OFF COLOUR JOKES

THE AMBIVALENCE OF `RACE' BASED HUMOUR.

TARA ATLURI

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Abstract:

This work examines the psychic and performative life of `race' based comedy. I use Sacha Baron Cohen's *Da Ali G Show*, its subsequent spin off films and the controversy surrounding these texts to discuss humour that plays with `race.' I argue that `race' based comedy is a site of ambivalence. The `race' based joke threatens to trouble essentialist notions of `race,' by playing with notions of authenticity and by revealing the psychic life of `race' within liberal societies that claim both rationality and colour-blindness. However, the `race' based joke also threatens to reinscribe racism, as one can use the realm of the comedic to mock the assumed racialised other.

In Chapter One, I outline the theoretical frameworks I will employ throughout my work. In Chapter Two, I discuss the methodological frameworks that inform and justify this work. In Chapter Three and Four I turn to the controversy that Cohen's primary characters Ali G and Borat have caused. In Chapters Five and Six I analyse sketches featuring the character of Ali through the lens of contemporary cultural studies, psychoanalytic, post colonial and post structuralist feminist/queer scholarship. In Chapters Seven and Eight I use similar theories to examine Cohen's increasingly more famous/infamous character, Borat. Chapter Nine draws on media studies, cultural studies and post-colonial studies scholarship to analyse sketches in which Cohen interviews major political figures.

Finally, I conclude by offering a discussion concerning the social, psychic, philosophical and political possibilities and limitations of comedic texts that play with `race.'

For my mother, whose resilient laughter never failed to inspire…

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Introduction

Humoring `Race', `Race'ing Humour

"What the Borat movie does best is to make us question the boundaries of funny. Each gag properly demands a set of responses from the viewer before laughter can erupt. However, the more I think about the film, the less amusing it becomes. *That's the funny thing about comedy - analyse it closely and it ceases to be funny.*"[1] - Jason Solomons, *The Observor.*

"I can appreciate the humour of an innocent confronting an expert and neither understanding what the other is on about. But a lot of the humour is laughing at black street culture and it is being celebrated because it allows the liberal middle classes to laugh at that culture in a context where they can retain their sense of political correctness.[2]" -Felix Dexter, Comedian

"The joke is not on Kazakhstan. I think the joke is on people who can believe that the Kazakhstan that I describe can exist...I think part of the movie shows the absurdity of holding any form of racial prejudice, whether it's hatred of African-Americans or of Jews."[3] -Sacha Baron Cohen

(Borat)has managed to spark an immense interest of the whole world in Kazakhstan, something our authorities could not do during the years of independence...If state officials completely lack a sense of humor, their country becomes a laughing stock."[4] -Sapabek Asip-uly, Khazakh novelist

"Perhaps he's trying to mock not just youth culture, but the hypersexism of capitalised Black culture. If that's his aim, there are better ways of doing it. In Britain, and this is a particularly British phenomenon, Ali G is able to crowd out a space of multiculturalism. Because, we are told by our friends in the House, Britain is a multicultural society, it seems not to matter much that Baron Cohen

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[1] Jason Solomons, "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan." *The Observor: The Guardian Unlimited.* Sunday October 29, 2006. Online edition. http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Observer_review/0,,1934191,00.html. (accessed: November 24, 2007).

[2] Malik, Sarita, Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television. (London: Sage, 2002), 102.

[3] Sacha Baron Cohen, quoted in Neil Strauss, "The Man Behind the Mustache." *Rolling Stone Magazine.* November 14, 2006. Online Edition. http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/sacha_baron_cohen_the_real_borat_finally speaks. (accessed November 24, 2007).

[4] Sapabek Asip-uly, quoted in Mansur Mirovalev, "Kazakh Says Borat Creator Deserves Prize." CBS News. November 24, 2006. Online Edition. http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/11/24/ap/entertainment/mainD8LJMP600.shtml. (accessed: November 24, 2007).

isn't a person of colour. He's appropriating the space of cultural criticism, facilitating Black cultural critique, and we should be both grateful and colour-blind about it. And for the many who think there's more to multi-culturalism than second-rate tokenist lovefests involving Meera Syal and Jasper Carrot, Ali G's continued popularity should be a cause for desperate anger."[5] -Raj Patel

What is the difference between a white person in blackface and Sacha Baron Cohen, the English/Jewish comedian behind the characters of Borat and Ali G who presumably come from Muslim cultural backgrounds?[6] -Abdul-Halim, "Planet Grenada"

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[5] Raj Patel, Voice of the Turtle Blog, comment posted February 1, 2002, http://www.voiceoftheturtle.org/show_article.php?aid=88, (accessed: April 22, 2007).

[6] Abdul Halim, Planet Grenada Blog, comment posted November 1, 2007, planetgrenada.blogspot.com/2006/11/borat-and-ali-g.html, (accessed: November 24, 2007).

He has been called a genius and a disgrace, a truth teller and a bigot, a modern day Lenny Bruce[7] and a modern day minstrel.[8] Sacha Baron Cohen, star and creator of *Da Ali G Show* and two films featuring characters from the show, has gained international acclaim and international infamy for his often outlandish comedy. *Da Ali G Show* and its characters play with racial and cultural identity and authenticity, often through the parodying of racist, xenophobic, misogynist, homophobic, and classist stereotypes.

Da Ali G Show and a (brief) Genealogy of `race' based humour:

Both Sacha Baron Cohen and his comedy can be situated within a broader genealogy of `race' based humour in the United Kingdom. Exploring the emergence of racialised and white subjects through the comic allows one to see the ways in which comedy might shed light upon, negotiate and produce changing meanings of `race' in contemporary social life.

Arguably, one could also trace Cohen's work genealogically through forms of Blackface minstrelsy in both the UK and the United States. I will explore Cohen's ambivalent relationship to Blackface traditions later in this work. I will begin however by situating Cohen within what I read as the shifting landscape of comedy, `race,' and racism in British popular culture.

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[7] John Walsh, "Keepin' it real, for real." *The Independent.* March 16, 2002. Online Edition. http://news.independent.co.uk/people/profiles/article192814.ece, (accessed: November 24, 2007).
[8] Malik, 102.

Early British television and film comedies that used humour to negotiate, construct and solidify `race' and racism largely began in 1970's after a large population of non-white immigrants from former colonies settled in Great Britain. Comedies such as *Love Thy Neighbour*, *Till Death Do Us Part,* and *Mind Your Language* appeared on the BBC, both reflecting upon and shaping national sentiments regarding `race.' These early comedies have largely been written about as being deeply racist and xenophobic in their mockery of Black British and British Asian subjects. The great breadth of jokes within these texts revolved around the racism of white Britains and their inability to accept people of colour into the country's national fabric. These racist comic serials centred around mocking people of colour in highly derogatory ways that often harkened back to colonial discourse.[9]

I would argue that what followed these early overtly racist comedies was a second wave of programming in which the `race' based joke was used by second generation people of colour in ways that asserted a Black British and British Asian identity. Shows such as *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No.42* emmerged on British radio and television in the late 1980's and early 1990's after the earlier racist British serials had run their course or were banned due to public

[9] *Ibid.*

outcry.[10] This second wave of comedy, largely dominated by British Asian and Black British comics and actors focused on using the `race' based joke to mock racist stereotypes of people of colour and also utilized a series of inside jokes which appealed to a large community of second generation diasporic people of colour.[11]

Most recently, I believe that a new third wave of what might be cautiously termed `post-race'[12] humour is emerging in the United Kingdom. While the first wave of humour was decidedly racist and the second wave was decidedly anti-racist and based on the creation of Black British and British Asian popular culture as a means of community building, the humour found in recent popular British comedies such as Sacha Baron Cohen's *Da Ali G Show* and other popular television serials such as *The Office* is much more ambiguous in its use of the `race' based joke.[13] Rather than outwardly mocking people of colour or creating inside jokes for a specific racialised community, I would argue that Cohen often mocks ideas of `race,' the ways in which `race' circulates within contemporary consumer culture, and finally our continued anxiety and inability to deal with

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[10] *Ibid.*

[11] "Goodness Gracious Me(Radio and Television). Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodness_Gracious_Me_(TV_&_radio). (accessed May 7, 2008).

[12] For a detailed discussion of the use of the term "post-race" in the contemporary United Kingdom see: Suki. Ali, Suki. *Mixed Race, Post Race: New Ethnicities and Cultural Practices.* London: Berg, 2003.

[13] For a discussion of *The Office* see: Gilroy, Paul. *Post-colonial Melancholia.* Columbia University Press: New York, 2004. 136-138.

`race' and racism within late capitalist Western liberal cultures. However, the politics of this post-`race' humour are obviously contentious, as mocking `race' can easily work to mock people of colour and to mock the ongoing tenacity of racism.

Of fans, critics, and the ambivalence of laughter:

Those who like Cohen, often point out that his comedy speaks to the changing face of multiracial Britain. For example, cultural theorist Paul Gilroy states that in contemporary Britain,

> We are awaiting a more sophisticated and complex *political* understanding of cultural change, influence and adaptation. In the meantime we are being entertained by Ali G, whose performances provide a satirical Rorshach blot in which even the most neurotic scrutineers of the national psyche can discover their fears and hopes.[14]

Those who dislike Cohen often point out that he is just another rich white guy who is mocking people of colour, pandering to and profiting from the racism of the general public. For example, in her work *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* Sarita Malik recounts criticisms of Ali G from Black British comedians. Malik states that,

> Felix Dexter and Gina Yashere were critical of the media frenzy over `Ali G', compared to its marginalization of and lethargy towards `genuinely' Black comedians, and comedian Curtis Walker compared Ali G to Al Jolson, feeling uncomfortable about the popularity of a `Blacked up' performer in contemporary Britain. Richard Blackwood, himself a rising

[14] Paul Gilroy, "Ali G and the Oscars." *Open Democracy*. http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Film/article_459.jsp, April 4, 2004, (accessed. October 10, 2007).

> star at the time of Ali G's phenomenal success, said `When I watch the show and listen to where the laughter comes from, I think the joke is on the black man, and that is a stereotype we are fighting every day."[15]

However, often times both fans and critics fail to offer a detailed examination of how comedic discourse operates in Cohen's work. The need to turn Cohen into either a celebratory spokesperson of `post-race' Britain, or a modern day minstrel figure fails to engage with the often ambivalent ways in which `race' based comedy functions.

The ambivalence of `race' based comedy speaks to the psychic life of `race' within modern supposedly multi-cultural settings, in which `race' is often repressed at the level of polite speech, but through humour, is revealed to generate anxiety at the level of the unconscious.[16] The ambivalence of `race' based comedy may also speak to the instability and inauthenticity of the racial stereotype in its ability to be mocked.[17] Finally, comedy about `race', particularly in cases in which one plays with notions of racial authenticity, can work to reveal

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[15] Malik, Sarita, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television*, (London: Sage, 2002). 104.

[16] See, Seshadri, Crooks, Kalpana, "The Comedy of Domination: Psychoanalysis and the Conceit of Whiteness." in *The Psychoanalysis of Race.* ed. Christopher Lane, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 353-379.

[17] For a detailed discussion of the ambivalence of the racial stereotype see: Bhabha, Homi, " The other question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," in *The Location of Culture,* by Homi Bhabha, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 57-94.

the performative[18] nature of `race,' gender, sexuality, and class in ways that challenge essentialist notions of identity.

However, while comedy has the potential to subvert `race' at the level of language, the ambiguities that exist in comedic discourse also allows for the reinscription of `race' based essentialisms and subsequently, racism. Furthermore, the potential that comedy carries to subvert `race' at the level of language may be temporary, with essentialist notions of `race' remaining in tact once the laughter subsides. Finally, the ability of 'race' based humour to effect `race' and racism at a structural level is obviously questionable.

The Punchline:

My core argument in this thesis is that `race' based comedy is a site of deep psychic, social and political ambivalence. At times and in certain contexts, the `race' based joke allows for the subversion of `race' through the mockery of essentialist categories of identity. Comedy can also point to the instability and nonsensical nature of the racial stereotype in its need to be anxiously repeated and in its ability to be mocked.[19] It can also subvert a liberal rhetoric of equality by revealing the anxieties, aggressions and desires that continue to exist towards the

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[18] It should be noted that while I am using the term "performative" which has been popularized by feminist/queer theorist Judith Butler, it is not my intention to equate performativity with performance. Rather, as I will expand upon in greater detail throughout this work, I believe `performance' can be used to shed light upon, reveal, offer insight into the performative aspects of identity which often cannot be apprehended in every day life.

[19] *Ibid.*

idea of `race' and towards racialised bodies. Furthermore, laughter at the `race' based joke may gesture to the psychic nature of `race' and racism, as humour reveals the anxieties, aggressions and desires that exist towards imagined Others.

However, in its ambiguity, comedic discourse risks reinscribing `race' and racism by offering up the figure of "the Other" as an object of ridicule. The attempt to subvert `race' through mockery can be read as a mockery of racialised bodies, depending upon how one takes the joke. Furthermore, the psychic release that the joke provides does not necessarily change how `race' is embedded into our unconscious, as the joke both simultaneousy reveals and conceals our continued investments in `race'.[20] Finally, the sale of `race' based comedy also risks reinscribing `race' and racism depending upon the context in which an artist is able to commodify humour and market it to audiences.[21]

For the purposes of this thesis, I want to take seriously the act of joking about `race.' I want to ask what humour can tell us about how `race' operates today, and about what `race' can tell us about uses of humour.

This topic is of course, laughable. The magnitude of these questions is too great and leads one in a ridiculous number of theoretical and philosophical directions if considered only generally. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on *Da*

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[20] See Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconcious* (London: W.W Norton and Company, 1960), 143-147.

[21] For a more detailed discussion of the politics of commodifying `race' based humour see: Atluri, Tara. "Lighten Up?! Humour as Anti-racism in the work of Asian American Comic Margaret Cho" (Masters diss., Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto, 2001).

Ali G Show, looking at skits featuring the character of Ali and the character of Borat. I will also touch on the film *Ali G Inna Da House*, which features the character of Ali and the film *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, featuring the character Borat. I will use *Da Ali G Show*, and its characters to reflect on wider questions concerning the complexities of humour and `race.' I have chosen not to discuss Cohen's third prominent character in *Da Ali G Show*, Bruno. This character is compelling in its parody/revisiting of mainstream queer male stereotypes and mockery of consumer culture. However, as my work deals with humour and `race,' I feel that Ali G and Borat provide better examples of the ambiguities of racialised comedy, as these characters deal with racial and cultural stereotypes. I have also chosen to limit my analysis to these characters in an effort to focus my analysis on a close reading of a manageable set of texts.

Using Da Ali G Show:

I believe that *Da Ali G Show* and its subsequent spin-off films point to the ambivalences of `race' based humour in several ways. Through analyzing several joke-techniques and tendentious aspects of humour in Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy, I attempt to discuss the ambiguities of racialised humour.

In conjunction with my overarching argument, I examine how *Da Ali G Show* and its subsequent spin off films work to subvert and reinforce essentialist

notions of `race' and racism. I will now touch upon some of the ways in which Cohen's comedy reflects upon the ambiguities of `race' and racism in greater detail. I will expand upon these arguments using direct examples from the show throughout this thesis.

The comedy of *Da Ali G Show*, through tools of performance, creates a discourse of sign slippage through which `race' is seen to be performative and unstable in its ability to fix bodies within an existing social order. The comedy of *Da Ali G Show* specifically, uses the comic to perform a hyperbolic repetition of the `race' based stereotype.[22] This repetition mocks the stereotype by revealing it to be both performative and ridiculous.

Da Ali G Show and its spin off films also draw attention to the psychic life of `race' and racism, challenging purely manifest readings of the `race' based joke. Laughter, in the face of `race' and racism gestures to the unconscious, involuntary aspects of both comedy and `race.'

However, through the continuous slippage of signs within comedic discourse, `race' based jokes also threaten to reinscribe racism. As meaning is rarely ever fixed in the comedic discourse of *Da Ali G Show*, there is also the potential that the joke can be read as reasserting essentialist understandings of

[22] See Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture.* (London: Routledge, 1994). 57-94. In his essay, "The other question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism" Bhaba discusses the ambivalence of the racial stereotype in detail. Bhabha argues that the stereotype gestures to an inherent anxiety within colonial discourse, as it must be anxiously repeated gesturing to its instability.

`race' and reinforcing racism. The hyperbolic repetition of the `race' based stereotype risks reinscribing racism. Cohen's performance may be read by some, not as an exaggerated parody of the racial stereotype, but as an authentic reflection of racial and cultural otherness. Read in this way, his work could serve to reinscribe `race' and racial violence onto the bodies of those deemed to be "other."

Furthermore, the temporary release of unconscious `race' based anxieties that the joke provides, does nothing to alter the ways in which `race' and racism are embedded into the unconscious.[23]

The performative value and psychic nature of the `race' based joke also does little to address the material realities of classism and racism which inform ones ability to `play' with and perform various identities. Ironically, while Cohen's characters may gesture to the instability of racial identities, some have argued that it is only because of his class based, white and Western privileges that these parodies are made possible.[24] Cohen has access to a range of linguistic registers, and is able to manipulate social norms and codes, moving in and out of

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[23] See Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconcious*. (London: W.W Norton and Company, 1960), 143-147.

[24] See Malik, Sarita, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 91-108. Malik cites criticisms from several Black British comedians on the grounds that Cohen's fame is based in part, on his racial and class privileges. Malik also offers a discussion in this chapter and throughout her work on the racism that exists within the British film and television industry.

racialised characters and caricatures, due to an understanding of various social norms, language codes and the different ways in which his body can be read.

Could a Black actor pass as a white character the way Sacha Baron Cohen passes as the racially and culturally ambiguous Ali G? Probably not. Could someone who has not attained a certain level of education or been raised in the West play with the norms of 'race', culture and language in Western urban centres the way Cohen does as Borat? Probably not.[25] The irony is that the fluidity of Cohen's characters are to a great degree informed by his own material privileges of class and skin, privileges which are grounded in the tenacity of racism at the psychic, social and political level.

The impersonation that Cohen offers as Ali G is also very much grounded in the commodification of contemporary Blackness. It has been argued that this impersonation would not be acceptable if it was a parody of another cultural, religious or racial group. It has also been argued that Cohen's comedy is only made possible because he is white. For example, Black British comedian Curtis Walker questions whether the fluidity of identity evinced in Cohen's performances would apply to Black comic impersonations. He asks, "...If we were to flip the script, would a Black comedian be allowed to dress up as a

[25] For a more detailed discussion concerning the ability of white performers to play with notions of race, as compared to performers of colour see: Pellegrini, Ann, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

Hasidic Jew, make jokes about being a tight-fisted, highly ambitious mummy's boy and do a similar sketch?"[26] Supporting this reading, Pickering and Lockyear state that Cohen's "...impersonation is neither susceptible to being used in a two-way manner, nor amenable to being used by Blacks themselves...Since it is not it tends to block subversion of the stereotype from within and encourage its reinforcement from without."[27] Cohen's impersonation of Black street culture, or of a subject appropriating Black street culture is perhaps rooted in his own whiteness.

However, paradoxically, this fluidity is also what makes Cohen's characters potentially subversive. In their ambiguity, his characters can be read as pointing to the racial and cultural hybridity of urban post colonial spaces. As Pickering and Lockyear state, "... the joke itself is possible precisely because our lives are ethnically intertwined in contemporary multicultural Britain."[28] And yet, this `intertwining' does not in any way mean that all actors are positioned equally, or that all cultures are appropriated to the same degree or with the same political implications.[29] Furthermore, the racial and cultural hybridity of contemporary

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[26] Lockyear, Sharon and Michael Pickering, *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (London: Palgrave, 2005), 195.
[27] *Ibid,* 196.
[28] *Ibid,* 197.
[29] Here, I am thinking of firstly, the economic realities that make appropriations of certain cultures by upper class white people deeply unethical. Black music and subculture has historically been appropriated by white musicians, record producers etc, in ways that rarely benefits black communities. For an interesting take on this phenomenon see: *Afropunk: The Rock n Roll Nigger*

youth culture does very little to erase the saliency of white privilege and anti-Black racism. As Pickering and Lockyear state, "...the problem nevertheless remains that while anyone can play at being black, you still have to be white to be white."[30]

While I agree with these authors, in that Cohen's privileges do, in many ways enable his comedy, I also believe that Cohen's performances are racially complex. For example, while Pickering and Lockyear state that "...you still have to be white to be white,"[31] they fail to account for the history of Blackface and comedic performances in England and America, both of which were often tied to an effort to *become* white on the part of Jewish performers.[32] The challenge of writing about *Da Ali G Show* is to constantly keep in mind the salient privileges

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Experience, DVD, directed by James Spooner. Produced by James Spooner and Ayanna Mackins. (2003; New York, NY: Afropunk Productions, 2003). Secondly, I am also thinking of the colonial history that informs certain contemporary acts of cultural appropriation. Colonialism was a capitalist enterprise and the theft of cultural artifacts on the part of white, European explorers is part of this colonial history. For a more detailed discussion of contemporary debates surrounding cultural theft and colonization see: Butler, Shelly. *Contested Representations : Into the Heart of Africa* (London: Routledge, 1999), Henrietta Lidchi, "The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures." in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.* ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications), 1997.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] See: Rogin, Michael, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot.* (Berkley: University of California Press), 1996. Rogin argues that European Jews were not considered to be "white" when they first immigrated to North America. However, it is important to distinguish the experiences of racialisation of European Jews to other Jewish groups such as African, Asian Jews. While European Jews were not initially considered to be white, it could be argued that the privileges of white skin allowed them to gain entry into the category of `whiteness.' For my purposes however, what is interesting and important is the role that public performances, particularly performances of blackface played in constructing Jews as white within a North American black/white racial binary.

that Cohen carries while also not foreclosing the ambiguities and rather messy constructions of `race' that his comedy plays with.

Cohen's characters may be used to play with notions of authenticity, however these performances do little to challenge the salience of identity based privileges off screen and out of character. As I have discussed, rather than see `race' based comedy as wholly celebratory, I believe that the `race' based joke also risks reinscribing essentialist understandings of `race' and racism. While Cohen offers up a series of texts that provide infinite fodder for theoretical analysis, the politics of his performances are ambivalent. Examining the theoretical arguments that I have outlined for their political value, it is clear that the implications and effects of `race' based humour are deeply ambivalent.

In his work *Race Riots: Comedy and Ethnicity in Modern British Fiction*, Ross agrees that the effects of the `race' based joke are decidedly ambiguous. He argues that, "Just as humour at times tends to reinforce social hegemony and at other times subvert it, so there is no one sweeping principle that can define all humour as either multiaccentual or monologic."[33] In relation to racialised humour specifically, Ross also emphasizes the ambivalent effects of the comic. He states for example that, "In an age that has witnessed racial and national conflict of unparalleled virulence, laughter itself has sometimes functioned as a potent

[33] Ross, Michael L, *Race Riots: Comedy and Ethnicity in Modern British Fiction* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press), 2006. 22.

weapon."[34] For Ross, this potent weapon has the power to both reinforce racism, and to subvert oppressive hierarchies of `race.' So he concludes the introduction to his work by stating that he hopes to give readers a sense of "...laughter's power, both to harm and to mend."[35] As I will argue throughout this work, the ambivalent powers of humour are especially evident in *Da Ali G Show*.

Dragging `Race': The Paradoxes of Camp and Comedy

In analyzing how Cohen performs `race' based identities through a manipulation of the signs of dress, bodily mannerism and language, I have found it useful to draw a parallel between his performances of `race' and those of `camp'[36] performers, who most often ironise static notions of gender. While `camp' is usually associated with queer parodies of essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity, I believe that one could view Cohen's `race' based performances as a form of camp. Camp is often tied to the comic. As one author states,

> Camp is a critical analysis and at the same time a big joke. Camp takes "something" (normally a social norm, object, phrase, or style), does a very acute analysis of what the "something" is, then takes the "something" and presents it humorously. As a performance, camp is meant to be an

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[34] *Ibid.*
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] See "Camp(Style)" Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_(style) (accessed: December 1, 2007). *Camp* derives from the French slang term *se camper*, meaning "to pose in an exaggerated fashion". The OED gives 1909 as the first print citation of *camp* as "ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to, characteristic of, homosexuals. So as a noun, 'camp' behaviour, mannerisms, et cetera. (cf. quot. 1909); a man exhibiting such behaviour". Per the OED, this sense is "etymologically obscure."

> allusion. A person being campy has a generalization they are intentionally making fun of or manipulating. Though camp is a joke it's also a very serious analysis done by people who are willing to make a joke out of themselves to prove a point.[37]

In the case of *Da Ali G Show* and its subsequent spin off films, the hyperbolic performances of the racial stereotype may be intended to be a camp version of static notions of `race' that mock the stereotype through its exaggerated repetition.

In his essay, "Humour: The Secret of Aesthetic Sublimation," Heike Munder draws a parallel between comedy and "camp." He draws on the work of Susan Sontag who states that,

> ...camp is a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. Camp, as the triumph of style over content, is a `dethroning of the serious' by means of exaggeration. Its distinct purpose is to turn the hierarchy of taste on its head and accelerate the break with convention—but all of this comes under the mantle of the aesthetic and not the political.[38]

In *Da Ali G Show*, `race' becomes an aesthetic performance that is parodied through the mimicry and exaggeration of dress, speech pattern, and gesture. In this way, like the camp performances Sontag gestures to, racialised hierarchies are mocked by Cohen's ability to drag `race'.

In her piece, "Racial Camp in *The Producers* and *Bamboozled*" Susan Gubar discusses the politics of `camp' performances of `race.' Gubar states that,

> Since racial camp intimates that less conscious performances off stage are just as scripted as more contrived performances on stage, the suspect

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[37] *Ibid.*
[38] *Ibid,* 15

> categories of Aryan and Jew, white and black multiply until reification unmasks their ludicrous artifice as well as their weird staying power.[39]

However, Gubar also makes clear throughout her piece that the costs of racial camp are not the same for all racialised bodies. Gubar compares the film *The Producers*, which involves an ironising of anti-Semitism and Nazism to Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* which touches on the evolution of anti-Black racism in the minstrel show. In comparing the two films, Gubar makes a point about how racial camp can operate quite differently, depending on the historical and contemporary racisms experienced by disparate groups. In relation to the very different portrayals of racial camp offered in both films she states that,

> Since the Shoah occurred over there and back then, while racial discrimination perpetuates the consequences of the Middle Passage here and now, the Holocaust is memorialized (as an American source of pride), slavery is recycled (as an American source of shame), and racial inauthenticity—which can function as a liberating source of amusement for Jewish American men—operates for African American men as an ongoing denigration (as the etymology of that word demonstrates).[40]

What Gubar alludes to and what I hope I make clear in this work, is that racial camp performance carries very different psychic, social and political meanings depending on the bodies of the performers, the racial identities being parodied, and the contexts in which performances are marketed and sold.

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[39] Gubar, Susan, "Racial Camp in The Producers and Bamboozled." *Film Quarterly*: Winter (2006/2007): 60.2. 35.
[40] *Ibid.*

Like Sontag's analysis, one could argue that Cohen's subversion happens at the level of aesthetics not politics. However, I am not convinced that questions of aesthetics and performance can be separated from politics. As I will discuss throughout this work, Cohen's `drag' performance is tied to wider political realities. However, the role that his comedy plays in relation to questions of `race' based and global politics is decidedly ambivalent.

That's Not Funny! Laughter and Oppression

The ability of humour to address political questions of oppression is questionable. For example, Munder states that,

> Humour used as a political tool has the effect of relieving and releasing pressure. But does humour not in fact take the position of the oppressed too lightly, so that an apparently hopeless situation is attacked via humour in order not to be crushed by it? Does painful humour help us to become accustomed to circumstances of domination?[41]

How can one draw the line between an exaggerated performance of the racial stereotype for subversive ends, and a performance of the racial stereotype that serves to reinscribe racism? If Munder is correct, `race' based humour may work to reinscribe racism by failing to take questions of racial oppression and white supremacy seriously. In mocking race, as a constructed category, the humour of *Da Ali G Show* may serve to dismiss the realities of racism, as a form of systemic oppression. Finally, the means through which artistic products are disseminated

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[41] Heike Munder, "Humour: The Secret of Aesthetic Sublimation." *When Humour Becomes Painful.* ed. Heike Munder and Felicity Lunn (Zurich: JRP Ringer, 2005), 21.

must also be considered. While Munder is talking about uses of humour in the work of underground artists, *Da Ali G Show* is a mainstream cultural product that is sold en mass through corporate film and television studios. His work is not viewed only by an audience that has progressive politics concerning `race,' and an understanding of the tools of camp and farce. Rather, the mass sale of his work creates the possibility for audiences to laugh at the racial stereotypes he revisits.

Anxious Laughter: `Race' Based Humour and Psychoanalysis

Neither Ross nor Munder gesture to the psychic aspects of comedy in their works. As psychoanalysis teaches, laughter may work to both reveal and conceal anxieties and inhibitions.[42] In his 1929 work, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud argued that humour acts as a means through which we release unconscious repressions, often related to taboo subjects such as sexuality.[43] Freud argued that the joke works to reveal our unconscious anxieties, desires and aggressions towards sex. However, the joke also works to conceal these anxieties, as we are made to think that we are laughing at the word play and technique of comedy. [44] Furthermore, while the joke may offer a momentary release of repression, laughter subsides. For Freud, jokes, like dreams offer insight into the unconscious, but may do little in the way of changing our

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[42] Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconcious* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 1960), 14-106.
[43] *Ibid.*
[44] *Ibid.*

behaviour in the waking, rational world.[45] Drawing on the work of Anne Anlin Cheng, I will now discuss the psychic underpinnings of racialised comedy through the lense of Freud's concept of melancholia.

Melancholic Laughter:

In her work, *The Melancholy of Race* Anne Anlin Cheng discusses the melancholic foundations of dominant white identity in America. Cheng states that "Freudian melancholia designates a chain of loss, denial, and incorporation through which the ego is born."[46] Drawing on Freud's theories of melancholia, she argues that in order for white America to maintain the myth of equality upon which the nation rests, the racial other is both incorporated and denied, functioning as a melancholic loss object. Cheng argues that both racist discourse and white liberal discourse operate melancholically, refusing the existence of racism either by denying the humanity of racialised subjects or by denying the daily operations of 'race.' She states that,

> ...both violent vilification and the indifference to vilification express, rather than invalidate, the melancholic dynamic. Indeed, melancholia offers a powerful critical tool precisely because it theoretically accounts for the guilt and the denial of guilt, the blending of shame and omnipotence in the racist imaginary.[47]

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[45] *Ibid,* 197-224.
[46] Cheng, Anne Anlin, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 8.
[47] *Ibid.* 12.

If discourses of `race' and racism can be said to operate melancholically, what is the relationship between the comic and the melancholic? Cheng states that,

> ...like melancholia, racism is hardly ever a clear rejection of the other. While racism is mostly thought of as a kind of violent rejection, racist institutions in fact often do not want to fully expel the racial other; instead, they wish to maintain that other within existing structures.[48]

The relationship between the white imaginary and the racialised `Other' operates ambiguously, resting on both expulsion and incorporation. `Race' based comedy and humour may therefore reflect upon the psychic ambiguities of racial melancholia. The `race' based joke may act as a way in which the racialised body is incorporated into the white imaginary, through the anxieties of laughter, while simultaneously denied, when laughter subsides and the rules of liberal speech are reinstated.

In his work *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture*, Paul Gilroy touches upon the psychic dimension of this anxious laughter, seeing it as reflective and productive of what he terms "postcolonial melancholia." Gilroy states that,

> ...postcolonial melancholia invites us to pass the time not by laughing at ourselves and our national plight but by laughing at immigrants and strangers and, in particular, finding distraction and respite in the uneven results of the country's incomplete transition to cultural diversity and plurality.[49]

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[48] *Ibid.* 13

[49] Gilroy, Paul, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 145.

He goes on to discuss how comedy is used to mock asylum seekers within national tabloid newspapers. This form of comedy works to feed into the post imperial anxieties of the nation. Gilroy's work draws upon psychoanalytic language to discuss how comedy functions within national media to manage psychic inhibitions and aggressions towards the figure of the foreigner. However he also gestures to the presence of comedic texts that may speak to changes in understandings of and anxieties towards 'race'.

Gilroy discusses the comedy of *Da Ali G Show* and *The Office*, two recent British comedies that joke about 'race'. Rather than dismissing or defaming the realm of racialised comedy, Gilroy sees newer forms of British comedy as reflecting upon the instability of British multiculturalism. In relation to the character of Ali G he states that,

> That unfixed and unstable Ali G might also have helped to break laughter's complicity with postcolonial melancholia and to locate new sources of comedy in a remade relationship with our heterogeneous selves, working through the aftereffects of empire in a self-consciously multicultural nation.[50]

He goes on to argue that newer forms of British comedy like the works of Sacha Baron Cohen are producing new forms of laughter, very different from the mocking tone that 'race' based comedy is assumed to provoke. He states that this laughter,

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[50] *Ibid.* 149.

> ...does not intersperse loathing and self hatred with manic elation. It helps instead to cultivate the everyday, ordinary virtue involved in managing healthier relationships with otherness that are not deformed by fear, anxiety, and violence.[51]

Following from Gilroy's analysis, I will examine *Da Ali G Show* and its subsequent spin off films for their psycho-social implications. Like Gilroy, I argue that *Da Ali G Show* has the potential to reflect upon the constructed nature of `race' based and cultural identities within post colonial urban contexts, in ways that subvert notions of essentialism.

However while Gilroy argues that the character of Ali G offers audiences a chance to reflect upon the constructions and ironies of `race', it is interesting that he fails to examine the Borat character. I believe that Gilroy is right in pointing to the subversive potential of *Da Ali G Show*. However, I also believe that attention to the Borat character, and greater attention to psychoanalytic writings on the comic, complicate an easy celebration of the texts. Attention to these nuances lead me to believe that *Da Ali G Show* and its recent spin off films may still carry a trace of the melancholic incorporation and expulsion of "the Other" within western psyches.

Cohen's comedy exposes psychic anxieties, desires, and aggressions towards racialised `Others' firstly through the hyperbolic performance of the racial stereotype, and secondly through revealing the racism of the general public.

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[51] *Ibid.*

However, in revisiting the site of politically and emotionally charged racist stereotypes, and in allowing racists to air their views over public airwaves, the politics of the show are deeply ambiguous.

Divergent Reactions: Manifest and Latent Laughter

Here, it is important to distinguish between at least two kinds of reactions to comedy in general, and specifically to *Da Ali G Show*. Firstly, there is the manifest, conscious, political and intentional response to *Da Ali G Show*. This is part of the anti-racist or politicized reading of the show which, as will be discussed later in this work, reads the characters and comedy as offensive. However, there is another level of reaction which interests me and informs this work. Here, I am interested in the latent, unconscious, psychic response which in the case of *Da Ali G Show*, often results in involuntary laughter. While I do not wish to dismiss the first kind of conscious, political reading of the show, my interests lie in the tensions between this manifest response and the latent reactions to the show which elicit laughter. What interests me about reactions to *Da Ali G Show* is that I believe they speak to the ambivalences and unconscious aspects of racial identification that cannot be erased or dismissed by purely conscious, manifest political readings of the show. What is important to my thesis is the relationship between manifest responses to `race' based humour and latent reactions to it.

To say that *Da Ali G Show* is racist and to subsequently dismiss the laughter it elicits is to overlook the curious ways in which we as subjects identify and react to texts. A purely conscious, anti racist reading of *Da Ali G show* fails to acknowledge the ambivalences, discordances and psychic life of both `race' and comedy. In her work *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian analysis of `race'*, Kalpana Seshadri Crooks argues that judgments as to the morality of racialised comedy often fail to examine how jokes function psychically. Crooks states that,

> Assertions to the effect that jokes are responsible for or innocent of racial oppression displace the emphasis from the joke's unconscious dependence on the prohibition of the law to intentionality and the conscious deployment of the joke as insult...Such a deflection would considerably impoverish an understanding of how variations in the dialectical pressure of aggression and inhibition(from which the joke originates) produce differing joke situations, which are indicative of shifts in the working order of race as common sense.[52]

To judge Ali G as right or wrong, good or bad, to respond to his comedy with a "yes" or "no" fails to ask more complex and I believe more interesting "how" and "why" questions. Why do we find the show and its characters funny? Or conversely, why are we unable to find humour in the show and its characters? Throughout my reading of the show and reactions to it, I will examine the limitations of a progressive politics dealing with `race' that dismisses attention to psychic and unconscious desires and drives. However, I will also argue that

[52] Crooks, Kalpana, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of `Race'* (London: Routledge, 2000), 92.

attention to the psychic life of 'race' should not be used to dismiss or overlook manifest anti-racist politics, as these processes are deeply intertwined.

Racial Gender-Bender: Ali G and the Queering of 'Race' based performance

In an article written in January of 2000 for the British newspaper *the Guardian*, writer Gary Younge discusses the politics of *Da Ali G Show.* Younge's piece points to the ways in which *Da Ali G Show* reflects the complex life of 'race' and comedy. Younge draws an interesting parallel, which I take up throughout this work between Ali G's play upon 'race' and performances that play with gender identity. He says of the character of Ali,

> *Like the racial equivalent of a gender-bender,* he stands on a precipice. On the one side is the relatively steady ground of alternative comedy; on the other is the sheer drop into racist buffoonery. It is an awkward place to be, not least because he finds himself at the epicenter of an awkward debate. But, so long as he can keep his balance, he will remain above the fray, if not beyond reproach. Move too far inland and he will be predictable and worthy; stray too close to the edge and he might topple over and land in the lap of Jim Davidson or the black and white minstrels.[53]

Here, Younge draws a parallel between Ali's racial drag show and that of gendered performances that often tow the line between troubling essentialist notions of gender and reproducing sexism. This parallel draws attention to the need to look at racialised comedy in relation to theories of performativity and

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[53] Gary Younge. "Is it Cos I's Black" http://www.guardian.co.uk/ali/article/0,2763,195449,00.html. *The Guardian Unlimited Online*, Wednesday January 12, 2000, 1, (accessed November 1, 2007).

subjectivity. Furthermore, it is interesting to think about how and why Cohen's parodies of 'race' and cultural difference have garnered so much backlash compared to his parody of queer subjects. While Ali G and Borat have gained a great deal of negative attention and many have questioned Cohen's motivations and ethics, there has been little outcry concerning his parody of queer male stereotypes through the character of Bruno. It is interesting to think about how sexuality and 'race' operate in ways that can be parodied, and further to think about how the parodying of both are received in very different ways.[54] It should be noted, that in making this comparison it is not my intention to argue that 'race' and gender/sexuality operate exclusively. Rather, as I will show, gendered performances are always racialised and vice versa.

Gary Younge's piece also draws attention to the psycho-social ambivalences of 'race' that the show sheds light on. For example, shying away from a moralistic discussion which defames laughter or uneasiness towards the show, he states,

> The issue is not whether we should be laughing at Ali G or not; we are. Even the black comedians who said he was offensive admit that he makes them laugh. Nor is the question whether some people should be uneasy at Ali G; they are. In such a nebulous, subjective and sensitive area the true mark of our racial sophistication will be whether we can have an

[54] Due to the confines of time and space, I do not have the time to expand upon these differences in great detail. I do however, plan to discuss the tensions, parallels and differences between 'race' based and gendered acts of passing in a forthcoming work.

> intelligent discussion about what makes us laugh and what makes us easy.[55]

Avoiding an argument that easily condemns those who laugh at *Da Ali G Show* as racist, or an argument that brands those who are uneasy with this comedy as overly sensitive or out dated, Younge takes these reactions to the comedian to be a given and instead asks why it is that he generates such sentiments. In doing this, he gestures to the psychic life of comedy whereby our investments in `race' exist at the psychic level in ways that cause us to react emotionally to performances that rupture ideas of `race.' Just as gender-bending performances have been known to elicit emotional responses, our reactions to *Da Ali G Show* speak to our psychic investments in `race'.

Young's piece also examines *Da Ali G Show* in a wider comedic context. He states that,

> We do not broadcast jokes about pedophiles, Holocaust survivors or the mentally disabled because there is a general, popular view that those people are not fair game. Black people were once considered absolutely fair game simply because they existed. In the mid-70's, the sitcom Love Thy Neighbour fed off a regular diet of jokes about "honkies" and "nig-nogs." Such jokes would not be acceptable now. And in 20 years time, we might watch Ali G or Goodness Gracious Me and wince. The line is blurred and keeps on moving. That is what is so impressive about Ali G. The debate he has sparked is forcing us to consider redrawing the line.[56]

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[55] *Ibid.*
[56] *Ibid*, 4.

Like Younge, I believe that *Da Ali G Show* and its characters exist within a longer history of comedy, and speak to how changing meanings of `race' and shifting boundaries of identity are often reflected in the comedic. Therefore, I will attempt to place the characters of *Da Ali G Show* within a broader socio-historical context of comedy and `race.'

Finally Younge discusses the ways in which Ali G speaks to changing meanings of `race' and identity among British youth. He states that,

> With black styles at the core of British youth culture, it is argued that Ali G is not poking fun at black people at all but `wiggers'—whites who want to be, or even think they are, black. As such, the argument goes, it reflects a sense of racial ease among younger generations of Britons, who all speak the same language, wear similar clothes and listen to similar music. It is a joke which could not exist without our lives being racially entwined.[57]

While Younge talks specifically about the character of Ali, I will discuss how Ali and another character featured in the show, Borat, speak to the changing meanings of `race' within postcolonial urban centres. In order to explore the psychic, social and political ambiguities of Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy, I will draw on a range of theoretical frameworks to make sense of how the `race' based joke functions in his work. I will now offer a more in-depth biography of Cohen and a history of *Da Ali G Show*.

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[57] *Ibid,* 2.

Introducing: Sacha Baron Cohen

Comedian Sacha Baron Cohen is a Cambridge educated actor, who was born in Hammersmith London into an orthodox Jewish family. Cohen received a Masters degree from Christ's College at Cambridge in History. His dissertation focused on Jewish involvement in the American Civil Rights movement, with a specific emphasis on the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner in Mississippi. Cohen first appeared on the BBC show *The Word* in 1995, playing a fictional television reporter from Albania, a character that was later developed into his very famous Borat persona. However, it was through the character of Ali G that he rose to fame. In 1998, Cohen appeared on the BBC's *The Eleven O'Clock Show* as "Ali G", a bumbling `junglist' from Staines, a small commuter town outside of London. The character received a great deal of attention and in 2000, *Da Ali G Show* aired on the BBC. The show featured the character of Ali, a dim-witted wannabe gangster interviewing political figures and discussing social issues. Later, Cohen expanded his cast of characters to include Borat, a foreign correspondent from Khazakstan, eager to find out about British life and Bruno, a camp Austrian fashion reporter. In 2002, the character appeared in a feature film titled *Ali G Indahouse: The Movie.* In 2006, Cohen starred as Borat in *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.*

The charm of Cohen's characters lie in their ability to mock authority figures through playing dumb. His humour is multi-layered, in that his comedy not only mocks those he interviews, but offers a larger commentary on the ironies of a postcolonial age.

However while Cohen has gained a huge fan-base, he has also generated disgust and outrage from many who find his humour offensive. Cohen has received negative reactions from groups as disparate as comedians and entertainers of colour, British media censors, anti-racist activists, European and North American governments, feminist and queer activists, members of the Christian religious right, orthodox Jewish groups and British Muslim groups. Cohen's critics attack his work on various grounds and often from very divergent political positions.[58]

Why study Ali G?

With all of this outcry and outrage, it would seem as though a study of *Da Ali G Show* and its characters by an anti-racist academic seems a bit ridiculous. Perhaps it is. But perhaps this is the point. While there seems to be an overwhelming focus on discussing whether or not Ali G and Borat are okay for us

[58] For a more detailed discussion of various lawsuits against Cohen see: "The Borat Backlash." *The Guardian Unlimited*. Online Edition. http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,1955919,00.html, November 24, 2006, (accessed: November 5, 2007).

to laugh at, there is less attention paid to why these characters are funny, and what this might tell us about how `race' operates psycho-socially and linguistically.

I am of course, sympathetic to those who are not interested in these how and why questions and who simply want recitations of racist speech to stop at all costs. For some, certain speech acts, even if in the context of art or performance, even if not meant to be taken literally, as in the context of comedy, still produce a potential to revisit violence which is too great a risk to take.

However, I believe that it is important, for my purposes to pay attention to speech acts concerning `race' that are from the outset, as troubling as `race' itself. The notion of static, fixed, authentic and essential identities which belong to certain subjects has been troubled by post structuralist scholarship which has argued that `race' is itself a fiction, a joke, if you will.[59] Therefore, I have become fascinated by how speech acts that mock `race' operate.

Watching *Da Ali G Show*, in which Cohen's characters break linguistic and social taboos by often openly uttering racial slurs and talking explicitly about sexuality and the body, while also mocking social and political processes, I am left asking myself why the show is so funny? Conversely, I also wonder what prevents one from finding *Da Ali G Show*, its characters, and its parodies of

[59] For a good discussion on the performative, constructed nature of `race' see: Chowdry, Maya and Nina Rapi, *Acts of Passion: Sexuality, Gender, and Performance,* (London: Haworth, 1998), 67-68. Chowdry and Rapi draw on the work of Stuart Hall. Using semiotics, Hall argues that `race' is a floating signifier, meaning that it is not an essential, biological trait but rather a stable, linguistic, cultural construct that shifts over time and context.

identity based and state politics funny? Following from this, I wonder what this comedy and reactions to it can tell us about how `race' and intersecting categories of difference operate? Finally, I want to question the motivations and effects of comedy that plays with `race'. Why do we find characters like Ali and Borat, who perform `race', and who break linguistic and social taboos in often hyperbolic ways, so funny? Why might we refuse or be unable to find humour in these characters? How is comedy being employed in ways that play with notions of identity and propriety that cause so many people to take notice? My work attempts to grapple with these and other questions through the lense of *Da Ali G Show*. I will now provide a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

Chapter Breakdown:

In Chapter One, I situate my work theoretically. I critique literatures dealing with comedy and comedy and `race,' showing how attention to post colonial theory, psychoanalytic theory, cultural studies, and post structuralist feminist/queer theory can offer new insight into the politics of `race' based comedy. I offer an overview of dominant writings on comedy and comedy and `race', providing a brief critique. Following this, I outline the major theoretical positions that guide this study. I discuss how I will employ various forms of critical theory to analyze the ambivalences of `race' based comedy in *Da Ali G Show*.

Chapter Two turns to reactions to *Da Ali G Show*. I focus here on some of the various controversies that the characters Ali G and Borat have generated. I discuss the negative reactions that many have had to *Da Ali G Show* and its characters. I frame this discussion in relation to debates concerning the relationship between `race', morality and speech, discussing the implications of holding `race' to be sacred subject matter. I examine arguments concerning the character of Ali as a mockery of urban Black culture and as a mockery of British Desi culture as well. In conjunction with my overarching thesis, I argue that reactions to Ali G speak to the inherent ambivalence of *Da Ali G Show*.

In Chapter Three I offer an analysis of the negative attention that Borat has received. I discuss this in relation to debates regarding identity, authenticity and cultural representation. I also discuss the political and ethical questions that this character generates, in relation to the relationship between performance, mass media and politics. Again, I argue that like the character of Ali G, Borat acts as an example of the moral, ethical and political ambiguities of `race' based humour.

In Chapter Four I offer an analysis of the character of Ali G. I attempt to locate this character within a tradition of Blackface minstrelsy which reflects upon the ambivalences of Jewish-Black relations and the ambivalences of racial, sexual and gender identification on the whole.

In Chapter Five I continue my analysis of the character Ali G, focusing specifically on this character's sexual humour. I discuss how Ali's homoerotics and his explicit naming of sexuality may subvert dominant white, heterosexual, Western norms concerning the body and sex. However, I also discuss how Ali G's childlike honesty could revisit the infantilisation of racialised bodies.

Chapter Six of this work focuses on the character of Borat Sagdiev. I examine how the humour of this character is subversive in it's politicization of the body. I focus specifically on how discourses of embodiment are connected to those of `race', class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. I also discuss how Borat's failure to approximate white American racism may work to challenge the oppressive ways in which subjects are interpellated into a linguistic and political order of `race.' I also discuss Borat's ability to reveal the tenacity of racial melancholia in the West.

Chapter Seven also focuses on Borat. I examine theories of immigrant humor and discuss how racial, cultural and national identities intersect in this character. However, as with Ali G, I discuss how the character of Borat walks a thin line between subverting and reinscribing racial and cultural stereotypes. I further look at how the comedy of Borat has changed from the BBC television series to the full length Borat film. I discuss how the humour that the character generates is deeply ambivalent, in that one could laugh at what Borat reveals

about Western culture, or one could laugh at the figure of the racialised, non-Western "other."

Chapter Eight of this work looks at the mockery of state politics and bureaucracy in *Da Ali G Show.* I begin by discussing how *Da Ali G Show* may reflect upon a moment in which politics is increasing being informed by popular culture, and vice versa. I draw on media theorists who discuss the relationship between mass media, political participation and celebrity. I look at how Ali's interviews with major, often conservative political figures work to subvert the formal world of politics, and formal structures of language. However, I also examine how Ali G's ironising of politics may work to dilute the seriousness of political issues and concerns. Ali G may also be read as mocking the assumed political apathy and ignorance of Black street culture. Again, I argue that Ali G's political satire is ambivalent in its negotiation of `race'.

The conclusion of this work brings together the various arguments and discussions that I have engaged in, in relation to *Da Ali G Show* specifically and humor and `race' in general. I provide concluding comments as to the potential and limits of *Da Ali G Show* and racialized comedy on the whole, to subvert essentialist ideas of `race'.

To summarise:

In this thesis I argue that *Da Ali G Show* reflects upon and exposes the psycho-social and discursive ambivalences of `race'. These ambivalences offer possible subversions and reinscriptions of the melancholic incorporation of "the Other" into dominant white, Western psyches. I focus my analysis on the characters of Ali G and Borat. I argue that both these characters tap into a long history of comedy through which discursive categories of Otherness are often troubled by the continual slippage of signs that appear within comic vernacular. Through comic vernacular and dialogue, both of these characters, in different ways, highlight the psychic life of `race' by showing how comedy works to reveal and conceal psychic inhibitions that exist at the level of both the individual and collective unconscious. *Da Ali G Show* can be read as being analogous to gender-bending performances, as the characters trouble the authenticity of `race' through processes of hyperbolic mimicry. However while the show may expose the continued tenacity of `race' based thinking and gesture to performative nature of `race' within a global capitalist order, this may offer little in the way of political change.

Chapter One

Theoretical Considerations

Theoretical Considerations:

In this chapter I offer an overview of some of the dominant approaches to studying comedy and `race.' I begin firstly by discussing what is meant by the term `race.' Following this I offer a critique of scholarship that often sees comedy about `race' as being either racist or anti-racist. I then discuss how psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and post- colonial theory can be used to explain how racialised comedy functions in often uneven and ambivalent ways.

Racism and `race': living a lie

Debates in the field of contemporary `race' scholarship often focus on the theoretical understanding of `race' as constructed and the political realities of racism, which cause `race' to inform our social and economic realities. This debate is one that colours the contemporary moment in which we live and write.[60] Anti-racist and Post colonial scholars have made enough inroads into the academy, that the idea of `race' as a biologically fixed, essential identity is continuously challenged by an understanding of how racial difference was marked onto certain bodies for political, social and psychic reasons. `Race' as we know it has not always existed. Its existence speaks more to a history of colonialism and a continued history of racial oppression than it does to any natural, inevitable

[60] Gen Doy. *Black Visual Culture: modernity and postmodernity* (London: I.B Tauris), 1-22.

categorization of bodies.[61] However, the danger in speaking of `race' as discursively produced, is that the realities of racism are masked by semantics. Anti-racist activists and scholars of colour have often been the first to point out that anti-essentialist theory can be used to justify a false universalism, which only works to exclude those on the margins.[62]

Still, for my purposes, I am interested in how cultural production is used as a means of drawing attention to the constructed nature of `race'. Studying racialised humour does not mean that I think that racism is funny. However, I believe that efforts to combat essentialist ideas of `race' cannot be fought or won by reifying these essentialisms. In order to combat the naturalizing effects of racism, we must disrupt and trouble the idea of `race'.[63] The disjuncture between the illusion of `race' and the material ways in which these illusions structure our lives lends itself to irony. It is in this gap, this fissure between the imagined difference of bodies and the skin of these bodies that I begin. I will discuss `race' as a socially constructed category, not as a means of dismissing its power, but as a means of disarming it. I will now offer an overview and critique of dominant approaches to studying the comic.

Humour as an act of power:

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[61] See Young, *Colonial Desire* 1995, Hall, *Representation,* 1997, McClintock, *Imperial Leather,* 1996.

[62] See Christian, "Black Feminism and the Academy." *Theories of race and racism: a reader.* ed. Solomos, John (London: Routledge, 2000), 462-478

[63] See McClintock 1996.

One of the dominant approaches to studying `race' based humour has been to write about it as a negative expression of existing racism. I believe that this way of conceiving of "racist humour" often draws on the philosophical and theoretical traditions of early Western philosophers.

For early Western philosophers like Plato, people often became jokes due to a lack of self awareness or what he termed vice. Plato believed that "...laughable people may see themselves as wealthier, more handsome, or smarter than they really are- a still viable description of many people whom we consider to be `jokes'."[64] Plato also drew an analogy between laughter and the itch. For him, "Just as the presumed pain of the itch is relieved by the pleasure of scratching, the pleasure of laughter relieves the pain associated with gloating over friends misfortune."[65] Following Plato, the work of Aristotle and Hobbes also focused on humour as a means through which one maliciously claimed superiority over others. Hobbes states that we can read humour as expressing a "...sudden glory' arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."[66] Early philosophers were less interested in the structure of jokes, and more interested in the political intentions and implications that coloured the joke.

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[64] *Ibid*, 13.
[65] *Ibid,* 14.
[66] *Ibid.*

Racist Laughter:

Dominant approaches to racialised comedy have often followed suit. For example, in his work *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy,* Robin Coleman states that "...always seeing Blacks in situation comedies indicates that Black life and Black issues are not taken seriously."[67] Similarly, Gregory Lewis, reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle writes that "...television has regressed to minstrelsy, exhibiting Blacks as buffoons thanks to shows such as Martin."[68] Many authors have also discussed the relationship between comedic racialised representations and slavery in detail.

Starting in the 19th century, the minstrel show was a vehicle through which white audiences in the United States constructed Blackness as laughable. Whether it was white or Black performers dressed in Blackface, playing the typical roles of the clown, the buffoon, the lazy slave, the carefree Jim-dandy, the point seemed to be the same—Blackness was laughable. Beyond the laughter though, were the very real projects of colonialism and slavery. Authors have argued that the minstrel show gained popularity at a time when movements to abolish slavery were also on the rise. The minstrel show, by depicting Black slaves as jovial and carefree acted as a counter to abolitionists who were often

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[67] Coleman, Robin Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humour* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6.
[68] *Ibid*, 7.

attempting to show the brutal realities of plantation life as a means of awakening the conscience of a nation.[69] Contemporary racialised comedy could therefore be seen as an outgrowth of the minstrel tradition, acting as means through which Blackness is laughed at in ways that diminish the seriousness of racism and construct African Americans as being figures of mockery.

In her work *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television*, Sarita Malik discusses the ways in which comedy about `race' has operated historically on British television. Malik states that,

> Comedy writers frequently pledge their commitment to irony or elevated liberal ideals to shield themselves and their comic creations from accusations of being anti-Black. This is a very British form of defence. Much of the British comedy tradition needs to be recognized as working within this culture of racism, while using the alibi of comedy to give the illusion of being outside it.[70]

Similarly, in his essay, "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media", Stuart Hall argues that race-based comedy reinforces racism and constructions of otherness. Hall states that,

> Telling racist jokes...reproduces the categories and relations of racism, even while normalizing them through laughter...The time *may* come when blacks and whites can tell jokes about each other in ways which do not reproduce the racial categories of the world in which they are told. This time, in Britain, is certainly *not yet arrived.*"[71]

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[69] See Coleman, 1997, Lott, 1998.
[70] Malik, Sarita. *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (London: Sage), 2002. 106.
[71] Stuart Hall quoted in, Malik, Sarita, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (London: Sage, 2002), 69.

I agree with both Hall and Malik in that comedy can, and is often used to reinforce an existing order of racism. However, in both of their works, `race' is seen to be a fixed thing that exists outside of gender, sexuality and class. Furthermore, racial representation, of which comedy is a part, is seen to reflect rather than constitute meaning.

Like the Hobbesian reading of humour, in which one subject is seen to be powerful and the other powerless, identity is constructed in static ways. This binary way of conceiving of power and identity has been challenged by post structural and post colonial theorists, whose work I will discuss in greater detail below. Similarly, like Hobbes, these authors conceive of comedy and humour as being wholly rational acts. Laughter is seen as a conscious, deliberate act with little attention paid to the psychic components of the comic. It is not my wish to discount influential theorists like Hall or Malik in their readings of how the joke can be deployed to reinforce racism. However, as I will establish later in this chapter, I believe that attention to post structuralist and psychoanalytic scholarship may offer interesting challenges and additions to writings dealing with `race' and the comic.

Racist Laughter and the Stereotype:

A related trend within writings pertaining to `race' and the comic, is to focus upon the reinscription of the racist stereotype through jokes. In their piece,

"Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour," Dennis Howitt and Kwame Owusu-Bempah state that,

> ...the stereotypes incorporated into racist jokes should not be regarded as trivial matters. Indeed, they often reflect some of the major fronts in the subjugation, discrimination, oppression and exploitation of black people. Such jokes frequently employ the very stereotypes which underlie some of the major controversies over `race' in the last hundred years.[72]

I agree with these authors in their reading of the `race' based joke as reinforcing the racist stereotype. However, what interests me is how the joke, as a form of stereotype may also speak to the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of `race' and racism. In his work, *The Location of Culture*, which I will discuss in greater detail in this chapter, Homi Bhabha discusses the ambivalences and ironies of the stereotype. Bhabha draws upon psychoanalysis and Foucauldian theory to discuss the ambiguities of the racist stereotype. He locates the stereotype as a site of ambivalence, as an attempt to fix difference that fails in its need to be anxiously repeated.[73]

Furthermore, he draws on psychoanalysis to discuss how the stereotype functions much like the fetish, as a tool that both gestures to and disavows difference. He states that, "The fetish or stereotype gives access to an `identity'

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[72] Dennis Howitt and Kwame Owusu-Bempah, "Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour," *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour.* ed. Sharon Lockyear and Michael Pickering (London: Palgrave, 2005), 54.

[73] See Bhaba, Homi, "The other question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism" in *The Location of Culture.* By Homi K. Bhaba (London: Routledge, 1994), 121-132.

which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it."[74] If the racist or `race' based joke is a form of racist stereotyping, we can also read it as speaking to the ambivalence, anxieties and contradictions of `race'. The anxious forms of defense, desire and disavowal that cause the stereotype to be constantly repeated and yet never fixed, gesture to the ambivalences of `race' and racism. While the joke may reinforce the stereotype, the stereotype may actually gesture to the anxieties and contradictions of `race' and racism. In discussing *Da Ali G Show* and its subsequent spin off films, I will therefore discuss the `race' based joke as reinforcing the racist stereotype, while also gesturing to the deeply anxious and ambivalent nature of this stereotype.

Humour as Resistance:

In opposition to scholarship that sees `race' based humour as an expression of racism, the `humour from below' camp emphasizes comedy as a tool of anti colonial and anti racist resistance. This work tends to celebrate the comedic as a wholly positive realm, in which humour taps into a pre-colonial tradition of oral stories or an anti-colonial tradition in which Trickster figures

[74] Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routlege, 1994), 107.

outsmart oppressors.[75] While scholarship that connects racialised humour to histories of Blackface and minstrelsy brands humour as oppressive, the humour as resistance school celebrates comedy as anti-racism. While there may be truths to both positions, the idealisation or condemnation of something does not address *how* it functions. Both the condemnation of a negative representation and the celebration of a positive one assume that there is some real and accurate representation waiting to be articulated, that an essential racial identity exists outside of representation. This way of thinking is incongruous with much of the recent theory on `race' and cultural studies.[76]

While humour as resistance scholarship moves away from condemning humour, it often celebrates `race' based humour in ways that still reify racial essentialisms. In looking at *Da Ali G Show*, in which lines of `race' and community are blurred through plays upon person/persona, performance/authenticity, I will examine the potential of the `race' based joke to not only celebrate or defame `race,' but to call it into question. One of the ways in which *Da Ali G Show* may play with `race' in interesting ways is by drawing on tactics of comic impersonation.

Comic Impersonation:

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[75] Lewis Hyde, *Trickster makes this world : mischief, myth, and art* (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

[76] See Lott, Eric, *Love and Theft: Blackface Ministrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.* ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

The politics of impersonation are highly ambiguous. Pickering and Lockyear state that,

> Impersonation is an ambiguous term. It can be viewed positively, as for instance when we say of a certain act that it is a good impersonation or when we regard a certain comedian as an effective impersonator. It can also be viewed negatively, so drawing on other meanings of the word. This happens when we use it in its associations with imposture, duplicity, fabrication and fraudulent practice.[77]

The use of impersonation within the comic realm retains this quality of ambiguity. In the case of Ali G and Borat, the comedy of both characters often functions based on the interviewee's belief that Cohen is "authentic." Therefore, the joke only works because Cohen is a successful impersonator. However, the success of this impersonation can also be questioned for its ethical implications. Cohen's ability to play deeply offensive characters that are easily believed, may speak to, and propagate racist stereotypes. The tension within comic impersonation functions through a play upon authenticity. Cohen's ability to mimic stereotypes of Otherness could be read as challenging the authenticity and accuracy of these stereotypes. However, it is only because the notion of authenticity continues to have weight that Cohen's characters generate laughter due to their transgression of racial boundaries. If the boundary was not there, crossing it would not generate delight or anger. The psychic release that the joke provides depends upon the

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[77] Pickering, Michael and Sharon Lockyear, "The Ambiguities of Comic Impersonation" in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*. ed. Sharon Lockyear and Michael Pickering (London: Palgrave, 2005), 180.

overcoming of an internal inhibition. In the case of Cohen, if we were not psychically invested in notions of authenticity and fixed notions of identity, his impersonation would seem banal. As Pickering and Lockyear point out, the comedy of Ali G "...was appreciated as a comic impersonation because we know we cannot slip out of our social selves at will..."[78]

While "...humour in everyday life generally relies on an assumed contract between those party to it,"[79] the comic impersonation of Ali G worked by violating this contract. Interviewees were unaware that Cohen was not "authentic" as Ali G or Borat. Pickering and Lockyear state that "...such figures were excluded from the discursive relationship active within the contract, whereas audience and host or hostess shared `a delicious intimacy, which is pleasurable and powerful in itself.'"[80] Cohen's impersonations were only made funny based on both their ability to be believable to interviewees and the understanding on the part of audiences that the characters were not "authentic." Again, this points to the ambiguities of Cohen's play upon 'race' and culture. The violation of the social contract between Cohen and his interviewees points to the possibility of successful racial passing, gesturing to the instability of authenticity. However, the audience's ability to find pleasure in the disjuncture between Cohen's real identity

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[78] *Ibid,* 185.
[79] Lockyear and Pickering, 181.
[80] *Ibid,* 187.

and those of his characters might reinforce racial and cultural boundaries. The joke of Cohen's impersonation therefore worked on two seemingly contradictory levels. Firstly, the humour generated by watching an affluent, white, college educated man, play a stereotypical racial and cultural other, reinforces the salience of `race' based identity. Secondly however, the humour was also generated based on the interviewees belief that the characters were authentic.

The authors note that comedy that resonates with audiences may also carry serious implications. They state that,

> The comic offence may leak back into serious discourse, or be taken as having a serious point above and beyond the immediate comic frame in which it is uttered, either through frame-jumping or code-switching by the comedian, or through divergent responses and interpretations on the part of an individual audience member.[81]

While comic impersonation may gesture to the salience of racial and cultural boundaries, impersonation may also carry the power and possibility of mocking our investments in authenticity. So, while Ali G is read by comedian Curtis Walker as pointing to the tenacity of anti-Black racism, he is also read by Paul Gilroy as speaking to the hybrid face of multicultural Britain. Furthermore, the serious effects of Ali G and Borat may lie in their ability to force us to question the notion of an authentic self. The fact that Cohen can be read as "acting" like another race or culture may point to the inherent theatricality of identity. Again, it

[81] *Ibid*, 182.

might be useful here to think of gender drag performance.[82]

Dragging Down `Race': Impersonation and Identity

It is interesting that throughout Pickering and Lockyear's work on comic impersonation, they continually talk of playing it "straight" as compared to acts of impersonation.[83] The notion of "playing it straight" seems strangely suspect if we consider that identity is performative and not pre-given. In the case of gender drag performance, the ethical, aesthetic and political ambiguities of impersonation are again highlighted. To impersonate a "woman" when one has been born as a "man" has become an act of political and social resistance in many queer communities.[84] However, some have argued that drag may reinforce static notions of gender and corresponding notions of `race' and class, as normative notions of masculinity and femininity are often performed.[85] As Lockyear and Pickering argue, impersonation remains an ambiguous concept, made even more difficult when related to off stage and off screen acts of passing.

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[82] It is beyond the scope of this project to offer a detailed examination of the politics of `drag.' For interesting discussions concerning the political effects, implications and possibilities of drag performance see: Munoz, Jose Esteban, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), Tyler, Carol Ann, *Female Impersonation* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[83] See Lockyear and Pickering, 182, 189, 194, 196.

[84] See Taylor, Carol Ann, "Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories.* ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1996), 32-93.

[85] For an interesting discussion concerning the politics of drag in relation to `race,' class, and gender see: Halberstam, Judith, "Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene," *Social Text.* No. 52/53. *Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender.* (Autumn - Winter, 1997), 104-131.

While staged forms of ambiguity may be increasingly mainstreamed for public consumption, this does not necessarily mean that every day transgressions of racial, cultural and gender boundaries would be received so well. For example, while drag may be increasingly sold en mass to North American and European publics, the hatred of transgendered people who often transgress gender boundaries daily remains fully in tact.[86] Similarly, while Ali G might be entertaining as a racially hybrid impersonator, those that attempt to pass for another race or straddle racial and cultural boundaries in daily life, are still often met with hatred.[87] Finally, the political power and context of impersonation must be highlighted. Drag performances are often tied to socially and politically marginalized queer communities as an act of resistance against a heterosexist and patriarchal state.[88] Cohen, as mentioned in the introduction, plays with `race' in ways that may further highlight his racial and class privilege. While there are moments in which his acts of impersonation have political value, unlike drag

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[86] See: Guidotto, Nancy. "Cashing in On Queers: From Liberation to Commodification." *Canadian Online Journal of Queer Studies in Education,* Vol 2, No 1 (2006). https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/jqstudies/article/view/347/461. Guidotto asks quite sardonically and quite rightly, "Who sympathizes with the black drag queen in Harlem who gets murdered on the subway? She is just another "dead faggot" to most people, that is, if she even gets eulogized at all. For all her glamour, that "dead faggot" never joined the lucrative ranks of the now-famous drag queen RuPaul and her MAC cosmetic endorsements."

[87] Suki Ali also offers an interesting discussion of the continued racism that mixed-race youth face, and the anxiety concerning racial and cultural boundaries that they create for various racial/cultural communities and for the nation state itself. See: Ali, Suki, *Mixed Race, Post Race: New Ethnicities and Cultural Practices* (London: Berg, 2003).

[88] See Taylor, Carol Ann, "Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag" in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories.* ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1996), 32-93.

performances, his performance is not tied to a wider political community or set of radical politics. My use of the term impersonation in applying to *Da Ali G Show* will therefore attempt to look at the ambiguities of Cohen's comic play of racial and cultural authenticity. Rather than celebrating or defaming his tactics of impersonation, I will interrogate the ambivalences of this strategy. I will also draw on, and interrogate the scholarship of those who have written about the politics of "ethnic humour."

Ethnic Humour:

There has been a considerable amount of related literature written about what is termed "ethnic humour." For example, in his work *On Humour* Simon Critchley discusses the use of jokes between members of different `ethnic communities.' Critchley states that within `ethnic' traditions of humour, "...the British laugh at the Irish, the Canadians laugh at the Newfies, the Americans laugh at the Poles..."[89] He further writes of how, "...the French laugh at the Belgiums, the Belgiums laugh at the Dutch and the Dutch laugh right back."[90] However, Critchley fails to discuss `race' based jokes, focusing instead on what he terms `ethnicity' and largely focusing on white ethnicities. Lem notes that Critchley, "...curiously limits ethnicity to white/European nationalities,"[91] and

[89] Critchley, Simon, *On Humour.* (London: Routledge, 2002), 12.
[90] *Ibid.*
[91] Lem, Jason. "When I call you a broke down, slanty eyed, ching chong ho." (Masters diss., McMaster University, 2006), 12.

argues that "...there needs to be a connection drawn to race and racialisation that moves beyond ethnicity (especially white ethnicities of white-white relations), given the differential impact that the racialisation of some ethnicities has `vis' a `vis' others."[92] The focus on white ethnicities precludes a discussion of how constructions of `race' and racism, that are tied to histories of colonialism and imperialism and cause extreme power differentials between subjects play out in the realm of the comic. Billig further notes that writings concerning `ethnic humour' tend to celebrate the healthy, reciprocal nature of jokes "between communities," in ways that foreclose discussions of white privilege and racial violence. He states that "...the strategy of defending ethnic stereotyping depends upon a form of avoidance: the blatantly cruel and bigoted aspects of humour are ignored."[93]

Theories of `ethnic humour' often focus on jokes that exist between members of "ethnic communities" or exist in a situation of reciprocity, in which two ethnic or national groups make fun of each other as a means of making sense of one another. However, these writings fail to discuss `race', racism and white privilege. All ethnicities, nationalities and communities are imagined to have access to the same amount of power and resources, and to use humour for the

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[92] *Ibid.*
[93] Michael Billig, "Comic Racism and Violence" in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour.* ed. Sharon Lockyear and Michael Pickering (London: Palgrave, 2005), 42.

same ends. These theories firstly, fail to name `race' and therefore fail to see how differences in racial privilege may affect uses of humour between different "ethnic groups." Secondly, theories of ethnic humour much like other dominant approaches to humour, take a structuralist position when conceiving of subjectivity and ethnicity. Terms like "ethnicity" and "culture" are used freely, with little attention to how these identities are constructed, and may shift over time, and be produced alongside and through discourses of class, `race', nationality, gender and sexuality.

In discussing the comedy of *Da Ali G Show* I will veer away from totalizing assertions that see humour as belonging to all members of an "ethnic" group. Rather, I will examine how humour gestures to the ambivalence and slippages of fixed ideas of `race' and ethnicity.

Humour and the Unconscious:

The next dominant strain of research on the comedic focuses on the relationship that jokes have to our unconscious. Sigmund Freud believed that jokes, laughter and the comedic work to relieve unconscious anxieties and tensions. For Freud,

> ...all laugh-producing situations are pleasurable because they save psychic energy. Humour brings pleasure because it spares expenditure of ideas, and joking because it spares expenditure of inhibition. This excess, `spared', energy is relieved in the act of laughter, which serves as a kind of

safety valve.[94]

Coming from a psychoanalytic perspective Freud was interested in the deeper psychic meanings behind laughter. He concluded that "Jokes, like dreams, have hidden benefits; both permit access to the unconscious."[95] However, it is interesting to note that while Freud discusses tendentious humour in terms of sexually obscene jokes he fails to discuss the psychic operations of `race' based comedy. In his essay "Comic Racism and Violence," Billing extends the structure of Freud's argument concerning the difference between the technique of joke work and the tendentious nature of jokes to include racist humour. According to a Freudian reading of the joke, we may think we are laughing at the technique of `race' based humour(word-play, impersonation, wit) when in fact we are often laughing out of unconscious aggressions, desires and anxieties towards the imagined target of the joke. For Freud, this imagined target was often a woman, with the imagined joke teller being a man using the joke to conceal sexual anxiety and aggression towards her.[96] Freud's reading of joke-targets can be extended to include a discussion of racist speakers and the racialised body as a joke target as well. However, while Freud's overall theory is useful in examining `race' based

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[94] Provine, 16.
[95] *Ibid.*
[96] Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconcious.* (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1960), 106-143.

humour, it is interesting to consider Freud's hetero-normative and `race'-blind bias.

Pellegrini discusses the tenuous relationship that Freud's work has to questions of Jewishness. She contends that many of Freud's theories concerning the development of `normal' female sexuality could be read as a displacement of an analysis of Jewishness. She states that,

> What especially fascinates me in all this is the way that Freud's ability to minimize difference or rather some differences (of `race' and Jewishness, for example) is itself dependent upon his reproduction and maximization of other differences... He ...maximizes one relatively minor difference (`sex'), so as to minimize another (`race').[97]

Freud's inability to deal with questions of racial difference even as they haunt his own body and the body of his text however, are not sufficient reasons to abandon his work. Rather, just as Pellegrini seeks to make identifications with his theory of sexual difference and that of Jewishness, I believe Freud's work on the comic can and should be revisited for its disavowed racial story. To use psychoanalysis is not only an attempt to understand comedy, but an attempt to re-read psychoanalytic scholarship in relation to the role that `race' plays in it, even when not explicitly stated. Furthermore, it is an attempt to challenge what Pellegrini argues that Freud is guilty of, inflating the importance of one facet of identity in order to minimize another.

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[97] *Ibid*, 34.

Rereading Freud: Looking for `Race':

In *Freud, Race, and Gender* Sander Gilman discusses Freud's treatment of `race' within his theories of humour. Gilman states that,

> Freud's work on the origin of humour, on the meaning of creativity, on the interpretation of childhood and sexuality, and on the construction of hysteria all fit into the models of `universalisation' of attributes and `projection' of these attributes onto other categories of difference. Central to my own work has been Freud's covert construction of the relationship between categories of difference, such as the constructed categories of `race' and `gender'.[98]

As Gilman suggests, in his work *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* Freud universalizes a discussion of humour, jokes and the comic. In the introduction to this work Freud writes that "We have already learnt from the connection of jokes with caricature that they `must bring forward something that is concealed or hidden.'"[99] He further states that "...it is natural then that we should choose as the subjects of our investigation examples of jokes by which we ourselves have been most struck in the course of our lives and which have made us laugh the most."[100] However, while Freud makes a case for the use of jokes that touch one personally, in the next breath he seems to retract this statement. He states,

> Leaving on one side the personal motives which make me wish to gain an insight into the problem of jokes and which will come to light in the

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[98] Gilman, Sander, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993), 3
[99] Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious,* 44.
[100] *Ibid.*

> course of these studies, I can appeal to the fact that there is an intimate connection between all mental happenings—a fact which guarantees that a psychological discovery even in a remote field will be of an unpredictable value in other fields.[101]

While Freud starts off by arguing that one should study jokes which have personal resonance, he quickly retracts his statement by dismissing his own personal motives for studying jokes. I believe that Freud's ambiguous statements as to the personal nature of joking speaks to what Gilman calls the universalizing of human experience throughout his writings. Freud's text is littered with Jewish jokes. While he includes these jokes throughout his text to illustrate the technique of joke work, he fails to discuss the specific implications of racialised comedy.

For example in his section "Technique of Jokes" Freud uses this example to discuss the use of `displacement' within jokes. He states, "`Two Jews met in the neighbourhood of the bath-house. Have you taken a bath?' asked one of them. `Why?' asked the other in return. `is there one missing?'"[102] After using this joke Freud quickly dismisses any possibility of the particularities of `race' in this joke. He states that,

> It is again a Jewish joke; but this time it is only the setting that is Jewish, the core belongs to humanity in general. No doubt this example too had its unwanted complications, but fortunately they are not the same ones that have so far prevented us from seeing clearly.[103]

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[101] *Ibid,* 46.
[102] *Ibid.,* 85.
[103] *Ibid.*

As with much of this writing, Freud does not acknowledge the specificities of racialised humour. Instead, he offers a universalist reading of this comedy.

It is interesting to note that while Freud fails to discuss the particularities of the racist joke, he spends a great deal of time discussing sexually obscene jokes. As Pellegrini states, "...Freud's failure might even symptomatize the necessary failure of identification: that is, narcissistic recognition of the same in the other and aggressive disavowal of the other in the same."[104] In order to avoid repeating Freud's failures or dismissing psychoanalysis due to these absences, I will examine the work of critical `race' theorists who have made use of his work.

`Race,' Humour and the Unconscious: Kalpana Seshadri:

There has been work dealing with racialised comedy that draws on Freud's work in interesting ways. In her work *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* Seshadri-Crooks analyses George Orwell's essay "Shooting the Elephant". Drawing on Freud's notion of jokes as a release of anxiety and inhibition, she states that "The possibility of the jokes expression- usually signified by fears of native laughter- produces racial anxiety, and Orwell experiences this moment as uncanny. On the other hand," she argues that "...the containment of the joke can powerfully assist the reproduction of racial

[104] *Ibid.*

dominance."[105] However, Crooks further notes that jokes also reveal racial anxieties that exist at the level of the unconscious, by exploiting psychic repressions and maintaining their repression at the level of polite speech. Jokes tap into the unconscious, but do nothing to permanently alter the psyche. The benefit of Freud's work on the unconscious and work that follows his lead, is that it delves into questions of why we laugh. Rather than judging the comedic text in isolation, this work attempts to look at the meanings that reactions to comedy may carry. I will draw on psychoanalysis therefore, to discuss what popular reactions to racialised comedy may tell us about the psycho-social life of `race'.

Racial Melancholia and the Comic

As mentioned in the introduction to this work, I will also discuss racialised comedy in relation to Freud's notion of melancholia, and Anne Anlin Cheng's use of this concept to discuss `race' and racism. Cheng offers an outline of Freud's 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia" and insight as to how the concepts of melancholia can be applied to contemporary understandings of `race' and racism. Cheng discusses Freud's differentiation between mourning and melancholia. For Freud, mourning is a healthy response to loss because as he states, "...we rest

[105] Crooks, 355.

assured that after a lapse of time, it will be overcome."[106] Conversely melancholia is a condition in which one is "...psychically stuck." Melancholia functions as a "...chain of loss, denial and incorporation though which the ego is born."[107] According to Freud, when one suffers from melancholia they deny the loss they experience by incorporating this loss within their ego, thereby foreclosing a process of grief that could be overcome. Freud states that melancholia therefore functions paradoxically as a form of both consumption and impoverishment. He states that,

> An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different...The free libido...was withdrawn into the ego...to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego...[108]

Freud continues to discuss how the relationship between the ego and the loss object functions through a form of consumption. He states that "The ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself, and the method by which it would do so, in this oral cannibalistic stage, is by devouring it."[109] Cheng draws upon this metaphor of `eating the object' to discuss the ways in which racial Others are incorporated melancholically within American national mythology. She states

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[106] Cheng, 8.
[107] *Ibid.*
[108] *Ibid.*
[109] *Ibid.*

that "Dominant white identity in America operates melancholically—as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial."[110] For the purposes of this work, what interests me is the relationship between racial melancholia and `race' based humour. I argue that laughter may be implicated in a process of melancholia through which the other is simultaneously consumed on screen and then expelled. I further argue that laughter may work to deny our implication in a racist order and to perhaps deny the grief of historical and contemporary racisms. In looking at the comedy of *Da Ali G Show*, I believe that there are moments that humour operates both melancholically, supporting the denial of racism, and also to reveal melancholia, subverting silences concerning the psychic life of `race.' In addition to the psychoanalytic writing of Freud and those writing after him, I will also draw upon dominant post structuralist theory to discuss racialised humour.

Complicating the Joke: Reading Humour through Judith Butler:

In her work *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler writes,

> ...if the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks, then language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression.[111]

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[110] Cheng, 11.
[111] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 2.

In reading Butler alongside Freud's work on jokes, we can perhaps consider the ways in which joking is not something done by the fully formed subject, but rather that joking is itself a part of subjectivity. In relation to racialised jokes then, we can move from reading racial identity as separate from discourses of `race', of which joking is a part, to asking how racialised jokes might work to produce racialised subjects.

Rather than seeing racialised jokes as attacking the subject, I will look at how `race'-based humour in *Da Ali G Show* may hold out new possibilities for conceiving of and speaking of `race'. Furthermore, Butler's analysis complicates the distinction that Freud makes between the telling and the reception of jokes. For Freud, the technique of jokes is a linguistic one while the reception of the jokes involves the release of psychic energy. In Butler's schema, both the teller and the receiver of speech are interpellated into a certain social, psychic and linguistic order. In conjunction with this, I believe that the telling of jokes is never an innocent game of word play. Rather, as will be explored in my discussion of Ali G and Jewishness, joke-tellers may also be driven by psychic processes.

Language, Subjectivity and laughter: The performative of comic speech

Notions of power used by Western philosophers like Plato and by anti-racist scholars alike, have been troubled by the influential scholarship of post

structuralist scholars, namely Michel Foucault. For Foucault, power is productive as much as it is repressive. In his essay "Truth and Power," Foucault states that "...what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is, simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no: it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse."[112] If Foucault is right, and I believe that he is, we must read racialised comedy not as an act of utter dominance, but as being productive of racial discourses that incite new ways of thinking and speaking about `race'.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler draws on a Foucauldian understanding of power, but also uses psychoanalysis to discuss how subjects are produced by the powers that also subordinate them. Butler states that "...power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self identity."[113] Butler's assertion that power is not something externally wielded by existing subjects, but is inherent in the formation of subjectivity itself offers a new set of questions for thinking through the power dynamics behind racialised comedy. How can we analyse the power of racialised

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[112] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books 1984), 61.
[113] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 2.

laughter if we understand power not as something external to the subject but as something that forms subjectivity, that enables individuals to speak intelligibly?

In *Excitable Speech* Judith Butler discusses how injurious speech can never be separate from our lives as linguistic beings. She states that

> If we are formed in language then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start as it were, by its prior power.[114]

Butler further argues that name-calling does not only demean the subject, but may be productive of new subjectivities. She states that,

> One is not simply fixed by the name that one is called. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name one is also paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call. Thus the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyse the one it hails but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response.[115]

While Butler is dealing specifically with hate speech, I am interested in how similar arguments could be used to investigate the possibilities of 'race'-based humour. Writings on racialised comedy, whether arguing for the subversive potential of jokes or against the injuries that such speech may cause racialised subjects, still conceives of comic discourse as existing outside of the subject. What if we looked at comic discourse in the same way that Butler examines hate speech? How could the racialised joke be seen not only to ridicule or mock an

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[114] *Ibid.*
[115] *Ibid.*

existing subject, but to construct a certain social subject who is produced through comedy? I will draw upon Butler's writings concerning the productive powers of language throughout this work, in analyzing both how humour functions in *Da Ali G Show* and the popular reactions to the show. I will also draw upon other notable theories that Butler has offered to the study of identity, namely her work on gender and performativity.

Performativity and the Comic:

In her work *Bodies That Matter*, a highly influential text in feminist and queer scholarship, Judith Butler advances a notion of gender performativity. Butler complicates the earlier division that feminist theorists often made between sex and gender, by arguing that sex is materialised through an existing discourse of gender that slots "acceptable" bodies into two categories, male or female. In Butler's schema, the categories "male" and "female" exist at the level of language as the only two acceptable categories into which bodies can be understood, so bodies therefore come to be "sexed" through existing gender schemas.[116] Rather than being used to regulate an existing subject, language materializes subjects.

If we accepted that Butler's arguments concerning the performativity of sex could also be applied to `race', what might this mean for anti-racist politics and performance? If we took seriously the assertion that `race' is constructed in

[116] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1-25.

highly politicised ways, and that these constructions come to materialise bodies, we could perhaps begin to look at moments in which `race' may be revealed to be inauthentic, inessential and constructed. Pointing to the constructed nature of `race,' as a reiterative and regulated performance is not an effort to dismiss racism. Rather, acknowledging that `race' is not biological, fixed and essential challenges the foundations upon which racism rests. Pellegrini elaborates on ideas of racial performativity, stating that,

> ...it is the body which is posed as the last and first best hope of holding the line between nature and culture, `sex' and gender, and perhaps also `race' and ethnicity. The body, far from `realizing' nature, is a contested discursive site through which ideological concepts are naturalized as biology."[117]

Pellegrini further states that "Like gender and the categories it authorizes(`male' and `female' or, in another and closely related scene, `man' and `wife'), race and racial identity are historically contingent, socially constructed categories of knowledge and bodily experience."[118]

The humour of *Da Ali G Show* offers insight into the ways in which racial identities are malleable, through a mockery of the authenticity of the racialised body. Yet it also offers insight into the psychic anxieties that arise when the performative nature of identity is revealed.

It should be noted that Butler warns against equating `performativity' with

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[117] *Ibid,* 6.
[118] *Ibid.*

`performance.'[119] However, while regulated daily performatives should not be mistaken for `theatrical self representation'[120] perhaps performance can be used to think about and elucidate aspects of performativity. In her work, *Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama*, Christina Ward states that,

> Protected by theatrical conventions, the theatre opens up a space for cultural observation and contemplation that everyday performances can hardly achieve. Rather than failing to expose the constructedness of gender, theatre can become an appropriate arena to stage and upstage notions of gender, to see traditional gender concepts from a critical distance and to reflect on their inherent theatricality, not despite of but because of the face that `theatrical performance depends on the legible presence of the quotation marks, which, as described by Butler, the process of performativity as citation operates to conceal in `everyday life'"(Harris 199: 76).[121]

While Ward is discussing gender performativity and theatrical performance, I believe her arguments can also be applied to `race' and to *Da Ali G Show*. *Da Ali G Show* and other acts of staged `race' based comedy are in no way performative. However, they may work to capture recitations of `race' based discourse that offer us an inroads into thinking about how `race' is currently articulated as a performative set of gestures through the language of late capitalism. The staged *performances* of `race' in *Da Ali G Show* may also offer us insight into the

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[119] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 234.
[120] *Ibid*, 95.
[121] Christina Ward. *Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* (London: Palgrave, 2007), 22.

relationship between `race' as a *performative* set of socio-linguistic, psychically driven gestures, and uses of comic speech.

In *Love and Theft*, Lott states that "...the engagement on the part of cultural critics with poststructuralist discourse, and a dismantling of binary racial categories in favour of multiply determined and positioned subjects has begun to trouble the notion of `racial' representation itself".[122] Just as Lott says of the Blackface mask, within a post-modernist framework racial humour can be examined"...as less a *repetition* of power relations than a *signifier* for them-a distorted mirror reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which...there exist lags, unevenness, multiple determinations.'"[123]. While many scholars who write about `race' based comedy still conceive of identity as being fixed and of comedy as being a wholly rational process, post-structuralist and psychoanalytic approaches to `race' and representation offer in-roads into studying the nuanced worlds of both laughter and `race.'

Rather than judging racial humour as either a wholly negative testament of the inability to take people of colour seriously, or as an expression of a mythical folk culture, post structuralist and psychoanalytic approaches offer insight into how racialised humour *functions* in often ambivalent and uneven ways. Other

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[122] Lott, 8.
[123] Lott, 4.

approaches that centre around `race' based ambivalence are found in post colonial theory, namely the work of Homi Bhabha.

Homi Bhabha: Comedy and the Post Colonial

Homi Bhabha's, *The Location of Culture* is a key text in postcolonial scholarship. Bhabha bridges cultural studies, postcolonialism and psychoanalysis to advance key ideas of colonial mimicry. I will attempt to outline his use of this concept and how it is relevant for a study of racialised humour. The notion of mimicry is one that I used in writing my masters thesis, "Lighten Up! Humour and `Race' in the Work of Margaret Cho."[124] I argued for a reading of Margaret Cho's humour as a strategy of mimicry. Bhabha states that,

> Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask: it is not what Cesaire describes as `colonization-thingification' behind which there stands the essence of the presence Africaine. The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object.[125]

Cho uses humor to not only mock her distance from the colonial subject, but to draw attention to the construction of this subject. For example after one vignette in which Cho describes an article in which she is falsely quoted as saying, "When I get heavy I just go back to that Asian way of eating." She performs this `Asian

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[124] Atluri, Tara. *Lighten Up!? Humour as Anti-Racism in the Work of Asian American Comic Margaret Cho* (Masters diss., Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto, 2002).
[125] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 88.

way' taking on East Asian accent, but ultimately mocks this essentialism saying "Come on, how Mulan,"[126] gesturing to the Walt Disney film in ways that point to the construction and commodification of supposed cultural authenticity. In this gesture Cho is using her double vision as someone with access to dominant Asian stereotypes and to an understanding of these stereotypes as fictions, to both establish distance from the stereotype, and to mock it through hyperbolic repetition.[127] In his essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse" Bhabha discusses the comic effects that are produced in the repetitive gestures of colonialism. Bhabha states that,

> If colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce. For the epic intention of the civilizing mission, `human and not wholly human' in the famous words of Lord Rosebery, `writ by the finger of the Divine' often produces a text rich in the traditions of trompe-l'ail, irony, mimicry and repetition. In this comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge.[128]

In this poignant essay, Bhabha goes on to define colonial mimicry as

> ...the desire for a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.[129]

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[126] *I'm the One That I Want.* Dir. Lionel Colman. Per. Margaret Cho. (New York: A Cho Taussig Production, 2000).
[127] Atluri, 100-155.
[128] *Ibid,* 122.
[129] *Ibid.*

Bhabha argues that the figure of the mimic is at once an outgrowth and a disruption of the totalizing power of colonial discourse.

For my purposes, what is interesting is that Bhabha continually gestures to the ironic and comedic effects of mimicry. The purity of an essential colonial culture is continually mocked by the figure of the colonial mimic who comes to repeat colonial norms and values, but always in a way that becomes parodic of essentialised identities. As Bhabha states, "What emerges between mimesis and mimicry *is a writing, a mode of representation,* that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable."[130] Bhabha goes on to state that "The desire to emerge as `authentic' through mimicry- through a process of writing and repetition- is the final irony of partial representation."[131] Mimicry ironises and parodies essentialised notions of identity, by revealing the performative nature of identity. Furthermore, mimicry mocks ideas of nationalism, by revealing the constructed nature of national identities. In repeating the norms of colonial rule, the figure of the colonial mimic on the one hand lends power to these norms, while also destabilizing them by virtue of their ability to mimic them. Bhabha argues that `mimicry' is not a form of `false consciousness' in which the colonial

[130] *Ibid,* 125.
[131] *Ibid,* 126.

subject's essential self is stunted by the gaze of the colonizer. Rather he states that mimics are,

> ...figures of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as `inappropriate' colonial subjects. A desire that, through the repetition of partial presence, which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority.[132]

The mimic, and the process of mimicry subverts the totalizing attempts at power produced by colonial authority. For my own work, I am interested in how colonial mimics might serve as comic presences, revealing the ironies of discourses of empire which attempt to both dehumanize and civilize a native population. I am interested in how Bhabha's notion of mimicry lends itself to an analysis of parodic and theatricalised gestures on the part of colonized subjects. Furthermore, I am interested in the parallel he draws between mimicry and Freud's notion of the fetish. Bhabha states that "...the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them. Similarly, mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its `otherness,' that which it disavows."[133] The fetish both reinscribes and troubles modes of authority, as it rearticulates dominant forms of power in terms of desire and fantasy. Similarly, the figure of the mimic plays with and ironises the authority of colonial rule by showing

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[132] *Ibid.*
[133] *Ibid,* 130.

essentialised ideas to be laughable in their ability to be hyperbolically, ironically, and slyly repeated.

To Summarise:

In this chapter, I have offered an overview of some of the dominant ways in which comedy concerning `race' is often conceived of. I began by discussing approaches to `race' based humour which read racialised comedy as being racist or anti-racist. I further discussed theories of "ethnic humour," in which `race' fails to be named and the relationship between language/subjectivity is conceived of only in mimetic terms. While these theories are useful and engaging, I feel that attention to post structuralism, psychoanalysis and post colonial theory complicate a reading of the `race' based joke as either good or bad, and a reading of `ethnic humour' as well. In analyzing *Da Ali G Show*, and its subsequent spin-off films, I will attempt to discuss how the racialised joke operates through the lense of these theoretical frameworks. I will now discuss methodological frameworks for studying humour, `race,' and popular culture. I will offer an overview of debates regarding methodology in cultural studies and a justification of my use of primarily textual, discursive analysis.

Chapter Two

A Method to the Madness: Methodological Considerations

Postmodernism and `Race':

In "Waiting on the end of the world?" Chambers discusses the importance of post-modernism in challenging a Eurocentric form of rational thought that continues to dominate academic writing in North America. Chambers states that,

> To abandon the confident appropriation of meaning and representation, and to acknowledge that the languages of nomination are neither neutral nor transparent, can be particularly hard for the pragmatic formation of Anglo-American empiricism to digest. [134]

To discuss `race' without problematising the concept often leads one to reify racism. Chambers draws on the work of Edward Said to discuss the politics of writing and representing `race'. In *Orientalism* Said argues that,

> ...the `knowledge' that constitutes the field of `Orientalism,' for instance- is at the same time a codification of the historical powers invested in the paradigm and in their underlying relation to the `real': Eurocentrism, imperialism, and racism, for example.[135]

Chambers goes on to note that "Such a breach in `reality' can therefore be fruitfully exposed and explored in order to deviate and unpack the languages that previously blocked our passage to the recognition of other realities."[136] To speak of Otherness in a language that fails to problematise rational, liberal, Euro-centric categorizations lends weight to these categorizations. Anti-racist scholarship that only seeks to document racism within institutions also fails to look at other forms

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[134] *Chambers, Ian. "Waiting on the End of the World," Journal of Communication Inquiry 10: 2 (1986): 99-103.*
[135] *Ibid.*
[136] Chambers, 100.

of social life, and alternative discourses through which subjectivity is formed, negotiated and contested. Chambers states that,

> Those areas traditionally most excluded from the `political'-identifications secured in gender, race, sexuality, the familial, but also in the psychic and the poetic (in sum, what was once consigned to the anonymous world of the `private') - provide the languages in which daily sense is usually secured and where eventually more extensive communal and social meanings (politics) take shape.[137]

Post modernism has challenged divisions between public and private worlds and between high and low culture. For my purposes, I am interested in studying popular culture as a serious site through which meanings around identity are formed, negotiated and contested.

The British cultural studies school has been instrumental in taking popular culture seriously, in an effort to break down distinctions between political and popular knowledge.[138] Attention to popular culture on the part of academics makes sense given the central role of culture industries in contemporary urban landscapes. Chambers states that,

> ...the experience of the modern city and languages of popular music, cinema and television, together with the metropolitan cycles of fashion and style, produced subjects who appropriated and transformed the world they inhabited without the approval of institutional mandarins.[139]

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[137] *Ibid.*
[138] *Ibid.*
[139] *Ibid,* 101.

Far from being inconsequential, the Cultural Studies school shows how culture industries are integral to the subjectivity, political, social and economic livelihood of many people, particularly those whose presence and interests are often excluded from the world of formal party politics.

Researching Media: Discourse analysis and Psychoanalysis

Within cultural studies, debates often arise surrounding the nature of empirical and ethnographic research versus purely textual analysis. In his essay, "On the Politics of Empirical Research," Ien Ang outlines debates in British cultural studies concerning theoretical versus ethnographic analysis of media texts. Ang states that the reading of texts was conceived of in early "screen theory" as entirely dictated by textual structures."[140] This textual and theoretical approach was challenged by scholars like Morely who used empirical research,

> ...to open up critical discourse on television audiences, and to sensitize it for the possibility of struggle in the practices of television use, and consumption- a struggle whose outcome cannot be known in advance, for the simple reason that encounters between television and audiences are always historically specific and context- bound.[141]

However, the debates between theoretical and empirical researchers remain unresolved. While those who employ ethnographic methods are critical of the

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[140] *Ibid.*
[141] *Ibid.*

certainty with which theorists often make meaning out of texts, empirical methodology is also a theoretical and ideological project. As Ang notes,

> ...scrutinizing media audiences is not an innocent practice. It does not take place in a social and institutional vacuum...because interpretations always inevitably involve the construction of certain representations of reality (and not others) they can never be `neutral' and merely `descriptive.[142]

Ang further notes that "...the `empirical' captured in either quantitative or qualitative form, does not yield self-evident meanings. Rather, it is only through the interpretive framework constructed by the researcher that understanding of the `empirical' comes about."[143] The interpretive framework that guides empirical research is evident in studies pertaining to `race.'

'Race' and Research:

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuwai Smith discusses the relationship between research, racism, and colonialism. Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Tuwai Smith shows that research has historically been linked to colonization and the imposition of a Eurocentric worldview onto those constructed as `other.'[144]*Decolonizing Methodologies* also demonstrates that far from being a thing of the past, many Western researchers continue to study the racial and cultural `other' using tools of

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[142] *Ibid.*
[143] *Ibid.*
[144] Tuwai Smith, Linda, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 42-43.

Western objectivity and rationality.[145] Contemporary mainstream Western social science research often bares a trace of the colonial origins of research, and therefore often works to justify racism and the ongoing oppression of non-white, non-Western subjects.[146] It is important for me to point out Tuwai Smith's work, because it points to the ethical and political problems of research as it relates to `race.' While there are many research methods and researchers that are anti-racist and anti-colonial, conducting empirical research does not make one objective or apolitical. Rather, as both Tuwai Smith and Said[147] demonstrate, `research' has always been deeply ideological.

For my purposes, I will do a discursive analysis of Ali G, not because I discount the value of empirical research, but because I see my project as being a theoretical one.

Discourse Analysis:

In his work "Encoding/Decoding" Stuart Hall states that

> ...while in no way wanting to limit research to `following only those leads which emerge from content analysis, we must recognize that the discursive form of the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange (from the viewpoint of circulation), and that the moments of `encoding' and `decoding', though only `relatively autonomous' in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are determinate moments.[148]

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[145] *Ibid,* 47-50, 58-59.
[146] *Ibid,* 78-83.
[147] See: Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1979).
[148] Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Media and Cultural Studies Key Works.* ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd 2001), 164.

My interest in Ali G is not so much in individual responses to his work, but rather in the various discourses that circulate in order to make meaning and specifically comedic meaning out of his work. A discursive analysis does not foreclose the importance or possibility of empirical work. However, this project attempts to use existing post modernist theory to analyse comedic discourse and discourses of `race' within *Da Ali G Show.*

In order to focus this project and to complete a thorough discursive analysis of the text, I have chosen to focus on deconstructing the content of the show rather than individual audience responses to the show. This allows for a cogent analysis of the show's content, while also arguing alongside post modern cultural theorists about the primary role that discourse plays in structuring realities. As Hall states, "Reality exists outside of language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse."[149] The idea that one can ascertain the "real" meaning of texts through empirical research ignores how these "realities" are articulations of various discursive positions.

I take seriously the work of Michel Foucault and the post colonial, cultural studies, feminist and queer scholars who write after him. Rather than seeing the subject as the owner and unmediated speaker of their ideas, I would argue that

[149] *Ibid.*

subjects are produced through language. Furthermore, their ideas are part of larger discourses which have long and complex histories of signification.[150] Hall discusses the role of discourse in producing media texts. Hall states that within mass media, "...the event must become a `story' before it can become a communicative event. Before this message can have an `effect'(however defined), satisfy a `need' or be put to a `use,' it must first be `appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded."[151] Cultural studies, particularly the work of Hall offers one level of interpretation in discussing how meaning is made out of media texts. I believe that a second level of interpretation can be made using psychoanalysis.

Psycho-analysis and Cultural Studies:

In their work *Psycho-Politics and Cultural Desires,* authors Jan Campbell and Janet Harbord discuss the relevance of psychoanalysis to cultural theory. Campbell and Harbord argue that cultural studies needs psychoanalysis in order to develop a nuanced understanding of how subjects interact with culture. They state that,

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[150] For a more detailed discussion concerning the relationship between subjectivity, language and discourse see: Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
[151] *Ibid.*

> In the absence of a psychoanalytic framework, cultural theory lacks a model of subjectivity, a model crucial to the understanding of the way in which culture is produced and operates.[152]

Campbell and Harbord argue that cultural studies needs psychoanalysis to understand the complex ways in which people interact with popular images. They ask:

> How, for example, is it possible to understand the commercial success of fantasy texts such as films that reproduce the same narrative sequences over and again- that we pay to see not just Nightmare on Elm Street, but Nightmare on Elm Street II and III? What model of audience engagement informs the legislation of culture in the instance of censorship? Can we monitor and comprehend the way that an audience engages with culture by empirical measures alone?[153]

Harbord and Campbell argue that these questions point to the need to open a dialogue between cultural studies and psychoanalysis, one that entertains the possibility that how people engage with cultural texts may be, at least in part, beyond the reach of rational explanation.

I believe that psychoanalysis offers important insight into how pleasure is derived and meaning is made out of popular cultural texts. Hall draws upon psychoanalysis to discuss the case of the Hottentot Venus. Saartje(Sarah) Baartman was an African woman brought to Europe and put on display for European audiences. Her body, particularly the size and shape of her buttocks

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[152] Campbell, Jan and Janet Harbord, *Psycho-Politics and Cultural Desires* (London: Routledge 1998), 1.
[153] *Ibid.*

was emphasized by audiences in a spectacle of racialised, gendered and sexual violence. In analyzing Baartman's story, Hall draws upon the notion of the fetish. Baartman's Buttock's acted as a fetish object used to disavow the desire to look at her genitals. [154] This desire was grounded in deeply racist Eugenicist thinking that argued against the humanity of Black subjects.[155] Hall states that fetishism, "...involves the substitution of an `object' for some dangerous and powerful forbidden force." [156] I will return to Hall's reading of the Hottentot Venus later, in reference to *Da Ali G Show*. For now, what is useful is that Hall draws upon psychoanalysis to analyse the pleasure that one derives from viewing racially charged and racist images and texts. Psychoanalysis allows a reading of responses to racial imagery that moves beyond solely rational and economic impulses.

`Race' and Psychoanalysis:

In her essay, "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," Linda Martin Alcoff discusses the paradox of `race' that began with the advent of liberalism and still haunts us today. Alcoff states that "Visible difference is still the route to classification and therefore knowledge, and yet visible difference threatens the liberal universalistic concepts of truth and justice by invoking the specter of relativism."[157] Alcoff continues by stating that,

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[154] *Ibid.*
[155] *Ibid.*
[156] Hall, *Representation*, 266.
[157] Alcoff, 268.

> ...the resultant juxtaposition between universalist legitimation narratives that deny or trivialize difference(one might think of Habermas, here, or Rawls) and the detailed taxonomies of physical, moral, and intellectual human difference (as, for example, in the recent bestselling book *The Bell Curve*) is one of the greatest antinomies of modernism.[158]

If we can rationally understand `race' to be a construct and if liberalism espouses a rhetoric of universalism where visual differences are said to be unimportant, how can we make sense of the pleasure that is derived from racially charged imagery? Specifically, if `race' can be rationalized to be a falsity and can be dismissed within liberal discourses of speech, how does the racially charged joke function? I believe that psychoanalysis is useful in understanding the function of race based humour, in that this humour works by tapping into disavowed anxieties and emotions concerning `race.'

In her work *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian analysis of race,* Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks draws on the work of both Freud and Lacan in analyzing `race' and humour. Firstly, Crooks draws on the work of Brennan who in, *History After Lacan(1993)* discusses what she terms

> ...the foundational fantasies of modern societies: a psychotic fantasy that by conceiving of the subject as the origin, cause, and end of knowledge wreaks incalculable havoc upon the environment. Such a fantasy presupposes an entirely self-contained and autonomous subject that is characterized by the dominance of the narcissistic ego, severed from all forms of intersubjectivity.[159]

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[158] *Ibid.*
[159] Crooks, 5.

Crooks then goes on to discuss `race' as being part of this fantasy. She states that,

> ...perhaps we can consider race itself as a symptom of what Brennan terms the `ego's era,' when objectification and dominance of others and of the environment are paramount. Among the many insights she offers about the historicity of such a subject of knowledge, Brennan suggests that the dominance of the visual is a symptom of such `social psychosis.'[160]

If we read Crooks and Brennan alongside Alcoff's discussion of liberal societies that deny difference while continuing to base judgements on visual appearances, it seems that discourses of `race' within contemporary societies are fraught with paradoxes.

To see `race' challenges the disembodied principles of liberal universalism that modern societies purport. The notion that "we are all the same inside" and that "everyone is equal" is continuously undercut by our ability to see, name and act according to visual signifiers of `race'. If we see otherness and act on it, then we must accept that liberalism is a farce, that we exist not as autonomous subjects but in relation to a whole host of Others who we recognize, categorise and treat in relation to our selves.[161] However, to recognize and acknowledge the falsities of liberalism may be too much for some. This is the point at which things often become funny.

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[160] *Ibid.*

[161] Also see: Ahmed, Sara, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000).

In her essay "Whiteness and the elephant joke" Crooks draws on Freud's 1929 text, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious.* Under the category of tendentious jokes Freud discusses obscene and sexual jokes which he argues stand in for sexual contact, and hostile or aggressive jokes which he argues "...open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible."[162] Crooks argues that Freud's understanding of tendentious jokes is most useful for understanding the anxiety of Whiteness that she sees as driving laughter at racially charged jokes.

We can understand laughter in the face of `race' I believe, only if we look at the psychic anxieties and inhibitions that the joke both works to reveal and conceal. Drawing on Freud, laughter at racially charged humour can be read not as literal, rational enjoyment, but as pleasure derived from a release of anxiety concerning `race'. We enjoy laughing at `race' as a way of containing actual anxieties, aggressions, desires and fears about `race'. Furthermore, if we read racially charged humour in the context of liberal societies in which discourses of difference are denied under tenets of liberalism, laughter works to relieve anxieties concerning the continued importance of racial difference despite claims of "colour blindness" and equality. Racially charged humour therefore cannot be read as a literal mockery of `race' or as just a joke. Rather, it speaks to how we

[162] Crooks, 90.

deal with psychic anxieties concerning `race' within contemporary cultures that claim not to see colour, while still obsessing over the visual.

Attention to psychoanalysis when discussing racialised comedy also stops one from falling into a moralistic trap that often taints mainstream North American anti-racist scholarship. Lane draws on the work of Frantz Fanon to argue that "...psychoanalysis insists that we cannot treat subjects and politics as entirely rational categories. Such emphasis helps us unpack the psycho historical dead-lock that Fanon once called a `Manichaeism delirium', in which whiteness seems identical to virtue and harmony. Fanon,"[163] Lane states,

> ...to put this sardonically: `Moral consciousness implies a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and an opposing black part. In order to achieve morality, it is essential that the black, the dark, the Negro vanish from consciousness.[164]

To analyse racialised humour as being right or wrong, turns `race' into a moral issue. Turning `race' into an issue of morals frames debates around racial representation and discourse in moralistic, rational terms that are themselves based in racial hierarchies. Furthermore, the debates about right or wrong do nothing to stop the laughter. Rather than asking whether racialised comedy is right or wrong, psychoanalysis teaches us ask how and why we laugh at `race'.

Fanon and the figure of the child

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[163] Lane, 14.
[164] *Ibid.*

In *Black Skin White Masks* Frantz Fanon discusses the violence that a racist gaze enacts on the corporeal schema of the man of colour. Fanon's essay "The fact of blackness" begins with his body being placed into a racist linguistic order through which he is interpellated into Blackness,

> "Look a Negro!" The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement. "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened! Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.[165]

While much has been written about Fanon's intervention into psychoanalysis and philosophy, less has been said about the figure of the child who calls Fanon into being. For my purposes it is both interesting and important to consider why it is a child that names `race'. In *Love and Theft,* Lott discusses the comedy of post antebellum minstrel shows. He states that,

> ...according to Freud...spectators indulge in lost moments of childish pleasure evoked by the antics of children, or of `inferior' people who resemble them. The great infectiousness of minstrel performances, I maintain, owed much to these childish sources.[166]

Reading Fanon alongside Lott, it seems that the figure of the child and of childish speech permits a discourse in which `race' can be openly named. Humour acts as a means through which the openness and irrationality of racial discourses can be enacted by adult speakers in ways that revisit the open, often amoral and lewd ways in which children speak.

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[165] Fanon, 112.
[166] Lott, 143.

By invoking childish speech patterns, humour reveals the unconscious and unspoken ideologies of `race' that lie dormant in the world of polite liberal adult speech. The pleasure that is derived according to both Lott and Freud, from laughing at the taboos of racist speech, comes from the release of the aggression and fear that surround `race'. The fear of speaking openly about `race' is managed through comedic discourse which allows a break from rational adult speech. The white spectators and performers of the minstrel show used comedy as a means of breaking from liberal adult speech and revisiting the honesty, rudeness and politically dubious speech of childhood.

For my purposes, I want to argue that the characters of Ali G and Borat, two primary figures in *Da Ali G Show* employ the same naiveté of children, engaging in types of bodily humour, ridicule, and breaking of taboos that are childish, and tap into the lost pleasure of infantile speech. This childish banter reveals a great deal about the suppressions of discourses of `race', sexuality and the body in western liberal discourse.

However, while the child may have the ability to break with the rational world of adult speech in ways that subvert the status quo, the figure of the immigrant and/or racialised other as childlike, is in danger of reinscribing

existing racist practices of infantilisation.[167] While the use of childlike innocence in both Ali G and Borat may be a comedic device, the humour may also function based on deep seated anxieties concerning the full humanity of racialised bodies. The joke threatens to reinscribe heinous and violent stereotypes in which Black and immigrant masculinities are infantilised, thereby stripping people of colour of humanity.

Psycho-analysis and film

In her foundational essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Laura Mulvey

discusses how patriarchal culture helps to structure both the gaze of dominant filmmakers and dominant audiences. Mulvey looks at film through a psycho-social lense, focusing on how pleasure from film derives from a wider set of political, social and psychic discourses. Furthermore, her work is groundbreaking in that she uses filmic texts to make larger claims about the psychic life of patriarchal and sexual norms.

One of Mulvey's central arguments in this piece touches on the ways in which cinematic pleasure is tied to patriarchal pleasure. She states that,

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[167] For a good discussion concerning racism and the infantilisation of people of colour see: Puwar, Nirmal, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender, and Bodies Out of Place* (London: Berg, 2004), 60. Incidentally, Nuwar points to Frantz Fanon as a scholar who associated infantilisation with racism. She then connects this to the contemporary labour market. Puwar writes, "In the occupation world, infantilisation involves women and racialised groups being imagined as much more junior, than they actually are"(60).

> The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pinups to striptease, from Ziegfiels to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combined spectacle and narrative.[168]

Mulvey's work can be easily critiqued for its inability to deal with how questions of sexuality, class, and `race' complicate ideas of patriarchy.

In *Performance Anxieties*, Pellegrini draws upon Mulvey's work to analyse Sandra Bernhard's film *Without You, I'm Nothing.* In the film Bernhard revists a history of Black/Jewish tensions by playing a white female subject who appropriates Black diva culture. Pellegrini notes that while Mulvey may locate the `unpleasure' of the male spectator in the castration anxiety produced by the woman on screen, Bernhard's film produces a sense of `unpleasure' that is based not only in gender but also in `race.' Pellegrini concludes that "To the extent that Bernhard may be seen to pose a threat to her audience's pleasure, that threat must be conceptualized as the anxious site/sighting of sexual *and* racial difference."[169] The important point that I take from Pellegrini's analysis is that concepts from feminist film theory may be useful in understanding the ways in which `race' comes to structure spectatorship.

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[168] *Ibid,* 346.
[169] *Ibid.*

'Race' and film:

In "Nightmare of the Uncoordinated White-folk": Race, Psychoanalysis, and H.D's *Borderline*" Jean Walton offers an analysis of the racial politics of the film *Borderline* using a psychoanalytic framework. *Borderline*, directed by Kenneth Macpherson is an interesting case in that the film was produced by the POOL group, a group of filmmakers who were especially interested in psychoanalysis. After one of the first screenings of the film Macpherson wrote,

> I decided to make Borderline with a 'subjective use of inference.' By this I meant that instead of the method of externalized observation, dealing with objects(as in Sach's discussion of Einstein), I was going to take my film into the minds of the people in it...To take the action, the observation, the deduction, the reference, into the labyrinth of the human mind, with its queer impulses and tricks, its unreliability, its stresses and obsessions, its half-formed deductions, its glibness, its occasional amnesia, its fantasy, suppressions and desires."[170]

Walton problematises Macpherson's writing, arguing that he "...posited a universal 'human mind' whose essential labyrinthine nature was shared by male and female, black and white."[171] I would argue that this notion of a universal mind not only informs the construction of characters in the film, but also assumes that the audience member who relates and reacts to the film has this assumed universal mind.

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[170] Walton, Jean, "Nightmare of the Uncoordinated White-folk in Race, Psychoanalysis, and H.D's *Borderline,*" in *The Psychoanalysis of Race.* ed. Christopher Lane (London: Routledge), 400.
[171] *Ibid.*

What is useful however about Macpherson's writing and Walton's analysis is that both authors take the psychic life of film seriously. However, while Macpherson treats these psychic processes as universal, Walton problematises this by looking at how the film constructs the subjectivity of characters differently according to `race'. For my purposes, I will look at how the comedy of Ali G works by exploiting psychic feelings about `race', and how these psychic processes are always informed by societal, political and cultural contexts.

In his essay, "The Epistemology of Race and Black American Film Noir: Spike Lee's Summer of Sam as Lynching Parable" Dan Flory argues that African American filmmakers use the concepts of film noir to provide "...critical evidence for claims advanced by work in the epistemology of race."[172] Flory uses the Spike Lee film *Summer of Sam* to offer insight into how film noir is altered by centering questions of `race'. He further shows how Black film noir acts as a means through which larger philosophical questions concerning the role of `race' in challenging universal subjectivity and morality are brought to light. For my purposes, I am interested in looking at how racialised comedy changes the nature of comedic discourse, and also how it may speak to larger theoretical and philosophical questions concerning constructions of `race'.

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[172] Flory, Dan, "The Epistemology of Race and Black American Film Noir: Spike Lee's Summer of Sam as Lynching Parable," *Film and Knowledge: Essays on the Integration of Images and Ideas.* ed. Kevin Stoehr (New York: McFarland 2002) 176.

Just as Flory uses *Summer of Sam* to write back to film theory, by looking at how questions of `race' complicate film noir, I will also use *Da Ali G Show* to write back to theories of popular culture and specifically to discourses of the comedic. Furthermore, just as Flory uses *Summer of Sam* to reflect upon the epistemology of `race', I will use racialised comedy as a means of reflecting upon post colonial, post modernist and psycho analytic theories of `race'. Flory concludes that,

> If we view *Summer of Sam* in conjunction with studies in the epistemology of race, its analysis brings out the ways in which its viewers—particularly its white viewers—need to attend to aspects of race in ordinary life. As such, this film joins forces with other Black American noirs...in exposing how a distorted social epistemology undergirds institutional forms of white supremacy.[173]

Far from being apolitical or obscure, Flory uses philosophical theory to show films subversive potential, and to reflect on epistemological questions concerning `race.' Flory uses theoretical texts dealing with `race' and contemporary popular culture to make broader conclusions concerning the nature of `race' in contemporary social life. He argues that "Juxtaposing Black American film noir with recent discussions of race in philosophy, then, can highlight elements depicting undetected aspects of daily life that betray a raced sense of knowledge and cognition."[174] Like Flory's work, I will attempt to read media texts in

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[173] *Ibid,* 186.
[174] *Ibid.*

conjunction with theoretical works to make wider claims concerning how `race' operates at the social and psychic level.

Queer Theory:

One of the great drawbacks that I have found in looking at theories of `race' and post colonial theory is their disengagement with feminist and queer theory. The work of canonical post colonial scholars like Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha can be critiqued from a feminist and queer perspective, that asks how questions of racial alienation and subject formation are always negotiated through questions of sexual difference.[175] Furthermore, in looking specifically at questions of language, representation and psychic formation, contemporary queer theory offers some of the most innovative and cogent analysis to date.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I wish to draw a parallel between racialised comedies and drag performance, as both being moments in which categories of identity are revisited and possibly destabilized through acts of mimesis.

If we accepted that Judith Butler's arguments concerning the performativity of sex could also be applied to `race', what might this mean for anti-racist politics and performance? I believe that if we took seriously the assertion that `race' is constructed in highly politicised ways, we could begin to

[175] See Gwen Bergner, "Who is this Masked Woman? Or, the role that gender plays in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*" *PMLA*, Vol. 110, No. 1, Special Topic: Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition (Jan., 1995), 75-88

examine how `race' may be interrupted in ways that gesture to the constructed nature of racial identities. Racially charged humour may offer insight into how racial identities are malleable, while gesturing to the psychic anxieties that arise when the performative nature of identity is revealed.

Racial Performativity: Complicating associations

Theories of gender performativity cannot be automatically translated into explanations of `race.' This difference between gender/sexual and `race' based identities are significant and problematise the easy alignment of gender/queer theory and `race'. However, I believe that rather than dismissing any potential for gender/queer theory to be used to apply to matters of `race', questions of racial performativity point to the complicated nature of racial identity and the way in which it shifts across time and place and in relation to other intersections of gender, sexuality, class, ability, etc.

For example, Gwen Bergner states that "In the Freudian/Lacanian scenario, sexual difference is signified by the literal and corporeal penis, which corresponds, inexactly, to the intangible signifier of sociosymbolic power, the phallus."[176] In the Freudian/Lacanian schema sexual difference is organized around the phallus, with women coming to symbolize lack as they often lack penises.

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[176] Bergner, 7.

However, in the colonial schema, difference is organized not only around the phallus but around skin colour. Bergner states that "To say that the phallus corresponds to whiteness is not to unhinge the phallus from the penis, but to complicate the association."[177] If we read Bergner alongside Butler's notion of gendered and sexed bodies coming into being through language, we can see that attention to `race' complicates both queer theories notions of performativity and points to how `race' always comes into being through categories of sex/gender. If sexed/gendered bodies are interpellated into being, named as male or female which causes them to form as such, how does `race' complicate this?

For my purposes, in looking at *Da Ali G Show*, I am specifically interested in how `race' comes to be performative through sexual/gender categories. Specifically, in the case of *Da Ali G Show*, I will look at how `race' comes to be interpellated through notions of masculinity.

Furthermore, I would like to problematise the assertion that Bergner makes in relation to racial difference being signified by skin alone. Bergner draws specifically on the work of Frantz Fanon, who writing of Black experience in France, centers discussions of `race' around skin. However, for my purposes I am interested in how `race' in contemporary urban societies may be signified by other factors such as dress, accent, speech pattern, and assumed cultural and

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[177] *Ibid.*

religious difference. While Fanon was dealing specifically with post colonial Black experience in 1960's France, I would argue that meanings around `race' have changed in contemporary urban centers due to the proliferation of `race' based signifiers in commodity cultures and due to the increased migration of immigrants from across the globe, all of whom are racialised in different ways.

The fact that Sacha Baron Cohen who plays Ali G has been critiqued for "acting Black" despite the fact that he does not appear in Black face points to the ways in which `race' can be performed and mimicked through other signifiers aside from skin colour.

While I do not wish to discount the salience of skin colour in determining racialised experience, I would like to use the concept of performativity in relation to Ali G to discuss how `race' may come into being through acts of naming that produce racial significations. How does `race' come to be formed through linguistic categories that then determine speech, dress, movement and attitude? How are these categories sexed/gendered? I will use notions of performance and performativity from feminist and queer theory firstly, to discuss how attention to `race' may complicate this theory and secondly, to explore the potential of race-based humour to subvert notions of essentialism by gesturing to the performative nature of identity.

To Summarise:

I have offered an overview of some of the major theoretical frameworks that I believe will be best suited to discuss the comedy of Sacha Baron Cohen. While I understand the importance of empirical audience research, I do not believe that it is best suited to my study which will attempt to look at what comedic discourses tell us about how `race' operates at the level of language, and psycho-socially. In structuring my analysis of *Da Ali G Show* I will look at particular characters and scenes from the television series, and analyse how humour and `race' operate using the different theoretical frameworks I have outlined. I will now turn to an analysis of the various controversies that have been caused by *Da Ali G Show* and its subsequent spin off films. I will also discuss the overall ethics of laughing at `race' based humour.

Chapter Three

Lighten Up?! Analysing the Controversy surrounding Ali G

Analysing controversy concerning Da Ali G Show

Da Ali G Show has gained critical acclaim in the United Kingdom and increasingly throughout the world. Furthermore, Cohen is gaining a North American fan base as he has released two films in the North American market featuring the characters Ali and Borat.[178] However, Cohen is not without his critics. Two major critiques seem to involve the characters of Ali and Borat, and be leveled on the grounds of racial and cultural inauthenticity and the reading of Cohen's comedy as racist.

For my purposes I am interested in the strong, often visceral reactions that people have to comedy that touches on `race' and nationality. I would argue that jokes concerning racial and national identity speak to the deep psychic and social investments that we have in ideas of `race' and national belonging. These investments cannot be divorced from the political contexts in which they take shape.[179] Furthermore, I am interested in exploring how comedy itself can produce negative reactions. I want to examine the debates concerning Ali G and Borat to look at the limits of parody and the ethical dilemmas that surround *Da Ali G Show*.

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[178] See: "Sacha Baron Cohen" Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacha_Baron_Cohen. (accessed: November 27, 2007).

[179] See Howitt, Dennis and Kwame and Owusu-Bempah, "Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour," *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (London: Palgrave, 2005).

Why does comedy concerning `race' and national identity cause such strong reactions? What do these reactions tell us about the psychic and social life of both comedy and `race'? As discussed earlier, I will draw on Judith Butler's writings on hate speech and censorship to explore the politics and possibilities of regulating racialised comedy.

The Ethics of Laughter

Philosophically, discussions of the comedic have often focused on ethical debates. In her work, *The Pleasure of Fools: Essays in the Ethics of Laughter*, Jure Gantar states that "...in the analyses of humour and comedy there is nary an attempt to disguise the demand for maintaining a certain moral standard."[180] Gantar goes on to discuss how throughout Western philosophy laughter has been "...associated with atheism, immorality and disorderliness."[181] Gantar further argues that even within post modernist writings concerning the comedic, laugher is often seen as being unethical. For example, in her work, *Comedy: A Mastery of Discourse,* Susan Purdie offers an account of how language functions within the comedic realm. However, even Purdie concludes that laughter is decidedly unethical stating that joking works to "...reinforce existing structures of exaltation or abjection."[182]

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[180] Jure Gantar, *The Pleasure of Fools: Essays in the Ethics of Laughter* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press 2005), 9.
[181] *Ibid.*
[182] *Ibid.*

As stated in Chapter One, Western philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato often judged laughter as being detrimental to the social body due to its malicious nature. Following from this, critics of racialised comedy tend to attack these discourses on moral grounds. For example, Howitt and Owusu-Bempah state that "...it is extremely difficult to see how even ethnic jokes contribute positively to the development of understanding relevant to multicultural society or globalization."[183] This tendency to judge racialised comedy on moral grounds often comes from a place in which the subject, who enacts speech, is seen to exist outside of language. Arguing against this way of conceiving of language and identity, Judith Butler asserts that the one who utters a speech act is always uttering a citation, a repetition in a long chain of signifiers. She states that,

> ...racist speech does not originate with the subject, even if it requires the subject for its efficacy, as it surely does. Indeed, racist speech could not act as racist speech if it were not a citation of itself; only because we already know its force from its prior instances do we know it to be so offensive now, and we brace ourselves against its future invocations.[184]

As I will discuss in the final section on censorship, the comedy of *Da Ali G Show* must be read not as producing an originary racialised comedic discourse, but as a citation of racial comedy which has its own long and complex history.

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[183] Howitt, Dennis and Kwame Owusu-Bempah, "Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour," *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (London: Palgrave, 2005).
[184] *Ibid,* 80.

Furthermore, this speech not only mocks or ridicules subjects, it is also productive of new possibilities of racial subjectivity and speech.

Race and Morality

In studying the comedy of Sacha Baron Cohen in great detail, one of the common critiques I have come across is that Cohen's comedy is racist and immoral.[185] Critiques of Cohen often centre around his appropriation and mockery of Black street culture as the character of Ali G, and his depiction of immigrant masculinity as licentious, misogynistic, and immoral as the character of Borat.[186] While I believe that both of these critiques are valid, I also believe that the terms of this debate need to be examined in greater detail.

The condemnation of Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy often fails to examine how the 'race' based joke functions in his work. The question-- Is it wrong to laugh at 'race' based humour?--implies that laughter is a question of morality. To judge comedy as right or wrong assumes that reactions to jokes function only at the manifest level, overlooking how reactions to jokes may speak to unconscious investments in 'race' and racism. Furthermore, to deny the power of the joke by

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[185] "Racism Rap for Ali G." http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/598586.stm. Tuesday January 11, 2000 (accessed: November 16, 2007).

[186] "Offensive and Unfair: Borat's Antics Leave A Nasty Aftertaste." http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,1886886,00.html. October 4, 2006 (accessed: November 15, 2007), "We Survived Stalin and We Can Certainly Overcome Borat's Slurs." *The Times Online.* *http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article1086792.ece.* November 4, 2006 (accessed: November 10, 2007), "Comic Pushes Limits in Anti-Semitic Sing Along." Jewish Daily Forward. http://www.forward.com/articles/comic-pushes-limits-in-antisemitic-sing-along/ August 13, 2004 (accessed: November 16, 2007).

condemning or banning it seems to be a strategy that might work to stop the joke from being told, but does little to stop our impetus to laugh. Why has Cohen's comedy gained so many fans, if it does speak to underlying attitudes towards `race' and cultural difference? Could opposition to his comedy also speak to an anxious desire to suppress `race' based laughter due to what it might reveal about attitudes towards `race'? I will attempt to discuss the ethics of laughing at Cohen's characters, by focusing on major oppositions to the characters of Ali G and what this might tell us about both the character and `race.'

While I want to steer away from making absolutist moralist arguments that tell the reader whether they should or shouldn't laugh, I am still interested in discussing the various political contexts that both enable and prevent ones laughter. I am interested in discussing the possible ways in which the `race' based joke may be apprehended and the political and ethical implications of this. Moving away from making `right' or `wrong' statements and asking how and why questions, does not condemn one to apathy. Rather one is made to discuss the variant and I argue ambivalent political positions that the joke contains.

Brown Like Who? Ali G as a mockery of Desi youth culture

I have chosen throughout this thesis to predominantly read "Ali" as white, as the character was revealed to be white in the film *Ali G Indahouse.*[187] However, I want to consider the possibility that, as some have argued, "Ali" was initially meant to parody South Asian youth in Britain who appropriate hip hop. [188]

The characters name "Ali" for example, has been critiqued for its reference to Islam, causing some to argue that the character is a mockery of British Muslim youth. [189] There have also been brief references to Ali G's possible South Asian, Muslim origins. For example, in an interview with Noam Chomsky, Ali talks about his cousin 'Sanjeev.' He states that Sanjeev has a Bangladeshi mom, but his Dad is from Staines.[190] Again, the character invokes `race' in ambiguous ways that make it hard to read him as a direct mimicry of Desi youth. The reference to the Bangladeshi cousin indicates that "Ali" may be Brown, but this is quickly undercut by his reference to Sanjeev's "Dad from

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[187] *Ali G Indahouse: The Movie.* London: Universal Pictures, 2002. In the film we see that the name "Ali" actually stands for "Allistar" Graham. We also see that Ali's mother is white, as are his girlfriend and friends. From this depiction it has largely been agreed upon that Ali is in fact white. Cohen also stated in an NPR interview that the character is white.

[188] *Ibid*, 166. Howells discusses early debates concerning Ali's "race." An early reading of the character argued that he was meant as a parody of young British Asians appropriating Black urban culture. He cites Stuart Jeffries who, writing in *the Guardian* stated that Cohen is "...a Jewish comedian posing as an Asian wannabe rapper." This reading would also speak to a growing trend of culturally, linguistically hybrid British Asian rude boy and hip hop culture.

[189] See: Howells, Richard. "Is it Because I is Black? Race, Humour, and the Polysemiology of Ali G." *Historical Journal of Film, Television, and Radio.* 26:2, 166.

[190] Ali G interviews Noam Chomsky. *Da Ali G Show: Da Complete First Season.* HBO, 2003.

Staines," who Ali aligns himself with stating, "his Dad's from Staines. Represent. West side." The `race' of the character is, or at least was initially ambiguous.[191]

It seems that `race' was often invoked in *Da Ali G Show* as a means of lending

authority to Ali in ways that would stop interviewees from questioning his credibility, due to fears of being publicly labeled as racist. Producer Harry Thompson stated that, "If he had a whiff of Islam about him, we thought people would be afraid to challenge him."[192] It was revealed in the 2002 film *Ali G Inna Da House: The Movie* that "Ali G" actually stands for "Allistar Graham," and the character is actually meant to parody a white subject who pretends that he is aligned with various racialised groups through different plays upon language such as naming, speech patterns and dress.[193] Howells states that,

> ...we would be wise to recall the original series producer Harry Thompson declaring in January 2000 that the name "Ali G" had been deliberately selected to give the character a "whiff of Islam" and that it would be explained that the name was short for Alistair Graham `if Muslims took offence.' It is entirely possible that in the years that followed, the issue of

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[191] For more detailed discussions concerning Ali's initial racial ambiguities see: Paul Gilroy. "Ali G and the Oscars." (New York: Open Democracy, 2001), Howells, Richard. "Is it Because I is Black? Race, Humour and the Polysemiology of Ali G." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television.* 26: 2, Weaver, Simon. "Comprehending Ambivalence: Ali G and conceptualizations of the `other'" *Connections 4.* Online. http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sociology/connections/weaver.pdf

[192] Saunders, 229. http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content?content=10.1080/10702890601162682. Online Publication Date May 1, 2007. (accessed. July 26, 2007), 229.

[193] *Ali G Inna Da House: The Movie.* London: Universal Pictures, 2002.

> Muslim offence became considerably more significant to the Ali G production team.[194]

September 2001 was the year in which the World Trade Centre in New York City was bombed, causing a global panic against "terrorism" which was mapped onto Muslim bodies. This moral panic could have contributed to the declaration that "Ali" is white rather than Brown and Muslim. I would argue that it is no coincidence that Ali's whiteness came at a time of increased policing of Muslims and associations between Brown men and terror. The London bombing, which occurred in July of 2005 has also helped to fuel anti-Muslim and anti-Asian sentiment and law in the United Kingdom.[195]

It could be argued that the character was initially meant to parody young British South Asians, but due to fears of backlash from British Muslim groups, and a global paranoia that connects Muslims to terrorism,[196] the producers and Cohen decided to make "Ali" white. Protest against "Ali G" must be taken in context, as occurring at a time and within a climate of Islamophobia which a Brown Ali may have only helped to fuel. It could be argued that Cohen was responding to the mass mobilizing of British Asians and specifically British Muslims against increased Islamophobia in the UK. Cohen and his entourage

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[194] Howells, 170.
[195] See: Sivanandan, A. "Race, terror and civil society" Race & Class, Vol. 47, No. 3, 1-8 (2006)
[196] For a more detailed discussion concerning global paranoia concerning brown bodies, Islam, and terror see: Poole, Elizabeth, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (London: I.B Tauris, 2002).

may have made "Ali" into "Allistar" out of fear. A generous reading may also see Cohen as veering away from mocking a character who could be read as Muslim due to an understanding of the serious nature of anti-Muslim rhetoric within the current global political climate.

Ragastannis: Ali G and British Asian Masculinities

It is interesting to examine what a Brown Ali may tell us about contemporary British Asian masculinities. Published in 2007, *Londonstani,* a novel by young British Asian writer Gautam Malkani takes the temperature of male British Asian youth culture. Like Ali G, Malkani also reflects upon the racially and culturally hybridized subculture of British South Asian youth. In fact, the novel was even referred by one writer as "..an Ali G spoof."[197] Malkani's novel focuses on British Asian men in London who borrow from hip hop and rude boy culture. While their father's generation aimed at attaining financial success, assimilating to white Western masculine norms through the labour force, Malkani's generation are intent on becoming "real men" through Black popular culture. The characters in Malkani's novel, like Ali G, borrow heavily from hip hop, reggae, and rude boy culture in their quest to attain an

[197] Sarfraz Manzoor, "Why do Asian Writers have to be 'authentic' to succeed?" *The Observor.* April 30, 2006. Online edition. http://www.sarfrazmanzoor.co.uk/articles/ (accessed: November 24, 2007).

identity that is both separate from their parent's Indianness and separate from dominant white British identity.[198]

Mournfully Middle Class: Racial Melancholia and Brown Ali G's

In *Londonstani*, one of Malkani's characters sums up the hybridization of cultures that make up young straight male British Asian subcultures,

> First we was rudeboys, then we be Indian niggas, then rajamuffins, then raggastanis, brit-asians, fuckin Indobrits. These days most a us try an use our own word for homeboys an so we just call ourselves desis but I still remember when we were happy with the word rudeboy. Anyway, whatever the fuck we are, Ravi an the others are better at being it than I am. I swear I watched as much MTV Base an downloaded as many DMX, Rishi Rich an Juggy D tracks as they have, but I still can't attain the right level a rudeboy finesse. If I could, I wouldn't be using poncy words like attain an finesse, innit.[199]

Malkani's narrative captures the sense of alienation that leads young British Asian men to borrow heavily from diasporic Black cultures in order to carve out a sense of subjectivity.

However Malkani, like Cohen, also points to the ironies of affluent Desis appropriating largely Black, working class signifiers. In an interview regarding the novel Malkani states,

> These boys pretend to live in a ghetto – which is why there is only one reference to drugs and one to graffiti in the book – when in fact they live

[198] Malkani, Gautum, *Londonstani* (London: Penguin Press, 2006).
[199] *Ibid.*

> in five-bedroom houses. A lot of people just assume that if they're ethnic they're underclass. But it's not the same as the Paris situation.[200]

If "Ali G" was, at one point, meant to mock middle class British Muslim and British Asian youth who appropriate hip hop, he may have grounds to do so. As urban Black popular culture offers a discourse of `race' and racism that is often grounded in the experience of racialised poverty,[201] affluent Desi appropriations of this culture may be worthy of mockery. What Cohen's comedy may be mocking are how Black cultures have become saleable commodities that middle class subjects can now appropriate with little knowledge, or experience of the histories of slavery and subsequent wage slavery that these subcultures were born out of. As one reviewer of *Londonstani* states, the Desi rudeboys described in the novel are "...almost mournfully middle class..."[202]

This "mournful" middle class-ness may also speak to the melancholic nature of Ali G, which I will elaborate on further throughout this work. The appropriation of hip hop and rude boy signifiers by middle class British Desis may speak to the melancholia of middle class mobility, which has divorced Brown youth(once historically `Black' in England) from grassroots anti-racist

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[200] Cole, Susan, "Gautam Malkani" *NOW Magazine.* October 19-25, 2006. Online Edition. http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2006-10-19/cover_story_p.html (accessed: November 8, 2007).

[201] See Kitwana, Bakari, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002) 3-51.

[202] 'Londonstani': A Streetside Slice of Culture. Interview with Gautam Malkani. July 29, 2006. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5590750 (accessed November 24, 2007).

movements and communities. Like Cheng's use of Freudian melancholia to apply to dominant white American subjects, we can also read middle class Desi rude boy culture as a form of racialised longing. Perhaps, in certain instances middle class Desi men incorporate an image of urban Black masculinity into their egos, as a way of denying their own middle class privileges and the fraught relationship that diasporic South Asian communities have to working class Blacks in the UK and elsewhere. This incorporation might involve a desire to revisit a sense of racialised masculine angst, and nostalgia for a community based in racial solidarity. This incorporation might also express a sense of guilt towards the class based privileges that make these revisitations possible only through consumer culture.

We could say that the Desi rudeboys that Malkani writes of and Cohen mocks are psychically stuck on a fantasy of racialised masculinity and anti racist resistance that is in many ways lost to them in their world of alienated middle class suburban privilege. Racial melancholia can be said to operate not only on the part of white subjects towards racialised others, but on the part of middle class people of colour towards images of working class, racially marginalized bodies and subcultures. Middle class people of colour, like Malkani's "Londonstani's" and Cohen's "Ali G" melancholically consume an image of the "authentic" racial

Other in a way that both gestures to and works to deny the privileges that class mobility allows for.

Masculinity Innit? Gender, Sexuality and Desi Rude Boys

Malkani also states that many middle class British Asian men gravitate towards hip hop due to images of glorified misogyny and materialism. He states,

> It was interesting that hip hop was becoming more central to Asian identity than Indian music. At the same time as we were trying to distance ourselves from the misogyny of our own culture in the 90s, we got some comfort out of hip hop because it made things like machismo and materialism cool.[203]

What Ali G might be reflecting on are the ironies of expressions of `race' on the part of British South Asian youth that are grounded solely in aesthetics, the language of late capitalism and bids to archetypal sexist, heterosexist masculinity.

Furthermore, Ali taps into the ironies of a middle class British Asian male subculture in which capitalism is inseparable from discourses of masculinity. Writing of the British Asian male subculture depicted in *Londonstani*, writer Kamila Shamsie states that,

> Malkani skillfully highlights the intersection of machismo and consumerism - this is 80s greed playing out 20 years later in the lives of young men who have never known a world in which success is defined by anything other than designer labels and cutting edge gadgets[204]

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[203] *Ibid.*

[204] Kamila Shamsie, "How many a us bredren b here?" *The Guardian*. Saturday May 6, 2006. Online edition. http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1768663,00.html (accessed November 24, 2007).

Similarly, "Ali G" seems to be mocking the construction of masculine identity within subcultures that are grounded in excessive consumerism.

Malkani also discusses the glorification of ignorance within contemporary straight male British Desi culture. He states, "In order to be cool and tough, Desis...try to suppress their intelligence and the depth of their character."[205] If read as a parody of middle class Desi's, Ali G could be poking fun at this celebration of stupidity through a hyperbolic performance of idiocy.[206] If Cohen is mocking British Desi male subcultures, he may have found a terrain fraught with contradictions and ironies that lend themselves to humour. The humour of "Ali G" may work to tap into the somewhat nonsensical nature of rich, Brown men misappropriating different notions of Blackness. The joke of Ali G may lie not in a mockery of Muslims or South Asians, but a mockery of middle class masculine investments in historically Black working class subcultures.

However, Ali G may also work to minimize the experiences of cultural and racist alienation that middle class Desi men experience which cause them to gravitate towards alternative subcultures. If British Asian men are so desperate for a sense of archetypal masculinity that they perform racist mythologies of Black

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[205] *Ibid.*

[206] Ali's idiocy and lack of intellectual skill, political knowledge, and poor vocabulary are constantly highlighted throughout *Da Ali G Show.*

machismo, and deflate themselves of all intelligence this may speak to a deep sense of alienation.

In researching *Londonstani*, Malkani states that,

> ...I could see that South Asian kids were trying to get the kind of respect blacks got through hip hop. Then, during the interview process, I started asking them to define the slang term 'coconut.' And they said what we all know: 'brown on the outside, white on the inside. But when I asked what does that really mean, they didn't couch it in terms of race. They used the word 'effeminate, gay, weak,' all of them gender references. [207]

The assumed effeminacy and passivity of South Asian men, a construct rooted in colonialism, has carried over to contemporary discourses of racism, sexism and heterosexism.[208] Young British Asian men may not be latching onto Black popular culture out of greed, vanity and apathy but rather as a consequence of the social and psychic alienation that these discourses of racism cause. [209] Desi rudeboy culture may be a means through which British Asians can assert notions of masculinity that are denied to them in a racist society that refuses them both sexual agency, and full human subjectivity.[210] It could be argued though, that seeking out normative masculinity through the imagined bodies of Black male

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[207] *Ibid.*
[208] *Ibid.* Also see, Jack Williams, "Paki Cheats: Postcolonial Tensions in England-Pakistan Cricket," in *Sport and Postcolonialism.* ed. John Bale and Mike Cronin (London: Berg, 2003), 91-107.
[209] An interesting discussions of the construction of South Asian men as effeminate in colonial discourse is found in: James Mills and Paul Dimeo, "'When Gold is Fired it Shines': Sport, the Imagination and the Body in Postcolonial India," *Sport and Postcolonialism.* ed. John Bale and Mike Cronin (London: Berg, 2003), 107-123.
[210] *Ibid.*

subjects, reinscribes racist constructs of Black men as hypermasculine, heterosexual, and overly sexual.[211]

Brownface: Ali G and the Ambiguities of Racial Passing

If we read the early "Ali" as Brown, we can see him as a mockery of Brown youth who attach themselves to Black popular culture as a means of gaining a sense of subjectivity. This need to carve out immigrant masculine subjectivity through appropriations of Blackness falls in line with the history of the minstrel show, in which many Blackface performers were working class, Jewish and Irish men. From its inception, the act of appropriating signifiers of Blackness was a means through which men who were abjected from dominant white middle class identity found expression. The question is--what exactly were they expressing?

The work of Eric Lott and Michael Rogin has been instrumental in arguing that what early Blackface performers were expressing was a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, it could be argued that "acting Black" gave them a voice in which they could play the role of "the Other," thereby expressing their own Otherness. On the other hand, appropriating signifiers of Blackness was also a way in which white working class, Irish and Jewish men became white, by mocking Blackness in ways that garnered them racial power and distanced them

[211] See Jackson, Ronald L II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media,* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 103-127.

from actual Black subjects. Finally, these performances expressed a desire to embody an ideal of Black masculinity in the face of their own emasculation.

How does a reading of "Ali G" as Brown complicate the notion of Blackface? While early Blackface minstrelsy occurred at a time in which racial lines in American and British culture seemed easily divided between Black and white, increasingly within contemporary post colonial urban centres, discourses of `race' are being articulated and felt in ways that challenge Black/white dichotomies. If the early Ali was meant to be Brown, the character may speak firstly to changing meanings of `race' in contemporary Britain, in which both the racialisation of and racially hybrid subcultures of British Asian youth challenge Black/white dichotomies of `race.'

However, humour may also be used to point to the deep ironies of this moment of cultural hybridity. It is a moment in which our lives may be racially entwined in terms of aesthetics and products, but not in terms of politics and class. As discussed, the middle class British Asian male subjects who increasingly appropriate signifiers of Blackness may do so out of experiences of racist alienation, but also do to sexist/heterosexist ideals of masculinity and the class privilege that allows them to buy a commodified version of Blackness.

Can South Asian youth in Britain be read as appropriating Blackness in these ways? How does the character of "Ali" express these ambivalences? There

are many obvious differences between early Blackface minstrelsy and contemporary appropriations of Blackness by Brown men. While white working class, Irish and Jewish men toed a line of whiteness, Desi rudeboys are not white. While Blackface was a staged performance, young British South Asian men, like those that Malkani writes about in *Londonstani* seem to be living out their affiliations with Black popular culture daily. Desi rudeboy culture is also not a carbon copy of hip hop or reggae subculture and slang. Rather, British Desis often create a hybrid culture that fuses elements of Black and Brown diasporas. This subculture cultivates a space in which many young Desis can define themselves against their parents generation which often remains rooted in South Asian culture, and against a white British culture which has historically expressed racism towards British South Asians.[212]

'Race' and British Asian subculture:

In her work, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* Gayatri Gopinath discusses the ways in which British (South) Asian popular culture acts as a critique of dominant representations of South Asian men. She states that,

> The trenchant commentary on racialised masculinities apparent in earlier forms of British Asian music are also evident in the music of newer Asian Underground bands. These new sounds explicitly challenge the pathologisation of British Asian masculinity within discourses that

[212] Sarah Harris "A brief history of British racism" *The Independent.* February 25, 2007.

> position young Asian, particularly Muslim men as the `new' threat to British society, the latest incarnation of the black folk devil.[213]

Gopinath also states that British Asian bands like Asian Dub Foundation(ADF), who draw heavily from hip hop and reggae, use music to unite different communities of colour. She states that,

> In the tracks of ADF, mass media representations of an unassimilable racialised underclass are transformed into the image of what the band calls the `digital underclass,' an imagined revolutionary coalition of sound that unites those outside of white male middle class normativity.[214]

However, while British Asian subcultures may offer possible challenges to racist constructions of South Asian masculinity while also uniting people of colour, it is important to differentiate between the Desi sub-cultures that Gopinath writes of, and the ones that Malkani and possibly Ali G are referencing. While Desi subculture may offer subversive political possibilities, the Desi rudeboys that Malkani and Ali G represent are not politically active or informed. Ali G is not mocking underground British Desi culture, but investments that middle class male Desis make in consumer culture.

Still, it is important to consider how these forms of consumerism and the appropriation of hip hop culture are never divorced from a context of racism. While middle class British Asians do not experience systemic racism in the ways

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[213] Gopinath, Gayatri, *Impossible Desires*: *Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Duke
University Press: Durham, 2005), 35
[214] *Ibid.*

that ADF's "ethnic underclass" does, this should not be used to dismiss the psychic, social and political weight of racism that middle class people of colour can experience. Desi subcultures emerged to challenge racist British nationalisms and hegemonic discourses of diaspora through which people of colour were often imagined as temporary residents in England. In reference to early British Bhangra musicians Gopinath states that,

> ...one of the defining features of the music of second generation British Bhangra artists was the challenge they posed to the ethnic absolutism and concomitant longing for lost homelands of conventional diasporic ideologies, as expressed in some of the music of an earlier generation of Bhangra musicians. Their music also challenged the ethnic absolutism and dominant notions of English national identity articulated by `New Right' nationalist discourse under Thatcher.[215]

Similarly, the Desi rudeboy culture that Malkani writes of and Cohen mocks must be read as existing as a challenge to an image of Britain as white, and an Orientalist, static image of South Asians. As Malkani states, the novel *Londonstani* is "...about an aggressive, assertive ethnic identity that is embraced by South Asian boys in Britain in the early nineties. It's about an anti-assimilation ethic, a kind of voluntary segregation."[216] Finally, Desi appropriations of Black culture may, in certain contexts also challenge the divisive nature of racism, and the anti-Black racism of diasporic Indian communities. As Malkani states of Desi rudeboy culture,

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[215] Gopinath, 33.

[216] Gautam Malkani quoted from 'Londonstani': A Streetside Slice of Culture. Interview with Gautam Malkani. July 29, 2006. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5590750. (accessed November 24, 2007).

> The subcultural identity has, in a sense surplanted the ethnic identity. What was once a fundamentally racial identity is now a part of pop culture. That can be a good thing. It can also be a bad thing. It's certainly good from the perspective of getting different races to coexist together, cos unlike ethnic identities sub cultural identities are more porous and people can live together...[217]

However, it is important to consider that porous subcultures do not necessarily change differences of class among various racialised communities.

What's this "We" Rich Man: Racial Solidarity and the Politics of `Class':

What "Ali" may poke fun at is the disjuncture between the language of `Blackness' which middle class Desis can download from the comfort of their suburban homes, and experiences of systemic racism and anti-racist activism that are less fashionable. More than mocking British Asian youth because they are Brown, what "Ali" may point to are the ironies of a generation of middle class youth for whom `race', and `culture', due to the market's increasing ability to commodify difference, are more expressions of style than political commitment. What Cohen's parody might also point to is how the ability to buy into various forms of Blackness while many Black communities remain poor, demonstrates that systemic racism continues to operate not based solely on colour but also on class.

Gautam Malkani and Sacha Baron Cohen also speak to the ironies of solidarities between people of colour, who are polarized in terms of class. Both

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[217] *Ibid.*

Malkani and Cohen attended Cambridge University. Both men have gained wealth and fame from producing cultural texts that appropriate Black culture. However, while it seems that racial and cultural hybriditiy are trendy, as mentioned, many Black British artists and entertainers struggle in obscurity.[218]

The celebratory or ironic readings of cultural hybridity were also met head on by the realities of the "war against terror." While Gilroy offers a celebratory reading of the `shape-shifting', `post-race' Ali, when bombs were dropped and anti-terrorist legislation was passed, the `shape-shifting' ceased and Ali G became very white, very quickly. Similarly, Gautam Malkani states that he called his novel *Londonstani* because it was "...a positive term that embraced British multiculturalism."[219] However, he also notes that after the London bombing, terms like "Londonistan" were used to allude to British Asian terrorism.[220] The disjuncture between Malkani and Cohen's commentary on cultural hybridity, and the economic realities of Black British artists and the realities of the global "war on terror" are telling. It reveals perhaps, the limits of celebrating postcolonial urban centers as racially and culturally progressive and fluid.

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[218] See: Doy, Gen, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Post-Modernity* (London: Tauris, 1999. Doy offers a succinct overview of the ways in which Black British artists continue to struggle financially, and struggle to gain national and international recognition despite the ways in which the language of `diversity,' and `multiculture' have gained popularity in artistic and academic worlds.

[219] Gautam Malkani quoted from 'Londonstani': A Streetside Slice of Culture. Interview with Gautam Malkani. July 29, 2006. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5590750. (accessed November 24, 2007).

[220] *Ibid.*

What I want to stress is the ambivalence of the figure of Ali G. The character can be read as pointing to the ironies of the commodification of Black popular culture by British Desis. Essentialist understandings of `race' are also challenged by discourses of class, gender and sexuality, which Ali draws attention to by parodying heteronormative Desi rudeboy maschismo. However, Cohen's humour also risks reinscribing racism in his failure to consider the alienation that British Desis may experience.

White since 2002: Racial Slippages and the Comedy of Ali G

While I have discussed the possibility that "Ali" was meant to initially parody British Asian youth, I want to now focus on an analysis of this character as white, as it seems to have become widely accepted and documented that Ali is white, or at least has been white since 2002. It is revealed throughout *Da Ali G Show* and in the feature film *Ali G Indahouse* that "Ali" stands for Allistar Graham and the character is in fact meant to be white. Pickering and Lockyear state that, "While Ali G's wigger persona was considerably...ambiguous...its source in youthful white fantasies of crossing the ethnic tracks is clear enough."[221] The initial racial ambiguity of the character made a multiple number of readings possible which would have potentially reinforced racism by seeing "Ali" as an effort to mock Black and Brown subjects. Therefore, those who do not read Ali

[221] Pickering and Lockyear, 185.

as white and are unaware that Cohen and the show's producers have stated that "Ali" is white may see the character as reproducing racist stereotypes.

Ali in the hot seat: A critique of Ali G's racial politics

In his work, "And What If They Don't Laugh" Ted Cohen discusses possible reasons why jokes fail. Cohen outlines three major reasons for failed jokes. He states that

> A joke gone wrong (or perhaps we should say, a joke gone nowhere) has fallen stillborn for at least one of these three general reasons:
> 1. The audience didn't understand the joke
> 2. The audience did understand the joke, but found no fun it it.
> 3. The audience did understand the joke, and found fun in it, but was somehow constrained not to laugh; that is, something overwhelmed what might otherwise have been a laughing response.[222]

I want to use this framework to discuss the possible motivations for negative reactions to the character of Ali.

Ted Cohen's first explanation, of an audience that did not "get the joke" may speak to a failure on the part of audiences who fail to understand the British reference points in Cohen's work. Galbraith states that,

> ...the transportation of humour into a new cultural environment entails its insertion into an unforeseen field of tension whose social, political, aesthetic, and linguistic coordinates may differ quite considerably from those whose retaliations generated laughter in the source milieu.[223]

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[222] Ted Cohen, "And What If They Don't Laugh," *The Anatomy of Laughter.* ed. Edith McMorran, Toby Garfitt and Jane Taylor (London: Legenda/ Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing 2005), 88.
[223] Ian Galbraith, " Without the Rape the Talk-Show Would Not be Laughable," *The Anatomy of Laughter.* ed. Edith McMorran, Toby Garfitt and Jane Taylor (London: Legenda/ Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing 2005), 94.

Ali G's references to being from Staines, to those who are familiar with British geography, explain a lot about the character. Staines is a small upper middle class suburban commuter town outside of London. Pickering and Lockyear state that Staines "...is a typically bland English town whose only claim to fame is that it was the place where linoleum was first commercially manufactured. In the words of the local journalist, Shannon Kyle: `Staines hasn't got too much of an image.'"[224] Ali's reference to being part of the "Staines massive" reveal him to be a middle class British youth whose affiliations with Black urban "gangsta" culture are laughable. Pickering and Lockyear state that "Existing socially in Staines while living imaginatively in places like the Bronx was central to the Ali G act. The absurdity of the contrast was the source of the comedy."[225] Harry Thompson, producer of the 11 o'clock show on which Ali G first appeared states that Ali G is "...the disaffected wannabe homeboy of the suburbs, the kid stuck in Staines who dreamed of Compton or Watts."[226] However, North American audiences who are unaware of this may be unable to pick up on these reference points and therefore may misread the character as mocking Black urban youth.

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[224] Pickering, Michael and Sharon Lockyear, "The Ambiguities of Comic Impersonation," *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (London: Palgrave, 2005), 184-185.
[225] *Ibid.*
[226] Saunders, Richard, "In Defence of Kazakshilik: Kazakstan's War on Sacha Baron Cohen," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power.* http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content?content=10.1080/10702890601162682. Online Publication Date May 1, 2007 (accessed. July 26, 2007), 229.

Rather than attempting to mimic an authentic racialised subject, Ali G continually draws attention to his mimicry. Furthermore, the character's racial identity is continuously shifting, which is part of what the humour derives from.[227]

Parody vs. Prejudice: The risk of Ali G

While those who object to Ali G may do so out of a misunderstanding of the character, their objections also speak to the slippery slope between parodying appropriations of Blackness and revisiting them. This is connected I believe to Ted Cohen's second possible explanation for failed jokes. Those who cannot find fun in laughing at a character who both misapprehends and appropriates Black subcultures, may take the implications of these appropriations quite seriously.[228]

While Ali is funny in his inability to approximate Black urban hip hop culture, he also speaks to the commodification of this culture by white youth, a reality that has serious implications for some.[229] By playing with signifiers that are endemic to hip hop, Cohen's comedy may be read as mocking the

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[227] Weaver, Simon, "Comprehending Ambivalence: Ali G and conceptualizations of the `other,'" *Connections 4,* Online. http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sociology/connections/weaver.pdf
[228] See Tate, Gregory, *Everything But the Burden: What white people are taking from Black Culture* (New York: Broadway Books), 2003.
[229] *Ibid.*

commodification of this culture which has dulled its claims to authenticity.[230] His mockery may degrade the tenet of "keeping it real" that is dear to many hip hop heads.[231] This degradation may prove to be offensive to those whose lives and livelihoods are invested in hip hop. When one considers that hip hop was largely formed in working class African American communities in the 1970's,[232] the race based implications of this are clear. As McLeod notes in relation to the growing popularity of hip hop music worldwide in the 1990's,

> Within only a few years, hip hop music was transformed from being an aspect of a small subculture identified with young, city-dwelling African Americans to a genre that had been absorbed into mainstream U.S. popular culture. Everything from soft drink commercials to "White" pop music appropriated hip hop music's musical and visual style.[233]

Cohen gestures to the ironies of a moment in which global capitalism has commodified Black grassroots culture. However, the exposure of this irony, may risk trivializing its social, economic and psychic implications. Furthermore, while Cohen's comedy may serve to mock white appropriations of Blackness, and may rupture racial binaries by showing how signifiers of otherness can be performed, his comedy in many ways excludes Black subjects.

White Jokes and the Erasure of Blackness:

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[230] For a detailed discussion of the politics of authenticity in hip hop culture see, McLeod, Kembrew, "Authenticity in Hip Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation," *Journal of Communication.* Vol. 49. Issue 4, 134-150.
[231] *Ibid, 3.* Kembrew notes that, "...authenticity has been invoked by hip-hop fans and artists throughout the 1990s, spoken in terms of being `true,' `real,' or `keepin' it real.'"
[232] *Ibid.*
[233] *Ibid, 3.*

In discussing the film *Without You I'm Nothing*, Ann Pellegrini critiques Sandra Bernhard's silencing of Black subjects, stating that "...Without You I'm Nothing seems to present its critique of white appropriation from the standpoint of whiteness—a whiteness masquerading, unsuccessfully as it turns out, blackness."[234] While Ali G serves to mock dominant whiteness and its appropriations of Blackness, it still does so in ways that largely silence Black voices. What becomes important and funny in Cohen's work are the failed racial performances of middle class white men. The focus on appropriations of Blackness has little to say about or to Black subjects. As with Bernhard, the danger in Cohen's mockery of racial appropriation is that it may end up inadvertently repeating it.

In parodying appropriations of hip hop, Cohen allows audiences to laugh at the commodification and fetishism of Blackness without really considering the serious political, social and economic effects that such appropriations have. Furthermore, while a misunderstanding of Ali G may prevent some from laughing, misapprehensions of this character can also help to reinforce a racist gaze. Those who do not fully comprehend that Ali G is meant to parody appropriations of Black signifiers may end up laughing at signifiers of Blackness themselves. Rather than laughing at Ali G because he is a white youth who

[234] Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties*, 53.

ridiculously misuses Black urban vernacular, viewers may laugh at the assumed anti-intellectualism of Black vernacular and hip hop culture.[235] Gilroy notes that while he believes Ali G to be a sophisticated parody of the misappropriations of Black American culture by British youth, many do not get the joke. He states that "No matter how ignorant, idiotic and inept Ali G becomes, there are hordes of illiterate juveniles and sad hedonists who will hail him as a hero…"[236]

I believe that Ali G offers a parody of contemporary performances of `race' within a global capitalist landscape, through a hyperbolic repetition of the stereotype. However, this parody also offers up a series of highly emotionally and politically charged racial signifiers. To offer up such signifiers as a means of critiquing them, places one on a "critical tightrope"[237] in which such loaded imagery always has the danger of being used to revisit racism.

Investments in Essentialism, Divestments in the Comedic:

Finally, I want to turn to the last explanation Cohen offers for failed comedy, the idea that one cannot find something funny, "…because something

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[235] I expand more fully on the implications of Ali's anti-intellectualism in the final chapter of this work.
[236] Gilroy, 3.
[237] This phrase is used by bell hooks in discussing Sandra Berhardt's performance in *Without You I'm Nothing.* Much like my argument in relation to Ali G, hooks is referring to a "critical tightrope" between mocking and revisiting white appropriations of blackness. See. Pellegrini, Ann. *Performance Anxieties.*

overwhelmed what might otherwise have been a laughing response."[238] In the case of Ali G, what I want to suggest is that what might overwhelm one's ability to laugh, is an investment in certain understandings of `race.' In order to find Ali's appropriations and inappropriate uses of Black signifiers funny, one has to in many ways be prepared to accept that these signifiers are not essential or innate to Black or Brown subjects. One has to fully accept that signifiers of `race' are empty and are not the property of one group. Theoretically, this seems easy. However, as mentioned, these signifiers continue to have emotional, social, and political resonance for many. To laugh at Ali's failed performance of Blackness is in many ways, to laugh at the failure of these signifiers to correspond to an essential racial community. This laughter may be overwhelmed by an investment in an idea of `race' as sacred.

While one may fail to find Ali G funny because they believe that his comedy works to mask racism and not `race,' the joke may also fall flat due to an attachment to essentialism. In discussing Black British comedians opposition to Ali G on the grounds of "cultural appropriation," Paul Gilroy states that,

> The ideas of cultural ownership and experiential copyright on which that criticism depends are now anachronistic. But the resort to them tells us a lot about contemporary anxieties over the integrity of marginal identity and the value of minority culture.[239]

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[238] Galbraith, 88.
[239] Gilory, Paul, "Ali G and the Oscars." Opendemocracy.

Gilroy further argues that due to the mixture of racial and cultural communities in diasporic contexts, and due to the proliferation of "Black" culture within mainstream British popular culture, notions of "owning" culture or `race' are not only problematic, but impossible. Notions of purity and authenticity not only revisit colonial and racist categories of `race,' they are also increasingly improbable within Western centres in which racial and culture mixture have become the norm rather than the exception.[240] However, I would argue that there still may be psychic and social attachments to notions of cultural ownership.

Strategic essentialism and humour: who's serious about `race'?

Fixations on the purity of `race' and the policing of racial boundaries occur not only among conservative forces, but also within the left, in an effort to create communities and to build a positive racial identity. Gayatri Spivak has coined the term `strategic essentialism' to refer to the use of essentialist ideas in certain time periods and contexts, in order to garner political solidarity.[241] Somewhat similarly, Judith Butler discusses what she terms "passionate attachment," to refer to the ways in which subjects may unconsciously cling to notions of identity that are at once regulatory and also enabling.[242] While the

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[240] *Ibid.* Also See: Gilroy, Paul, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[241] See: Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson, "Interview with Gayatri Spivak," *Boundary 2* 20:2 (1993): 24-50

[242] See: Zizek, Slavoj, "From `Passionate Attachments' to Dis-identification. *UMBR(a)* Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture. http://www.gsa.buffalo.edu/lacan/zizekidentity.htm

notion of a static, fixed "Blackness" may itself be racist, attachments to a "Black" or racialised identity may also help people of colour to form solidarity with one another and to develop a sense of pride and esteem in the face of persistent racism.

Furthermore, subjects may be unconsciously attached to essentialist ideas. By playing with and appropriating signifiers of blackness, Ali G may challenge claims to racial and cultural ownership which may be theoretically sound, but psychically and politically impossible.

Inhibitions and Suppressed Laughter: Why are you really laughing?

Closely related to this, it is important to consider how Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy may fall flat for certain audiences due to different psychic investments in discourses of 'race.' In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious,* Freud states that in a successful tendentious joke, "The external obstacle which is to be overcome in the hearer corresponds to an internal inhibition in the maker of the joke."[243] What may cause the humour of Ali G to fall flat lies in the lack of corresponding inhibitions surrounding 'race,' gender and sexuality. The internal inhibitions of suppressed racial-sexual Otherness and the suppressions of white masculine failure may not correspond to an external

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(accessed: November 16, 2007), Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (New York: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[243] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious,* 265.

inhibition that is overcome with laughter for all who view *Da Ali G Show.* The internal inhibitions that Cohen overcomes in order to act as a figure of ridicule lie in the ambiguous nature of Black-Jewish and Brown-Jewish relations which are also ambivalences of gender and sexuality. The ambiguities that the character of Ali must overcome reside in the suppressed anxieties of white middle class masculinity. Those who laugh can perhaps release external inhibitions and prohibitions concerning the failures of whiteness and masculinity and the failures of `race' to ever fully contain subjects. However, our inhibitions and investments in `race,' gender and sexuality are not universal and therefore neither is our laughter.

The Ambiguities of Comic Impersonation: Is it Alright to Laugh?

An inability to find Ali G funny may also lie in the ambiguities of comic impersonation, as discussed in Chapter One. The humour of Ali G lies in his ability to fool interviewees into believing that he is an "authentic" subject rather than a comic tool used to poke fun at social norms and racial stereotypes. Those whom Cohen interviews may be unable to find humour in his antics because they believe him to be a real person rather than a fictional character. I will discuss the politics of Cohen's interviews with politicians in more detail in the final chapter. For now, what is important is that Cohen's comedy is only funny for some, because it is not funny for others. If, as mentioned in Chapter One, comedy often

functions based on a social contract, the absence of this contract can produce outrage or confusion.[244] In the case of Ali G's impersonation, the humour functions based on the implied contract between Cohen and his audiences who understand that his characters are fictional and comic tools. The humour also functions based on the absence of this understanding between Cohen and those he interviews. Comic impersonation is deeply ambiguous, as it functions based on both its believability, and the understanding of its farcical nature. The joke of Ali G may therefore fall flat for interviewees who believe Cohen to be authentic, and also for audiences who do not understand that he is undertaking a form of impersonation.

Pickering and Lockyear point out that impersonation in *Da Ali G Show* allows for a deeply ambivalent discourse of comedy, in which, due to the blurring of person/persona, one could never be sure how to take the joke. They state that,

> ...because audiences were simultaneously aware of both persona and person concealed behind the persona, what was said retained its quality of ambiguity, enabling it to operate in both comic and serious discourses at one and the same time. Was that a joke or meant to be taken straight? Was the utterance sincere or insincere? Such questions couldn't be answered straightforwardly, as they can in everyday social interaction where the limits between serious and comic discourses are more strictly maintained...[245]

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[244] See Pickering and Lockyear, 188.
[245] Pickering and Lockyear, 189.

Pickering and Lockyear further note that the pretence of comic impersonation allows the audience to enjoy in the joke without implication. They state that comic impersonation creates a form of,

> ...comic licence where characters are constructed `so that an audience can engage with the action and yet be barred from implication with it. In an ordinary social setting they would inevitably be drawn into implication with it, and that is the crucial difference associated with the comic impersonation, not to mention the mediated relation to it.[246]

What is crucial is a reading of comic impersonation as barring the audience from the ethical implications of the joke. However, what is also key is the inherent ambiguity of comic impersonation. While in every day speech one would be held accountable for crossing ethical lines, and one who enjoyed such transgressions would be implicated, impersonation offers an escape from responsibility. Cohen's unwillingness to ever break character causes an inability to fully judge the ethics of his performance. Can he be held accountable if he is playing a character? Can audiences be held accountable for their laughter? Such questions create ethical dilemmas on the part of audiences and may stymie one's amusement.

Furthermore, the structure of Cohen's show also allows for serious moments. For example, while Cohen's characters are fictional, the celebrities, politicians, socialites and bureaucrats he interviews are not. Therefore, the show

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[246] *Ibid,* 188-189.

often reveals their deeply bigoted political and social views. While we may be able to find humour in the fact that high brow social actors were duped, the sometimes idiotic and bigoted views they reveal to Ali G are often deeply disturbing.[247] Impersonation works because the audience and performer share a social contract, but the interviewees do not, creating moments of seriousness as well as farce. The ambiguities of comic impersonation in *Da Ali G Show* creates a discourse of sign slippage in which meaning is rarely fixed. Sacha Baron Cohen's impersonations cause the lines between comedic and literal speech to be continuously blurred, creating ongoing discursive and ethical dilemmas that both enable and prevent our laughter.

Economics Realities: Laughing all the way to the bank

In her work *Representing Black Britain*, Sarita Malik discusses the negative reactions that many Black British comedians have had to the success of *Da Ali G Show*. Malik draws on the criticism of Black British comedians Felix Dexter and Gina Yashere. Dexter has argued that Cohen is in fact making fun of Black street culture, propagating a hyperbolic stereotype of Black masculinity as socially deviant.[248] While those involved in the making of *Da Ali G Show* have stated that "Ali" is white, there are those who may fail or choose not to get the

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[247] I will discuss moments where bigotry is revealed through Cohen's comedy in greater detail throughout this work.
[248] Malik, Sarita, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television.* London: Sage Publications, 2002.

joke. There may be some who see "Ali G" not as a mockery of white appropriation of Blackness, but rather as an actual representation of Black culture. Furthermore, as I will discuss in greater detail in reference to the character of Borat, there are economic realities that overwhelm laughter.

The gross irony is that while Cohen may use *Da Ali G Show* to mock white appropriations of Black street culture, his mockery is also an appropriation of sorts. "Ali G" is an appropriation of an appropriation, and one that has made Cohen as much if not more money than white musicians and record executives who sell black culture en mass, while Black communities often remain poor.[249]

Ironically, the misuse of racial and cultural signifiers play upon white liberal fears of being labeled racist, while also playing upon the inability of white liberals to properly identify racial and cultural signifiers.[250] However, while these signs may point to the ironies of white middle class liberal sensibilities, mocking discourses of racial and cultural sensitivity, they also create a character that is

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[249] Goldman, Lea, "Borat is Rich...NOT!" http://www.forbes.com/digitalentertainment/2006/11/13/borat-cohen-money-tech-media-cz_lg_1114borat.html, November 11, 2006 (accessed: November 16, 2007). While the author points out that Cohen only received a 5 million dollar advance for his Borat film, I still feel this is a sizeable amount compared to the livelihoods of many artists of colour. It should also be noted that Borat has grossed much more at the box office than *Ali G Inadahouse.* However, it was Cohen's initial parody of black street culture on Da Ali G Show that paved the way for the success of his other characters. While this article points out that previous to the Borat film Cohen was struggling away in obscurity on the BBC, many actors would undoubtedly love the chance to star in their own BBC television show.

[250] I will also develop this argument further throughout this thesis. See: Howells, Richard. "Is it Because I is Black? Race, Humour and the Polysemiology of Ali G." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television.* 26: 2 . 156.

fraught with ambiguities. These ambiguities allow for a possible reading of the character as an attempt to accurately represent Black street culture in moronic ways. However, what I want to stress are laughter's ambivalent effects. Comedy has the power to violate our sense of ourselves in ways that can be both disturbing and revealing.

Laughing at the Racial Self: the ambivalence of theory and politics

In his essay, "What's So Funny? On Being Laughed At..." Adam Phillips discusses Primo Levi's text, *If This is a Man* which tells the story of Levi's times in a concentration camp. Phillips discusses how Levi often makes sense of the incomprehensible cruelty of the holocaust using humour. Phillip's states that "Levi keeps coming to the conclusion that the only way of explaining this deranged and brutal world he has found himself in is that it is someone's joke; that they are all being laughed at."[251] Phillips then goes on to discuss the experience of ridicule. He states that,

> Ridicule is clearly the enemy of what psychoanalysts and democrats call free association—and what other people might just call sociability. In circulation with others—and in the circulation with ourselves that is called psychoanalysis—it becomes extremely difficult to sustain, to hold in place our preferred image of ourselves, of who we would rather be. One keeps being translated, redescribed. And it is this perhaps that makes comedy at once the most reassuring and the most scarifying of genres.[252]

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[251] Adam Phillips, "What's So Funny? On Being Laughed At." *The Anatomy of Laughter.* Ed. Edith McMorran, Toby Garfitt and Jane Taylor. (London: Legenda/ Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing) 2005. 125.
[252] *Ibid,* 126.

What is being translated and redescribed in the character of Ali G are signifiers of Blackness, which are detached from an essential racial subject and shown to be performed by a white middle class actor. This, I believe, has subversive potential in its challenge to essentialist racial thinking which sees these signifiers as innately belonging to Black subjects. However, the problem and the irony of this, is that often those who experience racial oppression become just as vested in essentialism as those who propagate it.

Rather than arguing against essentialist notions of identity, those on the margins have often attempted to celebrate essentialism. The character of Ali comes to trouble spectators who are invested in notions of `race' as belonging to one group. Ali G, in some ways, unsettles dominant discourses of `race' in which difference is romanticized and held to be sacred in ways that reinforce essentialism. Those who see Ali as offensive because he borrows from Black culture as a means of mocking appropriations of this culture, may be overwhelmed by ideas of `race' and culture as being immutable, fixed and owned by certain racialised subjects.[253] Like academic discussions concerning the value of post modernism in studying `race,' what overwhelms an appreciation of the

[253] Paul Gilroy gestures to this in his essay "Ali G and the Oscars." Gilroy states that, "...the betrayal that Ali G represents is the culmination of a larger process of dilution and mongrelisation in which the protective purity of largely racial cultures is being lost, leaving them vulnerable to unprotected encounters with difference that can only involve risk, fear and jeopardy"(3).

potential of deconstruction is the persistence of racism, which often causes one to adopt varying forms of strategic essentialism.[254]

In discussing the presence of jokes in Primo Levi's narrative, Phillips differentiates between violent violations of bodily integrity in the ridicule of Jews during the holocaust and the positive benefits of joking. He states that,

> There is the good mockery of everyday life that regulates our self-importance, and so relieves us of too much responsibility for the world. And there is the bad mockery that foists something upon us that we would rather, if we could choose, protect ourselves from.[255]

The comedy of Ali G regulates the self-importance of those who appropriate Black culture without any experience of systemic racism. However, for some spectators, Ali G it is a statement of how capitalism has appropriated the speech patterns and dress of Black urban culture and sold them back to consumers in ways that reinforce racism, sexism, and homophobia. In this way, to use Phillips language, it foists upon the viewer, a reflection of the dilution of Black American culture through mass appropriation and consumption. Rather than being laughable, Ali G may force us to see how aspects of Black culture have become depoliticized in tragic ways.

Theoretically, the work of Ali G is subversive in that it troubles not only the self-importance of subjects, but the notion of a unitary, stable and essential

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[254] See Christian, Barbara, "Black Feminism and the Academy" *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*. ed. John Solomos and Les Black (London: Routledge, 2000) 462-478.
[255] *Ibid.*

racial self. However, politically, those that experience racism often practice forms of strategic essentialism that attempt to maintain and protect racial signifiers as armour against white supremacy.

To Summarise:

In this chapter I have discussed the various controversies that surround the character of Ali G. I began by offering a general discussion regarding morality and comic speech. I then used Ted Cohen's framework regarding failed laughter to discuss the possible reasons that audiences might react negatively to Cohen's comedy, and `race' based humour on the whole. The ironising of `race' and the mockery of white middle class subjects who appropriate Blackness can also be read as subverting dominant understandings of `race' and racism. The possibility that Ali G is Brown also offers ambivalent statements concerning `race,' class, and gender. On the one hand, a Brown Ali G can be read as minimizing the racism that British Asian youth experience which causes them to gravitate towards Black popular culture. However, a Brown Ali G can also be read as mocking the class privileges and heterosexism of Desi rudeboy culture. The controversies surrounding Ali G speak to the great ironies of `race' based politics. On the one hand, an effort to trouble `race' may subvert essentialist understandings of identity that justify oppression. However, investments in essentialist notions of identity may act as a strategy on the part of racially

marginalized people, thereby making a mockery of `race' troublesome. I will now discuss reactions to Cohen's second and equally if not more controversial character, Borat.

Chapter Four

Jokes on Who? Analysing Reactions to Borat

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ambiguities of reactions to `race' based comedy through an analysis of oppositions to Ali G. I now turn my attention to Cohen's second character Borat. Again, I am interested in the deeply visceral anger that this character causes, especially in relation to global politics. I will discuss the various international scandals that Borat has caused and perhaps exacerbated. I will reflect upon what these scandals can tell us about Borat, Cohen's humour, and reactions to `race' based comedy on the whole.

They're not laughing in Kazakhstan: Critiques of Borat

Borat's longest and most publicized controversy has been with the government of Kazakhstan, where the fictional character is said to be from. Borat often makes outlandish sexist and homophobic comments, which he associates with his constructed Kazakh identity. He also often engages in what are largely considered to be lewd sexual acts, again making reference to Kazakhstan. At the 2005 MTV music awards, hosted by Borat, the character sang a sexual song about "children." Following this, the Kazakh Foreign Ministry voiced concerns about the character. Foreign ministry spokesperson, Yerzhan Ashykbayev stated that "We view Mr. Cohen's behaviour at the MTV Europe Music Awards as utterly unacceptable, being a concoction of bad taste and ill manners which is completely incompatible with the ethics and civilized behaviour of Kazakhstan's people."[256]

[256] *Ibid.*

He concluded by stating that, "We reserve the right to any legal action to prevent new pranks of the kind."[257]

Following the lawsuit, Baron Cohen released a video on the "Official Borat Homesite" where Borat responds to Ashykbayev. In the video, Borat states,

> In response to Mr. Ashykbayev's comments, I'd like to state I have no connection with Mr. Cohen and fully support my Government's decision to sue this Jew. Since the 2003 Tuleyakiv reforms, Kazakhstan is as civilized as any other country in the world. Women can now travel on inside of bus, homosexuals no longer have to wear blue hats, and age of consent has been raised to eight years old. Please, captain of industry, I invite you to come to Kazakhstan where we have incredible natural resources, hardworking labour, and some of the cleanest prostitutes in the whole of central Asia. Goodbye! [258]

Shortly after this statement was aired on *The Official Borat Homepage*, Kazakh authorities had Cohen's website which was initially hosted on Kazakh servers, shut down. The official reason cited for the relinquishing of the internet domain name was that Cohen had registered under a false name. However, The President of the Association of Kazakh IT companies stated that, "We've done this so he can't badmouth Kazakhstan under the .kz domain name...He can go and do what he wants at other domains."[259] This was a controversial decision and gained Cohen sympathies from groups such as *Reporters Without Borders* who came to Cohen's defence. The group argued that Kazakhstan's decision was an act of

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[257] *Ibid.*
[258] "Official Borat Homesite." http://www.borat.tv/. October 31, 2006.
[259] Saunders, 235.

censorship and queried "...the politicization of the administration of domain names."[260]

Will the Real Racist Please Stand Up? Cohen's Constant Performance

What is particularly interesting about the controversy caused by the Borat character is that Cohen consistently responds to lawsuits and outrage, as the character of Borat. Throughout various litigations, Cohen has responded in character, further exacerbating his critics. Appearing as Borat, he has frequently supported legal actions taken against Sacha Baron Cohen by the government of Kazakhstan, both mocking the claims of complainants and drawing attention to the characters as separate identities aside from his own. In his piece, "In Defence of Kazakhshilik: Kazakhstan's War on Sacha Baron Cohen," Richard Saunders states that,

> Baron Cohen's commitment to authenticity—evidenced by the maintenance of a web site which he used to immediately contextualize the ongoing dispute with the `real' Kazakhstan through ludic resistance—has resulted in an interesting postmodern praxis in which a media persona and national government can carry on dialogue.[261]

When Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev visited the United States to meet with President Bush, Borat appeared in front of the Washington embassy. Borat stated that media campaigns which depict women and religious minorities

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[260] Saunders, 236.
[261] *Ibid.* 226.

as enjoying equal rights are "disgusting fabrications,"[262] claiming that the ads were part of a propaganda campaign by Uzbekistan, a neighbouring country and historic rival of the country. "All claims that our glorious leader is displeased with my film…is lie. Infacts main purpose of Premier Nazharbayev's visit to Washington is to promote this moviefilm."[263]

By answering criticisms of the character as the character, Cohen offers an interesting post modern performance that gestures to the blurred lines between celebrity and identity, performance and politics. Saunders argues that "Borat is built on what Huhn describes as a `transfigured mimesis' which `performs' not as re-production but rather as production, and indeed a production upon an excessive mistakenness."[264] This form of `transfigured mimesis' offers insight into the slippages between identity and performance, a slippage which calls into question notions of authenticity. By staying in character even when offstage, Cohen creates characters that function not as different sides to his own personality, but as separate entities. His inability to break character offers a set of performances that exemplify post-modernist theory in that there is no "real" behind the construction.[265] Rather, Cohen's characters are actually interpellated into being

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[262] Borat, as quoted in Saunders, 226.
[263] *Ibid.*
[264] Saunders, 236.
[265] See Hutcheon, Linda, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 31. Hutcheon questions a notion of `the real' as existing outside of representation, "…have we ever know the `real' except through representations? We may see, hear, feel, smell, touch it, but do we

through the language of comedy. There is rarely a serious point at which Cohen breaks character. Rather, Borat and Ali G are discursive constructions, formed through the discourse of the comic.

Borat and Ali G can be read as being interpellated through the discourse of the racial stereotype. They embody the grotesque lies and ironies of racist and xenophobic stereotypes, and therefore appear to be ridiculous. The characters in many ways embody static discourses of Otherness; however they are utterly ridiculous, perhaps gesturing to the inane nature of the stereotype. It is as if Cohen has created personas that are based entirely on the neurotic projections of white Western psyches. These personas speak to the inane idea that "real" subjects could display the assumed traits of racial and cultural Otherness decreed by many racist stereotypes, as both characters are laughable. The fictitious construction of these characters may draw attention to the performative nature of racial and cultural identities. There is no true racial or cultural essence that drives Ali G or Borat. Rather they are fictions, generated out of the repetition of mis-appropriated signifiers. As Pickering and Lockyear state, "...Ali G embodied a deliberately exaggerated copy of cosmopolitan hip hop youth."[266] If Cohen can construct characters that are often believable in their hyperbolic portrayal of racial

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know it in the sense that we give meaning to it? In Lisa Tickner's succinct terms, the real is '*enabled to mean*' through systems of signs organised into discourses on the world."

[266] Pickering and Lockyear, 184.

and cultural difference, this may gesture to the inane nature of the racial stereotype. Furthermore, the ability to perform and hyperbolically mock the racial stereotype may gesture to its inherent performativity.

However, in gesturing to the performative nature of identity, the characters also reveal the ethical dilemmas surrounding performance. Critics have argued for example that rather than acting as a sophisticated parody of identity politics or authenticity, Cohen's refusal to appear in public allows him to avoid taking responsibility for the harm that his comedy may cause. Staying in character most of the time allows Cohen to mock his critics rather than enter into a meaningful dialogue about the politics of his work. As Rayner states, "Keeping himself and his creation separate makes an awful lot of sense for Baron Cohen. It means he never has to engage with the debate over his act."[267] By often refusing to answer questions as Sacha Baron Cohen, and by appearing in public as both Ali G and Borat, Cohen's characters take on a post modern life that may work to draw attention to the fictionalized nature of all cultural and racial identities. However, constantly performing as these characters means that Cohen eschews accountability for his actions and forecloses serious debate. While his constant performance may be theoretically subversive, questions of political and social accountability are lost.

[267] Rayner, quoted in Saunders, 234.

In examining the ethics of Cohen's comedy, it is important to differentiate between divergent investments in identity based discourses that fuel oppositions to Borat. Major critiques of Borat have often been leveled by American interviewees and by government officials of Kazakhstan. While both of these groups are invested in essentialist notions of identity and positive forms of representation, the motivations for these investments are driven by completely different economic, political and social contexts. Firstly, opposition comes from those who are interviewed by Cohen, the most vocal being those who are interviewed by "Borat" in the Borat film. The critique here centers around how Cohen convinces interviewees that he is authentic in his roles as Borat and Ali G. In believing Cohen to be authentic many interviewees are duped into revealing their racism, sexism and homophobia. After realizing that the joke was on them and that their views make them appear suspect to international audiences, many have sued Cohen on the grounds of misrepresentation and/or slander.[268]

I would argue that those who are suing Cohen or proposing that he be censored on the grounds that they were fooled by his techniques often reveal deeply racist, sexist, and homophobic views. The fact that they were willing to publicly air such views when they thought that Cohen was a "real immigrant"

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[268] "Frat boys sue, saying 'Borat' experience wasn't so glorious." http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2006/11/frat_boys_sue_s.html. November 10, 2006. Accessed: November 16, 2007.

from Kazakhstan reveal their investments in essentialist ideas of `race,' and reveal their deeply bigoted views to be their own, not Cohen's creation. Furthermore, while Cohen may be playing a character and is therefore "inauthentic," he does not force any of his interviewees to say anything. Rather than trying to sue or censor Cohen, his interviewees would likely be better off questioning what drives their own deep seethed prejudices.

However, I believe that the opposition to Borat from the Kazakhstan government is grounded in a very different political and social reality. Richard Saunders discusses the political, economic and social climate of Kazakhstan which has caused the government to react so strongly against the Borat character. Saunders explains the hostile reactions that Cohen has generated from Kazakhstan officials by looking at the controversy through the prism of "the brand state." Within an increasingly globalised economy Saunders and others have argued that nation-states are being invited to market themselves to foreign investors. Saunder states that, "From Cool Britannia to Sweden as Utopia to `Asia's World City' Hong Kong...Whole polities are now engaged in the building, maintenance and protection of their brands."[269] In particular, the branding of a nation state is important for less developed countries and countries undergoing social upheavals which make them dependant on foreign investment to stabilize their economies.

[269] *Ibid.* 244.

Kazakhstan is an example of a country that is struggling to redefine itself after the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, which once defined its identity and economy. Saunders argues that the ethnically and religiously diverse country, made up primarily of immigrants and nomadic peoples, cannot rely on religion, `race' or language to define national identity. The country, like many others, is also facing the impact of globalization on local cultures and tastes.[270]

Kazakhstan sits in a somewhat precarious position, as it struggles to create a national identity apart from the Soviet Union that does not alienate any of its racial or religious groups. Simultaneously, it must market itself to foreign investors, primarily American and European businesses who account for the majority of the nation's foreign revenue. While comedians often mock national identities, Cohen's comedy attacks a country that is in a particularly vulnerable position, at a time in which ridiculous and condemning portrayals of its citizens may jeopardize its place in the global economy. As this `global economy' is largely dominated by American and British interests, disparaging representations of Kazakhstan and its people to US and UK audiences could prove detrimental to the nation's livelihood. Saunders states that,

> Protecting `Brand Kazakhstan' in the UK and United States of America—the two countries where *Da Ali G Show* aired in its original form (though much of the show is accessible in cyberspace) is an especially sensitive issue. Together the multinational corporations based in the two countries

[270] *Ibid.*

> command the highest share of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Kazakhstan, accounting for nearly 50% of the country's overall FDI of 8.4 billion in 2004.[271]

Following Borat's mockery of Kazakh identity on MTV in 2005, the government of Kazakhstan issued a four page press release in *The New York Times*. The ad included several testimonials about national democracy, women's rights and the educational system. Kazakh Journalist Olzhas Aueyzov was critical of Kazakhstan's positive ad campaign, stating that the ads "... are part of a public relations campaign funded by Kazakhstan, awash in oil money, and common whenever the president goes on foreign trips."[272] Like reactions to the character of Ali, the comedy seems to be overwhelmed by the political and economic ties of the country. Appreciation of the jokes are stymied by the government's fears of negative depictions of the country interfering with economic and political relationships with the United States and the United Kingdom.

However, the politics upon which these calls for censorship are grounded in are obviously questionable. While the country is set on creating a marketable "brand" nation through which it may lure foreign multinational corporate investment, there are those that would surely argue that by potentially preventing American MNC's from investing in Kazakhstan, Cohen may actually be doing the country a huge favour. As has been documented by several anti-globalisation

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[271] *Ibid.*
[272] *Ibid.*

writings, the investments of Western corporations in non-Western nations may have devastating effects on the environment and local culture. Furthermore, mass foreign investments in developing countries may benefit the middle and upper classes of the country, but often do little to help the poor.[273] It seems somewhat ironic that Kazakh elites would attack Cohen for denigrating Kazakhstan's culture, while they simultaneously court American and British multinational corporate investors, whose presence in the country may help the economy but also denigrate local culture and fail to trickle down to the poor.

However, it should also be noted that the economic, social and political instability of a post-Soviet Khazakstan makes the need for "positive representation" and foreign investment a necessity. Unlike affluent North American and European centres and the citizens who populate them, Kazakhstan's national identity and international reputation begin from a place of great instability. Cohen's contribution to this instability may therefore have grave economic, social and political effects that a privileged Western actor could never imagine.

Any Press is Good Press: The paradoxes of Borat's mockery

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[273] See: Leo Panitch, "The New Imperial State," *New Left Review* 2, March-April 2000, Aleso Jose G. Sison, "When MNC's act as Governments...The Mobil Corporation Experience," *Instituto Empresa Y Humanismo.* Un Universidad de Navarra. January 27, 2006. www.unav.es. (accessed November 24, 2007).

While many government officials of Kazakhstan were quick to condemn Cohen, Borat may actually have helped the country to raise its global profile and its GNP. Saunders states that,

> ...despite Borat's being saddled with the title of `anti-ambassador of Kazakhstan' the `Unofficial Borat Homepage' suggests that the commercial linking of travel sites for Kazakhstan to Borat searches on Google is helping to `put Kazakhstan on the map.[274]

One can easily see the gross ironies of the success of Borat in relation to Kazakhstan. On the one hand, officials have argued that Cohen's success is ruining Kazakhstan's reputation. However, others have pointed out that Cohen has given Kazakhstan a reputation. Kazakh novelist Sapabek Asip-uly even nominated "Borat" for a national award given by the Kazakh Club of Art Patrons. Asip-uly argued that Borat has done more to raise the international profile of the country than national leaders have been able to do since independence from the Soviet Union.[275] Known for writing several political novels describing Russia's colonization of Kazakhstan and the purging of the country's political elites, Asip-uly stated that "If state officials completely lack a sense of humor, their country becomes a laughing stock."[276] While Cohen may mock the nation state in grotesque ways he has also helped to generate a huge media buzz which has

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[274] Saunders, 241.
[275] Sapabek Asip-uly, quoted in Mansur Mirovalev, "Kazakh Says Borat Creator Deserves Prize." CBS News. November 24, 2006. Online Edition. http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/11/24/ap/entertainment/mainD8LJMP600.shtml. (accessed: November 24, 2007).
[276] *Ibid.*

increased tourism. Saunders states that "Kazakhstan's embassy in the UK reported record numbers of visa applications of British tourists in the wake of the MTV awards show—undoubtedly a direct result of Borat's burlesque."[277] Saunders further discusses an incident in which *The Daily Mirror* applied for a visa in the name of Borat Sagdiyev. He states that the request received a positive response from those working for Kazakhstan immigration. An official is reported to have stated,

> More people are applying for visas to Kazakhstan than ever. Tourism is booming and there are more business trips every year. It seemed unfortunate this man portrayed our country in that way but we think only stupid people believed him. It seems that many are intrigued by him and he's introduced them to the country.[278]

The country has also received "positive" media coverage due to Borat, as television shows like *Good Morning America* have aired segments that attempt to counter the images depicted in the Borat film. *Good Morning America* aired a segment following the release of the Borat film that outlined the charges leveled against Cohen. News Anchor Robin Roberts began the programme by stating,

> Now to an international scandal that has the world's ninth largest country threatening to sue a comedian. The country, Kazakhstan which used to have more than a thousand nuclear warheads. And the comedian is a guy named Sacha Baron Cohen, who's very thankful those warheads are now out of commission.[279]

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[277] *Ibid.*
[278] *Ibid.*
[279] *Ibid.* 237.

At first glance, the *Good Morning America* programme seemed to be propagating images of Kazakhstan as `backward.' However, as the show progressed the programme emphasized "positive" images of the country to counter Borat's (mis) representations. *Good Morning America* aired images of the breathtaking scenery of the country, its urban modernity and its vast industrial sector. A news correspondent then stated, "Kazakhs want you to think of these images when you think of their motherland, not Borat's boorishness."[280] While undoubtedly, the character of Borat offers a mockery of Kazakhstan that may be detrimental to the country, the success of Borat has also helped increase the international profile of the country. In an era in which nations and those who populate seem not to exist if they are not present within a globalised media, ironically, Borat may have helped to generate a discourse concerning Kazakhstan that could encourage knowledge concerning the country. However, the fact that an affluent Western entertainer could so heavily influence the reputation, understanding and economy of a nation that Cohen reportedly knows nothing about and Borat in no way accurately represents,[281] is also deeply disturbing. Furthermore, the making of the Borat film has also caused great controversy.

3 pounds for the Villagers of Glod, Billions for Sacha Baron Cohen

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[280] *Ibid.*

[281] Nikola Krastev, "Kazakhstan: Borat Movie Ridicules Kazakhs, Americans Alike." *RadioFreeEurope, Radio Liberty.* November 6, 2006. http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/11/bdf83982-a615-4991-be8a-e91beb1daeeb.html (accessed: November 27, 2007).

The Borat film generated huge sales at the box office and garnered Cohen a Golden Globe Award.[282] However, the ethics of the making of the film have come under scrutiny. Cohen is currently being sued by the residents of Glod, a Romanian village in which he filmed *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.* Villagers who appeared in the film, and whose houses were used in the film are suing Cohen on the grounds that they were depicted in barbaric ways and were not paid adequately. *The Daily Mail* reports that the villagers claim they were lied to, and that Cohen and his crew told them they were making a documentary about their poverty and hardship. Instead, they were mocked in the film, with frequent jokes concerning bestiality and sexual depravity. *The Daily Mail* reports that,

> the villagers of this tiny, close-knit community have angrily accused the comedian of exploiting them, after discovering his new blockbuster film portrays them as a backward group of rapists, abortionists and prostitutes, who happily engage in casual incest.[283]

The mockery of their lives is made more insulting by the economic exploitation that accompanied it. It is alleged that the villagers in the film were paid 3 pounds

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[282] "Borat's Box Office Double." *The Guardian. Online Edition.* Wednesday November 8, 2006http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Guardian/0,,1942158,00.html. (accessed: November 16, 2007).
Glaister, Dan. "Borat and Queen crown British success at Globes." January 16, 2007. *The Guardian.* Online Edition. http://film.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1991461,00.html (accessed: November 16, 2007).
[283] Pancevski, Bojan. "Borat film `tricked' poor village actors." November 11, 2006. Online Edition.http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=415871&in_page_id=1770. (accessed. November 8, 2007).

each for appearing in a film that made over 27 million pounds in it's first week at the box office.

Bogdan Moncea of Castel Film, the Bucharest-based production company that helped the filming in Romania, states that the filmmakers donated computers and television sets to the local village school, however the villagers deny this. They state that the school received a few notebooks, but little else. Villagers are angered by how they were depicted in the film and how they were exploited due to their poverty.[284] Claudia Luca, a woman who lives in Glod stated, "We now realise they only came here because we are poorer than anyone else in this village. They never told us what they were doing but took advantage of our misfortune and poverty. They made us look like savages, why would anyone do that?"[285] Perhaps in order to make large sums of money. If the accusations are true, Cohen and his enterrouge have made an enormous amount of money for their film while skimping on the salaries of poor Eastern European villagers whom they depict as boorish savages. In terms of how their homes were treated in the making of the film, one villager commented,

> It was very uncomfortable at the end and there was animal manure all over our home. We endured it because we are poor and badly needed the money, but now we realise we were cheated and taken advantage of in the worst way.[286]

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[284] *Ibid.*
[285] *Ibid.*
[286] *Ibid.*

It is reported that none of the villagers have actually been able to see the Borat film. *The Daily Mail* reports that, "Not a single villager we spoke to had ever been able to afford a trip to the nearest cinema, 20 miles away."[287] The author concludes by stating, "Perhaps that's the real reason why film-makers chose Glod in the first place."[288] While the cultural and identity politics of Cohen's characters may leave room for ambiguity, if these allegations are true, the economic and political realities that ground the making of his film leave little room for ambiguity.[289]

It is quite possible that Cohen was only able to "play" with culture and `race' due to his great economic, racial, and cultural privileges. Due to his privileges as a Western, educated, English speaking celebrity he was able to make his film in a small Eastern European village where residents are not fluent in English and therefore could not understand they were being mocked. Furthermore, if the allegations of economic exploitation are true, Cohen was able to exploit his gross class privileges to sweep into the village, make his film, and

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[287] *Ibid.*
[288] *Ibid.*
[289] At the time of writing, Cohen's production company had been sued by two villagers from Glod, Romania, in New York. They were asked to refile their lawsuit, as the presiding judge said they were not making specific enough claims. The lawyers representing the two people from Glod stated that they will re-file their claim. See: "Villagers to refile lawsuit against Borat film." Tuesday December 6, 2006. CBC.ca Arts. http://www.cbc.ca/arts/film/story/2006/12/05/borat-lawsuit-village.html. Accessed: December 1, 2007.

go on to make mass amounts of money which the economically disenfranchised people of Glod will never see.

The economic realities that are connected to those of nationality and `race,' are also expressed in reactions to *Da Ali G Show.* While Cohen has risen to international stardom and has become extremely wealthy, based on his television programmes and spin off films, many Black British and British Asian comedians continue to struggle to be recognized.[290] While the comedy of Cohen may ironise `race' and culture, it also exploits the very un-ironic ways in which white and Western privilege continue to inform wealth and recognition.

As I discussed in relation to Ali G's mockery of appropriations of hip hop, the joke of Borat may be lost on those whose economic, social and political livelihoods depend upon the integrity of racial and cultural identities. While I believe that the intention behind the Borat character largely lies in mocking British and American xenophobia, the joke also only works through Borat's vulgarity and by association, the vulgarity of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, if allegations are true, the Borat film also worked by exploiting the economically disenfranchised villagers of Glod, Romania. There seems to be a great deal less at stake in the mockery of dominant, white, American subjects than in the mockery

[290] As mentioned, for a detailed discussion of the racism that Black British artists experience see: Malik, Sarita, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (London: Sage, 2001).

of the citizens of Kazakhstan, whose national identity and economic and political order are undergoing mass upheavals.

Islamophobia, Anti-Semitism, and Political Ambiguities

When *Da Ali G Show* first aired on the BBC, as mentioned, the name "Ali" caused many to see the character of Ali G as being Islamophobic. However, the most vocal oppositions to the character seemed to be raised on the grounds of his mockery of Black street culture. Recently, however, with the release of his film *Borat: Cultural Learning of America Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*[291], criticism has been leveled against Cohen for Islamophobia. Many have read the character of Borat as a mockery of Muslims due to the reading of Kazakhstan as a Muslim country.

It is reported that the country of Kazakhstan is split almost evenly between Muslims and Christians. In 1999, it is reported that 47% of Kazakhstan identified as Muslim and 46% of residents identified as Christian.[292] Some have argued that the practice of Islam is actually declining as more Kazakhs convert to Christianity, or are increasingly becoming secular and non-religious.[293] However,

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[291] Note, I will refer to this film throughout this work as the "Borat film" in the interests of space.
[292] "Islam and Kazakhstan." http://www.islamawareness.net/CentralAsia/Kazakhstan/kz.html (accessed November 16, 2007). "Islam in Kazakhstan." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Kazakhstan (accessed: November 16, 2007).
[293] Saunders, Robert, "In defence of Kazakshilik: Kazakstan's War on Sacha Baron Cohen," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 14:3. 225-255. http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content?content=10.1080/10702890601162682. (accessed November 1, 2007).

others read Kazakhstan as a Muslim country and compare it to Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries.[294] If Borat is read as Muslim, his virulent anti-semitism taps into deep seated Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims (and specifically immigrant Muslim men) as barbaric and uncivilized.[295] Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Poole states that Western discourses about "the Orient" constructed an image of the "Arab mind" or "Muslim mentality" as one of "...sensuality, irrationality, backwardness, degeneracy, deviancy and barbarism..."[296] Far from being outdated colonial stereotypes, many have argued that these images are being used to fuel America's war on terror and the growing discourse of Islamophobia that permeates Western media.[297] The construction of a character like Borat, who could be read as Muslim[298], and is depicted as anti-Semitic, irrational, misogynistic, homophobic and blood thirsty could tap into and propagate this rhetoric.[299]

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[294] Syed, Aijaz Zaka, *The Radical Left and the Khleej Times.* http://www.khaleejtimes.com/index00.asp. 11, November 2006 (accessed: November 2, 2007).
[295] See Abbas, Tahir, "Muslim Minorities in Britain: Integration, Multiculturalism and Radicalism in the Post 7/7 Period." *Journal of Intercultural Studies.* Vol. 28. Issue 3. August 2007. 28-37.
[296] Poole, 29.
[297] *Ibid.*
[298] As I will discuss in greater detail in the coming chapters, Borat is read as a Muslim by white Americans he encounters in the full length film featuring the character.
[299] The depiction of Muslims as misogynistic and homophobic is I believe, connected to the depiction of Muslims as violent, and subsequently as terrorists. In both cases, Muslims are depicted as irrational and "backward" as compared to the supposedly free and liberal West. The rhetoric of sexism in Islam has undoubtedly helped to fuel America's "War against terror" by constructing the self serving, economically driven invasions of Muslim countries as being efforts to liberate "the people" and specifically the "Muslim women" who are constructed as being one homogenous group of "oppressed women." See: Muneer Ahmed, "*Homeland Insecurities: Racial*

It has been argued that having the character of Borat utter frequent anti-Semitic statements, taps into an Islamophobic stereotype in which Muslims are thought to be anti-Semitic.[300] By displaying Borat's rabid, nonsensical hatred of Jews, Cohen's comedy may reduce current debates concerning neo-colonialism, racism and land claims to ill-informed anti-Semitism.[301] This reduction is not limited to Cohen, but is part of a wider rhetoric in which anti-Zionism is mistaken for anti-Semitism.[302]

Writing of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Europe, Bunzl states that "Alarmists often focus on the issue in their warnings against the new anti-Semitic threat. But their assertion that anti-Zionism is nothing but a permutation of the old anti-Semitism is plainly false."[303] He continues by arguing that,

> Certain elements on the European left were and are quite demonstrably anti-Zionist....however, this position, which is usually articulated through a mixture of anti-colonialism, antinationalism, and anticapitalism, also includes resolute opposition to the old anti-Semitism.[304]

Violence the Day after September 11," Social Text – 72. Volume 20, Number 3, Fall 2002, pp. 101-115

[300] For a more detailed discussion of the ways in which anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are increasingly collapsed within the public imaginary in ways that reinforce Islamaphobia and support occupation and war see: Bunzl, Matt, "Between anti-Semitism and Islamaphobia: Some thoughts on the new Europe." *American Ethnologist.* Vol. 32. No.4 499-508.

[301] See: Tariq Ali, "To be intimidated is to be an Accomplice: Notes on Anti-Semitism, Zionism, and Palestine." Counterpunch. http://www.counterpunch.com/ali03042004.html. February 26, 2004. (accessed: November 17, 2007)

[302] *Ibid.* Ali argues that, "The campaign against the supposed new 'anti-semitism' in Europe today is basically a cynical ploy on the part of the Israeli Government to seal off the Zionist state from any criticism of its regular and consistent brutality against the Palestinians."

[303] Bunzl, 501.

[304] *Ibid.*

What Bunzl also points out is that while discussions of anti-Semitism abound in Europe, virulent forms of Islamophobia are on the rise. Bunzl discusses the exclusion of Turkey from the European Union, the virulent hate crimes against Muslim immigrants throughout Europe, and the Islamophobic policies of Jean Marie Le Pen. He states that,

> Europe needs to address the problem of anti-Semitism, and it must do so on its own terms and in recognition of its particular history. Much more pressing, however, is the issue of Islamophobia, both in terms of Europe's future and the geopolitical situation at large.[305]

While there is no doubt that anti-Semitism is alive and well, by creating a character who could be read as Muslim, Cohen may be tapping into a climate of Islamophobia, a climate of deep anxiety towards Muslims that his jokes may feed off of. Aijaz Zaka Syed, a writer for *the Radical Left* and *the Khleej Times* writes,

> the butt of ridicule in Borat is not the Jews, gays or even the ever self-absorbed Americans and their fabled ignorance of the world beyond their shores. The real target of the cleverly produced faux documentary is the 'Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan' — and by extension, the whole of Muslim world.[306]

Syed argues that the film is mocking Kazakhstan, which he writes of as being a "Muslim country" due to a deep seethed Islamophobia. He goes on to state that,

> Cohen, a practising Jew, as Borat comes across as so crude, so offensive and so revolting that your skin crawls. But then this is what the creator of

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[305] *Ibid.*
[306] Syed, Aijaz Zaka, *the Radical Left and the Khleej Times.* http://www.khaleejtimes.com/index00.asp. 11, November 2006 (accessed: November 2, 2007).

> Borat clearly wanted: to put you off Kazakhstan — and with it the rest of the Muslim world and all things Islamic — for life.[307]

Given the current global panic concerning "terror" and the growing backlash against Muslims the world over, it seems that in parodying a character that could easily be read as Muslim, Cohen taps into and exacerbates a deep anti-Muslim sentiment. The Borat film has recently been banned in almost all Arab countries, with the exception of Lebanon. A censor at Dubai's Ministry of Information called the film, ""vile, gross and extremely ridiculous."[308]

Writer Lubna Abdel-Aziz also sees Borat as Islamophobic and connects this to the prominent role that she argues that Jewish moguls play in Hollywood cinema. She states

that Cohen's,

> ...offensive portrayal of a third world backward, buffoon, has sparked much controversy, not the least of which comes from the country of Kazakhstan, a far cry from his preposterous portrayal. None can stop the squeals of laughter, ridicule and contempt of the savage, ignorant, Islamic country and its citizen. The lie seeps quietly into the subconscious, leaving a "nasty aftertaste." Like it or not, the average viewer, not only in America, but throughout Europe and the rest of the world is oblivious to the subliminal impact of racial denigration of the Arab, the Muslim, the Catholic, and others, perpetuated by Hollywood bosses. It speaks volumes

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[307] *Ibid.*

[308] See: "Arab Countries Ban Borat" Friday December 1, 2006, Online Edition. http://film.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1961870,00.html (acessed: November 27, 2007)and "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan" Wikipedia.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borat:_Cultural_Learnings_of_America_for_Make_Benefit_Glorious_Nation_of_Kazakhstan#_note-0 (accessed: November 27, 2007).

> of who controls Tinsel town, American thought, and ultimately, world opinion.[309]

I agree with Abdel-Azziz's reading of the ways in which Cohen's comedy taps into Orientalist anxieties, and I will explore this further in analyzing scenes from *Da Ali G Show* and Borat film. However, what is interesting is that while Cohen's comedy is being read as being Islamophobic it is also being read as anti-Semitic.

The Anti Defamation League(ADL) issued a press release after the release of the Borat film. They stated that,

> When approaching this film, one has to understand that there is absolutely no intent on the part of the filmmakers to offend, and no malevolence on the part of Sacha Baron Cohen, who is himself proudly Jewish. We hope that everyone who chooses to see the film understands Mr. Cohen's comedic technique, which is to use humour to unmask the absurd and irrational side of anti-Semitism and other phobias born of ignorance and fear.[310]

ADL goes on to state, "We are concerned, however, that one serious pitfall is that the audience may not always be sophisticated enough to get the joke, and that some may even find it reinforcing their bigotry."[311] The Anti Defamation League goes on to warn against the reproduction of Cohen's anti-Semitic humour. They state that "It is our hope that everyone in the audience will come away with an understanding that some types of comedy that work well on screen do not

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[309] *Ibid.*

[310] Anti Defamation League, "Statement on The Comedy of Sacha Baron Cohen, A.K.A. `Borat'" http://www.adl.org/PresRele/Mise_00/4898_00.htm. Issued: September 28, 2006. (accessed: November, 3. 2007).

[311] *Ibid.*

necessarily translate well in the real world—especially when attempted on others through retelling or mimicry."[312] The same text that is read by some as constructing an anti-Semitic portrayal of Muslims, is read by others as creating a stream of anti-Semitic jokes that may cause violence to be inflicted towards Jewish people.

While both positions could be true, what is interesting are the ways in which Cohen's characters, by remaining racially ambiguous, manage to anger such diametrically opposed groups. The ambiguity of the characters creates the possibility of mocking essentialist notions of `race', faith and culture by offering up characters that can be read in such different ways, pointing to the continuous slippages of `race' based, cultural and religious identifications. Borat is misread by interviewees in the film as being Muslim, when in fact Cohen is Jewish. However, his Jewishness is challenged by Borat's repetition of anti-Semitic jokes which some argue invites a mimicry of racism towards Jews. However, these ambiguities also mean that audiences can use Borat as a repository for their various racisms toward Kazakhs, Immigrants, Muslims or Jews. The political and global context in which this character emerges may trigger anxieties and aggressions towards racialised bodies.

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[312] *Ibid.*

What is of further interest are the ways in which, like his characters, Cohen's religious and political leanings are read in a variety of different ways to suit different aims. Cohen's activity in progressive causes and his interests in the civil rights movement is used to justify his comedy. As Gilroy states, "The PR machine tells us that while he was an undergraduate, Baron Cohen was fascinated by the history of the US civil rights movement."[313] Similarly the ADL notes that he is a "...proud Jew" as a means of defusing the Anti-Semitism of his comedy. However, Cohen's identity as an affluent white Jew is also used to dismiss his works. In Syed's critique of Borat as Islamophobic he emphasizes that Cohen is "...a practising Jew..."[314] Similarly, Abdel-Azizz's critique of Cohen seems to centre not only on his work, but based on a wider set of assumptions concerning the power of Jewish media moguls in Hollywood and their assumed anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments. What we see is life imitating art. Just as the Borat character can be read in a variety of different ways to suit a variety of political aims, so too can Cohen's identity be constructed in divergent ways. What these multiple readings point to is the inherent slippage that is present in all acts of identity formation and identification.

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[313] Gilory, Paul, "Ali G and the Oscars" Opendemocracy.org. March 4, 2002. http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Film/article_459.jsp. (accessed. November 8, 2007).
[314] Syed, *Ibid.*

What these readings also point to is the continued conflation of authorship and text. Many writers quickly dismiss or support Cohen's comedy by judging his politics through his aesthetics and identity. As mentioned, the reading of a text through its author alone has been challenged by post modernist scholarship.[315] As I will explore, in greater detail below, I believe that Cohen's comedy must be read not based on his identity and politics, but as a citation in a longer history of racist and `race' based humour. While this does not absolve him of responsibility, as I will discuss in relation to Butler's work on hate speech, it challenges the usefulness of censorship.

Never Laugh Again: censorship, comedy and `race'

Debates about the censorship of racist speech continue to plague cultural critics, anti-racist activists, artists and law makers. *Da Ali G Show* has at different times been banned by the BBC and Cohen has been censored by various hosts and television programmes, who have stopped interviews with the character or refused to broadcast Ali G interviews and sketches.[316] As mentioned, the Borat film has been banned in several countries throughout the world.[317]

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[315] See: Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author."
[316] See: "Da Ali G Show" Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Da_Ali_G_Show#Controversy. accessed: November 27, 2007.
[317] See: "Arab Countries Ban Borat" Friday December 1, 2006. Online Edition. http://film.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1961870,00.html. (accessed: November 27, 2007), and "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan."

These debates point to a persistent reliance on thinking that looks at subjects as fully formed, outside of language and as being the originators of the speech that they utter. As discussed, Butler's work on hate speech complicates this reading. Butler states that,

> Whereas earlier moments in the civil rights movement or in feminist activism were primarily concerned with documenting and seeking redress for various forms of discrimination, the current political concern with hate speech emphasizes the linguistic form that discriminatory conduct assumes, seeking to establish verbal conduct as discriminatory action.[318]

Debates concerning the regulation of racist jokes cause unlikely groups to reach the same conclusions. While conservative governments may oppose *Da Ali G Show* on moral grounds, anti-racist and feminist activists may also oppose this speech on the grounds that it is seen to offend, and to enact racial violence against its listeners.

Firstly, I would argue that the comedy of *Da Ali G Show* should not be read as an originary act of racist speech. Consider for a moment, Judith Butler's reading of pornography, a critique of long time activist and writer Catherine MacKinnon's argument against pornography. While MacKinnon conceives of pornography as inciting sexual violence against women, Butler states that

> ...what pornography delivers is *what it recites and exaggerates from the resources of compensatory gender norms,* a text of insistent and faulty

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Wikipedia.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borat:_Cultural_Learnings_of_America_for_Make_Benefit_Glorious_Nation_of_Kazakhstan#_note-0. (accessed: November 27, 2007).

[318] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 32

> imaginary relations *that will not disappear with the abolition of the offending text,* the text that remains for feminist criticism relentlessly to read (my emphasis).[319]

Similarly, I believe that rather than seeing the racialised comedy of *Da Ali G Show*, and racialised comedy in general as being productive of racist speech, comedy functions as a recitation and an exaggeration of existing racial discourse, which it continuously hyperbolizes and plays with.

Da Ali G Show is not an originary text through which racial jokes are born. Rather it is a citation which signifies by virtue of it's relation to a long history of racialised comedic discourse and racial discourse. As Butler states, "Racist speech works through the invocation of convention; it circulates, and through it requires the subject for its speaking it neither begins nor ends with the subject who speaks or with the specific name that is used."[320] Questions such as, Is *Da Ali G Show* racist? Should it be banned?, assume that the show and its characters are productive of the racially charged speech on which many of the jokes function.

However, I believe that firstly, like pornography, the humour of the show works against an existing field of 'race' which it borrows from as a means of generating laughter. Secondly, the jokes that Cohen uses are not his alone, they reference a long history of racialised comedy which has attempted to manage and

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[319] *Ibid.*
[320] *Ibid.*

negotiate categories of racial and sexual alterity and terms of assimilation. To defame, censor or ban the racialised joke is an attempt to control speech. However, as the show makes clear, the discourse of `race' is continually shifting and is constantly at play. An effort to silence racialised comedy fails to see this discourse as existing within a long history of racial signification, by which comedy has emerged as a response to linguistic and psychic censorship.

Everyone's a Critic, but why? What drives reactions to Da Ali G Show?

What is of further interest to me is how both positive and negative reactions to *Da Ali G Show* often fail to engage with psychoanalytic understandings of comedy. As discussed earlier, Weaver argues that both positive and negative reactions to Ali G are caught within what Zygmunt Bauman has termed "proteophobia" and "proteophilia." Weaver states that,

> While not appearing to be as obviously pernicious as proteophobia, proteophilia is problematic because the stranger can only transgress aesthetic spacings in play or in inconsequentiality. So it is always the novelty of the stranger that is consumed rather than a more complete view of her, before she is discarded.[321]

Using Bauman's concepts, Weaver critiques not only negative reactions to Ali G but positive celebrations concerning the subversive potential of his comedy as well. Weaver states that "It is the inconsequential play of Ali G, the visual unreality or ambiguity, which becomes the focus of the aesthetic consumption and

[321] Weaver, 10.

so manages ambiguity in the mind of the proteophilic."[322] Weaver discusses this comment, made by Gilroy in his article "Ali G and the Oscars," "I'm sure he knows that a new sense of what it means to be English is at stake. No wonder he wants to conceal the political intelligence that guides this liberating project."[323] Weaver states that "This celebratory comment forms a part of a discussion that downplays the perniciousness of racist meanings generated by the character, without providing an adequate theorization of why these meanings are mistaken or less `central.'"[324]

Both Gilroy and Weaver fail to acknowledge that *Da Ali G Show* and its characters are comedic, and therefore I believe reactions to the show must be analysed in reference to the psychic and social meanings of humour. Neither Gilroy nor Weaver acknowledge that the pleasure one derives from the show may not be rational as reactions to comedy are tied to the unconscious.

In *Performance Anxieties* Pellegrini discusses the problematics of "positive" representation using psychoanalysis. Pellegrini states that,

> However tempting it might be to counter "negative" images of blackness with "positive" images, this political and psychological response to the deprivations of being identified from without cannot go all the distance. We can no more predict what actions or identifications `positive' representations will give rise to than we can be certain to capture the all of us in "our" would-be positive images. Can any campaign for `positive'

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[322] *Ibid,* 11.
[323] *Ibid,* 12.
[324] *Ibid.*

> images reckon with the unconscious and its unpredictable uptake of `the' image?[325]

Like the racialised image, the racialised joke offers up a whole host of responses that often tap into one's anxieties, fears and desires and therefore exist outside of the realm on the rational.

In refusing to acknowledge the possibility of *Da Ali G Show's* racism in order to celebrate the possibilities of his subversion of `race', Gilroy fails to acknowledge the possibilities that laughter is not always driven by rationality. Similarly, while Weaver uses Bauman's framework to discuss how discourses of Otherness are present in both positive and negative reactions to Ali G, he also ascribes a sense of rationality to one's reactions to comedy. Conversely, drawing on Freud, Phillips states that

> The joke, like a dream or a symptom, gives us (regulated) access to otherwise forbidden pleasures. *And yet, or so, `we scarcely ever know what we are laughing at in a joke.'* That we laugh makes it appear self-evident that we know what has amused us. But the joke, Freud suggests ominously, only works because it conceals this piece of knowledge from us....[326]

Phillips goes on to state that

> A joke is a translation from a secret language. So when we laugh at others—when the joke is on them—we can infer that at least three things are going on. First, that we have found a way of using them for our forbidden pleasure; secondly, by the same token, our knowledge of what is giving us pleasure is opaque to us, is hidden or disguised in what we have

[325] Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties*, 80.
[326] Adam Phillips, 128. my emphasis.

> chosen to laugh at; and thirdly, where we are amused is where we desire...[327]

He continues by stating that

> What Freud calls my `attacks of critical reason' are there to protect me from too much knowledge of what I desire (clearly this version of critical reason has no sense of humour). And a sense of humour acknowledges the apparent senselessness of humour; we mustn't know what we are laughing at. We can know that we are getting pleasures, but not what is giving it to us. Laughing at someone is—like all real pleasures—a stolen pleasure.[328]

Yet, Phillips acknowledges that those who feel they are being laughed at, feel stolen from, feel that their sense of control over their representation has been violated. However, in using Freud's analysis he moves away from condemning this act of "stolen pleasure" as being a rational one. Similarly, I would argue that the pleasure that one gains from laughing at Ali G should be analysed not as negative or positive, but rather as symptomatic of the psychic life of both `race' and comedy.

The pleasure that we derive from laughing at the racialised comedy of Ali G, draws from histories of `race' and racialisation and from a proteophilic gaze at otherness in a confined space. However, it is also a pleasure that cannot be fully known to us, as comedy works to both reveal and conceal our unconscious fantasies and desires towards `race'. We can, according to Freud, never fully

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[327] *Ibid.*
[328] *Ibid,* 129.

know what makes us laugh, as laughter works to protect us from fully acknowledging our fears and desires. We laugh at Ali G in ways that reveal our anxieties and desires concerning racial transgression, however in ways that also mask an ability to fully articulate these feelings. Phillips states that,

> We only laugh at those with whom we feel we have an affinity that we must repudiate, that we feel threatened by. Ridicule, in other words, is a terror of sociability. We laugh at to sabotage our feeling of being at one with; but the feeling of at-oneness has already happened.[329]

In many ways, what a refusal to laugh at and laughter at Ali G and Borat reveal are psychic investments that continue to be made in essentialist notions of identity. Those who refuse to laugh at Cohen on the grounds that he mocks their essential racial and cultural identities may be refusing an affinity with his mimicry. This refusal is based in a notion of racial and cultural authenticity that is being violated. This refusal is perhaps based on a repression of anxieties concerning racial and cultural transgression that cannot be overcome. Those who cannot laugh may be choosing to repudiate affinity with the figure of the mimic.

However, laughing at the characters may also be a way of releasing anxieties that exist towards the bodies of imagined racial and cultural others, thereby reinforcing the idea of essentialism. Finally, those who do laugh may be gesturing to anxieties concerning their own identity based performances. Racial performativity becomes funny, thereby revealing the spectators own racial

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[329] *Ibid,* 130.

performance and also concealing it by constructing the performer to be an object of ridicule. To laugh or not to laugh at *Da Ali G Show* is neither right nor wrong, but rather is reflective of the ways in which investments in identity exist at the level of the unconscious. However, we may never fully know why the racially charged joke is funny because it works to protect us from this knowledge.

Interpretations of Ali's `race' and Borat's nationality and religion operate in similar ways as interpretations as to the ethics of comedy. Neither of these wills to categorization and moralism allow for the possibility of the unknown, the ambiguous, the laughable. What an obsession with racial authenticity and an obsession with the ethics of laughter reveal to us, is our unwillingness to allow for the possibilities of the irrational, the uncountable, the inscrutable. However, as I have pointed out, this inability to allow for racial ambivalence may be due to the continued tenacity of racism in terms of class based oppression, war, and the policing of people of colour. The continued tenacity of racism may ironically lead to a greater reliance on essentialist ideas of `race' in order to form solidarities among people of colour. `Race' like comedy reveals as much as it conceals. Comedy about `race' reveals that we continue to form fears, desires and anxieties based around `race', yet the full meanings and motivations of the pleasures we derive in racial classifications are drowned out by our laughter.

What you talking about fool? Comedy and the production of subjects:

Finally, I want to consider the ways in which racialised comedy is not only citational, but could be productive of new forms of racial subjectivity and speech. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler argues that hate speech does not only offend or defame the subject but may produce new modes of being and speaking that overwhelm the intentions of injurious speech. Similarly, I want to ask how racialised comedy does not simply mock or ridicule an existing racialised subject, but may be productive of new ways of speaking and living `race'.

What does it mean to take a joke? Is it a fully formed subject who takes the joke, reacts to it and responds to it as if it were an intrusive object outside of oneself? How could "taking a joke" be conceived of differently if we saw the power of language as not only oppressive but productive? Butler states that "If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start as it were, by its prior power."[330] Conceived of in this way, we are already mocked by the originary discourse of `race' that we are interpellated into in varying ways, a discourse that is always also an interpolation into a gender/sexual order as well.

We are already ridiculed in our efforts at autonomy, mastery and individualism by virtue of only existing through a system of `race' which seeks to classify and name us. The joke does not create this system. Rather, by pointing

[330] *Ibid,* 2.

out this system, it sheds light on it and in the case of *Da Ali G Show*, mocks the invisibility of this orginary joke which we are always telling ourselves.

The racialised joke, rather than simply enacting itself on an existing subject could be productive of new forms of speaking about and living `race'. Webster's defines a `joker' as being akin to a `fool'. A fool is defined as: "1: a person who lacks good judgment."[331] What might it mean to not have "...good judgment" about `race'? While a lack of racial judgment could mean the enacting of hateful speech which incites a history of racism, it could also mean a lack of judgment which troubles the easy ways in which we judge `race' to be essential. To be a fool towards `race' might mean lacking the judgment with which we submit to a racial order, that seeks to naturalise its power by causing `race' to be unspeakable and therefore unquestionable.

To speak foolishly of `race' threatens to slip into a dangerous space that recites hateful, harmful racist speech. However, to speak foolishly also offers the possibility of enacting new discourses of `race' and new forms of racial subjectivity. If "good judgment" within the dominant linguistic and social order of `race' means naturalising essentialist performances of `race' and silencing discourses of `race' and racism that structure our thinking and lives, perhaps playing the racial fool opens up subversive possibilities.

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[331] *The Oxford English Dictionary*. http://www.oed.com/ November 1, 2006.

I believe that the new possibilities of speaking that the joke allows for, may create spaces of artistic performance in which the notions of essentialist ideas of `race' are continuously played with, and in which `race' is always undercut by discourses of class, gender, ability, sexuality, making the notion of fixed, unitary understandings of `race' laughable. I believe that the artistic possibilities offered in playing with ideas of `race' may have interesting reverberations in the world.[332] While, as stated, the ability for cultural production to challenge systemic and global imperialist racism is questionable, the value of popular culture should not be undermined.

Playing with `race' in theory might, as Gilroy suggests in his reading of Ali G prefigure and supplement a necessary challenge to subvert racial essentialisms politically. If, as Stuart Hall agues, representation does not reflect an event, but enters into the making of the event, what might the effects be of representing `race' through the lense of the comic? The results of course, as in the case of *Da Ali G Show* would be decidedly ambiguous. On the one hand, to laugh about `race' might disrupt the ways in which a rational liberal order

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[332] For insight into how humour can be used to offer a subversive commentary on `race', class, gender and sexuality see the work of artist Glen Ligon, http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/Ligon/LigonGallry.html (accessed: November 27, 2007) For more examples of artists who use humour in their work see: Munder, Heike and Felicity Lund, *When Humour Becomes Painful* (Berlin: JRP Ringer, 2006), Doy, Gen, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: Tauris, 1999).

categorises bodies racially. However, to laugh at `race' may also be mistaken as mocking the continued presence of racism.

Furthermore, playing the fool, as Ali G and Borat prove in their interactions with those they meet and interview, reveals that everyone is a bit of a fool when it comes to `race'. From British high society types to American politicians, everyone is seen to in some ways lack good judgement in ways that reveal the instability of dominant discourses of identity and civility. The foolishness of the characters opens up a space where we are all seen to be laughable, thereby subverting oppositional categories and hierarchies and revealing the constant slippage of identities and power. However, the leveling that takes place in Cohen's comedy, the mockery of all subjects, refuses to recognise salient differences of power between bodies and nations.

While comedy hold out the possibility of the discursive subversion of `race', and potentially creates a space in which essentialist identities are mocked, the economic and political realities that govern racialised subjects affect the ability of some to get the joke. The linguistic, psychic value of comedic discourse to challenge essentialist forms of identity and 'positive representations' of `race' and culture does not affect us all in the same way.

In the case of Black communities whose political, social and psychic livelihood may depend upon the creation of strategically essentialist forms of

community and on economic control over Black counter culture, the ironies of Ali G may be lost, or at best, bitterly felt. In the case of Borat, the political and social instability of Kazakhstan may foreclose the humour found in the ironising and parodying of the national identity of a people, struggling to find a sense of itself. Furthermore, the economic vulnerability of the country and the power of Western media to define a nation's image may also cause the joke to fall flat for those whose lives depend upon cultivating a serious and positive national image.

To Summarise:

In this chapter, I have discussed the ethical controversies surrounding the character of Borat, made popular in *Da Ali G Show* and the recent Borat film. Cohen's relationship with Kazakhstan points to the disturbing power that Western media has in determining the reputation and livelihoods of nations like Kazakhstan, struggling to rebuild itself after gaining independence from the Soviet Union. Borat also has the potential to reinscribe xenophobic and racist stereotypes of immigrant, and particularly Muslim immigrant men. However, debates concerning Borat's assumed anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are deeply ambiguous. The character can be read as reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims in a political climate in which anti-Muslim rhetoric is informing national and international law, policy and military intervention. On the other hand, both Cohen's assumed Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are sometimes being judged

based on his personal biography and religious identity. The flippant ways in which identity politics are used to replace political and historical knowledge are mocked by Cohen's characters, and ironically, help to deconstruct criticisms of his comedy as well. However, the economic and political instability of Kazakhstan and the alleged exploitation of villagers in Romania in the making of the Borat film point to the salience of Cohen's racial, class and national privileges. While Cohen's identity should not be read as determining the meaning of his texts, his identity does determine his ability to produce this comedy. Finally, drawing upon Judith Butler's writing on hate-speech I also discussed the paradoxes of censorship and the linguistic, psychic and performative possibilities the joke holds for disrupting notions of authenticity and fixed identities. The arguments advanced in this chapter support my overarching argument in this thesis, concerning the ambivalence of `race' based comedy.

Chapter Five

Modern Day Minstrel or Post-modern Mixture?
Ali G, `Race' and Humour

Towards an understanding of Ali G

In this chapter, I will attempt to grapple with the complexities of the humour of "Ali G." Authors have argued that this character reflects the ambiguities of 'race' and culture within post-colonial Britain.[333] Others have argued that the character speaks to the tenacity of anti-Black racism.[334] While I will touch upon both these arguments, I am interested in what post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory can tell us about Ali.

Specifically, I am interested in how 'race', gender and sexuality intersect in the comedy of Ali G, and what the character might reveal about the psychic and performative dimensions of 'race'. Looking at Ali G through a psychoanalytic and post-structuralist lens leads one to see the character as an example of the ambivalences that are contained in Cohen's comedy, and 'race' based humour on the whole.

Ali G, Blackface and the evolution of minstrelsy

I would argue that Ali G's parodies of Blackness place him in a tradition that harkens back to the days of Blackface minstrelsy. Rather than reading the Blackface minstrel show as being a wholly rational act of white supremacy, Eric Lott argues that "...blackface was about much more than the degradation of African Americans, it too, was a mask for whites obsessive curiosity and envy

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[333] See Paul Gilroy, "Ali G and the Oscars" (New York: Open Democracy, 2001)
[334] Malik, 102.

over blackness."[335] Lott's work is important in that he discusses the ways in which representations of `race' speak to the ambiguities and anxieties of identity. Lott critiques the work of Huggins who writes that "The arrival of Jim Crow was to provide the final ingredient in the total pattern of anti-black prejudice."[336] He states that

> ...this necessary critique seems somewhat crude and idealist; in reading off from a text the stereotypes that a historical moment is presumed to have required it is typically presentist, and in viewing minstrelsy as the nail in the coffin of cultural containment it is rather narrowly functionalist. Based on a politics of `positive' black images, images meant to replace racist types with what Stuart Hall terms the `essential black subject,' this strategy still, in certain instances, offers the terms in which cultural struggle ought to be waged.[337]

To counter this reading, Lott states that,

> Where representation once unproblematically seemed to image forth its referent, we must now think of, say, the blackface mask as less a repetition of power relations than a signifier for them-a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which and the social field there exist lags, unevenness, multiple determinations.[338]

Lott's work is insightful not only for it's reading of racial representation from a post structuralist framework, but for the special attention he pays to how class and masculinity structured the investments that were made in the minstrel show. He draws on the work of critics like Hall who argues, "...that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other

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[335] Lott, 8.
[336] *Ibid.*
[337] *Ibid.*
[338] *Ibid.*

categories and divisions."[339] Following from Hall, Lott argues that acts of Blackface spoke to the insecure and ambiguous position of white working class men in relation to Black culture. The minstrel show spoke to the contradictions of the national culture of the moment, and the ways in which white audiences simultaneously desired and feared Blackness. Similarly, the character of Ali G may point to contradictory forms of desire, anxiety and aggression that drive contemporary appropriations and mimicries of Blackness.

Ali G and the Ambivalence of Modern day Minstrelsy

Like the early minstrel show, Ali G's investment in hip hop culture speaks to the often ambivalent relationship that white men (and particularly white working class, white Jewish and white immigrant men) have to both whiteness and blackness. However, I would argue that *Da Ali G Show* cannot simply be read as an outgrowth of the minstrel tradition. While Lott is interested in the anxieties and ambiguities that he sees as lying below the surface of the minstrel show, in the world of Ali G many of these ambiguities and anxieties are presented to the audience in order to generate laughter.

For example, in the opening sequences of the film featuring Ali G, *Ali G Indahouse*, we see the ambivalence of white masculine investments in racial "Otherness." Furthermore, we see how comedy reflects upon these ambivalences

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[339] *Ibid.*

in ways that can both subvert and reinforce essentialist notions of `race.' The scene begins with Ali confronting two Latin American "gang bangers" who are being abusive to two Latin American women. Ali acts as the "great white hope," rescuing the two women and dodging an array of bullets. The scene is riddled with racist stereotypes. The Latin American men are figured as criminals and misogynists while the Latinas are hypersexualised. The sequence ends with the Latinas thanking Ali for his heroism with sexual favours.[340]

However, just when it seems that Ali G is a classic racist minstrel figure, appropriating and deriding Otherness, the camera cuts away. The audience sees that Ali has been dreaming. We are swiftly brought into Ali's less than glamorous reality, a small suburban home in England. The Latin-American woman performing fellatio on Ali in his dreams is actually Ali's dog. In addition, we see that Ali's dream is interrupted by his elderly white British mother summoning him to wake up. "Ali Pally,"[341] she screeches as Ali tries hard to hide the sexual acts his dog is performing on him. The racist fantasy is undercut by our ability to see that it is just that, a fantasy of a white suburban boy. Lockyear and Pickering actually refer to Ali G as performing a "dream" of white suburban boys looking to transgress their race and class.[342] The joke seems to contain the

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[340] *Ibid, Ali G Indahouse*, 2002.
[341] *Ibid.*
[342] Pickering and Lockyear, 184.

ambivalences of minstrel identification. Yet, through humour these ambivalences are laid bare for the audience to see, and potentially laugh at. While early minstrels attempted to disguise or mask the anxieties that informed their desire to ape and mock blackness, Ali's insecurities concerning masculinity and sexuality are made clear. The joke seems to be on the figure of the immasculated minstrel rather than the imagined Other. Furthermore, the structure of the dream allows us to see that the racial stereotype is not a reality, but rather a fantasy of dominant white subjects.

The Psychic Formations of Ambivalence: 'Race,' Melancholia and Ali G

While I discussed the racial melancholia that a Brown Ali G might be symptomatic of, I want to discuss the possible melancholic formations that Ali G could gesture to as a white character appropriating Blackness.[343] I want to discuss Ali G in relation to the melancholic formations of the minstrel show, and the character's comic revisiting of minstrelsy. If dominant white American identity is based on a form of melancholia, a refusal to grieve for the racism upon which the nation state was built, Blackface minstrelsy may be said to operate as a sign and symptom of racial melancholia. Drawing from Freud, Cheng states that "...the melancholic is stuck in more ways than just temporally; he or she is stuck—

[343] As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ali was revealed to be officially white in the film, *Ali G Inadahouse* in 2002.

almost choking on—the hateful and loved thing he or she just devoured…"[344] As mentioned in Chapter One, melancholic formations involve the incorporation of the loss object into the self. As Cheng states, "The melancholic eats the lost object—feeds on it, as it were."[345] Consider the allusions of feeding on, consuming and cannibalizing in relation to the history of Blackface minstrelsy and contemporary appropriations of Black popular culture by white middle class youth.

Consuming the imagined Black body acts as a symptom of the melancholic incorporation of the racialised Other into ones own ego. However, in accordance with melancholic symptoms, this incorporation and appropriation of the Other also involves a denial of grief.

Dawning Blackface can be read as an expression of the inability of white subjects to grieve for racial injury, while at the same time gesturing to the melancholic formations that this denial produces. Ali G's contemporary minstrel show, which speaks to the commodification of Black popular culture on the part of white youth can also be said to reflect upon racial melancholia. Cheng states that "…melancholia offers a powerful critical tool precisely because it theoretically accounts for the guilt and the denial of guilt, the blending of shame

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[344] Cheng, 9.
[345] *Ibid,* 8.

and omnipotence in the racist imaginary."[346] The blending of shame and omnipotence is clear in Ali's dream in which he acts as the "great white hope," only to have his powers undercut by the shame of his emasculation. The blending of guilt and the denial of guilt is also evident in Ali G, and other white middle class appropriations of Black popular culture. The guilt associated with white middle class identity is denied through the consumption and incorporation of the racial other through signs and signifiers of Blackness. As Cheng notes, contemporary racism like melancholia does not often involve the complete expulsion of the Other.[347] Rather, an order of 'race' and racism require the Other to be present in order to function as a shadowy repository of fantasies, anxieties and desires.

In the case of Ali G, we can read his "gang banger" fantasy as speaking to the bitter ironies of contemporary white middle class identity which often consumes Otherness while denying implication in racism. However, I would argue that the joke also functions by melancholically reflecting on the losses of both white and Jewish masculinities. The myth of white masculine power is continually undercut by Ali's banal suburban realities. As mentioned, the consumption of signifiers of Black masculinity provide Ali with the feeling of powerful masculine omnipotence. However, the joke of Ali G continuously

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[346] *Ibid,* 12.
[347] *Ibid.*

undercuts this prowess through the shame of his unbearable middle class whiteness, as omnipotence is unmasked as impotence. It could be argued that in appropriating the signifiers and signs of archetypal Black masculinity, Ali consumes the Other in order to deny the failures of white masculinity. However, humour continuously gestures to these failures, revealing Ali's melancholic racial guilt and masculine failures.

Finally, if we read Cohen as a Jewish actor in the context of a long line of Jewish actors who have "acted Black" as a means of assimilating to North American and British racial divides, it could be argued that what is being expressed and denied is the loss of racial identity on the part of Jewish men. The minstrel show was often a vehicle through which Jewish, Irish and white working class men in America became white by mocking the imagined Black subject. However, one could read this mockery as a form of deeply ambivalent melancholia. These once racialised bodies could be read as consuming Blackness as a means of denying their own racialisation. Yet, more than a direct, rational act of passing and denial, melancholia also gestures to the grief that this denial entails.

Cheng states that "The `shadow of the object' that falls on the ego carries with it a reproach. Since the melancholic subject experiences resentment and denigration for the lost object with which he or she is identifying, the melancholic

ends up administering to his or her own self-denigration…"[348] She continues to state that implicit in Freud's essay on melancholia, "…is the profound ambivalence that continues to be generated around the 'swallowed' object."[349] This ambivalence is clearly expressed in Blackface minstrelsy, in which once racially marginalized white ethnic and working class actors both mocked, desired and literally embodied the imagined bodies of Black men.

In Ali G, we see a similar ambivalence. On the one hand, Ali could be read as desiring to be like an imagined Black other, however his desires are also grounded in racist denigrations. Similarly, Cohen's comedy can be read as a melancholic expression of the ambivalent relationship that Jewish actors have had to Black culture historically. This ambivalence speaks to the slippery relationship that Jewish subjects have to histories of 'race' and racism, being read as both white and non-white in different contexts, acting as both allies and adversaries to Black subjects historically. Cohen's work mocks those who appropriate Blackness without any knowledge of politics and history thereby mocking white consumerist subjects. However, his comedy can also be seen as bearing a trace of mockery towards Black subjects themselves in the recirculation of racist tropes.

Black Bodies: Imagined, Present, Ambiguously Positioned

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[348] *Ibid,* 8.
[349] *Ibid.*

While the joke may lie in Ali's ridiculous imaginings of racialised Others and in his own banal whiteness, it may also exist by virtue of Ali's inability to live up to fantasies of white and racialised masculinities. Ali's inability to achieve his dreams of archetypal racialised masculinity may work to mock whiteness but may also reinforce the image of racialised masculinity as hypersexual, innately physical and aggressive. Furthermore, upon awaking from the dream, Ali is seen to be a provincial English schoolboy involved in no sexual conquests or escapades. While this serves to make him a figure of ridicule, it may also serve to construct whiteness as being disembodied, moral and lawful as compared to the imagined deviance of racialised others. Like both `race' and melancholia, humour is most often ambivalent. Are we laughing at the overblown racial stereotypes that Ali dreams of? His indisguiseable whiteness? His inability to live up to archetypal white and black male stereotypes? Or at the racist stereotype which constructs Black and Latino men as hypersexual and violent?

Again, what is important is that while early Blackface performances were clear in their mockery of Blackness, the comedy of Ali G is decidedly more ambivalent. Rather than using the joke as means of mocking Blackness, Ali G is seen to be a figure of ridicule, as comedy allows for continuous shifts in meaning and power.

The minstrel show functioned by mocking an imagined and absent Black subject. The dawning of Blackface was meant to parody Black subjects who the audience was then invited to ridicule through the body of the white performer who wore this racist disguise. This structure also informed the comedy of the shows. Lott states that

> ...the implicitly triangulated, derisive structure of minstrel comedy, in which blackface comic and white spectator shared jokes about an absent third party, usually resolved to a configuration of two people, the joker personifying the person being joked about. The central component of mimicry in minstrel acts was just this aggressive triangulation(the basic situation in Freud's account of the joking process) masked as an intimate but no less objectifying affair of two.[350]

I would argue that one could read the comedy of Ali G as functioning based on the same structure where the joke works to conceal and simultaneously reveal aggression towards an imagined Black subject that Ali represents. However, the joke could also function not by mocking the imagined Black subject, but rather by mocking the imagined white subject who can never quite approximates Blackness. Cohen may not be attempting to play an essentially Black character, but rather playing a character who has appropriated the signifiers of Blackness. The comedy does not serve to mock Black subjects, but rather mocks subjects who invest in urban Black youth culture through commodity culture.

Me Brothers in Africa: Ali G and `Live Aid'

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[350] Lott, 142.

In the opening credits to Cohen's "Live Aid" performance to benefit charities in Africa, Ali G displays his ignorance toward Black diasporic cultures and Africa. He states, "Here me now. You is probably wonderin, why is I doin comic relief? Well me only did it coz me thought me was going to get a free trip to visit me brothers in Africa. And maybe get some Botswanan homegrown."[351] It could be argued that the joke works by mocking Africa, however I would argue that Ali is the real joke. By referring to his "brothers in Africa," we firstly see that Ali is appropriating Blackness. However, when he references 'Botswanan homegrown," the joke lies in Ali's idiocy as he associates Africa with drugs. Again, the humour is ambiguous. It could be argued that connecting Africa to drugs is deeply xenophobic and propagates racist connections made between Blackness and deviance. Furthermore, it could be argued that the joke fits into a traditional minstrel structure with an imagined Black subject being mocked.

However, I believe that we are also made to laugh at Ali. The joke seems to lie in the ridiculous ways in which Ali appropriates the speech of Black nationalism, referring to "brotherhood" when in reality he knows little about politics, and is only interested in justifying his love of weed. The joke does not simply reproduce static `race' based stereotypes. Rather, it plays with stereotypes in ways that make subjects like Ali who propagate them, figures of ridicule. What

[351] "Beckham Posh Ali G" Youtube. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FEOw7dCmMs (accessed: December 1, 2007).

is funny is not only Ali's inability to live up to his fantasy of "Africa" or "Blackness," but the complete inaccuracy of his stereotype. He continues, "Now check it. Africa ain't just the country that gave us Bob Marley."[352] The joke here builds upon the last, as we are made to further laugh at Ali's complete ignorance towards both Africa and Black diasporic culture. For Ali, Africa is synonymous with Jamaica, where Bob Marley is actually from.

Rather than mocking an imagined Black subject, as the minstrel show did, I believe that we laugh at Cohen in order to mock an imagined white subject, the character of the modern day minstrel that Ali G exemplifies. Perhaps Ali is meant to represent a middle class subject who ingests snippets of hip hop, Rastafarianism and Reggae through popular culture, with little understanding of any of these subcultures or movements. Again, the joke is not on Africa or Bob Marley, but on Ali, a subject who is unable to pass in his appropriations of Blackness, and whose appropriations also continuously fail to miss their mark.

Ali continues, "I is seen documentaries and there is some terrible images that have been left in me mind. Especially of tribeswomen with well droopy swingers. With your help we can stop these shocking things happening."[353] This last joke is the most contentious made in this segment. Firstly, it could be argued that the joke functions by mocking the bodies of African women and African

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[352] *Ibid.*
[353] *Ibid.*

culture on the whole. It could be argued that like the structure of the minstrel show, the body that is being ridiculed belongs to the absent Black, African woman whose imagined cultural difference from a white European norm is ridiculed.

Disavowal, Fetishism and the Comic:

The mention of African "...tribeswomen with well droopy swingers..."[354] can be read as generating laughter based on anxieties towards the body of the Black woman. As mentioned in Chapter One, Stuart Hall has written of the ways in which the body of Saartje Baartman, known as "The Hottentot Venus" was constructed as a fetish for white, European spectators. In 1819, Baartman was brought to England by a Boer farmer from her home in Southern Africa. Baartman's body was put on display for white, European audiences. There was an emphasis on looking at her buttocks, which Hall argues acted as a fetish that replaced the actual obsession with her genitalia. The obsession with Baartman's genitalia was part of a racist, eugenicist form of thinking that sought to dissect and categorise the bodies of Black people to prove them as being less than human. This obsession was also connected to the sexual titillation of looking at Black female bodies, an act of voyeurism that is connected to the objectification of women of colour. Hall states that "Fetishism takes us into the realm where

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[354] *Ibid.*

fantasy intervenes in representation; to the level where what is shown or seen in representation can only be understood in relation to what cannot be seen, what cannot be shown."[355] Hall further states that fetishism,

> ...also involves displacement. The phallus cannot be represented because it is forbidden, taboo. The sexual energy, desire and danger, all of which are emotions powerfully associated with the phallus, are transferred to another part of the body or another object, which substitutes for it.[356]

In the case of the Ali G skit, invoking the African woman's breasts may serve to stand in for the genitalia as a fetish. What is key in relation to *Da Ali G Show* is that the fetish is used to both conceal and reveal anxieties towards Black female sexuality through comedic discourse. These anxieties, like the displaced attention towards Black female genitalia are about more than just sex.

While Freud argued that tendentious jokes work to release and simultaneously manage sexual tension, here, the anxieties are not only ones of sex but 'race.' Stuart Hall discusses the work of disavowal in fetishising parts of the Black body. He states that, "Disavowal is the strategy by means of which a powerful fascination or desire is both indulged and at the same time denied."[357] I want to argue that joking also functions as a form of disavowal. The fascination with Black female genitalia is not only disavowed onto the Black woman's breasts. This fascination is also disavowed through the act of joking, which

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[355] Hall, Stuart, *Representation*, 256.
[356] *Ibid*, 267.
[357] *Ibid.*

allows one to engage in the sexualizing of the Black subject while denying this fantasy through the state of exception that comic discourse allows for.[358] This act of disavowal is also enabled by having Ali G invoke an imagined Black body. Rather than laughing at an actual Black female body, we are invited to mock an imagined subject, giving us further license to engage in our sexist and racist fantasies.

However, I believe that we can also read the joke as mocking the figure of the modern minstrel, Ali. In telling the joke, Ali is revealed to be a complete buffoon in his total misapprehension of African culture and his complete misunderstanding of global politics. It may be that the joke lies in the disjuncture between the realities of poverty in the developing world and of middle class white western subjects who are driven to "save Africa" without any understanding of these realities. It is important that the joke is told in the context of a "Live Aid" comedy showcase in which money is being raised for charities in Africa. It could be argued that Cohen is poking fun at the practices of middles class charity and aid to the developing world, through Ali G's assumed ignorance. The joke seems to be on the white minstrel figure who attempts to speak for and to appropriate Blackness and is revealed to be completely ignorant in their efforts at mimicry.

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[358] As mentioned Lockyear and Pickering discuss the state of exception that comedy and specifically comic impersonation allows for. See Lockyear and Pickering, 182.

While Lott states that the minstrel show worked to reinforce dominant white bourgeoisie norms, the comedy of Ali G also serves to mock dominant whiteness.

Again, the implications and meanings of these skits are decidedly ambivalent. As stated in the previous chapter and throughout this work, there is no single static meaning that can explain *Da Ali G Show*. As Gilroy points out, while the character can be read as mocking misappropriations of African and Black culture, the character can also be understood literally in ways that support racism and overall ignorance.[359] There are those who can miss the joke, or who can take the jokes as an opportunity to revel in anti-Black stereotypes. Furthermore, while Cohen may have intended his humour to be interpreted in one way, jokes concerning `race' tap into historical and contemporary anxieties. These anxieties, as evinced in the joke concerning the body of the Black woman are beyond the control of the individual telling them. Rather, they are wrapped up in a history of racism that is disavowed through the circulation of fetishes or in this case, jokes.

In Basic Black: Racial Cross Dressing and Ali G

In the opening credits of every episode of *Da Ali G Show*, Cohen appears naked. He is magically and mechanically clothed as the show begins. Like a super hero, Cohen's nude body is clothed in a Tommy Hillfigger suit, an Ali G

[359] See Paul Gilroy, "Ali G and the Oscars," (New York: Open Democracy, 2001).

hat and a thick gold chain. His clothing turns his body from a blank and unmarked slate, into the racially and culturally hybrid character of Ali.[360] Pickering and Lockyear state that Ali G's dreams of approximating commodified images of Black masculinity find their expression through signs of dress and gesture. They state that, "The dream was lived out in the clothes and lingo: Tommy Hillfiger skull cap, wraparound yellow shades, bright yellow sportswear, Lion of Judah pendant, heavy gold rings and exorbitantly priced trainers, accompanied by gangsta-style argot and streetwise hand and arm gestures."[361] As I discussed, Ali's appropriation of hip hop signifiers may speak to a wider form of racial melancholia on the part of white youth. I will continue to discuss melancholia, however I also want to examine Ali G in relation to post structuralist and post colonial theories concerning `race.'

While early Blackface minstrels used colour to mark their white (or Black) faces as Black, denoting a performance of race, for Ali, clothing comes to mimic Blackness. Anne McClintock states that "Cross-dressing is not only a personal fetish; it is also a historical phenomenon. What one can call a sumptuary panic (boundary panic over clothing) erupts most intensely during periods of social turbulence."[362] McClintock states that in the early modern period in Europe and

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[360] *Da Ali G Show*,'The Law', Episode 1 (*HBO Television:* New York 2002).
[361] Lockyear and Pickering, 184.
[362] Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 174

Britain, new forms of imperial power shifted class relations in ways that threatened earlier distinctions of wealth and rank. In order to police class boundaries, distinctions of dress became integral to maintaining class hierarchy. McClintock states that "Clothing became central to the policing of social boundaries, marking out `visible and above all legible distinctions of wealth and rank within a society undergoing changes that threatened to even obliterate social distinctions."[363]

While McClintock is discussing the panic around class that existed in colonial Europe, I believe that the same panic around race is occurring within post colonial urban centres today. Gilroy supports this idea in "Ali G and the Oscars." He states that

> In Britain, mixture is ordinary. Cross-racial sex is no more or less meaningful than multi-racial football. White kids speak patois and borrow strategically from Punjabi. Jamaican-born nutters can become eloquent mouthpieces of political Islam, the leader of the Nation of Islam can be Leo X Chester, an unfunny ex-comedian who has an Asian wife.[364]

Gilroy states however, that this era of mixity is not without its critics and detractors, who cling mercilessly to fixed, static ideas of `race' and culture. He states that "New Labour's leaders have recently confirmed their detachment from the world the rest of us inhabit by speaking heavy-handedly about the

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[363] *Ibid.*
[364] Paul Gilroy, "Ali G and the Oscars," (New York: Open Democracy, 2001) 2.

transmission of English norms, the management of national identity and belonging and the necessity of assimilation."[365] Conversely, Gilroy argues that

> ...huge amounts of energy are being wasted worrying about whether Ali G is a white Jew pretending to be black, a white Jew pretending to be a white pretending to be a black, a white Jew pretending to be an Asian pretending to be black and so on. Zygmunt Bauman calls this sort of reaction to the unclassifiable `proteophobia.' No one knows for certain what Ali is. Hatred, fear and anxiety appear in response to his ability to confound the categories that hold contemporary Britain stable.[366]

This anxiety about categories and classification creates heightened attempts to maintain aesthetic and cultural borders, while also gesturing to the presence of figures who transgress these boundaries. However, as mentioned, Weaver critiques Gilroy's reading of Ali G, arguing that just as conservative forces attempt to defame and pathologize racial and cultural ambiguity, progressive writers often attempt to fetishise ambivalence.

Rather than celebrating or defaming Ali G, I believe the character is a reflection of larger anxieties concerning the blurring of aesthetic and social boundaries. These anxieties I believe are never separate from questions of gender, sexuality and nation. Hence, while McClintock points to early colonial Europe and Britain as places and times in which norms of class based dress were heavily regulated, these were also times and places when cross dressing became popular. McClintock states that "Cross-dressers seldom seek the security of a

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[365] *Ibid,* 3.
[366] *Ibid,* 5.

perfect imitation; rather, they desire that delicious impersonation that belies complete disguise..."[367] In relation to Hannah Cullwick, a cross-dresser who often adorned different styles of class based dress McClintock states that "...she throws into question the naturalness of the categories of dirty work or clean work, dirty women or clean women, insisting that she `could play either part so well' because both were invention."[368] Similarly, by adorning the visual signifiers of Blackness through dress, Ali G's act of racial cross dressing may be read as troubling essentialist notions of `race' and Blackness. The very fact that Cohen can adorn himself with garments that cause the viewer to read him as "acting Black" troubles the idea of Blackness as an essential or innate thing, and reveals `race' to be a performance that can be mimicked. However, as discussed, Ali's act of racial cross-dressing could also be read as symptomatic of the melancholic incorporation of the Black body into white culture through acts of appropriation.

Mimicry or Mockery: Ali as a post-colonial mimic man

As McClintock says of the cross-dresser, Cohen's cross dressing is not an exact replica of that which he mimics. Instead, by appearing naked and then having his body instantaneously adorned with hip hop attire, he gestures to the performative nature of `race' in an urban post colonial climate. In his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse" author Homi Bhabha

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[367] McClintock, 175.
[368] *Ibid,* 176.

discusses the notion of colonial mimicry. Bhabha deals specifically with the mimicry of colonial authority by the colonised.[369]

I believe that one can use Bhabha's theory of mimicry to apply to a post-colonial subject who mimics essentialist notions of Blackness as well. While Bhabha's mimic man is one who disrupts the authority and finality of the colonial gaze, Ali G is a post colonial mimic man who destabilises both the unmarked power of whiteness and the notion of essential racial otherness.

In the opening sequences of *Da Ali G Show*, Cohen's naked body stands in for a post colonial subject who comes to perform Blackness through a mimesis of dress. It is significant that Cohen is shown as being naked, rather than changing from one set of "white" clothing to another set of "Black" attire. His nudity is reminiscent of a new born, who comes into being through signification. His racial identity is not seen to be innate, pre given or essential, but rather is performed through language. Furthermore, the naked white male body challenges the positional superiority of whiteness. As Richard Dyer remarks in *White*,

> The white man has been the centre of attention for many centuries of Western culture, but there is a problem about the display of his body, which gives another inflection to the general paradox, already adumbrated, of whiteness and visibility. A naked body is a vulnerable body...Clothes are bearers of prestige, notably of wealth, status and class: to be without them is to lose prestige...The exposed white male body is liable to pose

[369] Bhabha, 122.

> the legitimacy of white male power: why should people who look like that- so unimpressive, so like others- have so much power?[370]

Ali G's nudity disrupts the white male body as a figure of privilege and as a figure of absolute difference. Nudity reveals the white male body to be one that is vulnerable. Furthermore, by clothing this body in attire stolen from Black youth culture, the inherent exceptionality of whiteness is also troubled, as Ali emerges looking racially indeterminate. However, while one could read the nude white male body as subverting racialised sexual hierarchies, the nudity, like the character's comedy could also be read as reinscribing racism.

Ali's nudity could also be read as a mockery of the assumed hypermasculinity and hypersexuality of Black street culture. We see this in the final moments of the opening credits, in which the clothed Cohen always grabs his crotch. What is funny here, I believe, is the character's attempt to parody a vulgar stereotype of Black masculinity. What the character offers is an interesting insight into the ways in which hypersexuality and hypermasculinity have come to be associated with Blackness, both for the bumbling Ali and for viewers who respond with both outrage and anxious laughter. However, the character toes a thin line between offering up a mockery of uninformed appropriations of Black masculine archetypes and of mocking Black masculinity. As mentioned previously, this ambivalence can also be explained by examining Freud's work on

[370] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 146.

melancholia, in which the seemingly contradictory impulses of desire and revulsion are felt towards the incorporated loss object. These feelings of resentment and longing are not only symptomatic of contemporary white youth and consumer culture's relationship to Blackness, but also of Jewish-Black relations.

Jewish Jokes: Ali G, Jewishness and Masculinity

While I wish to read the character of Ali as white, as Cohen and several writers have stated that he is meant to mock whiteness, one could read Cohen's body as that of a Jewish performer who is therefore implicated in a different history of racialisation. As mentioned, I am critical of reading the political motivations of Cohen's comedy through his religious identity. However, I do find the relationship between histories of Jewish performance, racialisation and masculinity to be interesting. I believe that a critical reading of the racial and gendered ambivalences of Jewish performance is different than condemning or celebrating Cohen because of his religion.

In relation to Freud's studies of sexuality Pellegrini notes that "The problematics of racialised Jewishness provide the subtext for much of Freud's case studies."[371] The unveiling and veiling of the Jewish male body points to a history in which this body has been historically constructed as racially inferior

[371] Pellegrini, 21.

through a discourse of sexual degeneracy and effeminacy. In relation to Freud's projection of issues of `race' and masculinity onto the female body Pellegrini states,

> Freud transformed a medical discourse about masculinity and `race' into a discourse about femininity and `sex'. Crucial to this project was removing the Jewish male from the scene—and `seen'—of femininity. This required concealing the Jewish male's hypervisible body, for his womanliness was written on and through that body.[372]

The Jewish male body coded in signifiers of Blackness could signify an attempt to assimilate to Black popular culture as a means of escaping the pathologising and feminizing of this body. However, in revealing this process, the ways in which this body attempts to be seen as fully male are show to be performative gestures. The naked Jewish male body signifies resistance to a concealment of this body; however the clothing of this body signifies continued attempts on the part of such bodies to cloak themselves in cultural signifiers that will allow them to appear as properly gendered and heterosexualised subjects.

In the case of this first scenario, Cohen is born as Ali G through the language of dress. What this birthing gestures towards is the constructed nature of racial identity. There is no essential Blackness or whiteness that lies behind

[372] *Ibid,* 22.

Cohen's dress. Rather, he adorns himself in the signs of racial otherness, gesturing to 'race' as a signifying practice.[373]

Again, the politics of this performance are ambivalent. Ali can be read as a white body, adorning himself with racially coded clothing in ways that gesture to the performativity of 'race.' However, the association between Blackness and commercial clothing like Tommy Hilfiger is a sad statement as to how Black culture has been commodified and has come to be associated with mainstream consumerism.[374] The character did not create this association, but rather gestures to it. Cohen's comedy pokes fun at this reality, and yet in many ways capitalizes on it. Furthermore, the irony is completely lost on viewers who may read Ali as Black and use him to mock Black culture and subjects. On another level, Sacha Baron Cohen is a Jewish actor who revisits a complex history in which Jewish masculinity was often negotiated through performances of Blackness. Rather than offering a definitive anti-racist stance or a virulent discourse of racism, Ali G seems to both reflect on and construct a discourse of 'race' that is ambivalent.

Is It Coz He's Black? Ali G and the discourse of 'race'

One of the most interesting recurring features of *Da Ali G Show*, lies in Ali's constant uttering of the phrase, "Is it Coz I's Black." For example, in one

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[373] See Stuart Hall, *Representation:Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* (London: The Open University, 1997).
[374] See Tate, Gregory, *Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black culture* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003).

skit Ali joins an environmental protest. The activists are protesting the removal of trees in London's Crystal Palace neighbourhood. The skit shows Ali repeatedly trying to cross a police barrier and being stopped, at which point he accuses the police of racism. Ali G tries to cross the police barrier: "Is it possible for us to get in?"[375] The officer responds, "Not at this stage because it's still dangerous."[376] Ali G responds, "Is it coz I's Black?"[377] "Not at all"[378] says the officer. The audience erupts in laughter at Ali G's accusation and at the police officers response, which doesn't deny Ali's Blackness despite the fact that his body visually reads as white. Ali G continues to cause trouble. He tells the audience, "Me has heard both sides of the argument. Me don't understand either of them—but me is well up for a ruck anyway."[379] At this point he steals the protestors megaphone and starts screaming, "Freedom."[380] He tries to cross the police barricade, and is automatically stopped by two Police officers. Again, he asks, "It is coz I's Black?" [381] In another skit, Ali is hosting a panel on "Medical Ethicz" on his mock "Youf" show. He asks the medical experts about the possibility of biological racial selection:

Ali G: Wouldn't it be great if we had the technology to make everybody

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[375] *Da Ali G Show. Da Complete Second Season* (New York: HBO, 2002).
[376] *Ibid.*
[377] *Ibid.*
[378] *Ibid.*
[379] *Ibid.*
[380] *Ibid.*
[381] *Ibid.*

Black? Or is that just a dream?
Dr. Michael Howitt Wilson, Guild of Catholic Doctors: You couldn't...
AG: Ain't that a bit racialist
MHW: I think—no I don't think—
AG: That's bit racialist innit?
MHW: I think it's a bit racialist—
AG: Speak to me `and coz ne `ead ain't listenin'
MHW: I think it's a bit racialist to suggest that it would be a good think for everybody to be Black.
Dr. David Cook, Lecturer in Genetics(to AG): You see your point was very interesting. You said why shouldn't everybody be Black—but that' because you happen to be Black.
AG: (nodding in assent): Aiii'(Alright)[382]

In both these cases, as well as other instances in which Ali utters his famous phrase, "Is it coz I's Black" the humour seems to function based on the audiences understanding that Ali is not in fact Black. As Howell's states in relation to the "Medical Ethicz" skit, "...the audience laughed because they could see with their own eyes that Ali G clearly wasn't Black at all."[383] Rather, what was funny was his appropriation of racial outrage. However, what was further funny in these scenes is that police officers and medical experts did not challenge Ali's claims to Blackness.[384]

Firstly, Ali G's appropriation of the discourse of racial injury as an adjunct to his appropriation of hip hop culture is laughable. The joke lies in a mockery not only of Ali G, but perhaps of a generation of privileged youth who appropriate

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[382] *Da Ali G Show. Da Complete Second Season* (New York: HBO, 2002).
[383] See Howell's, Richard. "Is it Because I is Black: Humour and the Polysemiology of Ali G." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*. 26:2. 160.

signifiers of racial oppression with little personal experience of oppression. What Cohen may be mocking is the disjuncture between the civil rights and the hip hop generation.[385]

However, the joke is also on those who accept Ali's utterance, "Is it Cos I's Black?" without question. Here, the discourse of racial tolerance is unmasked, as being one that speaks to continued ignorance concerning `race' and racism and to a refusal to enter into a dialogue concerning `race' out of fear. Polite liberal silences in the face of speech acts concerning `race' are seen to be comical. In the liberal discourse of `race,' not questioning one's identity claim is often seen to be progressive. As Howells says of the policeman's response to Ali G's claims of racial profiling, "...the policeman did not challenge Ali's dubious claims about his racial identity. He simply responded with a polite denial of prejudice: `Not at all.'"[386] However, this politeness is ridiculed through Ali's racial farce. The police officers and medical experts, in their efforts to seem progressive are actually mocked for their inability to interrogate the terms of `race' based difference. The fear of being labeled a racist is seen as one that leads to an anxious defensiveness. The joke functions by revealing the interviewees anxieties as well as the audience's anxieties concerning racial misrecognition and racism.

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[385] See: Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002).
[386] Howells, 159.

Finally, the joke functions because those whom Ali professes his Blackness to are unaware that he is a fictional comic character. They take him to be an "authentic subject" and therefore believe his claims to Blackness. What is interesting about people's willingness to accept Ali's declarations of Blackness is that this in many ways points to the discursive construction of `race.' `Race' in these instances is not being read off the body, but rather functions as a speech act, and as a series of adjunct signifiers of dress, accent, mannerisms. While `race' may have once been *solely* based on skin colour, Ali's performance and its believability show `race' to appear as a series of utterances, signs and styles. Even if those who believe Ali to be "Black" do so out of fear of being labeled as racist, rather than out of an understanding of signifiers of hip hop as related to Blackness, this too points to changes in the discursive construction of `race.' This may point to how the institutionalization of anti-racism and multiculturalism has moved `race' from being solely a reading of the body, to a discursive construction within the language of law, norms and policy. The act of saying one is "Black" is connected to a set of linguistic signifiers of popular culture and of legalistic anti-racist and multicultural discourses that are divorced from the body. Ali G therefore draws attentions to the ironies and ambiguities of the discursive construction of `race' in a postcolonial Western climate, in which `race,' to a certain degree operates as a set of linguistic utterances that can be played with.

The joke of Ali therefore becomes multi-layered. It seems ridiculous that those who encounter Ali G would believe him to be `Black' and yet the audience also finds him to be funny because they understand that the linguistic, cultural, musical signifiers he adopts mean that he is `acting Black.' The performance moves `race' away from the body, in ways that call into question whether `race' can be said to be solely read off the body. However, the gap between Ali's utterance of Blackness and his white skin also produce anxiety, as essentialist racialised meanings are called into question. If Ali can "act Black" and be believed to be Black despite his white skin, what does this tell us about the instability of not only Blackness but whiteness? The laughter at Ali's attempts at racial passing in many ways works to relieve the anxieties of the blurring of discursive categories of `race' and to changing meanings of `race' which complicate essentialist understandings of the body.

However, it could also be argued that in using this refrain "Is it Cos I's Black" to generate laughter and to manipulate authority figures, Cohen's character plays with `race' in ways that dilute the severity of real racial injury. Ali G and his creator can safely slip in and out of Blackness due to his power as a white subject. He can invoke the language of racial oppression as a joke, as he does not experience the reality of racial profiling and policing. It is never `cos he's Black," and therefore his lack of emotional and political investment in

Blackness allows him to use `race' as a trope with little investment or consequence. Furthermore, it is still possible that despite the dominant understandings of Ali as a white character parodying Black culture, audiences may use his refrains to mock Blackness. One may laugh at his refrain, "Is it Cos I's Black" as a mockery of Black subjects who air `race' based grievances that are thought of as being as comical as Ali's false claims.

`Race' Based Anxiety and Authenticity in Ali G in Da House

Throughout the evolution of *Da Ali G Show*, there have been countless discussions concerning the true `race' of the character of Ali.[387] It has been widely agreed upon by media pundits and academics that "Ali" is in fact white. Furthermore, the show's producers have confirmed on several occasions that Ali is a parody of white British youth who appropriate the signifiers of African American gangsta rap culture. Dan Mazer, producer and director of the second season of *Da Ali G Show* stated that the parody speaks to a particular cultural moment in suburban England. Mazer states that "There are a lot of real Ali Gs in Staines, people who genuinely believe they are living in Compton, Los Angeles…"[388] Further elaborating on this phenomenon Mazer stated that,

> There are groups of people in Britain who think they are in the Bronx or South Central L.A. They drive cars, smoke joints, and listen to rap music,

[387] See Gilroy, "Ali G and the Oscars," Howells, 155-177.
[388] Howells, 167.

> aspiring to be in a drive by shooting. Their dad's an accountant and their mum's a primary school teacher and they are fairly well brought-up.[389]

Rather than discussing "Ali's" racial authenticity, what is interesting is how the humour of the show initially functioned in many ways based on racial ambivalence. Once this ambivalence was lost, one could argue that Ali G ceased to be funny.

Howells discusses the controversy concerning Ali G's true `race'. Howells argues that it is confirmed that "Ali" is in fact white in the feature film, *Ali G Indahouse.* He argues that the film confirms Ali G's whiteness through the depiction of his friends and family as white, middle class Brits. Howells states that in the film, "Ali's grandmother (`me Nan') with whom he lives is white, as is his girlfriend (`me Julie'). His posse are all Caucasian, and he lives in a middle-class semi-detached suburban house."[390] It is also in the film, *Ali G Indahouse* that we learn of "Ali's real name. When Ali is elected to public office in the film his full name, "Allistar Graham," is revealed. What is interesting for my purposes is the poor reception that the film received. While the television series received international acclaim and garnered unprecedented ratings, the film was met with lukewarm success.[391] After the release of the film, the popularity of *Da Ali G Show* also declined. In 2005 HBO stated that it would not be releasing another

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[389] *Ibid.*
[390] Howells, 170.
[391] *Ibid.*

series of the programme.[392] Howells argues that this could be due to the often unsuccessful conversion of television shows into films. However, as I will discuss in relation to Cohen's next film featuring Borat, I believe that this claim does not hold true. Howells also suggests that "...some of the comic edge may have been lost by explaining too much about Ali G."[393] I believe that this may be true, insofar as what was revealed about Ali G was his whiteness.

This relates to Howells third possible explanation. He states that,

> Less typical though was the explanation of a situation whose opacity was, for many people, the appealing part of the enigma of Ali G. For some, it is contended, the transgression into `politically incorrect' humour may have been neutralized by clarifying Ali G as a white suburbanite.[394]

While I have been arguing that the character of Ali reflects upon the ambivalences of `race' and masculinity, it is important here to make it clear that not everyone appreciates, understands or responds to ambivalence in the same ways. What is interesting is that while audiences found the `race' based indeterminacy of Ali G funny, the `white' Ali G was less entertaining. Why?

There is no absolute answer here. Firstly, Howell's explanation may be correct for many viewers. Howell's argues that the humour of Ali G functions through transgression. He states that Ali G works to transgress both the sensibilities of conservatives and liberals alike. He states that,

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[392] See "Da Ali G Show" Wikipedia.
[393] *Ibid,* 169.
[394] *Ibid,* 170.

> ...the transgressive nature of Ali G's humour is not limited to areas(such as swearing and sexual innuendo) that might imitate conservative tastes. Ali G also (and gleefully) transgresses liberal sensibilities by making merry in sensitive areas that many consider should not be trespassed upon with irreverent humour.[395]

Cohen's character of Ali also worked to transgress lines of racial and cultural authenticity. In so doing, he challenged conservative essentialist understandings of identity, and ironically, liberal understandings of identity politics. But, why were these transgressions funny? The answers are multiple.

For some, the notion of a character that crosses lines of 'race' may generate laughter due to deep anxiety. The joke allows for a momentarily release of aggression and anxiety toward those who do not fit into 'race' based categories. As Vincent Cheng notes, while racial and cultural hybridity is currently on the rise within western urban spheres, "...modern and contemporary cultures—especially First World cultures—are increasingly marked by an anxiety over authentic cultural identity."[396] The inauthentic and indeterminate Ali could have generated laughter based in these anxieties. However, the character may also work as a release of aggression and anxiety in the face of the "political correctness" that Howells discusses. In his ambivalence, the racially ambiguous Ali may have offered audiences a way of covertly laughing at Blackness, British

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[395] *Ibid,* 165.
[396] Cheng, Vincent J., *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

Asians and Muslims, which the white Ali does not allow for. Finally, the laughter may have been one that was born out of recognition. As Gilroy has argued, the off-white Ali may have spoken to the racial and cultural ambiguities and ironies that exist within contemporary Britain. Gilroy argues that laughter at the early Ali G worked as a healthy way of managing anxieties concerning the increasingly mixed-race future of England.[397]

All of these explanations are possible, and all reflect upon the ambiguity and ambivalence of Ali G. The "Alistair Graham" of *Ali G in Da House* may have fallen flat for several reasons. Firstly, for some, the character no longer offered a cheap laugh at racial others. Secondly, the character no longer worked as a way of managing unresolved anxieties towards racial ambiguities. And thirdly, the character no longer spoke to the face of a racially indeterminate England.

In all of these cases, what the popular character of "Ali" and the newer less popular "Allistair" speak to is how comedy is used to manage anxieties concerning racism and `race'. Furthermore, what Ali G speaks to are the infinite ways in which comedy can be used to manage divergent psychic and political interests.

Writing again in *the Guardian*, Gary Younge stated,

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[397] See Gilroy, Paul, "Ali G and the Oscars," Opendemocracy.ca.

> There's no doubt that Ali G's funny...But are we all laughing for the same reasons?...His racial identity may be unclear. Views over whom his jokes are directed may differ...we are left guessing...leaving the key question of 'What are we laughing at?' 'Whom are we laughing at?' and 'Whom are we laughing with' either unanswered or with contradictory responses.[398]

I would argue that what is missing in Younge's analysis of Ali G is an understanding of the comedic as operating at the level of the unconscious. To try to find the "true" and singular origin of one's laughter at Ali G assumes laughter to be a rational process. This assumption discounts the ways in which the joke may work to manage contradictory and ambivalent feelings that have been suppressed at the level of rational speech. Like the dream, the true operation of the joke may not be fully clear to us as it works to resolve tensions and anxieties that can never be wholly known to us. Therefore, rather than trying to find the true meaning of one's laughter at Ali G, I believe that the character reflects upon the deeply ambiguous psychic investments and disavowals made regarding 'race' and racism.

To Summarise:

In this chapter I focused on the racial ambivalence of the character Ali. I drew upon theories of melancholia, mimicry and performativity to discuss the complexities and overarching ambivalence of Ali G. I analysed sketches from the show that can be read, like much of Cohen's body as both mocking the racist

[398] See Younge, quoted in Howells, 168.

stereotype and as mocking the imagined body of the racialised other. I argued therefore, that Cohen's comedy stands both within the history of Blackface and in certain instances, at an ironic distance from it. I also discussed Ali G's ability to trouble `race' at the level of discourse by passing as Black. However, I further discussed how Ali's privileges seem to enable these acts of passing. Finally, I touched on the changing reception that the show received once it was revealed that "Ali" was in fact white. I discussed the multiple reasons that the early racially ambiguous Ali may have caused laughter in ways that the white Ali did not. My overarching argument in this chapter is that Ali G offers an ambivalent commentary on the possibilities of humour and the comic to reflect upon the psychic and social ambivalences of `race,' while also possibly reinscribing racism. In the next chapter, I turn to an analysis of the character of Ali G that examines sexuality and masculinity. I draw upon the arguments made in this chapter to discuss the ambivalence of `race' based humour in relation to discourses of gender. I argue that the ambiguities of the comic in relation to Ali G are made more salient when we pay attention to how `race' is negotiated comedically through discourses of masculinity.

Chapter Six

Ali G, Masculinity, Sexuality and Comedy

In this chapter, I continue to discuss the character of Ali G. However, while the previous chapter focused on the characters ambivalent relationship to discourses of `race,' this chapter focuses on his relationship to discourses of sex. I offer an analysis of several skits from the show in order to examine how the comic is used to negotiate discourses of both `race' and sexuality.

Honkys, Donkeys and Touching Blokes: An Analysis of `The Law'

The episode, "The Law" begins with Ali G lying on a hospital bed surrounded by nurses and a doctor. "I've never seen injuries this bad before. What happened to him?"[399] enquires one nurse. "I don't know. But they say that he saved the world,"[400] says another. A flashback occurs where we see three figures under a Banner that reads "Staines town hall: Increase Da Peace Conference." The three figures represent different world religions, one dressed in traditional orthodox Jewish dress, another dressed in clothing representing Islam and possibly Palestine or the Middle East in general, and a third is dressed like the Roman Catholic Pope.[401] The audience sees and hears an unseen figure point a gun at the trio, when Ali appears. Ali runs towards the three men. He is shown throwing himself in front of all three men, and being shot three times. Then we follow Ali as he enters heaven. God is depicted as a black man sitting on a

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[399] *Da Ali G Show*, Episode 1, `The Law'. (*HBO Television:* New York, 2000).
[400] *Ibid.*
[401] *Ibid.*

throne. "This must be heaven,"[402] says Ali. "And you must be Jah. Big up yourself. Can I come in please?"[403] Asks Ali. "We've already got Tupac and Biggie,"[404] answers Jah. "Heaven's not ready for another Angel. Go back to earth Ali."[405] At this point, Ali disappears only to reappear a moment later. "While I is up here,"[406] he says. "I couldn't get another couple of inches could I?"[407] "No," answers Jah. "Eleven is enough for any man."[408]

The humour of this sketch functions on several levels and points to several post colonial ironies. Firstly, the idea of Ali as "saving the world" at the "Increase Da Peace" conference at "Staines Town Hall" points to the disjuncture between the quasi-political identities that middle class subjects form through appropriations of Black popular culture and their distance from global political conflict. The moniker, "Increase Da Peace" points to the circulation of political vernacular through urban culture, which functions as superficial slang that connotes no real relation to political life. The idea of world leaders meeting at Staines Town Hall and Ali saving the world is ridiculous. The ridicule is not of global conflict, but of Ali's involvement in world issues.

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[402] *Ibid.*
[403] *Ibid.*
[404] *Ibid.*
[405] *Ibid.*
[406] *Ibid.*
[407] *Ibid.*
[408] *Ibid.*

The larger joke lies in the disjuncture between actual world politics and the construction of identities through commodity culture. In *The Colonisation of Psychic Space*, Kelly Oliver argues that capitalism has affected people's sense of themselves and their investments in identity. Oliver states that in an era of global capitalism, "Difference itself has become a marketable commodity."[409] The commodification of difference is fraught with irony. Black urban culture, which often came out of a response to histories of slavery and capitalist exploitation of Blacks by upper class whites, now becomes bought back by middle class white youth who relish in the cultural capital of Blackness.[410] While this trend has been written about by Black authors as having serious implications for economic development and cultural identity within Black American communities[411], the mass sale of hip hop to white audiences is also fraught with contradictions that are also quite laughable, as they point to the insecurities and anxieties of white male subjects who are often depicted as intellectually and morally superior to racial others. While Ali can say "Increase Da Peace" and spout off other racially and politically conscious slogans, he remains a privileged, sheltered and ignorant subject thereby making his saving of the world a joke.

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[409] Oliver, Kelly, *The Colonisation of Pyschic Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 66.
[410] See Greg Tate, *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking From Black Culture* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003).
[411] *Ibid.*

However, as stated in the previous chapter, the mockery of the privileged subject who unsuccessfully attempts to "...cross the tracks..."[412] offers nothing to those who are assumed to be on the other side of these tracks. Ali G offers a commentary on the failures of white subjects who emulate Blackness, but this commentary says little about the affects of this appropriation on Black subjects or Black culture.

The other joke occurs when Ali gets to heaven. The Black god figure who he names "Jah" points to Rastafarian and Afrocentric culture. Again, the joke lies not in mocking this culture but in mocking Ali's allegiance to it. The fact that "Jah" references Tupac and Biggie as "Angels" points to the disjuncture between the commodities of hip hop culture and the sanctity of religion. For Ali, and others like him whose only political icons come from popular culture, their only angels are slain rap stars. What is being mocked is not the death of these rappers, but a generation whose only political, cultural and spiritual reference points come from popular culture. The serious moment of reckoning, where Ali meets Jah are undercut by his reference to these icons. The moment is further made into mockery when Ali asks Jah for an increase in Penis size. Ali's only request from God is a larger Penis, pointing to his ridiculous investment in archetypal masculinity. Furthermore when Jah responds that "11 inches is enough for any

[412] Lockyear and Pickering, 182.

man," the audience realises that we are being made to be spectators in Ali's false fantasy. The idea of his gigantic penis becomes just as laughable as the notion of him saving the world. His role as both a hero and a hypermasculine physical specimen are mocked by the improbability of both.

What I further believe Cohen is also tapping into is an unspoken anxiety around white male sexuality. Dyer states that,

> All concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality. Race is a means of categorizing different types of human body(sic) which reproduce themselves...Heterosexuality is the means of ensuring, but also the site of endangering, the reproduction of these differences.[413]

Dyer further discusses the paradox of white sexuality. He states that "To ensure the survival of the race, they have to have sex- but having sex, and sexual desire, are not very white: the means of reproducing whiteness are not themselves pure white. This is the logic behind the commonly found anxiety that the white race will fade away."[414] Within a Christian tradition of mind/body dualism, racial otherness is associated with the body, and with urges of the body, sex being one of them.[415] Therefore, white bodies and white sexualities are often hidden, repressed in popular discourse and polite speech. Yet, paradoxically in order to maintain the supposed purity and the positional superiority of whiteness, white

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[413] Dyer, 20.
[414] *Ibid,* 26.
[415] *Ibid*, 26-30.

heterosexual masculinity must be represented as functioning and dominant. Dyer states that "The sexual dramas of white men have to do with not being able to resist the drives or with struggling to master them."[416] Dyer notes that this drama is one that harkens back to the story of Christ. He states that,

> The divided nature of white masculinity, which is expressed in relation not only to sexuality but also to anything that can be characterized as low, dark and irremediably corporeal, reproduces the structure of feeling of the Christ story. His agony is that he was fully flesh and fully spirit, able to be tempted though able to resist. In the torment of the crucifixion he experienced the fullness of the pain of sin, but in the resurrection showed that he could transcend it. The spectacle of white male bodily suffering typically conveys a sense of dignity and transcendence in such pain.[417]

The initial scene of Ali, as a Christ like martyr figure is reworked as a parody of this persecution narrative. When Ali awakens in his coma, it is significant that it is his penis that is the first organ to move underneath the white hospital sheet. The flat line that had been read on the monitor begins to play a hip hop beat and Ali jumps to his feet and begins to sing, "Oh yeah, Oh yeah. Raise your hands in the air, Raise em like you just don't care." The nurses become go go dancers. Far from being a Christ like figure of purity and sexual abstinence, the joke mocks ideals of white Christian purity and martyrdom. Furthermore, by making God a Black `Jah' rather than a white Christ and referring to Tupac and Biggie as Angels, Cohen turns the white narrative of Christian suffering on its head. Rather

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[416] Dyer, 27.
[417] *Ibid,* 28.

than being redeemed by a white God, Jah and his angels are Black. Rather than being resurrected and reborn as pure and virginal, Ali wants to be reborn with a larger penis.

It is also notable that Tupac Shakur, a famous rapper who was killed in the late 1990's titled his last album, *Resurrection*.[418] For Ali, and a generation schooled in popular culture texts more than biblical texts, their gospel is the gospel of Black urban music and culture, their angels are dead rappers and their ideal is not puritanical morality but hypersexuality. What is being mocked therefore is not only white investment in Black culture, but also the sanctity of dominant white Christian norms which the hip hop generation seems to have little interest in. The dominant persecution story is seen to be passé. Instead Ali wants to attach himself to the commodities of Blackness and to revel in the darkness that earlier notions of white masculinity were conceived against.

However, once again the appropriation of Rastafarianism and hip hop is ridiculed without any serious consideration as to the effects that this form of cultural theft may have on those who are politically, socially, spiritually and materially invested in these cultures.

The joke of white male sexuality: where to begin...

[418] Tupac Shakur, *Resurrection* (Interscope Records. November 14, 2003).

The joke of white male sexuality is two fold. On the one hand, the purity and disembodiment of earlier notions of white puritanical masculinity are being mocked. On the other hand, the ability of young suburban white men to perform an idealised version of Blackness is also mocked. Essentialised ideas of controlled, white male sexuality are seen to be laughable. However, essentialised ideas of hypermasculine Black sexuality are also seen to be a funny stereotype that exists in the minds of many anxious white boys. Through a hyperbolic performance of the racist and sexist stereotypes often attached to Black bodies, one could argue that the stereotype is seen to be a comical piece of fiction materialized in anxious white minds.

What is being mocked is the nature of the investment that white suburban men have in Black popular culture. By comparing Ali to Tupac and Biggie and then mentioning penis size, the joke functions to reveal the anxieties around white masculinity that lead Ali to attach himself to Blackness. Ali's investment in hip hop culture is not born out of any real anti-racist solidarity, but rather comes from an investment in archetypal masculinity. The audience is made to laugh at the familiar stereotypes of Black masculinity as being associated with violence and sex.

However, rather than laughing at Blackness, we laugh at the superficial ways in which normative whiteness seeks to construct and then consume

Blackness in order to perform heteronormative masculinity. The reason that Ali is funny is because his attempts at accessing this masculinity continually fail. We see this throughout *Da Ali G show,* when his overblown rhetoric of machismo is continuously undercut by his idiocy and effeminacy. What is also mocked by extension are overblown stereotypes about Black men that circulate within popular culture.

"The Law": From Gangsta Rap to Spaghetti:

The episode, "The Law" continues with Ali giving his customary greeting to the audience: "Booyakasha." He continues, "Me name be Ali G and me is straight out of the Staines Ghetto. In the UK. It's not far from Windsor castle where the Queen lives. Recognise."[419] Cohen's humour functions by revealing the insincerity of Ali's thug persona. Ali is a comic figure in that he appears to be unaware of the stupidity of referring to Staines as a ghetto, when it is in fact a middle class neighbourhood. At the same time, Ali is funny because he mocks not only himself but a generation of suburban British youth who emulate African American hip hop culture, with little connection to the material and political struggles that this sub culture emerged from. By referring to himself as having grown up in a ghetto, Ali gestures to the cultural cache of otherness that commodified Black popular culture offers to many middle class youth. The irony

[419] *Da Ali G Show*, Episode 1, 'The Law' (*HBO Television:* New York, 2000).

and subsequent humour lie in the disparity between Ali's language and his actual experience. Furthermore, Cohen gestures to the ridiculous nature of capitalist culture, as experiences of racial, cultural and class oppression themselves have now been turned into commodities. Ali continues:

> America has invented some of the bestest things in the world: McDonalds, gangsta rap, spaghetti, and swimming. But your country's got problems too. There's been nuff sadness since the terrible events of 7-11. And there is still racialism even to the native people. You know, what is they called?(at this point Ali puts his hand over his mouth and makes a stereotypical `native' tribal chant). How comes you never ever see them in prominent jobs? Apart from that bloke in the village people. And even then he couldn't go out without a police man, a fire man and someone from the navy to protect him.[420]

At first glance, it would be easy to dismiss Ali G as a racist character, propagating racial slurs and minimising the serious nature of the bombing of the World Trade Centre and the colonisation of Aboriginal peoples. However, rather than mocking racial violence or the victims of racial violence, I believe that Ali functions to mock dominant whiteness. The figure of mockery becomes Ali himself and by extension, normative middle class white masculine subjects like him. While Ali professes to be interested in politics and speaks with the authority of white Western masculinist rationality, his authority is undercut by his ignorance. Ali G is a vehicle through which his audience can laugh at the political and racial

[420] *Ibid.*

ignorance and unfounded arrogance of white middle class subjects who co opt the empty signifiers of hip hop culture.

However, as I have argued throughout this work, it is important to note that the ambiguity of Ali G allows for an ambivalent reading of race and racism. As Lockyear and Pickering state, "...the open ambiguity of the person/persona distinction allowed a continuous oscillation between actual insult, and serious and comic registers..." The humour of Ali G functions by tapping into the possible moral and social transgressions that may be involved in laughing at jokes which are potentially racist. In order for this humour to function, the ambivalence between subverting and reinscribing `race' and racism is constantly at play.

Honkys, Donkeys and Blokes: `Race' and Homoerotics:

"The Law" episode continues with Ali going to Philadelphia to train at the Police Academy. Ali is asked to put out an APB describing three suspects who are accused of mugging. His partner tells him to read over the walkie talkie that the suspects are described as, "1 black male, 1 white male and 1 Spanish male."[421] Ali responds by reading, "1 brother, 1 honky, 1 spanish."[422] As they get into the police car, his partner tells him that "We refer to the person as a white male, not a honky."[423] "Why not?"[424] asks an oblivious Ali. "A honky in the

[421] *Ibid.*
[422] *Ibid.*
[423] *Ibid.*
[424] *Ibid.*

United States is not a nice term for a white person,"[425] his partner says. "For real. But they say that you can be a honky and still be hung like a donkey."[426] His partner pauses for a moment, then responds, "Possibly…."[427] Again, `race' and sexuality are connected in the functioning of the joke. Ali's lack of racial sensitivity and use of street vernacular is made funny by his ignorance. Ali sees no problem in the term "Honky" and instead undercuts any seriousness in racial name calling by referring again to Penis size. On one level what is being mocked is Ali's stupidity. However, on another level the ways in which discourses of `race' become interchangeable with archetypal masculinity, points to larger ironies concerning how racial discourses function. Penis size erases the sting of the word "honky," thereby pointing to the ways in which `race' is conceived of as a battle over masculinity.

The emasculation of the imagined white subject is prevented when Ali suggests that white men can still have large penises. What is concealed and yet present in this joke is a battle over penis size, sexuality and masculinity between white and Black men that often structures racial antagonism. For Ali, racism is not severe if it can be traded for hyper masculine superiority. This is the reason that Ali and many white suburban boys like him can attach themselves to Black

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[425] *Ibid.*
[426] *Ibid.*
[427] *Ibid.*

popular culture with little political affiliation to anti-racism or first hand knowledge of racism.

Blackness and whiteness in the world of commodified culture are emptied out of all political meaning and instead become the ground over which desires for masculinity are waged. The humour of this skit reveals again, the ridiculous and superficial attachments that Ali makes towards `race'. What is also funny about the skit is that Ali himself is white. His use of the word "Honky" is less an expression of any anti-racist politic, and more a repetitive gesture learned from Black popular culture. It is an ironical and funny statement that white youth like Ali have co-opted and mimic Black culture to the point that they may end up using vernacular that disparages whiteness. However, while a mimicry of Blackness on the part of dominant white subjects may disparage whiteness momentarily, is whiteness really unsettled by the language of dress and gesture? What is funny about Ali G is that his attempts to mimic Blackness are couched in the safety of white middle class privilege, gesturing to the ridiculous and superficial performance of these identities.

Comedic Desires: Homophobia, Homoerotics and Laughter

The scene continues with Ali being made to search a man who is being arrested. Ali is asked to search the suspect by padding him down to find concealed weapons. Ali sheepishly pokes at him with his gun. When his partner

tells him he has to search the man he states, "I's hate touching blokes."[428] When he is finally forced to touch the suspect's crotch, he jumps and recoils. "Aw, that's disgusting,"[429] he says squeamishly turning away. Like the reference to penis size, Ali's homophobia is a testament to his ridiculous investments in masculinity. What is funny is that Ali's over the top references to penis size and his petrified homophobia reveal him to be a frightened child. The irony is that the more he tries to perform heteronormative masculinity, the more he is revealed to be immature. Again, what is mocked is white male investment in Black popular culture. This investment for Ali, and for other white suburban boys like him, is seen to be nothing more than a desperate attempt to play out a homophobic hypersexual version of masculinity. The funny part of this fantasy is that it reveals the extreme immaturity of these subjects. What is being mocked is not only Ali's ignorance of racial politics and investments in masculinity through signifiers of Blackness, but his failure to perform this masculinity properly. The skit ends after Ali has continually failed to perform all of his tasks in police training. He asks his partner, "Do you think I could make a good cop?" "Probably not," says his partner as the camera cuts away.[430] Ali's macho vernacular, sex jokes and homophobic rants are undercut by his actual inability to

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[428] *Ibid.*
[429] *Ibid.*
[430] *Da Ali G Show*, Episode 1, 'The Law'.

do anything right. In the end, he is a buffoon who borrows snippets from hip hop culture to try desperately to be a man, but can never quite get it right. The audience is left laughing at his continued failures not only at becoming a police officer, but also at becoming hyper masculine.

Bleaching out Desire: `Race', Racism and Sex

What Ali G's comedy taps into is a wider set of collective fears concerning `race,' gender and sexuality. In *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality* Joane Nagel discusses the history of fear and anxiety concerning Black male sexuality that has structured anti miscegenation laws and anti-Black racism in the United States. Nagel states that "When they were enslaved, black men were depicted sexually more often as overabundant than as dangerous or seductive..."[431] Nagel goes on to discuss how the image of the Black man as sexually threatening and dangerous was one that was often used to police Black men's relationships with white women. Alongside stereotypes of sexual aggression, Black men were also represented as hypermasculine subjects, often through depictions of the Black male body as hypersexual and virile. Nagel states that these representations said more about threats and anxieties concerning white masculinity than they did about actual sexual relations or bodies of Black men. She states that,

> The symbolic transformation of black men from emasculated slaves into vengeful rapists during the decades following the Civil War thus set the

[431] Nagel, Joane. *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 109.

> tone for black-white sexual politics in the twentieth century. Early-twentieth-century concerns about white men's waning social autonomy, personal power, and sexual virility were heightened by biological theories of race popular at the time that supported a view of black men as `hyperpotent.[432]

In the world of Ali G, Black-white sexual politics have been altered by the overdeterminance of Blackness in popular culture. The white men of the 20th century who once wanted to eradicate Blackness due to the threats that Black men posed to their masculinity, now want to buy into this idea of hypermasculine sexuality. Ali G's humour functions by revealing the irony of anti-Black racism, by unmasking the white male subject as one that in fact desires Blackness due to his own neurotic anxieties of emasculation. When Cohen makes jokes that gesture to `race' and penis size in the same breath, I believe what he is tapping into is a collective unconscious in Western society that is founded on the repression of open discussions of sexuality and `race.'

What Ali G's comedy also taps into is a racialised anxiety concerning homosexuality. Ali's over determined homophobia actually reveals an anxiety over white heterosexuality. His attachment to Black masculinity and by extension white male attachments to Black masculinity speak to the homoerotics of racialised desire that are abjected in the white gaze. These abjections however, are never complete, and therefore must continuously rearticulate themselves in the

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[432] *Ibid,* 115.

form of homophobia. It is worth noting that all of Ali's objects of idealization and affection are Black male figures. From Tupac to Biggie, Ali displays a deep desire for Black men. His idealisation of Black masculinity ironically valorizes hyper masculine heterosexuality, while also carrying an unspoken trace of homoerotic desire. If Dyer is right and `race' always involves the reproduction of heterosexuality, then what is abjected in discourses of miscegenation is not only the possibility of cross racial heterosexual relations, but also homosexuality. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler argues that

> ...it seems crucial to rethink the scenes of reproduction and, hence, of sexing practices not only as ones through which a heterosexual imperative is inculcated, but as ones through which boundaries of racial distinction are secured as well as contested. Especially at those junctures in which a compulsory heterosexuality works in the service of maintaining hegemonic forms of racial purity, the `threat' of homosexuality takes on a distinctive complexity.[433]

The humour of Ali G taps into not only the instability of whiteness, but it also taps into the anxieties of heteronormativity. The final sketch discussed in which Ali refuses to touch the suspect in which he states that he "...hates touching blokes"[434] does not mock homosexuality, but mocks homophobia. Ali begins to wipe his hand obsessively and screams out, "Oh, that's disgusting," when he is finally forced to touch the suspect. His obsessive rubbing of his hand taps into discourses of purity, in which the straight, white normative male body must

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[433] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 114.
[434] *Da Ali G Show*, Episode 1, `The Law'.

obsessively cleanse itself of otherness.[435] However, the hyperbolic ways in which he performs these gestures, reveal the phobic anxieties concerning homosexuality to be ridiculous. Ali's buffoonery may not mock the abjected body, but mock those who fear the abjected body.

Ali's heteronormative stance and extreme homophobia are further made funny by the audience's realisation that Ali's efforts at masculine prowess continually fail. Furthermore, his homophobia is seen to be a further irony as he is shown to be obsessed with Black male bodies and his hyper homosociality always bears the trace of the homoerotic.

Humour functions in the work of Ali G to reveal the anxieties that lie behind discourses of `race' and sexuality. Within the world of polite speech, often language concerning both `race' and sexuality are silenced. In *White*, Dyer argues that Western culture is largely based around a Christian tradition that devalues the body and valorises the mind. He states that "Christianity maintains a conception of a split between mind and body, regarding the latter as at least inferior and often as evil."[436] Historically then, one strategy that has been used to racialise, devalue and oppress people of colour has been to depict them as being of the body rather than the mind.[437] However, a further outgrowth of the

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[435] See Dyer, 1-16.
[436] Dyer, 16.
[437] See Dyer, 16-25.

racialisation and devaluing of both the body and of people of colour has been the silencing of both discourses of `race' and discourses of the body in Western culture.

As much as we fail to talk about `race', we also fail to talk about the body. In addition to offering a platform for discourses of `race' to be spoken, Ali G's humour offers a stage for discourses of the body to find expression. In "The Law" he not only uses popular vernacular to talk explicitly of race—"1 Honky, 1 Brother, I Spanish"[438] but his discussion of Penis size also brings the body out of the linguistic, psychic and social closet. By playing the fool, Ali G taps into silences of embodiment in Western culture.

But what if your sister was Halle Berry? Ali G and discourses of sexuality

Ali G troubles dominant norms by employing a vernacular and a set of codes and ethics that challenge white middle class morality. In the episode "Da Family" Ali G discusses "family values" with a group of experts from various religious and governmental organizations. *Da Ali G Show* often employs panel discussions dealing with different social issues, in which Ali asks questions of various experts. It is interesting to note that all of the participants on Ali's panels are white, educated, Western middle class subjects. The comedy functions when

[438] *Da Ali G Show*, Episode 1, `The Law'.

Ali's ethics born out of hip hop culture and "street ethics" are juxtaposed with the formal knowledge and middle class sensibilities of those on his panels.

The segment begins with Ali introducing the topic, " Hear me now. Today we will be chatting about the family. Do you think the way we be raisin' kids has changed?"[439] Michael Ealey of The Family Life Ministries responds, "Yes, some of it's great. Some of it's not so great."[440] Ali continues, "So, at what age do you think parents should give kids their first spliff?" "I don't think they should,"[441] says Diane Knippers, with the Institute of Religion and Democracy. Because it's illegal in our society." "How's the kid going to know what's good shit and what ain't?"[442] The discourse of child protection and parental responsibility which is tied to state-led notions of citizenship and social responsibility is undercut by Ali's ethics which are based in a counter culture in which knowledge of drugs is valued. The humour functions by using a different value system and world view to trouble dominant visions of parenting.

It could be argued that by donning his Fubu suit and speaking in a poorly rendered accent which borrows often from both popularized hip hop slang and commodified patois, Ali G mocks Blackness and exploits the racist stereotype of the illegitimate Black male. However, I would argue that Ali G's troubling of

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[439] *Da Ali G Show*, Episode 2, "Da Family" (*HBO Television:* New York , 2000).
[440] *Ibid.*
[441] *Ibid.*
[442] *Ibid.*

family values through uses of hip hop vernacular and bodily discourses are more complex.

While Ali himself is somewhat of a buffoon and his antics are laughable, the real humour I believe lies in the disjuncture between Ali and those on the panel. While his lack of knowledge and crude sensibilities are laughable, so too is the propriety and impractical righteousness of those whom he interviews. "Da Family" segment continues with Ali discussing sexuality. "Do you think parents should talk to kids about sex?"[443] The panel responds by saying yes. However their vision of talking about sex differs greatly from Ali's,

> So should parents invite the kids into the room while they is bonein? Or should they show them porno? Like when me asked me dad about sex, him said, `You hide in that kitchen cupboard at 8'o clock and then at 8'o clock he brought back this honey much fitter than me mum and him boned her every which way while winking at me. And man, I still use some of those moves."[444]

Again, the humour of this sketch functions by exploiting the differences in norms and understandings between Ali and his panel. The humour I believe works because it undercuts middle class norms from below.

The notion of `sex education' as a formal and bureaucratic process is undercut by Ali's explicit naming of sexual practices. In his work *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I,* Michel Foucault discusses how the

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[443] *Ibid.*
[444] *Ibid.*

bureaucratization and institutionalization of sexuality through the production of an official proper discourse of sex, helped to construct categories of deviance that worked to oppress marginalized groups. Foucault also discusses the treatment of childhood sexuality, and how the sexuality of children became a public problem throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries. He states that "The sex of children and adolescents has become, since the eighteenth century, an important area of contention around which innumerable institutional devices and discursive strategies have been deployed."[445] Foucault discusses a great festival organized in Germany in 1776. He states that,

> Before the assembled public, one of the professors, a certain Wolke, asked the students selected questions concerning the mysteries of sex, birth, and procreation. He had them comment on engravings that depicted a pregnant woman, a couple, and a cradle. The replies were enlightened, offered without shame or embarrassment[446]

Foucault continues to point out, directly related to my interest in Ali G that,

> *No unseemly laughter intervened to disturb them-except from the very ranks of an adult audience more childish than the children themselves,* and wholm Wolke severely reprimanded. At the end, they all applauded these cherub-faced boys who, in front of adults, had skillfully woven the garlands of discourse and sex.[447]

Children are used to discuss sexuality, as they have not yet formed taboos concerning the explicit naming of sexual acts and the body itself. The adult

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[445] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I.* (New York: Random House, 1978), 30.
[446] *Ibid,* 29.
[447] *Ibid,* my emphasis.

audience however, being inculcated into the world of normative speech can only laugh at the brazenness of the children. For my purposes, what is interesting is that the figure of the child generates laughter in the anxious adults.

Adult Sexuality: cause for humour

Similarly, Ali G acts as a childlike figure who fails to perform adult rationality due to his investments in youth culture. This innocence and ignorance of the `proper' way to act generates laughter in audiences who watch *Da Ali G Show*. However, just as Foucault mocks adults who laugh at the breaking of taboo, the disjuncture between Ali's freeness in naming the body and sexuality and the adult recitation of official discourses of sex, cause the other panelists to also be the butt of the joke.

The subversive potential in Ali's comedy lies in the fact that his lack of inhibition in naming bodily practices allows him to revisit the honesty of a child. This lack of inhibition produces laughter in those who `know better' but also offers its own internal critique of the ways in which official discourses of sexuality produce `sex' and subjects in certain ways that seem to counter lived and bodily experience. Ali's innocence causes him to articulate a counter discourse that troubles official constructions of sexuality which would pathologise acts that fall outside of the normative heterosexual family.

Humour works by exploiting taboos concerning overt discussions of

sexuality in general and childhood sexuality specifically. The sketch continues with Ali asking the panel about incest. "Let's talk about a very touchy subject, relationships in the family or as it's called, incense."[448] "Incest,"[449] says one of the panelists, correcting him. "Yeah, whatever,"[450] says Ali. The official discourses of sexual normalcy are troubled by Ali's lack of awareness or need for formal nomenclatures. Much like his version of "sex education," his knowledge of "Incense" is misnamed, as his understanding does not come from formal discourse but from everyday experience. "Does you think it's wrong that a brother can never marry his sister?"[451] The panelist from "Veteran feminists of America" says, "Yes."[452] "For real,"[453] continues Ali. "...cause once I was at my mate Jazzy F's house and there was this game and I didn't know at the time she was my cousin, but if you got locked in the closet you had to bone her."[454] "Is that insects?" "The definitions of incest vary from culture to culture," responds the panelist.[455] The humour of this sketch functions by exploiting the differences between formal, governmental and academic discourses concerning sexuality and everyday lived experience. Furthermore, Ali's frank discussion of sexuality and

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[448] *Da Ali G Show*, Episode 2, 'The Family' (*HBO Television:* New York, 2000).
[449] *Ibid.*
[450] *Ibid.*
[451] *Ibid.*
[452] *Ibid.*
[453] *Ibid.*
[454] *Ibid.*
[455] *Ibid.*

reference to his `mates' and to sexual games break taboos concerning frank discussions of personal sexual exploits. The breaking of these taboos trouble dominant white middle class adult discourses of sexuality which categorise and name sexual behaviour while still silencing the messy realities of sex.

Sex education: From academic discourse to street vernacular

What is also funny about this sketch is Ali's troubling of upper and middle class ways of speaking about sexuality, by inserting a `street' vernacular into the discussion. This insertion of experience upsets boundaries between objective and subjective knowledge. This insertion also troubles the ways in which expert knowledges are often conceived of in disembodied and bureaucratic ways. "Incest" is something Ali G cannot even pronounce. His knowledge of sexuality comes from lived experiences in which easy categorizations are complicated by the messier realities of desire. Ali continues, "What if Halle Berry is your sister? If you don't fancy her, you're pretty much gay."[456] "No,"[457] responds the veteran feminist "...there are a lot of boys who grow up with very attractive sisters and they still want to pull their pigtails."[458] What is further funny is the "veteran feminist's" inability to speak about sexuality and the body outside of trite metaphors. "Now, I is alright,"[459] Ali responds. "My sister is a dog. Her body is

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[456] *Ibid.*
[457] *Ibid.*
[458] *Ibid.*
[459] *Ibid.*

alright. Her butt is fine and she's got amazing tits. But her face is like a real brown bagger. So I ain't got that problem."[460] The panelists look shocked.

Ali troubles taboos against familial sexual relations by evading academic jargon in favour of a counter discourse which explicitly names the body. He breaks taboos against incest by engaging in lewd sexual speech. His hyper masculinity and juvenility work to undercut authorial voices. He continues. "But is it always wrong to see your sister in a kind of sexual way cos I feel weird about it. My mates in Staines say that she gives the best blowies in the area. I know I should be proud but I feel a bit weird."[461] Ali's humour works to tap into taboos concerning familial sexual relations within Western culture. Like his humour concerning `race', his vernacular concerning sexuality and the family taps into silences concerning the body. What his humour points to are the paradoxes of polite middle class liberal Western speech in which to see and name bodily difference and desire openly is prohibited. Ali's humour is humour that troubles middle class morality.

Subversion—Sort of: The politics of Ali's sexual politics:

The subversive potential of Ali's counter discourse of sex, which fails to engage with official discourses of sexual category, lies in his troubling of the

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[460] *Ibid.*
[461] *Ibid.*

pathologies of sexuality which have been formed under various sex-based categorisations. Foucault states that,

> Since the eighteenth century, sex has not ceased to provoke a kind of generalized discursive erythrism. And these discourses on sex did not multiply apart from or against power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise.[462]

He continues,

> From the singular imperialism that compels everyone to transform their sexuality into a perpetual discourse, to the manifold mechanisms which, in the areas of economy, pedagogy, medicine, and justice, incite, extract, distribute, and institutionalize the sexual discourse, an immense verbosity is what our civilization has required and organized.[463]

Foucault's reference to imperialism is telling. Much like the taxonomy of racial difference used during colonial projects, sexual discourses work to produce hierarchies and binaries in which people are slotted due to their sex acts. Ali G's ignorance towards these taxonomies and his counter discourse of childish play and visceral desire which break taboos of familial sex and proper sexual education troubles this imperialist classification.

Moreover, by evoking humour, shock, discomfort and anxiety in the panel members he talks to, he points to our investments in these discourses. Furthermore, his alternative discourse points to the ways in which sexualities are

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[462] *Ibid,* 33.
[463] *Ibid.*

often lived in contradiction to normalizing discourses, and to the ways in which supposedly normal sexuality is an expression of middle class white hegemony.

However, as mentioned, the construction of non-white, Western people as childlike is one that is rooted in colonial discourse and carries through to contemporary racism.[464] While Ali's open, innocuous, childlike play with the norms of sexuality may work to subvert the dominant white, Western, middle class status quo, it could also be read as further infantilising racialised bodies. Again, as I have been arguing throughout this work, the comedy of *Da Ali G Show* is deeply ambivalent in its subversion and reinscription of `race' and racism.

"You'd Make Your Own Grandma feel Like Rubbish?"
Ali G and the Troubling of `Race'

Much like his troubling of sexual norms, by playing the fool, Ali G also troubles the disjuncture between commodified, glorified understandings of gang culture and lived experience. In doing so, he points to the differences between commodified signifiers of Blackness, and urban Black experience.

In the segment "Ali and Gangs in LA", Ali G interviews a `real' gang member from LA. The humour of the skit exploits the difference between Ali's understanding of gang culture and Alejandro Alonzo's, an ex-gang member from Los Angeles. While it could be argued that Cohen's humour mocks racialised

[464] See Puwar, 60.

youth involved in gangs, I believe the humour actually exploits the differences between the sensibilities of middle class youth who are attached to hip hop and the experiences of Black working class urban youth. Furthermore, I believe that Cohen's humour works to mock the hyper-masculinity of mainstream hip-hop culture, gesturing to how dominant discourses concerning Black working class masculinity construct archetypal figures who are scripted as existing outside of feminine or familial space.

The skit begins with Ali stating, "Check it. I is in LA to meet with ex-gang member Alejandro Alonzo to talk about gangs and thing. So, how many gang members are there in all of LA?" Alonzo responds, "Well, according to the Los Angeles county sherrifs department, from 1998 there were about 150 thousand gang members." "Repect," says Ali. "We is only got 8 in the West End massive."[465] The humour functions to reveal the gap between Ali's "gang," which is actually a small group of privileged British suburban youth and Alonzono's understanding of gang culture, rooted in poor racialised communities in the United States. Ali is once again a buffoon, whose lack of understanding of gangs serves to mock investments that white youth make in Black culture apart from any real experience of racialised poverty or violence.

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[465] *Da Ali G Show. Innit.* (London: BBC Television,1999).

However, as the skit continues, Ali's humour begins to mock Alonzo and gang culture itself. I would argue however, that what is being mocked is a version of hypermasculinity that is often privileged within hip hop culture. Alonzo tells Ali that gangs are often divided by the colour of clothing that they wear. He responds by asking, "What would happen if your mum did a wash and she put in one of her red sweaters and all your clothes turned red, even if you is in blues. What would you do?" Alonzo responds by stating that "You'd probably throw the clothes out and buy some more." "But the mum would be well miffed about that,"[466] says Ali.

Here, the humour functions on two levels. Firstly, Ali, as usual, is a figure of ridicule as he is seen to be a young provincial boy with no understanding of the gritty realities of urban violence. However, in introducing the figure of the `mum' the hypermasculinity of gang culture is also mocked. Ali continues by asking, "What would have happened say, if your nan had knitted you like a red sweater, and you was in the blue crips. What would you do?" "Well the person would never wear it in the first place," says Alonzo. "But then his Nan had spent like ages knitting it," says Ali. "They wouldn't care. They would probably throw is out. Or, they would tell her to do it in my favourite colour, which is blue." "But then you make the Nan feel bad, or whatever. You'd make your own

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[466] *Ibid.*

Grandma feel like rubbish!" he exclaims. "Well, I don't really think they'd be concerned about making someone in their family feel bad about the colour. If I was in a situation like that," continues Alonzo, "I'd probably take it but not wear it." "But they is always check, you know" says Ali, "If they've spent that long knitting something they'll always check to see if you'll wear it." The bit finishes with Alonzo stating, "Well, I personally don't know anyone who's every had a sweater knitted for them. So, maybe in England it's a little different than it is in the States."[467]

This sketch is one of the funniest I believe, in *Da Ali G Show.* What it points to is how ridiculous white middle class masculine investments in Black street culture are, as the sensibilities of white middle class men can never fully grasp the magnitude of violence that exists in poor racialised urban communities. However, I also think that the feminization of this discourse helps to mock the hyper masculine individualism of urban male culture on the whole. The introduction of the figure of `the mum' and `the nan' works to turn Ali into more of a buffoon, while also undercutting the masculinist authority of gang culture, by pointing to the existence of hypermasculinised `thugs' in imagined familial and domestic space.

In her work *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* bell hooks states

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[467] *Ibid.*

that "At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute—the untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling."[468] Ali G's insertion of feminine bodies into his dialogue with Alonzo could be read as mocking the figure of the Black gangsta in ways that diminish how racialised poverty has produced this culture. However, it could also be read as mocking an image or ideal of racialised masculinity that has been constructed by white supremacy and feeds into a neurotic white imagination. The humour of this skit I believe, taps into the anxieties of white masculine identification with Black culture, and with anxieties concerning the actual humanity of Black subjects. Hooks states that, "Negative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to overdetermine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves."[469] She further states that

> The radical subculture of black maleness that begin to emerge as a natural outcome of militant anti-racist activism terrified racist white America. As long as black males were deemed savages unable to rise above their animal nature, they could be seen as a threat easily contained. It was the black male seeking liberation from the chains of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that had to be wiped out.[470]

The depiction of Black men as `thugs', and as being hyper masculine individualists who are irresponsible to families and communities is one that serves

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[468] bell hooks. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xii
[469] *Ibid.*
[470] *Ibid,* xiii.

a racist agenda well. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, racial discourses like discourses of sex/gender are performative, and work not to describe existing subjects but to produce them.

In his work, *Scripting the black masculine body: identity, discourse, and racial politics in popular media,* Ronald L. Jackson states that "Since the emergence of race as a social construct, Black bodies have become surfaces of racial representation. To say it bluntly, race is about bodies that have been assigned social meanings."[471] Jackson goes on to state that "...the Black body is treated as cultural capital and commodified in the popular marketplace. The materialistic dividends gained from exploiting Black bodies are lucrative, while the nonmarket values of love, hope, and collective sharing are dismissed."[472] By pointing to an ethic of care, Ali G's humour taps into the silences that inform dominant representations of Black masculinities in American popular culture.

Jackson discusses the coupling of racial and gender scripts that produce static images of Black masculinity in popular culture. He states that,

> The public narratives pertaining to Black men's lives comply with several racialised projections about the Black masculine body as: (1) exotic and strange, (2) violent, (3) incompetent and uneducated, (4) sexual, (5) exploitable, and (6) innately incapacitated.[473]

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[471] Ronald L Jackson. *Scripting the black masculine body.* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2006) 12.
[472] *Ibid,* 73.
[473] *Ibid,* 75.

As Stuart Hall points out in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices,* many Black filmmakers, artists and activists attempt to contest dominant negative images of Blackness by asserting positive imagery. He states that,

> This approach has the advantage of righting the balance. It is underpinned by an acceptance—indeed, a celebration—of difference. It inverts the binary opposition, privileging the subordinate term; sometimes reading the negative positively...It tries to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected.[474]

However Hall problematises this strategy, stating that,

> The problem with the positive/negative strategy is that adding positive images to the largely negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of the ways in which 'being black' is represented, but does not necessarily displace the negative. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them.[475]

Hall points to another strategy for troubling racial representation. He states that this strategy,

> ...locates itself within the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to contest it from within. It is more concerned with the forms of racial representation than with introducing new content. It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, while acknowledging that, since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any final victories.[476]

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[474] Hall, *Representation,* 272.
[475] *Ibid,* 274.
[476] *Ibid.*

Rather than naturalizing the Black male `thug' or romanticising an alternative positive representation, Ali G's humour troubles *discourses of `race'* through mockery. White masculinity is not demonized for it's commodification of Blackness; it is laughed at and unmasked in its failure to perform hypermasculinity. Similarly Black masculinity is not constructed as being wholly positive or wholly negative; rather the dominant discourse which constructs it is troubled by questions that taunt its authenticity.

Humour acts as a means through which racial meanings become fluid, in which identity is never stable or fixed but is as precarious as laughter itself.[477] The power relations between Ali G and Alonzo are continually shifting and the meanings of `race' and masculinity are unstable, as irony is used to contest versions of manhood and racial authenticity. While some may read Ali G's mockery of `real' gangsters as derivative of urban poverty and crime, I believe that just as Hall says of comedian Lenny Henry[478], we are made to laugh with rather than at Ali G's misapprehension of gang culture. We are not made to laugh at Black subjects themselves, but rather to laugh at the ways in which discourses of `race' are constructed in such static terms that they can be easily unraveled by a mocking gaze.

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[477] See Hall, *Representation*, 223-291.
[478] *Ibid,* 254.

However, I want to avoid romanticizing the character of Ali G. While the character points to the ability of discourses of `race' to be negotiated through comedic language and technique, the political subversion of these acts is questionable. The discourses of `race' and Blackness, like the power dynamics between Ali and Alonzo are continually at play within this skit. Ali's humour works by continuously shifting meanings concerning `race', sexuality and identity throughout the text. The jokes work by exploiting the distance between mainstream understandings of Black masculinity and gang culture and Ali's middle class British suburban vernacular. What is `at play' throughout these skits are static notions of whiteness and Blackness. However, the element of play and surprise needed to make the skits funny ensure that as much as `race' is never reified as an essential discourse, it also fails to ever be fully subverted.

Ali G's whiteface is a comedic face. The comedy of Ali G is used to parody attempts at racial solidarity, understanding and affiliation through appropriation. However, the skit works not only to reveal these appropriations but to mock them. Humour here, reveals the inability of these appropriations to approximate or understand racial alterity. What is at play in the work and world of Ali G are discourses of `race' and masculinity that are continuously undercut by their inability to remain fixed. Ali G does not embody a superior position to those racialised subjects that he attempts to portray, as his whiteness always

seems to garner the last laugh. However, performances that attempt to parody racial appropriations through putting signifiers of racial and cultural authenticity 'at play,' are always walking a thin line between mocking racism and reinscribing it. As Pellegrini says of Bernhardt's performance, "Ultimately, the shifting positions occupied by the black audience in *Without You I'm Nothing* indicate the ambivalent fortunes of (re) appropriation and subversion."[479] This ambivalence in Ali G is seen in the position of Alonzo Aleandro in *Da Ali G Show.* While Aleandro acts as the "straight-man" that reveals Ali G's inability to understand or embody racialised urban masculine life, in many ways he acts as a backdrop through which we come to laugh at Ali's whiteness. As Pellegrini says of Bernhardt's film, "...Without You I'm Nothing seems to present its critique of white appropriation from the standpoint of whiteness—a whiteness masquerading, unsuccessfully as it turns out, as blackness."[480] Again, there are clear similarities in this analysis of Bernardt and the comedy of Ali G. Ali G works to mock dominant appropriations of Blackness, but in many ways this mockery comes from a perspective of whiteness as Ali, while acting as the object of ridicule is also the focus of our gaze.

However, unlike Bernhardt's silent Black audience, the comedic discourse of Ali functions based on his difference from those he speaks to and their

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[479] *Ibid.*
[480] *Ibid.*

reactions to him. Within the dialogue between Alejandro and Ali, we see Alejandro's inability to comprehend Ali, his mockery of Ali and a play of power and discourse, where he often slips into an understanding of Ali's vernacular which mocks his own racialised performance through entry into the space of the feminine. Within their dialogue, there are times when Aleandro is clearly perplexed, annoyed and dismissive of Ali's seemingly trivial questions concerning nans and sweaters. However, there are moments where he entertains these questions as feasible,

> `Well, I don't really think they'd be concerned about making someone in their family feel bad about the colour. If I was in a situation like that,' continues Alonzo, `I'd probably take it but not wear it.'[481]

The sketches of Ali G work by exploiting the humour of ambivalent discourses of `race' and masculinity, which are continually at play in ways that parody notions of static Blackness, sexuality or manhood. However, the comedy of the work functions through a lack of finality. The skits never come to any resolution. No grand statement concerning `race' or identity is made. Rather, the signs of identity continue to slip. What becomes funny is the irresolvable tension between Ali and those he interviews and within the character himself. It is an ambiguity that leaves one with no final political or moral feeling, but does leave one laughing.

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[481] *Da Ali G Show, Innit.* (London: BBC Television, 1999).

To Summarise:

In this chapter, I have discussed the ways in which the humour of Ali G works to negotiate discourses of `race', gender and sexuality. As with the previous chapter, I argue that the humour of the character can be read as both subverting and reinforcing the status quo. Ali G's explicit naming of the body and sexuality challenge polite, middle class silences concerning the body. By tapping into the honesty and inappropriateness of childish speech, Ali G ruptures dominant adult speech which would repress the naming of `race' and sex. However, as I discussed, the association between people of colour and infantilisation comes out of a colonial history that informs contemporary racisms. Similarly, while Ali G's dialogue with Alonzo in the episode "Ali G and gangs in L.A." may work to mock white middle class investments in Black culture and the assumed machismo of hip hop culture, it could also work to reinscribe racist constructions of young Black men. Overall, in conjunction with the overarching argument of this thesis, I have concluded that the humour of Ali G is psychically and socially ambivalent in its treatment of `race.'

I will now move to an analysis of another comedic character that Cohen has made popular, Borat. I will examine how this character works to manage and reflect upon `race' and racism at a psychic and discursive level.

Chapter Seven

Revealing or Reinscribing Racism? An Analysis of `Borat'

The changing faces of Borat

In this chapter, I will discuss the politics of Cohen's increasingly most famous and controversial character, Borat. When Borat first appeared on the BBC, the comedy centered around the use of the figure of the "foreigner' or immigrant as a tool used to unmask the pretensions of middle class British culture. Paul Gilroy supports this reading of early "Borat" humour. Gilroy draws a parallel between Cohen's comedy and the 18th century novel *Persian Letters,* written by Montesquieu. He states that,

> That enlightenment tale disguised its fictional character through a sequence of authentic letters circulating between an oriental(sic) traveler who comes into the west as a visitor and his various correspondents at home. This imaginary alien visitor offered a scurrilous critical commentary on modern metropolitan life.[482]

I agree with Gilroy in his reading of the *early* Borat sketches. Borat's early interviews and forays into British life provided an ironic and sometimes poignant commentary on British social life.

I will begin by discussing sketches featuring Borat on the BBC's *Da Ali G Show.* In these sketches Borat explicitly names the body and `race' in ways that shed light upon the prejudices and anxieties of the white Western subjects he encounters.

'Last Night, I have sex': Borat and the body politic:

[482] Gilroy, "Ali G and the Oscars." 2.

Borat, is introduced by Ali as a "...bloke I came across on Kazakhstan television..."[483] at which point the credits for Borat's guide to Britain begins. Borat, an immigrant from Kazakhstan appears in a series of positions, traveling around England in an effort to find out how British culture functions. Like the character of Ali, Borat acts as both a figure of ridicule and a mockery of wider cultural norms. Firstly, Borat himself can be seen as a figure of ridicule, in his inability to ever quite grasp "Englishness." However, on another level Borat also mocks Englishness, calling into question the disembodied norms of white upper class British culture.

In the opening Credits of "Borat's Guide to Britain" we see Borat figured in a variety of poses. One striking image is of him lined up on a beach next to three Black men. All of the other men are muscular and are flexing their beach muscles, while Borat appears thinner and hairier than the trio.[484] I believe this clip speaks to the changing meanings of `race' in a postcolonial world. While `race' and racism have often been written about as matters of Black against white, the image of Borat standing next to the three archetypal Black masculine bodies speaks to the ways in which cultural difference comes to stand in for racial difference. Drawing on the work of Philomena Essed, Handa argues that,

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[483] *Da Ali G Show, Da Complete First Season*, (New York: HBO Television ,2000).
[484] *Da Ali G Show*, Episode 2, `Borat's Guide to Britain' (New York: HBO Television, 2000).

> ...nineteenth century arguments about racial inferiority(based on biological and genetic differences) are no longer seen as credible and have been replaced with apparently more tolerant notions of cultural inferiority. Cultural difference has thus become the new marker of socially constructed racial difference.[485]

While Borat may be `white' in terms of skin colour, his body as that of an immigrant is figured as being less normative than the Black masculine bodies he is positioned beside. Borat's body becomes a site of ridicule because he fails to perform masculinity properly. This failure speaks to the failure of immigrant bodies to conform to normative aesthetics which are tied to issues of class and culture. Dyer states that "The built body is a wealthy body. It is well fed and enormous amounts of leisure time have been devoted to it."[486] While Dyer notes that bodybuilding has often been racially inclusive especially to those of African descent, he notes that the ideal in bodybuilding is largely based around a white European norm. He states that,

> First, bodybuilding makes reference to classical- that is, ancient Greek or Roman- art. Props or montages often explicitly relate body shape and pose to classical antecedents, as does writing about body building...Second, bodybuilding now more often invokes a US, and a fortiori Californian, life style, with a characteristic emphasis on ideas of health, energy and naturalness. Dutton locates bodybuilding's US-ness in its concatenation of labor and leisure, pain and consumerism.[487]

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[485] Essed, Philomena cited in Handa, Amita. *Of Silk Saris and Miniskirts: South Asian Girls Walk the Tightrope of Culture* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2003), 19.
[486] Dyer, 155.
[487] *Ibid,* 149.

Borat's body as a mockery of American ideals speaks to how foreignness of culture and a lack of class privilege come to stand in for `race' within the postcolonial West. While Borat's skin may be lighter than the Black men he poses next to, it is his body that stands as a figure of ridicule through his inability to conform to Western notions of health, beauty, heteronormative masculinity, and success. Borat's body reflects upon how discourses of racism based in pigment are articulated against and alongside processes of racialisation that focus on assumed cultural difference.[488] The humour functions by tapping into anxieties that construct the immigrant body as out of place due to culture not colour.

The humour generated from the juxtaposition of the immigrant male body and the Western hetero-normative bodies of the Black men that Borat is positioned against, functions ambiguously. One could laugh at Borat's inability to achieve normative masculinity. However, one could also laugh at the exaggerated differences between Borat's body and those of the muscular men in ways that mock normative Western categories of masculinity themselves. It could be that Borat's body itself acts as an object of ridicule thereby reinforcing normative categories of masculinity and Western superiority. However, it could be that the normative figures of masculinity are revealed to be grandiose and

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[488] For a detailed discussion of the politics of `culture' and `race' See: Handa, Amita. *Of Silk Saris and Miniskirts: South Asian Girls Walk the Tightrope of Culture*, Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), Said, Edward. *Orientalism,* (London: Routledge, 1979).

laughable through Borat's difference from them. The immigrant body may not be laughable, but rather Western bodies may be revealed to be strange and funny through Borat's difference from them.

In his essay, "Did you hear the joke about the philosopher who wrote a book about humour?" Simon Critchley draws a parallel between the work of the philosopher and that of the comedian. Critchley states that "Both the philosopher and the comedian ask you to view the world from a Martian perspective, to look at things as if you had just landed from another planet."[489] The figure of the immigrant who is "alien" to Western norms and culture can act as a tool through which Western values and bodies appear strange. In this way, the comedy of Borat may not work to make the Other laughable, but rather as a vehicle through which we come to laugh at ourselves. However, Critchley also notes that while the joke has the ability to reveal to us our own strangeness, humour also often works to reinforce the status quo. He states that, "...much humour seeks to confirm the status quo either by denigrating a certain sector of society, as in sexist humour, or by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider."[490] Borat may work as a figure who subverts the norms of Western culture by revealing many of the norms and values of British and North American subjects to be hypocritical and elitist. However, he may also serve to confirm a sense of Western

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[489] Critchley, Simon. *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 48
[490] *Ibid.*

superiority. We may not be laughing at the inane customs and values of the West, but at the immigrant's inability to assimilate to these norms.

However, Critchley notes that there is something telling even in the most malicious forms of laughter. He discusses what he terms "reactionary humour," a form of humour that manages the potential threat that difference poses to the social order through mockery. He states that,

> ...such humour lets us reflect upon the anxious nature of our throwness in the world. What I mean by the latter is that in its `untruth', as it were, reactionary humour tells us important truths about who we are. Jokes can therefore be read as symptoms of societal repression and their study might be said to amount to what Freud would call `a return of the repressed.' In other words, humour can reveal us to be persons that, frankly, we would really rather not be. In my view, accepting that you are someone you would really not be is the true recipe for psychical health.[491]

The humour of Borat may work to reveal latent aggressions and anxieties towards racial and cultural difference within the Western psyche. The joke allows these repressions to be released, thereby subverting a liberal order in which attitudes towards `race' and racism are repressed at the level of polite speech.[492] The joke does not offer a political programme that would challenge Western superiority and normative whiteness, however the joke may reveal that discourses of `race' and racism exist at a psychic level. As both a mockery of normative Western ideals, or as a release of repressed aggressions and anxieties towards the body of

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[491] *Ibid,* 49.
[492] See Alcoff, Lisa. "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment." in *Race*. ed. Robert Bernasconi. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 267-284.

the immigrant, Borat reveals the tenacity of `race' and racism in spite of ideologies of equality and `race'-blindness.[493] If Critchley is correct there may be something healthy about comedy's ability to unmask us of our pretensions and reveal our psychic anxieties towards `race.'

Ill-mannered laughter: Borat and codes of civility

In "Borat's Guide To Etiquette" we see Borat meet with Lady Chelsea, who attempts to teach Borat about the manners of high British society. He begins, " I am here with Lady Chelsea to learn how to be real gentleman" He asks Lady Chelsea if she approves of his dress, "Is the way I dress nice? And are my shoes good. It is from shoe express in Oxford street."[494] The joke functions by revealing Borat to be unschooled in the norms of upper class Britain. He is unaware that "Shoe Express" in Oxford Circus is not a high society store, and that upper class culture dictates a silence around such direct pleas for affirmation. Like the character of Ali, one could read Cohen's humour as mocking "the Other." However, Borat also works to mock dominant white British culture. Borat's innocence allows him to break taboos that serve to mock the dominant gaze of Lady Chelsea. The figure of Lady Chelsea, schooled in white upper class

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[493] For a more detailed discussions of the silencing of `race' and racism within a liberal order see: Linda Martin Alcoff, "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment" in *Race.* Ed. Robert Bernasconi. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 267-284.

[494] *Da Ali G Show*, Episode 2, `Borat's Guide to Britain,' (New York: HBO Television 2000).

feminine propriety can only smile and nod at Borat. Her repressed decorum is mocked by Borat, who troubles the class based silences of British etiquette.

The skit alternates between Borat's lesson with Lady Chelsea and his performance at a luncheon, where he is supposed to display his etiquette. The luncheon begins with Borat, Lady Chelsea and two other guests, one male and one female performing a toast. After the toast, while the other white, upper class British guests sip their champagne, Borat chugs his alcohol fiercely. The male guest tells Borat not to drink so quickly. "When someone gives you a nice glass of wine, it's like making love"[495] he says in his upper class British drawl, "You want to sip it. You don't want to go too quickly." Borat loudly interjects, "Yes, I want to last a long time!"[496] Borat breaks white middle class Judeo-Christian conventions that regulate discussions of sexuality and the body.[497] This continues throughout the skit. During his lesson with Lady Chelsea, Borat asks what topics he should talk about during lunch. Lady Chelsea responds, "Anything that comes into your head really."[498] The camera switches to Borat at lunch, "My wife she is

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[495] *Ibid.*
[496] *Ibid.*
[497] For a discussion concerning the intersection of sexuality, bodily silences, Christianity and whiteness see:
Dyer, 145-184. It should be noted that bourgeois Western Judeo-Christian tradition is not the only discourse that encourages silence concerning sexuality, the body and mortality. However, as Borat is positioned within and against upper class white British culture, I believe these are the specific silence that his humour is challenging.
[498] *Ibid.*

dead," he pronounces. "She died in a field."[499] The comment clearly shakes up the upper class lunch guests, disrupting norms around white upper class propriety. Death, like sex is a topic of conversation that brings the body into full focus.[500]

Humour and the Anxieties of the Western Body:

The humour of Borat lies in his ability to tap into the anxieties of the body that are repressed within the Western psyche. In *Imperial Leather*, McClintock notes that in European colonial society bodily practices acted as expressions of and metaphors for racial and class based boundaries. Colonised peoples and lower class whites were frequently associated with bodily excess.[501] Borat's explicit naming of the body breaks this taboo. His humour reveals the anxieties of the bourgeois body, displayed in the shocked faces of Lady Chelsea and the other party guests as well as the humour of the audience. The sketch continues as we see Borat back with Lady Chelsea, learning rules of etiquette. "Is it okay to talk about what I did last night?"[502] "Yes, she says. As long as you don't go into too much detail."[503] We again see Borat back at the lunch party. "Last night," he says, "I have sex." Lady Chelsea and the other guests are shocked. "I told you

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[499] *Ibid.*
[500] *Ibid.*
[501] Mclintock, 30-36.
[502] *Da Ali G Show, Da Complete Second Season.* Episode 2, 'Borat's Guide to Britain' (New York: HBO Television, 2000).
[503] *Ibid.*

that you shouldn't talk about such things,"[504] says an exasperated Lady Chelsea. "But you said, I could talk about what I did last night,"[505] says Borat. "But it was nice,"[506] he continues. "She was lovely."[507] Again, the humour functions by tapping into anxieties concerning sexual and bodily silence that inform the European bourgeoisie subject.[508]

The camera switches back to Borat in his lesson. "What if I have to use the toilet?"[509] He asks. "Well, you say please excuse me for a minute."[510] We see Borat putting the lesson into practice at the party. "Please excuse me for a minute,"[511] he says and leaves the table. Borat is gone from the table for an extremely long time. The guests start to shift uncomfortably. By leaving the table for an excess amount of time, Borat again brings the body into focus. When he returns to the table, everyone is silent for a moment. He then declares, "I had a good shit."[512] This time, his naming of bodily excess is explicit. This is the final and most lewd in his efforts to bring the body into focus. The guests all laugh

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[504] *Ibid.*
[505] *Ibid.*
[506] *Ibid.*
[507] *Ibid.*
[508] *Ibid.*
[509] *Ibid.*
[510] *Ibid.*
[511] *Ibid.*
[512] *Ibid.*

uncomfortably as Borat taps into racial, class, and cultural norms that cause the explicit naming of the body and bodily practices to produce anxieties.[513]

In "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess" Kathleen K. Rowe states that,

> For women, excessive fatness carries associations with excessive wilfulness and excessive speech. Through body and speech, the unruly woman violates the unspoken feminine sanction against `making a spectacle' of herself.[514]

In Western culture, women who are located as being of the body are often represented as being comedic figures. The excess of their physical size and their sexual appetites also become tied to an excess of speech, where they violate decorum through words as well.[515] While Rowe argues that the body is a means through which women and particularly working class women have been depicted as Other,[516] I believe the same argument could be made for marginalised men. Borat's humour therefore functions through his bodily excess, and his naming of this excess.

Humour, the unconscious and the possibilities of subversion:

As mentioned, literature pertaining to marginality and the comedic has often failed to touch on the psychoanalytic aspects of humour. In relation to George Orwell's "Shooting the Elephant," Seshadri Crooks states that "..the

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[513] *Ibid.*
[514] Kathleen Rowe, "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess," *Screen* 31.4 1990, 86.
[515] *Ibid.*
[516] *Ibid.*

possibility of the jokes expression- usually signified by fears of native laughter- produces racial anxiety, and Orwell experiences this moment as uncanny. On the other hand,"[517] she argues that "...the containment of the joke can powerfully assist the reproduction of racial dominance."[518] Jokes function to both reveal and simultaneously conceal racial anxieties that exist at the level of the unconscious, by exploiting psychic repressions while simultaneously maintaining their repression at the level of polite speech. Jokes tap into the unconscious, but do nothing to permanently alter the psyche.

In his work *Racial Castration*, David Eng makes similar arguments about the presence of hysteria. Eng draws on Freud's writings on female hysteria. Freud's most famous case study of hysteria is his 1905 study, "Dora: Fragment of an analysis of a Case of Hysteria". This study has been taken up by many leading feminist scholars. Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement are two of the scholars that Eng examines. For Cixous, Dora's hysterical symptoms function as a protest against her place within the patriarchal and familial order. Eng states that,

> for Cixous, then, hysteria represents an effective `language' of female resistance in a social order that renders direct expression nearly impossible for women. As expression of women's power to protest, Dora's hysteria not only `bursts the family into pieces' but finally breaks something. It breaks, Cixous maintains, the rigid structure of the familial order."[519]

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[517] Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness,* 355.
[518] *Ibid.*
[519] Eng, David, *Racial Castration* (New York: Duke University Press, 2001) 175.

In contrast to Cixous's reading of the subversive potential of female hysteria, Clement sees hysteria as doing little to trouble the social order. Clement argues that hysteria "...mimics, it metaphorizes destruction, but the family reconstitutes itself around it. As when you throw a stone in water, the water ripples but becomes smooth again..."[520] Eng argues that,

> it is neither possible nor useful to read hysteria as a psychic or a political state of either/or- as only a negative sign of an oppressed normative feminine condition or as only a positive sign of the rejection of femininity's social constraints. The role of the hysteric...is decidedly ambiguous.[521]

Like hysteria, comedy works by revealing that which is repressed at the level of the unconscious. However, as Clement notes, this break is only temporary. Furthermore the hysterical or comic figure can be pathologised as a means of maintaining hegemony. It is interesting to note also, as discussed briefly in the previous chapter, that the symptoms that Freud ascribed to the female hysteric were often ascribed in anti-Semitic discourses to Jewish men. As mentioned, Pellegrini argues that Freud displaces a discussion of Jewish masculinity onto an analysis of supposedly hysterical women. She states that,

> In sharp contrast to the insistence with which contemporary medical discourse linked the Jewish male to the feminine and from there to 'womanly' diseases like hysteria and narcissism, Freud has represented femininity as a cultural and psychic project which puts women at heightened risk for hysteria. By emphasizing the distinction between

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[520] *Ibid,* 176.
[521] *Ibid,* 176.

> masculinity and femininity as the signal difference in the aetiology of hysteria, Freud effectively displaces the mise-en-scene of hysteria from race and gender wholly to gender.[522]

Pellegrini's criticism offers us insight into the suppression of `race' in Freud's work. It also offers insight into the ways in which gender and race may intersect in the figure of the comic. While Freud read hysteria as a female disease which brought to surface not only the unconscious repressions of the individual but as Clement argues, the repressions of the society, the comic can be seen to offer a rupture in the social order, if only momentarily.

In her essay "A Fool's Discourse: The Buffoonery Syndrome," Mady Schutzman discusses the relationship between the comic and hysteria. Schutzman states that, "...Jean Martin Charcot, the French neurologist who defined hysteria and charted its `phases' in photographic tableaux, named the second phase of hysteria `the phase of clownism,' or the buffoonery syndrome."[523] While authors have argued that comedy is a form of mastery over discourse which allows the speaker to take a masculinist authoritative position,[524] Schutzman's work points to the feminization of comic behaviour as being connected to hysteria. Like Cixous, Shutzman reads the "clownish" behaviour of the assumed hysteric as one that

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[522] Pellegrini, 28.
[523] Mady Schutzman. "A Fool's Discourse: The Buffoonery Syndrome" in *The Ends of Performance.* ed. Peggy Phelan (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 131.
[524] See Purdie, Susan. *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

often hyperbolizes a stereotype in ways that may be disruptive. Shutzman states that,

> In corporeal expletives and exclamations, the hysteric (of both medical science and contemporary advertising) embodies the gender disorders of the social body and simultaneously screams her distress. Her excessive visual presence both disguises and disclaims her assigned absence within the social sphere. Put yet another way, in her overstated assumption of the mask of femininity, she indicts the very power politics that her body economy suffers. She plays the clown."[525]

In similar ways, it could be argued that by playing a racial clown, Cohen's comedy may offer a hyperbolic racialised performance that works to mock the construction of Jewish, Black and immigrant masculinities. The "hysterical" performances of both Ali G and Borat can therefore be read as tapping into not only the repressions of `race,' but the repressions of racialised masculinities which have historically been femininised. They point to the indeterminacy of these masculinities, which have historically been interpellated through sexual and gender regulations which Freud now casts as strictly female.

Furthermore, like the figure of hysteria which Freud and feminist writers after him grapple with, the political significance of comic ruptures to the social order are decidedly ambivalent. Ali's fake thug antics can be read by a sophisticated viewer as a parody of the ironies of a postcolonial age. However, for a viewer who is unaware that Ali G is supposed to represent dominant

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[525] *Ibid,* 132.

whiteness, he can be read as a mockery of Blackness. Similarly, while Borat can be read as a vehicle through which upper class white British culture is mocked, he could also be read by a xenophobic audience as a laughable immigrant whose humour lies in his stupidity and not the stupidity of the cultural norms he breaks.

Borat, foreignness and the naming of difference:

As stated earlier, one of the paradoxes of modern liberal societies is that we are made to pretend as though difference does not exist, despite continuing evidence that difference structures human interaction.[526] This paradox creates a discursive dilemma, in which Western subjects are taught not to name aesthetic differences , not to admit to seeing and subsequently acting on markers of aesthetic difference. The figure of Borat in *Da Ali G Show* troubles this silence by playing the role of the "foreigner" who does not know enough to stay silent. Borat's foreignness allows him the position from which to articulate forms of social difference in ways that tap into the anxieties, fears and aggressions that drive attitudes towards Otherness.

Borat's Guide to USA:

For example, in *Borat's Guide to the USA,* the segment "Buying a House" exploits the supposed lack of understanding of social taboos of the foreigner to reveal attitudes towards `race', sexuality and ability. Borat tells the white

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[526] See Linda Martin Alcoff, "Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment" in *Race.* ed. Robert Bernasconi. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2001), 267-284.

American real estate agent, "My wife is very scared of men with chocolate face. They will be in the community?"[527] The real estate agent responds by stating, "There may or may not. They would have to be fairly well off to live in this area." [528] "So they would not behave like the other chocolate faces?"[529] Continues Borat. "No no. Oh no,"[530] says the agent. Borat's lack of familiarity with English and with taboos concerning openly revealing one's racism, allow him the space in which to articulate racist ideology. This space reveals the racism of the real estate agent. Borat's dialogue is couched in racist terminology, as he refers to men with "chocolate faces." Yet, his racial slur is inaccurate and strange, and therefore seems somewhat absurd.

The figures of the immigrant, the foreigner, the tourist are constructed as being unaware of the language, custom and protocol of the spaces they reside in. This ignorance allows these figures the means through which to speak openly about their observations, as they are seen as not knowing any better. The figure of Borat revisits the notion of childlike humour that was discussed earlier. Those whom Borat talks to, like the real estate agent, are allowed by association to indulge in behaviour and dialogue that are normally taboo among white western middle class actors. Just as Freud argued that humour allows one to revisit

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[527] *Da Ali G Show, Da Complete Second Season.* Episode 2, 'Borat's Guide to Buying a House'. (New York: HBO Television, 2000).
[528] *Ibid.*
[529] *Ibid.*
[530] *Ibid.*

childhood, the figure of the immigrant is constructed as possessing an innocence that lends itself to often brutal honesty and offensive rhetoric. However, just as with the child, adults may partake in the humour of Borat as a means of releasing the liberal repressions that colour their normally repressed thinking.

However, while the construction of the character of Borat as childlike is used as a trope that reveals the racism of those he encounters, the construction of the immigrant as naïve and buffoonish leaves room for the reinscription of racism. Are we laughing at the ignorance of those who take Cohen's hyperbolic performance of the naïve, racist, crude immigrant to be authentic? Or are we laughing at the character as an authentic representation of boorish, infantilised, uneducated immigrants? As discussed in relation to Blackface ministrelsy, the infantilizing of "the Other" was a strategy that was used to justify colonial rule, racism and the superior status of whites. This translates into contemporary discourses of racism in which non-white bodies are conceived of as childlike, challenging their bids to authority and autonomy.[531] In creating a space in which the taboos of speech that name the body are broken, the comedy of Borat also risks reinscribing essentialist markings of difference onto the body. Borat's humour functions to psychically reveal the inhibitions of racist speech, however

[531] Puwar, 60.

the ways in which this release is apprehended, made sense of and used by an audience are deeply ambivalent.

The ambivalence that is apparent in Ali G's childish outbursts are also apparent in Borat's infantile jokes. By feigning innocence and ignorance, the infantile humour of Borat also allows him to disrupt the silences of white, western, adult bourgeoisie culture. The invocation of childish speech therefore has ambivalent political implications and psycho-social value.

Kids Say the Darndest Things: Comic Speech and Childhood:

While post colonial scholars have emphasized the racist implications of infantilisation,[532] for Freud, the indulgence in childish behaviour that joking offers to adults reveals that adult subjectivities are always being contested both externally and internally.[533] Similarly, the indulgence in racist speech that those who encounter Borat are allowed to engage in works to reveal the psychic and social repressions of race. Lowe states that one of Freud's key conclusions concerning humour is "...that jokes succeed in liberating an otherwise suppressed, or `censored' thought via the disguise of humour, thereby releasing energy and creating joy."[534] The joy or pleasure that comes in laughing at the

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[532] See Puwar, 60, Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks* (London: Grove, 1968).
[533] Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconcious* (New York: W.W Norton, 1960).
[534] John Lowe, "Theories of Ethnic Humour: How to Enter, Laughing," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1986), 442.

easy ways in which Borat discusses `race' in often racist ways lies in the suppression of racist ideas at the level of polite speech.

My point is not that racism should be celebrated or laughed at, but rather that the reaction of laughter can tell us something about the ways in which the censoring of racist speech does nothing to alter the psychic life of `race' that is expressed in laughter. Of course, not all openly racist discourses are funny. Many produce at best outrage or sadness, and at worst, belief. The difference here is that Borat is unaware that his statements about "chocolate faces" are taboo. The humour lies in the politically unaware and unapologetic ways in which he articulates racist ideology. Furthermore, as with Ali G, the audience is in on the joke and knows(hopefully) that Cohen is playing a character. Therefore, the humour can be read as mocking those who Borat interviews and who believe him to be a `real' person. Again, the character can be read as a device that is used to mock the general public through tools of comic impersonation.

What is also funny I believe is that Borat's racism, much like his performance of social etiquette is never quite right. The term "chocolate face" indicates a lack of familiarity with racist speech in America. Jackson states that "...it was during enslavement that Whites developed many of their anxieties toward Blacks, and established safeguards for rationalizing their vulnerability and

unacceptable activities as slave owners."[535] If Jackson is right, the question that follows in making sense of a character like Borat is, how do new immigrant groups who are not directly connected to histories of slavery come to learn about and articulate racist discourses? One could argue that immigrant groups learn to mimic the racist ideology of those in power. However, I believe that Borat reveals that things are more complicated than this.

Failure, Farce and Misrecognition: Humour and Interpolation

It is interesting that Borat refers to men with "chocolate faces" rather than Black men. In his seminal essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" Althusser discusses the ways in which subjects are interpellated into the social order through acts of naming. The subject becomes a subject by being hailed or called into being. Athusser states that,

> ...ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in, such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals. It recruits them all, or transforms the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey you there![536]

Althusser continues by stating that, "Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailing is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call of whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being

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[535] Jackson, 16.
[536] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.* ed. Louis Althusser (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 130.

hailed." In reading Althusser in relation to humour, I want to consider for a moment the possibility that he dismisses--that of misrecognition. He states that hailings "...*hardly ever* miss their man..." My question is, what about when the marks are missed?

In the case of Borat, his racial name calling, on the one hand taps into a history and continued criminalization and pathologising of Black men. However, his name calling does not quite hit its mark. His use of the term `chocolate faces' is funny in a traditional Freudian sense, in that it taps into latent racial aggression. However, I would argue that it is also funny because it does not quite get racism right. Like the character of Ali G, the real humour lies not in an exact and hostile mockery of Blackness, but in a mockery of the failure to signify Blackness. In this way Borat's failure to properly articulate racist stereotypes may, like the initially ambiguous Ali G, tap into anxieties concerning the ambiguities and slippages of `race.'

In her essay "(Laughter)", Ann Pellegrini revisits Althusser's famous essay, stating that "...Althusser makes the turn into subjectivity a highly theatrical one. In his own initial presentation of interpellation, he figures subject formation as a kind of street theatre..."[537] Pellegrini cites the point of misrecognition as one which can generate laughter, while also pointing to the construction of the subject

[537] Ann Pellegrini, "(Laughter)" in *Psychoanalysis and Performance.* ed. Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear (London: Routledge, 2001), 178.

at the interstices between state and ideological power, and the possibilities that performance can offer in troubling static notions of identity. She poses the question, "Might performance offer a potential site of rejoinder, helping not just to illumine relations between the psychic and the social, but, perhaps, even to remake them?"[538] Revisiting Althusser's scene of hailing as a sort of street theatre, Pellegrini points to the subversive potential of the tenth individual in his schema: "One individual," writes Althusser, "(nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns around, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that `it really is he' who is meant by the hailing."[539] This individual, argues Pellegrini, points to the possibility of interpellation failing to indoctrinate subjects into the social order in exactly the same ways. It points to the slippages in language, doctrine and discourse that cause identity and ideology to never be fully closed practices or spaces. Furthermore, Pellegrini points to the potential for performance, for stagings, like Althusser's street theatre to highlight the imperfections of interpellation.

The Possibilities of Failed Interpellation:

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[538] *Ibid.*
[539] *Ibid.*

Borat's recitation of racist speech and his performance of dominant North American and British whiteness point to the instability of these identities as they can be, must be, and are continuously performed. Furthermore, his inability to quite hit his mark generates a laughter which points to the anxieties concerning racial, national and cultural identities. The fact that he doesn't quite get whiteness right and doesn't quite get racism right, points to the ironies of the naturalization of racial identity as it is seen to be a script that can be poorly performed.

Ann Pellegrini draws on the work of Judith Butler, who in an extension of Althusser's work on interpellation discusses the ambivalence of identity through the practice of name-calling. Pellegrini states that,

> In her own extension of Althusser's theory of interpellation, Judith Butler suggests the ambivalent course of name-calling. Though called one thing, I may become another; or I may become that name, but do it—that name, that identity—in ways counter to the terms first given me, first given as me.[540]

Throughout sketches featuring Borat, the character continually asserts that he is interested in becoming an "English gentleman" or in figuring out how to take on hobbies and buy real estate like a "real American." However, what follows these assertions is a continuous failure to approximate dominant white middle class, heterosexual British and American identities. In never quite getting it right, what is revealed is not only Borat's failure, but the failure of the terms "English

[540] *Ibid,* 185.

gentleman" or "real American" to act as names that can successfully fix all bodies within an existing social order.

Borat's failure, his inability to ever be properly interpellated into British and American culture, point to ways in which language, culture and custom offer a malleability through which new immigrant groups can alter meanings of dominant culture in ways that might point to the fluidity of dominant identities. Pellegrini draws on the work of Jose Esteban Munoz, who advances a notion of disidentification that borrows from both Marxism and psychoanalysis:

> By disidentification he means strategies of resistance undertaken by the oppressed that work `on and against dominant ideology.' It is a `third mode,' which refuses the either/or of identification/reversal that is determined by what it would resist...From `inside' ideology, then, the `disidentificatory subject' works to transform the conditions of his or her own pre-appointment as subject.[541]

Munoz's notion of disidentification revisits Bhabha's notion of mimicry, in that subjects alter the terms of identification through partial forms of identification and negation of the regulatory system in which they are placed. In the case of Borat, disidentification is made humourous by his hyperbolic performance of dominant whiteness which not only show him to be a failure, but shows whiteness to be a fiction which must be endlessly repeated, and continuously fails.

The humour of disidentification:

[541] *Ibid.*

But why are "disidentificatory subjects," or mimics funny? Ann Pellegrini draws on the work of performance artist Holly Hughes, whose piece "Preaching to the Perverted" mimics, parodies and mocks a supreme-court case that took place in March of 1998 in New York City. In the case National Endowment for the Arts et al. versus Finley et al,

> ...the Court upheld the constitutionality of a `decency and respect' clause regulating government funding for the arts. The National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, as amended by Congress in 1990, required the National Endowment for the Arts to evaluate grant applications for `artistic excellence' and now also for `decency': `artistic excellence and artistic merit are the criteria by which applications are judged, taking into consideration general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public.[542]

What spurned this new legislation were a series of highly politicized and public controversies concerning the NEA's funding of supposedly poronographic art. Pellegrini notes that,

> Congressional opponents focused their wrath on two awards in particular, both made in 1989: a grant to the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania for a retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography; and a grant to Andres Serrano, which was routed through the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art.[543]

In "Preaching to the Perverted," artist Holly Hughes re-stages the oral arguments presented to the supreme-court and performs the majority opinion to enforce standards of decency at the NEA. Pellegrini argues that Hughes piece is

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[542] *Ibid.*
[543] *Ibid,* 183.

subversive in its restaging and retelling of the events in highly theatrical and comedic ways. She states that,

> In an act of re-naming, Hughes calls upon her audience to remember- re-call- with her. If this renewed naming does not undo the injuries of racism, homophobia, sexism that she and other artists she names have variously endured, it yet refuses to let those earlier namings be the end of the story nor even its absolute origin.[544]

Similarly, the figure of Borat revisits dominant namings of whiteness, recalling traditional notions of British propriety and American consumerism. However, his repetition of these norms alters the script of whiteness, by showing how new immigrant groups are both indoctrinated into and yet fail to fully comply with these norms, thereby altering meanings of racial, national, and cultural identity. What is also similar is that Hughes's piece is also comedic. Through hyperbole, irony, and word play Hughes uses her voice and bodily gestures to mock state authority and invites her audience to laugh along. Pellegrini states that,

> Hughes out-performs the state, and in this double sense: she brings out the performative dimension of subjection to and for national belonging; and her embodied acts before an audience call up a different sort of public; one in which subjection might be lived out differently. In the space opened by her performance, those who have been defined as outside the nation's bounds—its extra-national subjects –may come together to form and inhabit a counter-public.[545]

This counter public is one that is invited to laugh not only at the performer who mocks state practices and dominant ideologies by their refusal or inability to

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[544] *Ibid,* 186.
[545] *Ibid,* 187.

conform, but also laughs at the farce of interpellation on the whole. Pellegrini concludes her essay by revisiting Althusser with new eyes. She states that,

> The hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns around.' What if the tenth man, the one who turns the wrong way or at the wrong time, is a woman, Holly Hughes? In the space of her embodied performance, laughter re-turns us to the fresh work of renewing and remaking a social world.[546]

Laughter can act as a subversive force, through which the fixity and surety of interpolating subjects into an oppressive linguistic and ideologic schema can be challenged through mockery. Borat fails at being British, American and white, and yet his failure is met with laughter at the ridiculous terms and codes that govern these signifiers and cause them to be easily mimicked and mocked. The possibility of misrecognition, of the subject who is interpellated wrongly into the gender, racial, national, cultural order of things is one that might trouble this order.

The possibilities of misrecognition and failed interpellation may produce anxiety in those that see this slippage, thereby causing us to laugh in trepidation at the instability of our own identities. Like laughter's managements of anxieties in the face of Ali G's racial indeterminacy, humour can be used to momentarily release our fears of failing to properly articulate ourselves within a normative state and social order. However, we may also laugh, as Hughes's audience does,

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[546] *Ibid,* 189.

with recognition at the ridiculous nature of the state's power to name and regulate bodies.

Good For them, Not Good For You: Borat and the Melancholia of American Racism

While Borat's racism gestures to the linguistic failures of interpolating non-Western subjects into a Western order of `race', his overt racism also works to reveal the melancholic bigotry of American culture. As I have been arguing throughout this work, Cohen's comedy works to subvert a liberal, multicultural rhetoric in which racism is actively practiced but never named.[547] Furthermore, as mentioned, the figure of the immigrant or foreigner can be used as a device that helps to shed light on the hypocrisies of the culture they encounter. Borat works to reveal the racism of the American public through feigning ignorance toward histories of `race' and racism within America. The exposure of the psychic and social repressions of `race' and racism, as discussed has ambivalent political and social effects.

In one early sketch from *Da Ali G Show*, Borat goes to a private wine tasting in Mississippi. The construction of the character as both being "foreign" and deeply bigoted causes those he encounters to reveal their deep seethed anti-Black racism. Borat is shown with two older, white men. The only Black man in the skit is the waiter. Borat says to one of the white men, "He is your slave?"

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[547] See Alcoff, Lisa, 267-284.

"No no no." He continues, pointing at the other white man, "He is his slave?" "No no no. We don't have slaves here anymore." "You don't have..." The man interrupts Borat. "No no no. It's a law that was passed. They can no longer be used as slaves..." The man pauses and continues, "Which is a good thing..." Borat says, "Yeah it is a good thing for them. But not so much for you." "You're right,"[548] says the white man, agreeing with Borat and revealing his dismay that slavery has been formally abolished. This is a shocking example of anti-Black racism that Cohen works to reveal by playing a character who is firstly ignorant to the history of the United States and secondly, racist. In an interview with National Public Radio, Cohen comments on this interview. He states that the man interviewed, "...basically implies that he's a little bit upset that there's no longer slavery in Mississippi."[549] He continues, stating that,

> ...I think that's quite an interesting thing with Borat, which is...people really let down their guard with him, because they're in a room with somebody who seems to have these outrageous opinions; they sometimes seem much more relaxed about letting their own outrageous, politically incorrect opinions come out.[550]

Borat works as a tool in this instance for unmasking the racism of the American public. As I discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One of this work, Anne

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[548] This sketch is played in Sacha Baron Cohen interview with National Public Radio: Robert Seigel, "Fooling Serious Interviewees, All for a Laugh." Interview with Sacha Baron Cohen on National Public Radio. July 23, 2004. Online edition. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3613548. (accessed: November 24, 2007)
[549] *Ibid.*
[550] *Ibid.*

Anlin Cheng draws on Freud's writings on melancholia to discuss `race' and racism in contemporary America. Cheng states that, "Racialisation in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialised others."[551] Like the melancholic chain of loss, denial and incorporation explained in Chapter One, American identity is largely founded on a melancholic inability to grieve for the myth of liberal equality. As Cheng states,

> The history of American national idealism has always been caught in this melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection. If one of the ideals that sustained the American nation since its beginning has been its unique proposition that `all men are created equal,' then one of America's ongoing national mortifications must be its history of acting otherwise.[552]

In the wine-tasting skit, the humour of Borat reveals the racial melancholia that is inherent in American national identity. The incorporation of the racialised body as the server, and his expulsion from the `private members' club gestures to the melancholy of a racist order in America that denigrates people of colour, while still incorporating them within the nation as inferior Others. Furthermore, Borat gestures to the myths of American equality and the `national mortification' of histories of slavery upon which the nation was built. It is interesting that in this scene, the white men at the wine tasting are literally consuming the products brought by the Black waiter/modern day slave. Both Freud and Cheng discuss

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[551] Cheng, Anne Anlin, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10.
[552] *Ibid.*

how melancholia operates as a kind of swallowing, a consumption of Otherness that works to deny loss. In this case, the bourgeoisie wine- tasting works to swallow the labour of the Black male server in the context of an upper class ritual that denies the grotesque nature of white American identity. It is as if slavery is swallowed under the guise of bourgeoisie capitalism. However, paradoxically, the Black body is still needed, in order for the racial superiority of white American identity to function. As Cheng states, "Segregation and colonialism are inherently fraught institutions not because they have eliminated the other but because they need the very thing they hate and fear."[553]

Borat's humour works to expose the inherent grief that is at the core of American identity. It is not the literal grief that is expressed in the gentleman's racist utterance of mourning slavery. Rather it is the wider horror of the continued failures of the rhetoric of equality and freedom in America. The exposure of American melancholia causes the humour of Borat to produce a bitter laughter. A laughter that I would argue operates ambiguously, in its ability to both reflect upon but also propagate melancholic racial formations. Laughter itself may be part and parcel of racial melancholia, as it could function as a form of incorporation and denial. We take in these images and instances of deep seethed racism, but then deny our implication in them through our laughter.

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[553] *Ibid,* 12.

The easy way that Borat can speak about `race' allows those he comes into contact with to also indulge in childish ways of reading social difference directly off the body. This space works to reveal the racism of the white real estate agent, and the white men at the wine tasting as well. Borat's ignorance functions as an open door through which we catch a glimpse into the often publicly repressed views concerning African Americans in the United States. Exposing this racial melancholia may offer us a chance to reflect upon America's inability to grieve for the racism upon which white American identity rests. However, laughter, as mentioned often works to tap into anxieties that are momentarily revealed and concealed when the joking is done. Therefore, depending upon how one takes the joke, the humour of Borat may work to both reflect upon the racism of America, and/or to deny one's implication in it through laughter.

Psychic Inhibitions: Releasing `Race' Through Laughter:

In "The Comedy of Domination: Psychoanalysis and the Conceit of Whiteness" Seshadri Crooks states that,

> Racist jokes in a civil society often emerge from ethnic heterogeneity; surfacing on the cusp between inside and outside, they also mark social boundaries by treating citizens as foreigners. We sometimes hear that such jokes are a healthy sign in a civil society, in which interracial aggression is forbidden.[554]

[554] Crooks, 363.

The subversive potential of the racist joke is of course debatable. The release that the figure of Borat provides in allowing a space in which one can see how 'race' and racism operate, reveals racial anxieties, tensions and aggressions that are repressed at the level of polite speech. However, the joke also conceals the magnitude of this aggression, as the momentary break from polite speech is just that, momentary.

The figure of the immigrant, the foreigner is allowed to break cultural taboos in ways that produce humour, as the violation of linguistic and cultural boundaries produces a pleasure derived from such violations. However, the humour of Borat I would argue, rather than being solely productive of racism or anti-racism serves as a mirror for the deep seethed psychic and social life of race in North America and Europe.

To Summarise:

In this chapter I have drawn upon various critical theories to discuss the humour of Cohen's second most famous character, Borat. I discussed Borat's humour as a humour of the body. I argued that the character works to subvert white, Western, liberal bourgeoisie norms through explicit bodily humour. I further discussed the limits of the subversive potential of this type of humour and humour on the whole, by drawing on the work of post structuralist and psychoanalytic theorists. I then moved on to discuss Borat's overt racism and the

divergent ways in which it can be read. I offered an argument concerning the subversive potential of failed interpellations and their relationship to the comedic. Finally, I discussed the ways in which, like Ali G, Borat works by revealing the tenacity of `race' based and racist thinking on the part of those he encounters. I discussed the possible subversive potential of his ability to unmask liberal culture of it's supposed "colour blindness." Drawing on the work of Cheng, outlined in Chapter One, I discussed Borat's reflection upon racial melancholia. I further examined laughter's potential complicity in and productivity of racial melancholia. I also drew on the work of Crooks to discuss how the humour of Borat may function by both revealing and concealing `race' base anxiety. As with my reading of Ali G, I argue that Borat's treatment of the body, `race' and racism are deeply ambiguous. I will now discuss these ambiguities further by analyzing the humour of Borat as "immigrant" humour, and by examining Cohen's recently released full length film featuring Borat.

Chapter Eight

Enter Laughing? Borat and the Humour of the Immigrant/Foreigner

In this chapter, I discuss how Borat fits into a tradition of immigrant humour. I begin by discussing sketches from *Da Ali G Show.* I discuss the comedy of Borat as functioning based on the gaps between the figure of the immigrant or foreigner and the dominant culture they encounter. I draw on the work of critical theorists to discuss humour's ability to not only mock those deemed to be foreign, but to reveal that we are all foreign to ourselves. However, I then turn to an analysis of the Borat film. I argue that the comedy of the film departs from the structure of early Borat humour. I further argue that the humour of Borat taps into anxieties towards the body of "the Other," feeding off of the disturbing political climate in which the film was released.

Everybody Dance Now! Borat and the tradition of Immigrant Humour:

Borat troubles and mocks Western culture by virtue of his lack of familiarity with the decadence and frivolity of Western consumerism. In "Borat's Guide to American Hobbies" we see the character of Borat delving into the world of North American pastimes. The segment begins with Borat stating, "In Kazakhstan, hobbies include disco dancing, table tennis, rape, and archery."[555] The invocation of rape works to tap into anxieties concerning the assumed misogyny and violence of immigrant and specifically immigrant Muslim men, if as previously discussed, the character is read as Muslim. However, the humour

[555] *Da Ali G Show, Da Complete Second Season* Episode 3, 'Borat's Guide to American Hobbies'. (New York: HBO Television, 2000).

also functions by juxtaposing the violence of assault with the frivolity of Western conceptions of leisure activities. Again, the humour functions ambiguously both mocking the figure of "the Other" and mocking the figure of the American, by virtue of the assumed space between Western and non-Western realities.

While Borat may offer a mirror of the absurdities and decadence of Western life, he may do so in ways that reinforce racism and xenophobia. Within the "Guide to Hobbies" sketch Borat reinforces stereotypes of immigrants and the countries they come from as violent and tyrannical. While, as argued, Cohen is perhaps using this hyperbolic performance of otherness to critique Western culture, the joke may not be understood in this way. Rather, the joke may lie in mocking the barbarity of the male, immigrant, Muslim man. The tools of comic impersonation and hyperbole, as in the case of Ali G, may be lost on audiences who read the humour as a literal depiction of the racialised other.

Borat's humour in this skit also works to break taboos concerning openly racist and sexist discourse. For example, when he visits the Self Defense class he begins by asking the instructor, "What is the best move to silence a woman?"[556] The instructor looks shocked and slightly outraged. "I don't know that you can silence a woman."[557] While one could quickly conclude that Cohen's humour is misogynistic, the audience is aware that he is playing the character of Borat, who

[556] *Ibid.*
[557] *Ibid.*

is unaware of the problematic nature of speaking this way and that Cohen's comedy often works to shock the white liberals he interviews. The humour works by exploiting the belief in Borat's authenticity on the part of those he encounters and their reactions to his outlandish behavior. He continues to talk to the Self defense instructor, "What is the best way to defend against a Jew?"[558] The instructor again looks dismayed. "In America," he says, "We respect other people's beliefs. Whether they believe in Jesus or Allah or any other God, we respect their right to that belief."[559] Borat continues, "But, how do you defend against the Jew claw?"[560] He then proceeds to make his hand into a claw. "So, if the Jew come at you with the claw,"[561] he says lunging at the instructor with his "claw", which the instructor then knocks away. Again, the humour of this skit functions ambiguously. Firstly, if we read Borat as a Muslim character, as mentioned earlier, the character taps into the assumed anti-Semitism, irrationality and violence of Muslim, and particularly, Muslim male immigrants. However, what is also funny is the way in which the white, Western actors whom Borat encounters easily believe his performance, thereby revealing their own Orientalist understandings of immigrant men. Finally, the humour also functions through the juxapositioning of Borat's outlandish and absurd statements, and the unsuspecting

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[558] *Ibid.*
[559] *Ibid.*
[560] *Ibid.*
[561] *Ibid.*

people he encounters. As mentioned, comic impersonation functions to create an understanding between actor and audience that leaves the duped interviewee as the figure of ridicule.

Yoga Massacres: Borat and the Shock of White Liberals:

Borat's lack of awareness of Western culture also works as a means through which this culture can then be mocked. Borat goes to a yoga studio next. The yoga teacher tells him he will be unable to attend the yoga class in his suit. The next thing the audience sees is Borat emerging from the change room in a pair of very tight shorts and a tiny tank top. The figure of Borat in very small shorts and a tank top from the 1980's is humorous because of his lack of awareness of the fashion that surrounds new age health practices. After he emerges, he sees a keyboard that the yoga teacher has lying in the studio. Borat begins to play the song, "Everybody Dance Now," by CNC music factory. Unaware of the ways in which yoga and new age culture are marketed in the West, Borat points to the ironies between the commodification of idealized third world cultures and the figure of the immigrant, who is unaware of the unspoken protocols of North American "New Age" cultures. The irony of global economies and the fantasies of difference lie in the disjuncture between Orientalist understandings of Otherness and the actual, ordinary bodies of immigrants and people from the developing world.

These ironies continue when Borat goes to "The New Age Dance Studio." After doing an interpretative dance exercise with three other students, led by a very New Age instructor, the group is asked to "draw what they feel." The other students in the group draw very touchy, feely, new age type pictures. However, Borat's drawing depicts a war. He tells the group that his drawing is of the "Tichniak massacre, where many Uzbek's were crushed."[562] "How did you feel," asks the New Age dance teacher, in a tone of deep empathy. "Very proud,"[563] says Borat in a deadpan voice. "Isn't it sad, though?"[564] Asks another very sympathetic new agey student. "It is not sad. It is us who do the killing."[565] The sentimentality of the New Age movement, and the romantic self indulgence of hobby culture on the whole is troubled by Borat's crassness and his violent nationalism. What is being mocked is not necessarily war itself, but the disjuncture between a hyperbolic construction of Western and non Western realities. Again, the humour works by exploiting the shock of white liberals when they encounter forms of social difference that violate their sensibilities. However, as mentioned and as I will explore later in this chapter, one could also find humour in this joke due to anxieties concerning the assumed violence of immigrant, Muslim men.

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[562] *Ibid.*
[563] *Ibid.*
[564] *Ibid.*
[565] *Ibid.*

How to Enter Laughing: The Comedic Immigrant:

In "Theories of Ethnic Humour: How to Enter, Laughing" Lowe argues that discourses of the comedic lend themselves to immigrants, and that immigrant experience lends itself to comedy. Lowe draws on the work of Sollers who notes that,

> ...ethnic identity may be determined by consent as well as by descent, and that this in fact has happened repeatedly. Comic boundaries....can be rapidly created and moved, as communities of laughter arise at the expense of some outsiders and then reshape, integrate those outsiders, and pick other targets...in all cases the community of laughter itself is an ethnicizing phenomenon, as we develop a sense of we-ness in laughing with others.[566]

Lowe also draws on the work of Kallen who he says goes,

> ...indirectly to the heart of the immigrant's dilemma when he describes a `traveler' to a new country who laughs at all the local customs, the dress, or `the very scenery' as ludicrous. Eventually, however, `the disharmonies seem to rub off; the articulation of life becomes smoother and less noisy. He himself has now become, to some degree, part of the structure; speech, manners, dress-his own have somehow become confluent with them, have set him at their centre, where he once was the periphery.[567]

In addition to the narrative of assimilation which often begins with ethnic humour, Lowe also draws on the work of Eastman who discusses the relationship between humour and disappointment. Lowe states that the humour of disappointment,

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[566] Lowe, 441.
[567] *Ibid,* 444.

> ...develops when, for instance, someone dignified... starts to sit down; someone snatches the chair, and she lands on her rump. Applied to the myth of America, it seems only natural that this strand runs rather broadly throughout ethnic humour traditions....[568]

The humour of disappointment offers a means through which immigrants can critique the dominant culture into which they are thrown, and the political and social customs they observe. As Lowe states, for some immigrants "...appearing after the founding of an impossibly Utopian "American Dream" and the myth of the lady with the lamp, unfulfilled expectations became the inevitable norm, and the constant topic for American jokes."[569]

Lowe cites the humour of Groucho Marx, who constantly mocked the disjuncture between the promises of American capitalism for new immigrants, and the actual realities. As Groucho once said, "When I came to this country, I hadn't a nickel in my pocket—now I have a nickel in my pocket."[570] Lowe analyses the ways in which humour functions in this joke, stating that,

> ...in this joke Groucho has pulled an `expected' chair out from under us, substituting something else just before we hit the floor, for the dream would indicate a second line of `now I am a millionaire.' The old saying that American streets were paved with gold created similarly heightened expectations and inevitable comic deflation: `When they got there they learned three things: first, that the streets were not paved with gold; second, that the streets were not paved at all; and third, that they were expected to pave them.[571]

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[568] *Ibid.*
[569] *Ibid,* 446.
[570] *Ibid.*
[571] *Ibid.*

The humour of the immigrant therefore, functions on two levels. Firstly, jokes often revolve around the strangeness of the immigrant body itself, and its inability to properly conform to customs and rituals that are familiar. This comedy can amount to a mockery of the immigrant. However, this mockery may also serve to question the normalcy of white, Western bodies and norms. As Lowe states that,

> ...immigrant facial and corporeal types, styles of dress, gestures, and so on (not to mention the multiple manifestations of this sort one finds in the crucial area of language, even when the ethnic speaks English) make the ethnic in question a kind of societal 'clown' who distorts the idea of the 'normal' WASP American.[572]

The humour of the immigrant is ambiguous in its ability to both offer a mockery of the body of the foreigner and to use this mockery as a critique of dominant culture.

As mentioned, the comedy of Borat can be said to function on both levels. On the one hand, we are made to laugh at Borat himself. His lack of familiarity with American middle class norms and with the polite silences of liberal speech make him somewhat of a clown. However, beyond an easy mockery of difference, Borat also sheds light on the comic nature of dominant white middle class British and American culture. His misunderstanding and inability to grasp or perform Western ritual place him at a distance from dominant cultural norms which he can then trouble. In asking British and American people to explain their

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[572] *Ibid.*

customs, habits and beliefs, we are made to see how nonsensical and laughable many of these beliefs are. To return to Lowe's initial quote about the immigrant as a figure of ridicule, one could argue that the immigrant does not simply fail to meet the standard of the "'normal WASP American," but rather, comes to challenge and distort this standard altogether.

Borat's inability to fully assimilate to the world of American hobbies, for example, does not just construct him as the butt of jokes, but rather mocks the notion of Western leisure altogether. Comedy does not have to act as a means through which the immigrant assimilates, or as a means through which their failed assimilation is mocked. Instead, the idea of America itself becomes a joke. Lowe states for example that,

> ...when one thinks about the beginnings of America, one might, in the right frame of mind laugh, for the whole thing was really a tremendous joke on the confident European adventurers and explorers who thought they had discovered a western route to India. Columbus, playing the long-lasting joke of naming the people he found `Indians,' was himself the victim of a cosmic comedy.[573]

Colonial discourses and post colonial identities it seems, lend themselves to comedy. The ironies of the miscalculations, misapprehensions and false promises that America was founded on are in many ways tragic. However as comic Carol

[573] *Ibid.*

Burnett notes, "...comedy is tragedy plus time."[574] Similarly, the experience and subject formation of the immigrant often lends itself to parody, farce, and irony.

Lowe discusses the comedy of many early immigrants who often used joking as a means of assimilating to American norms. He states that on the one hand, in using

> ...comic arsenal that included folklore, descriptive and idiomatic- of local-color exotica, immigrants made feared ethnics human, interesting, funny and likeable. Their creation of comic commentaries on both local and national politics offered dramatic proof of their pride and interest in becoming good Americans.[575]

However, the tensions that come out of ethnic comedy may speak to an overall tension that defines immigrant experience. On the one hand, the immigrant strives to assimilate and uses comedy as a means of constructing a likeable persona in dominant culture. On the other hand, the immigrant also carries with them a pride in their former home that often acts as a critique of the dominant nation-state into which they are thrown. Finally, the immigrant is often exploited by racist and classist structures, thereby offering grounds for mocking the supposed equality and opportunity available to them in Western liberal democratic countries. As Lowe notes, dialect writing was often used as a tool with which to critique dominant political ideologies of the nation state. He states

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[574] Carol Burnett, "Carol Burnett quotes." Thinexist.com. http://thinkexist.com/quotation/comedy_is_tragedy_plus_time/7495.html (accessed: December 3, 2007).
[575] *Ibid,* 447.

that many ethnic writers used dialect and humor as a "...ploy of great advantage, mounting savage attacks on the central government and the excesses of mainstream capitalist society in a curiously disarming manner."[576] The possibilities of critique that the comic allows for, gesture to wider debates concerning creative resistance by post colonial scholars. Comedy could be read (in certain contexts) as speaking to Bhabha's notion of mimicry.

Borat meets Bhabha: mimicry and the mockery of assimilation

As mentioned throughout this work, Homi Bhabha conceives of the colonizer as carrying a sense of anxiety that is evinced in their need to continually repeat colonial stereotypes. This colonial anxiety offers a space of resistance for the colonized. As Huddart states, "...anxiety is matched by mimicry, with the colonized adopting and adapting to the coloniser's culture. Importantly,"[577] he continues, "...this mimicry as Bhabha understands it is an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas. This exaggeration means that mimicry is repetition with difference, and so it is not evidence of the colonized's servitude."[578] For my purposes, what is especially interesting and useful is that Huddart discusses Bhabha's notion of mimicry in relation to the comedic. He states that "...this mimicry is also a form of mockery, and Bhabha's post-colonial

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[576] *Ibid,* 447.
[577] David Huddart, *Homi K Bhabha* (London: Routledge 2006), 57.
[578] *Ibid.*

theory is a comic approach to colonial discourse, because it mocks and undermines the ongoing pretensions of colonialism and empire."[579] Huddart goes on to reference Bhabha's discussion of humour among Jewish and Parsi communities. Here, Bhabha suggests "...that both groups repeat stereotypical jokes about themselves, but that the repetition always transforms those jokes, and kick-starts the frozen circulation of stereotypes: joking becomes a form of resistance to colonial discourse."[580] Huddart further notes that "The comic quality of mimicry is important because colonial discourse is serious and solemn, with pretensions to educate and improve."[581]

In the case of Borat, discourses of nationalism, civility and immigrant assimilation are mocked firstly by Borat's hyperbolic repetitions of both British and American cultural and social norms. Secondly, discourses of assimilation are mocked by Borat's hyperbolic failures to approximate norms of Western civility. The exaggerated ways in which Borat performs rituals of Western etiquette reveal his mockery of immigrant compliance and servitude. These exaggerations may be read as becoming comedic through their mockery of Western ideals. While Bhabha's ideas of mimicry and sly civility apply to colonial rule, I believe that these concepts can be used to discuss post colonial realities. The figure of the

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[579] *Ibid.*
[580] *Ibid,* 58.
[581] *Ibid.*

immigrant, the foreigner, troubles the hegemony of the nation state in similar ways that the colonized troubles colonial discourse. As Bhabha says of colonial mimics, they are "almost the same but not white."[582] This axiom especially applies to Borat, who aesthetically looks white, but is unable to quite perform dominant whiteness correctly. However, this failure to approximate whiteness can be read as a form of resistance, as Borat's mimicking of authority comes to parody it. The double vision of the immigrant is similar to that of the colonized. On the one hand, the immigrant or foreigner is encouraged to assimilate to dominant norms, to become civilized and educated according to Western hegemony. On the other hand, as Bhabha points out in relation to colonial education, the replication is never quite the same. The immigrant bears a trace of another culture, place, and language. This trace seeps into the dominant culture, and can act as a means through which Western hegemony is both mocked and challenged.

The double vision of the colonized I would argue is not dissimilar to the double vision of the immigrant, who must perform Western rituals and speak English, but often does so slyly, performing their identities as "good Americans" in highly theatrical ways, that can mock nationalist discourse. In the case of Borat, his hyperbolic performances of Britishness and Americanness, which I

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[582] *Ibid.*

would argue are also performances of whiteness, are laughable. Just as Bhabha points out the comedic nature of mimicry, the laughter that Borat generates can be read as mocking the notion of foreignness, troubling ideas of similitude and national belonging.

Almost the same, but not white: the uncanny and the immigrant comic

Bhabha interestingly enough, uses the idea of the uncanny to discuss notions of foreignness. Huddart states that,

> ...for Bhabha, post-colonial criticism conducts this analysis from the margins of modern nations: they provide a privileged perspective on the apparently stable identities of modernity in general. The margins of the modern nation, like the situations of colonized peoples, should not be romanticized; however, they do offer striking resources that transform our rigid sense of the grand narratives of modernity. In their ambivalence, these margins are an uncanny echo of histories that modernity might prefer has remained hidden.[583]

Huddart continues, by outlining how Bhabha's notion of migrant experience ties in with Freud's notion of the uncanny. Huddart states that Freud uses the idea of the uncanny,

> ...to explain the feeling we get when experiences of childhood that have been repressed return to disrupt our everyday existence. For Bhabha, it is possible to compare the childhood of an individual with the beginnings of modern Western history; in both cases, something is repressed but inevitably breaks through the veneer of civilization.[584]

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[583] *Ibid,* 86.
[584] *Ibid.*

The notion of the uncanny, if read alongside the earlier discussion in Chapter 1 concerning humour and the figure of the child, offers an interesting commentary on immigrant humour in the modern Western nation state.

For Bhabha, the migrant taps into the repressions of the modern Western nation state which must conceive of itself and its citizens as stable and fully individuated. The figure of the migrant or the foreigner speaks to how even those who are "naturalized" citizens are not so natural. Rather, they too have been constructed by the nation state. The figure of the foreigner mimicking, in hyperbolic and obvious ways, the regimes and rituals of the nation state, draws attention to the performative nature of national, cultural and racial identity. What the immigrant's humour taps into is the foreignness and lack of civility that lies in every citizen, thereby threatening the divide between insiders and outsiders. The post colonial mimic bears an uncanny resemblance to the "naturalized" citizen, in a similar way that the drag queen bears an uncanny resemblance to the "natural" woman. As in the case of drag, which was discussed earlier, immigrant or racialised humour could be read as mocking the figure of difference itself. However, if read through a psychoanalytic and post structuralist lense, these parodies become repetitions which gesture to the performative, repetitive, rehearsed nature of supposedly natural and naturalized identities.

Borat bears an uncanny resemblance to a white, British or American citizen. However in his repetitions of everyday ritual and custom—eating, dating, etc—he can never quite approximate that which he mimics. This failure however is not a sign of loss, but rather offers up a new space from which one can question the discourses of Western culture. This parodic repetition draws attention to the ways in which identities are processes of continued repetition. Like the colonial stereotype which Bhabha argues reveals the anxiety of the colonizer in its need to be constantly repeated, the joke that is told again and again, the repetition of rituals by the figure of the mimic, points to the instability of fixed identities and ideas. As stereotypes, jokes and rituals are revealed to bear repeating, they are revealed to be unstable. In relation to criticisms of Borat which argue that the character is racist and anti-semitic, Cohen has responded by stating that Borat's racism acts as a "...dramatic demonstration of how racism feeds on dumb conformity, as much as rabid bigotry."[585] Borat's repetition of often outlandish and often in-correct racist and anti-semitic hate speech points to the instability of the racist stereotype, in that it must be, as Bhabha notes, anxiously repeated.

Strangers to Our Laughter: Humour as Foreign to Bodily Autonomy:

[585] See Cohen, quoted in "The Man Behind the Mustache" *Interview with Rolling Stone Magazine.*

The anxiety of Western democracies towards foreignness, especially in a time in which aesthetic and cultural difference do not always go hand in hand, allows for the humour of the immigrant. It is not simply the difference of the immigrant that we find funny. It is also the possible sameness and our own possible foreignness that drives our laughter. Perhaps it is the anxiety born out of the rupturing of insider and outsider, "natural" and new citizens, mimics and authentics that drives us to laugh. In her work *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva draws on Freud's notion of the uncanny to look at how the concept of foreignness troubles reason itself. Kristeva states that,

> With Freud...foreignness, an uncanny one, creeps into the tranquility of reason itself, and, without being restricted to madness, beauty, or faith any more than to ethnicity or race, irrigates our speaking-being, estranged by other logics, including the heterogeneity of biology...Henceforth, we know that we are foreigners to ourselves, and it is with the help of that sole support that we can attempt to live with others.[586]

Humour, I believe acts as a means through which this understanding of foreignness is illustrated and negotiated. Firstly, as Huddart and Kristeva both point out, we are foreign to ourselves. This psychic, social and bodily foreignness is evinced in our laughter at the figure of the mimetic migrant. Our laughter comes from an understanding of the ways in which Western cultural and national habits and tastes appear to be quite ridiculous once we see someone else trying to learn them. Put on display to reveal their bigotry and often faulty logic, Western

[586] *Ibid,* 87.

cultural norms seem foreign, even to Westerners. Our laughter makes us foreign to ourselves, in that laughter is not necessarily a rational or controlled response but rather a bodily urge that we cannot often control or repress. As Kristeva states,

> Even our bodies are foreign to us, according to Freud: they answer to biological drives, despite our attempts to repress these urges. Foreignness is not confined to any particular group, and the possibility of different groups living together depends on acceptance of this general truth.[587]

Laughter I believe can act as a sort of collective catharsis, in which even "naturalized" citizens are made to reveal the repressed foreignness of their own subjectivities.

Kristeva goes on to note the ways in which psychoanalysis has been used to discuss what she terms "the irreconcilable." She states that "Psychoanalysis is…experienced as a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable. How could one tolerate a foreigner if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself?"[588] Read in this way, humour has subversive potential as it acts as a means through which we come to challenge the seemingly irreconcilable difference of the imagined Other through recognizing our own irreconcilable Otherness. Our inability to regulate our unconscious will to laugh makes us strangers to ourselves. Therefore, laughter

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[587] *Ibid.*
[588] *Ibid.*

does not have to be a malicious form of power held over the imagined Other, as described in Platonic thought, but can be a means through which we develop "...an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable."[589]

Firstly, the humour of Borat serves to mock dominant cultural norms and to reveal the normal to be strange to the immigrant or foreigner who carries a different worldview and history. Secondly, on another level, laughter rattles our bids to rationality by tapping into the unconscious. We lose control, if only for a moment of our bodily drives and emotions, something resonates with us and we lose ourselves in laughter. As Huddart states,

> To put it another way, knowing how strange I am to myself helps me (at least) tolerate the strangeness of others, a strangeness that can be so easily viewed as threatening to my identity. In fact, the relationship of self and other is an uncanny one. Kristeva describes an otherness that is always already within the self: she argues that all subjects are from the beginning haunted by uncanniness.[590]

I believe this notion of uncanniness can be used to relate to Bhabha's concept of mimicry and therefore to the comedic. The mimic bears a resemblance to the originary object that they attempt to replicate, however in their mimicry they call into question the authenticity and innateness of the original. They bear an uncanny resemblance to the original, through which one can make an identification.

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[589] *Ibid.*
[590] *Ibid.*

We laugh with the figure of Borat and at the ridiculous nature of Western culture. We are also afforded the indulgence in the pleasures of laughing at thoughts, attitudes and speech that he can access, which we have repressed in our interpellation into the dominant codes and scripts of Western, bourgeois modernity. The comic therefore might become a place and space of critique and also communion. The humour of Borat critiques the silences, and normalcy of dominant white Western culture, while also offering a space in which all are mocked and therefore all are viewed to be strange or laughable.

Borat and the Absurd

While I have discussed several of the possibilities that cause Borat to be a comical figure, I also believe that one of the ways in which this character functions is through the realm of the absurd. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud states that absurdity is one of the ways in which jokes and the comedic function. Freud states that "...joke-work makes use of deviations from normal thinking—of displacement and absurdity—as technical methods for producing a joking form of expression."[591] Displacement works to project feelings or attitudes towards one thing onto another, thereby creating a joke that functions often by making an unlikely comparison. Absurdity however, involves

[591] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconcious*, 97.

the disruption of the normative linguistic order through nonsensical speech or gestures.

In many ways, the character of Borat is an example of absurd or nonsensical comedy. Borat's open utterance concerning "chocolate face" men and "Jew claws," his breaking of social taboos and his overall hyperbolic body language, movements and facial postures create a figure of absurdity who becomes funny simply by virtue of how strange and out of place they seem to be. His use of racial, gendered, sexual and bodily speech at the most inopportune times and in the most unlikely places produce laughter by virtue of how bizarre they appear to those he comes into contact with, as well as to the audience watching *Da Ali G Show*. This absurdity however, also becomes instructional, as Borat not only reveals his own strangeness but the strangeness of those he encounters and the social habits, customs, and language of Western and European societies. In his absurdity, he reveals normative speech concerning `race' and social difference, as well as normative rules governing habits and the body to be equally absurd.

Outside the Domain of Speakability: Impossible Comic Speech:

In her work, *Excitable Speech* Butler discusses the repercussions of breaking or challenging normative laws of speech. She states that

> To move outside of the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject. To embody the norms that govern speakability in one's speech is

> to consummate one's status as a subject of speech. `Impossible speech' would be precisely the ramblings of the asocial, the rantings of the `psychotic' that the rules that govern the domain of speakability produce, and by which they are continually haunted.[592]

Consider Butler's statement of the pathologisation of `impossible speech' and impossible speakers alongside Freud's observation that "...the joker is a disunited personality, disposed to neurotic disorders."[593] Freud continues by stating that,

> The insufficiency of documentary evidence, however, will certainly prevent our setting up a hypothesis that a psychoneurotic constitution of this kind is a habitual or necessary subjective condition for the construction of jokes.[594]

It is not my intention to pathologise jokers or joking, but rather to read comedy as a means through which "impossible speech" may momentarily, be possible. Absurd and nonsensical speech which would normally be pathologised as `psychotic' is made acceptable through comedic discourse. Those who attempt to speak outside of a socio-linguistic order in which `race', gender, sexuality and class are policed and normalized risk losing their sense of subjectivity. However, comedy allows for a temporary break from this order, a moment or series of moments in which absurdity is accepted. This break from rational, literal speech allows the figure of the comic a means to not only retain a sense of subjectivity while speaking the impossible, but also allows the comic to challenge common

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[592] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech,* 233.
[593] Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconcious,* 194.
[594] *Ibid.*

sense ways of speaking and seeing the world. Borat's absurdity is not pathologised, as it is seen to be comedic speech. Therefore, Cohen can use `nonsense' to not only generate laughter, but to question our interpellation into a linguistic and social order which upholds categories of difference and codes of civility.

However, while I have been arguing for a reading of Borat as questioning the linguistic order of `race,' and shedding light on the psychic life of racism, it is important to stress the characters ambivalence. In conjunction with my overarching thesis regarding the ambivalence of Cohen's comedy, it is necessary to discuss the racist violence that Borat may contribute to, given the political context in which his comedy is read. It is also important to note that the humour of Borat seems to have changed over time, in ways that could lend themselves not to a nuanced statement regarding the ironies of `race,' but to a laughter that exploits contemporary racist, religious and xenophobic anxiety.

Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan

The full length feature film, *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* was released in 2006. The film in many ways revisits the common "Borat jokes" that I have discussed. However, the structure of the film and its development of the character depart from the short interview segments that Borat appears in on *Da Ali G Show*. In offering an in-

depth portrayal of the Borat character as he travels from Kazakhstan to America to gain insight into the American way of life, we are given much more background information about this character, and are offered more `race' based humour through the character's antics.

The first major thing that the film offers which is not available in the show is a detailed depiction of Borat's home life in Kazakhstan. As discussed, while the depiction of the character on *Da Ali G Show* angered Kazakh officials and citizens of Kazakhstan, the Borat film has caused unprecedented outrage and litigation.[595] As the film opens we see Borat in his native Kazakhstan village, Kuzak. The first lines uttered by Cohen in the film are as follows, "My name is Borat. I like you. I like sex. Is nice. This is my country of Kazakhstan. It locate between Tajikistan, Kyrgystan and assholes Uzbekistan."[596] The film immediately aligns the character with Kazakhstan while also constructing a rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Borat is immediately introduced to the audience as licentious and violently nationalist, constructing him through the

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[595] See Dan Glaister, "Khazakstan fights back ahead of Borat film release," *The Guardian.* Online edition. Thursday September 28, 2006. http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/sep/28/broadcasting.film. (accessed: November 17, 2007), "Arab Countries Ban Borat." *The Guardian.* Online Edition. December 1, 2006. http://film.guardian.co.uk/censorship/news/0,,1961871,00.html. (accessed November 20, 2007).
[596] *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.* Dir. Larry Charles. Written, produced and starring Sacha Baron Cohen. 20th Century Fox, America. 2006.

lense of a racialised trope in which "foreign" men are often deemed to be unruly and filled with a violent, xenophobic patriotic zeal.

The stereotypes concerning Kazakhstan continue as we are introduced to a host of characters within Borat's village, as he leads the audience on a tour. Borat states, "This is our town rapist," and gestures to a man with an unsavoury expression. "This is our town kindergarden," he states and points to a mud pit where unruly children are playing with makeshift weapons. "This is our town mechanic and abortionist" he says, pointing to another man whom he passes. "This is my sister Natalia," he says gesturing to a woman whom he then passionately kisses. "She is number one prostitute in all of Kazakhstan. Nice." He then gestures to a woman who appears to be very old. "This is my mother. She oldest woman in whole of Kuzack. She 43."[597] The humour of this opening sequence functions on many levels and could be interpreted in divergent ways.

Firstly, the humour works by shocking viewers through the breaking of taboos concerning sexual norms, including rape and incest. The skit also works to break taboos concerning aging and death, through the scene of the children playing with weapons and the figure of the oldest woman in Kazakhstan, a 43 year old. The humour both reveals and works to conceal anxieties concerning sexuality and mortality within dominant Western culture. The anxieties of sexual

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[597] *Ibid.*

morality and mortality may not simply be universal ones, but rather latent anxieties that exist towards cultural and national "Others" who are assumed to be less "civilized" than those in the West.

The humour of this sequence and of the figure of Borat may also work to reveal the anxieties of the racist stereotype. Rather than being read as an attempt to represent Kazakhstan authentically, the humour can be read as a hyperbolic performance of the racialised stereotype of the generalisable foreigner who acts as a repository for Western anxieties, fantasies and desires. Borat's breech of moral, sexual and social taboos may be funny not as a mockery of the Other and of less developed countries, but rather as a mockery of the racialised stereotype itself. The mention of the town rapist and of the oldest woman in Kazakhstan as a 43 year old extremely elderly woman are gross exaggerations of cultural stereotypes of non-Western countries and people. As the character of Borat was initially written about as being from Albania, it is likely that Cohen is not interested in using Borat as a tool with which to mock Kazakhs. Rather, if we see the character as a "camp" version of the figure of the foreigner, the character may act as a tool with which to ridicule sexual and moral stereotypes that are attached to non-Western bodies.

However, the use of the figure of "the foreigner' from a less developed country also structures the joke. It could be argued that by constructing not only

Borat but all those in his village as morally and sexually depraved according to dominant Western standards, the film invites us to mock assumed cultural Otherness, less developed countries, and the subjects who are imagined to populate them. As discussed in Chapter 3, the use of humour to reinscribe racial violence towards imagined Others is made even more troublesome if one considers the allegations of exploitation of real Romanian villagers in the making of the film. It could be argued that Cohen is tapping into latent aggressions concerning Otherness which he has not created. However, if he in fact used the bodies of people in Glod without their consent, his comedy does not just reveal racism towards people from lower income countries, it propagates and profits from it.

I would argue that there has been a definite shift in the nature of Cohen's Borat humour from his BBC television show to the feature length Borat film. While the show mainly worked to reveal the nonsensical and hypocritical nature of dominant white Western norms, the Borat film seems to appeal to the lowest common denominator. The film loses much of the subtlety of Cohen's earlier comedy, and crudely mocks the figure of the imagined "Other." While the early Borat segments on *Da Ali G Show* may have offered up the character of Borat as humorous, the joke largely functioned based on the difference between Borat and those he interviewed and encountered. While the Borat film contains similar

segments, the opening segment of the film sets an unfortunate tone for the film. The nuances and wit of early Borat humour is often lost in a lewd, ethnocentric and frankly boring mockery of imagined "Kazakhs." As I will now further discuss, while the humour in the Borat film may work to mock the stereotype through its hyperbolic repetition, there is also a strong possibility that viewers will read the Borat film as a mockery of racial and cultural Otherness.

The racial and cultural indeterminacy of the character, who has a large moustache, who says in the film that he "worships the hawk," who speaks "Kazakh" which is actually a mixture of an orchestrated dialect and Hebrew,[598] challenges the idea that Borat is meant to represent an authentic racial and cultural subject. Rather, the character may act as a mirror, revealing to audiences the ridiculous nature of racial and culture stereotypes, and the enduring racism of North America.

However, the reading of Borat as a camp racialised figure assumes a great deal of sophistication and reflexivity on the part of the audience. It also assumes that the audience understands Borat's performance to be a hyperbolic exaggeration of the racial stereotype, as a means of ridiculing it. These assumptions rest on the assumed progressiveness and intelligence of the audience.

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[598] see: *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.* Dir. Larry Charles. Written, produced and starring Sacha Baron Cohen. 20th Century Fox, America. 2006.

While Cohen's intention may be to use Borat to mock North American culture and to mock stereotypes concerning "the foreign," audience members may laugh at the assumed depravity of the immigrant.

In my Masters work dealing with the comedy of Margaret Cho, I reached similar conclusions regarding the ability of Cho's humour to subvert racism. On the one hand, Cho's performance of Orientalist stereotypes worked to mock the ridiculous nature of sexist-racist constructions of Asian women. On the other hand, Cho's audience, many of whom are affluent white gay men might miss her parody of Orientalism and use her comedy as a license to mock Asians. This was seen in the opening credits to her filmed stand up routine, *I'm the One that I Want* where a white male fan mimicked Cho's parody of her mother's Korean accent in ways that reinforced his ability to mock racialised others.[599] Cho's parody of her mother's accent and of Asian stereotypes may have been intended as camp renditions of Orientalism. However, in revisiting the racial stereotype, if even to mock it, one must recirculate racialised signifiers. These signifiers are politically, socially and psychically charged and may allow audience members an outlet to reveal their racist aggression.

The Same Old Jokes: Sameness and Difference in the Borat film

[599] See: *I'm the One that I Want.* Dir. Lionel Coleman. Perf. Margaret Cho. A Cho Taussig Production, 2001.

While the Borat film has been fiercely contested due to its gross misrepresentations of Kazakhstan, in analyzing the structure of the film it is interesting to examine how parallels between the stereotypical less developed country and the United States are continuously made. In his essay "The Christian-Hegelian Comedy" Slavoj Zizek writes that "Crucial for proper comic effect is not difference where we expect sameness, but rather sameness, where we expect difference."[600] Zizek further notes the relationship between comedy and abjection. He tells a joke concerning a patient in a hospital who asks that those who are dying be moved to a special room, only to find that he is already in this special room. Zizek states that "...he finds himself included in the group from which he wanted to maintain distance."[601] Jokes and the comic can function by working to separate the gap between Self and Other, revealing the ironies of difference by virtue of sameness. In the case of the Borat film, while Kazakhstan is initially presented as misogynistic and aggressive, the America that Borat finds also reveals misogyny and aggression. In fact, the structure of the narrative works to reveal America and Americans to be just as "savage" as the imagined Kazakhstan that we first see.

However while Borat's mockery of both Kazakhstan and America may be subversive, the economic and political effects of Cohen's comedy on both nations

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[600] Zizek, Slavoj. "The Christian-Hegelian Comedy" When Humour Becomes Painful. 58.
[601] *Ibid,* 53.

point to the limits of this subversion. While Americans may be mocked, due to the gross economic and political power of the nation, there is often little at stake in this mockery. Conversely, as I have previously discussed, the mockery of Kazakhstan and the making of the film in the village of Glod, Romania, perhaps carries greater political, social and economic ramifications. While the technique of jokes may work to level differences between disparate groups, these differences are only reinforced when one considers the manufacture and sale of Cohen's comedy.

The second way in which the humour of Borat's interviews in America function is through his ability to fool Americans into believing that he is actually an immigrant from Kazakhstan. The humour functions based on the audience's awareness that the character is fictitious, and used as a tool to expose the hypocrisy and bigotry of American culture.

There are several sketches which I believe illustrate the deep seated racism, misogyny and homophobia of mainstream white middle class American culture. One prominent example is a scene in which we see Borat going to a rodeo. We see him talking to a white American man who encourages him to shave his moustache:

> Shave that dog gone moustache off so you're not so conspicuous. So you look like maybe an Italian. Of course every picture we get back from the terrorist or the Muslims, they look like you. Black hair and black moustache. Shave that dog gone moustache off so you're not so

> conspicuous. So you look like maybe an Italian or something. I see a lot of people and I think there's a dog gone Muslim and I wonder what kind of bomb he's got strapped to him. And you probably aren't a Muslim. Maybe that's not your religion.[602]

At this point he responds, "No. I am a Kazakh. I follow the Hawk."[603] The man seems to ignore this comment and continues on his tirade. "But you look like one. When this thing gets done and we kick their butts over there, and all of them son of a butts are hanging from the gallows...By that time you will have proven yourself and you'll be accepted."[604] Borat then tries to kiss the man goodbye. "I ain't going to kiss you. People who do the kissing over here are the ones that float around like that,"[605] he says making a fairy like gesture with his hands, giving the impression of a homophobic slur. Borat responds, "In my country, they take them to jail and finish them."[606] The man responds, "Take em to jail and finish them. That's what we're trying to get done here." "High five," says Borat and they proceed to slap hands.[607]

The humour of this skit functions on several levels. Borat acts as a vehicle through which the Islamophobia, homophobia and blood-thirsty zeal of middle America is revealed. The effect of revealing this bigotry is achieved through the

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[602] *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.* Dir. Larry Charles. Written, produced and starring Sacha Baron Cohen. 20th Century Fox, America. 2006.
[603] *Ibid.*
[604] *Ibid.*
[605] *Ibid.*
[606] *Ibid.*
[607] *Ibid.*

construction of the Borat character as also being deeply bigoted, and through the belief on the part of those he interviews that he is a real person. Bigotry is also revealed because, as mentioned, the Borat character is ambiguous in his racial, cultural and religious indeterminacy. The audience is able to see the ironies of the assumed cultural superiority of the American in relation to imagined immigrant Others, as Americans are revealed to be violently xenophobic. As Zizek notes, the humour lies in the similitude[608] between the constructed hyperbolic misogyny and racism of "the Other" and the hypocrisy of the liberal West, which is revealed to be rife with bigotry.

Furthermore, the comedy functions based on the audience's knowledge that Cohen uses the character of Borat to reveal the manifest aggressions of the American interviewees and the latent aggression of Western audiences, who reveal their anxieties concerning the veiled bigotry of liberal culture in their laughter.[609]

However, as discussed in Chapter 3, the comedy within the Borat film also threatens to propagate deeply racist stereotypes, particularly given the political context in which the film was made and released. I will now discuss the ways in which I believe Cohen has exploited anxieties and aggressions that exist towards immigrant, and Muslim male bodies in the Borat film.

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[608] Zizek,
[609] See Lockyear and Pickering, 180-198.

Borat and A discourse of Terror:

While I am arguing that the humour of the Borat film departs from the usual comic structure of the early BBC sketches, it should be noted that many of the jokes in the film follow the same pattern. We see Borat going to New York City and trying to befriend people on the street. He is met with deep hostility and threats of violence. In a particularly funny and shocking sequence a man runs frightfully from him. [610] The humour lies in the disjuncture between the seemingly open, friendly immigrant and the cold, individualistic, xenophobic American public. As the camera and narrative take on Borat's perspective, it is American culture that comes off looking ridiculous. Similarly, when Borat is hitch hiking and picked up by a group of American frat boys, again Borat is portrayed as earnest and kind, while the frat boys are revealed to be misogynistic, homophobic fools. [611] Finally, when Borat attends a dinner party with a group of affluent white Americans in Texas, the structure of the jokes are similar to Borat's earlier sketch with Lady Chelsea. The humour functions to trouble disembodied liberal silences of the body and to unmask the pretensions and hypocrisy of white, middle class culture.[612]

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[610] *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.* Dir. Larry Charles. Written, produced and starring Sacha Baron Cohen. 20th Century Fox, America. 2006.
[611] *Ibid.*
[612] *Ibid.*

However, what is striking about the film is the inclusion of sketches which largely depart from the nature and I would argue value, of Cohen's earlier comedy. For example, in one scene in the film we see Borat and his companion Azamet running naked through their hotel. Their nude bodies work to shock people they encounter in the elevator and they also streak a large banquet hall, shocking conference participants.[613] It could be argued that this scene corresponds with the use of Borat character to challenge anxieties towards the body in Western culture. However, the sequence ends with Borat and Azamat wrestling naked on a bed together.[614] Here, the humour departs from the usual nature of Cohen's comedy, which always functions through the linguistic and bodily differences between Western and Non western, white and non-white characters and constructs.

In this sequence of Borat and Azamat's naked wrestling, the humour lies solely in repressed anxieties and aggressions towards the naked immigrant male body, and towards its assumed homoerotic value.[615] What is more disturbing is that Cohen's film was released at a time in which the image of naked, male, non Western, Muslim bodies had already entered into global consciousness in horrific ways.

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[613] *Ibid.*
[614] *Ibid.*
[615] For an overview of the ways in which Orientalism mapped homoeroticism onto "Oriental" bodies see: Lewis, Reina, *Gendering Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1995), Nagel, J. *Race, Ethnicity and Sexuality.* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003).

The tortures at Abu Ghraib:

On April 28, 2004, the American television programme *60 Minutes II* aired a series of deeply disturbing photographs of Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison being brutally tortured by American soldiers. Among the most vivid and widely circulated images were those of Arab, Muslim, male prisons who were forced to lie naked on top of one another while American soldiers stood by laughing and grinning.[616] Less that two years later Cohen's film revisits a similar image, with the bodies of naked, immigrant, possibly Muslim characters lying on top of one another to generate laughter. The torture of Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison is an extreme example of the ways in which "humour" can be used to justify abhorrent acts of colonial torture. Morreal states that "When asked why they made prisoners pile on top of one another naked, for example, some soldiers said that they did it as a kind of practical joke, `just for the fun of it.'"[617] This incident illustrates the ways in which deep seated racial hatred can find expression in irrational hate crimes that can be justified under the guise of comedy.

Torture and Melancholic Laughter: From Abu Ghraib to Borat

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[616] Rajiva, Lila. *The Language of Empire: Abu Ghraib and the American Media*(NewYork: Monthly Review Press, 2005).
[617] Morreal, John. "Humour and the Conduct of Politics." *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour.* ed Sharon Lockyear and Michael Pickering (London: Palgrave, 2005).

I would argue that the tortures of Abu Ghraib are examples of violent and heinous forms of racial melancholia. The racialised body is incorporated into national American narratives, consumed through images that celebrate its degradation, while the racism of this degradation is denied under the guise of American military intervention and soldiers who were "just kidding around."[618] The melancholic loss object is further incorporated into the national psyche through the dissemination of photographs that are consumed, while the wider implications of American racism, xenophobia, and imperialism are denied through various stories of "a few bad soldiers."[619] I believe the Borat movie also reflects upon and functions as a form of racial melancholia.

The joke of the naked Borat and Azamet functions as a melancholic incorporation and denial of loss. We consume the images of naked, Muslim men, tapping into a litany of images such as the horrors of Abu Ghraib, other incidents concerning Islamophobia and racism in the West, and ongoing racist war atrocities propagated by Westerners. However, laughter may function as a form of denial. The comic serves to bar us from implication.[620] As mentioned, the tools of comic impersonation allow one a space in which to laugh because the scenario is fictional and therefore does not demand the empathy that realism

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[618] *Ibid.*
[619] See Rajiva, 79-84.
[620] As mentioned Lockyear and Pickering discuss how comedy violates the rules of liberal speech, and how in particular, comic impersonation involves a violation of existing social contracts. See: Lockyear and Pickering, 180-182.

would.[621] Secondly, the discourse of the comic allows one a space in which to violate the normal codes of speech and civility. Therefore, we can deny that our laughter is connected to the denigration of real bodies.

Cheng states that "...Freud's notion of this uncomfortable swallowing and its implications for how loss is processed and then secured as exclusion lend provocative insights into the nature of the racial other seen as `foreigner within' America."[622] The `uncomfortable swallowing' of melancholic laughter could also take the form of an uncomfortable laughter. The humour of Borat therefore operates melancholically, generating an uncomfortable laughter that is filled with the denial of grief that haunts racial politics in America.

"Just Joking?" The Ethics of Comic Performance:

As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, while humour can be subversive, humour also has the potential to reinscribe, justify and dismiss heinous acts of racial degradation. Even more disturbing is the power to refuse to take responsibility for hate crimes, and to consider the colonial history they are part of, by using the comic to mask ones actions.[623] Comedic discourse does not exist outside of a social and political context or abstracted from a history of

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[621] See Lockyear and Pickering, 182.
[622] Cheng, 10.
[623] For a more detailed discussion of the ways in which race, gender, sexuality and colonialism intersected in the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib see: Eisenstein, Zillah, "Sex Humiliation, Gender Confusion and the Horrors at Abu Ghraib," Women's Human Rights Net. http://www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-sexualhumiliation.html, July 2004, (accessed November 5, 2007).

racism. As mentioned, a joke is not an isolated speech act, but rather like other speech acts, its meaning is formed as a citation in a long history of racist and comedic speech. Therefore, the defense that one was "just joking" is not a place where analysis should end, but rather a place from where we should begin to interrogate the psychic and social life of `race' based humour.

It is difficult to discern whether Cohen considered how the image of a naked Borat and Azamat would signify to an American and European public who had seen the Abu Ghraib photos repeatedly in international press. However, intention aside, what is dangerous is that there is the potential that laughter at Borat may be connected to similar anxieties, aggressions and desires that informed the ridicule and torture of Iraqi prisoners.[624] Western audiences may find this image funny due to their exposure to similar images from the Abu Ghraib scandal. What is even more likely is that homoerotic images of naked men who can be read as immigrants, foreigners, Arabs, and/or Muslims, tap into a litany of anxieties and desires that remain at the forefront of the global war against terror.[625] Sadly, Cohen offers an outlet where the deeply colonial implications of the sexualized, Orientalist images of Abu Ghraib are lost in their fictionalized and comic recreation.

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[624] *Ibid.*

[625] For an excellent discussion of the ways in which gender, sexuality, `race,' and class intersect in the "War against terror" see Naber, Nadine. "The Rules of Forced Engagement: Race, Gender and the Culture of Fear Among Arab Immigrants in San Francisco Post 9/11" in *Culture Dynamics*. Vol. 18. No. 3. 235-267, 2006.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 3 the humour in the Borat film also threatens to reinscribe racist, Islamophobic sentiments. While, as discussed, the early Borat humour occasionally mentioned non-sensical anti-Semitism and played upon the racial ignorance of the character, the film offers a great deal of anti-Semitic jokes. We see Borat entering a gun store in America and asking to buy a fire arm to hunt a Jew. We also see Borat and Azamat being taken in by an older couple who they discover are Jewish. Upon making this discovery, a litany of jokes based on Borat's anti-Semitism ensue.[626] While again, the hyperbolic nature of Borat's anti-Semitism may be intended to mock the racial stereotype, the context in which these jokes are told and the cultural/racial ambiguities of Borat offer disturbing possibilities for how this comedy could be read. As evinced in the Cowboy's reading of Borat as Muslim and in the large presence of Muslims in Kazakhstan, the character could be read as being Muslim. If so, Borat's anti-Semitism could be read as a mockery of the assumed anti-Semitism of Muslims, a charge that is often leveled by conservatives to dismiss the realities of Israeli apartheid in Palestine, and growing Islamophobia in Europe and the West.

To Summarise:

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[626] *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.* Dir. Larry Charles. Written, produced and starring Sacha Baron Cohen. 20th Century Fox, America. 2006.

The early comedy of Borat and some of the better parts of the largely disappointing Borat film lie in mocking assumed differences of culture, race, nationality, and class. The problem lies in the terms through which differences are made and become as Kristeva states, irreconcilable. While psychoanalytic concepts help us to see that we are all foreigners, we are not all foreign in the same way. Our foreignness is not policed to the same degree, for the same ends. So, to return to the Groucho Marx joke, some immigrants are still left with only a nickel in their pocket.

Furthermore, as I have tried to demonstrate, particularly in reference to the Borat film, laughter can act as a form of melancholic incorporation and denial of the racial Other. The film's timely release taps into the anxieties, aggressions and melancholic inabilities to grieve for current acts of racist imperialism. There are moments where it seems that Borat reflects upon our racism in ways that may be psychically healthy and socially useful. However, there are times when it seems that the character, Cohen, and the laughter they generate feed off racism in deeply disturbing ways.

I will now turn to an analysis of Cohen's interviews with major political figures, examining the ways in which his humour reflects upon the relationship between popular and culture. In conjunction with the overall focus of this work, I

will pay specific attention to how his mockery of formal politics, and use of the popular to mediate the political is connected to `race.'

Chapter Nine

Court Jesters and State Clowns:
Da Ali G Show and the Mockery of "Politics."

Ali G and Pop Politics:

Throughout this thesis I have been using *Da Ali G Show* to discuss the philosophical, social, psychic and political ambiguities of `race' based humour. However, in this chapter, I want to discuss how *Da Ali G Show* points to larger ironies and ambivalences concerning the relationship between popular culture and politics. The connection between mass media and political life, as I hope to show, is connected to a mass mediated discourse of `race' that Cohen plays with through comedy. As mentioned in Chapter 3 of this work, the character of Ali G is characteristic of a time in which Black popular cultures that were once connected to anti-racist politics have increasingly become commodified and sold en masse. The political interviews that Ali G conducts speak to these realities, and to a wider blurring between the worlds of political and popular culture. What the character gestures to are the ironies of a contemporary moment in which the world of politics is increasingly being mediated by mass media and consumer culture.

In their piece, "The Re-styling of Politics," John Corner and Dick Pels point to the demise of public engagement with formal political culture and the rise of public engagement with popular cultures. For example, the authors state that,

> ...whereas politicians encounter the greatest difficulty in `getting out the vote' in ordinary elections, the enthusiasm to vote for wannabe celebrities

> on reality shows such as *Big Brother*, *Popstars* and *Pop Idol* regularly reaches levels that border on collective frenzy.[627]

They further note that "In the February 2002 finals of the 23-week Pop Idol `election campaign,' the two remaining candidates together polled more votes than the Liberal Democrats in the general election."[628] Increasingly, engagement with popular culture is far surpassing engagement with political culture. In playing the character of "Ali G" and in interviewing politicians who appear on Ali's spoof talkshow, in an effort to appeal to youth, Cohen gestures to the rise of pop over traditional notions of politics. However, rather than pointing to the victory of pop over politics, what Cohen's humour reveals is the increased amalgamation between the two.

Mediatised Politics and Politicised Media:

Just as "Ali" gestures to the blurring of boundaries between Black vernacular and youth vernacular, his spoof interviews also gesture to the blurring between popular and political cultures. As Corner and Pels point out, increased emphasis on mass media and popular culture in social life has worked to change politics. They state that,

> …`official' politics has been catching up, blurring the boundaries and leveling the hierarchy between `high' political representation and `low' popular entertainment. If manufactured pop has adopted some of the

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[627] John Corner and Dick Pels, "The Re-styling of Politics." *Media and the Restyling of Politics.* Ed. John Corner and Dick Pels (Sage Publications: London, 2003).
[628] *Ibid.*

> paraphernalia and conventions of political electioneering, politics has become more of a `culture industry', increasingly resembling a talent show or popularity contest, where polling is as relentlessly continuous as in the music and film charts, and star-gazing and infotainment have become equally central as they are to tabloids and the celebrity magazines.[629]

Through humour, Cohen offers an ambiguous statement concerning the relationship between pop and politics. On the one hand, it is precisely through the blurring of boundaries between the political and the popular that Cohen's comedy functions. It is precisely because of the increasingly `pop' world of political engagement that Cohen is able to get politicians to appear on his mock youth television programme. On the other hand, it is also this erosion of boundaries that Ali G mocks, both in his parody of corporatised hip hop and mockery of politicians who want to be "down."[630]

Da Ali G Show speaks to the increasingly politicized world of popular culture, and the increasingly popularized world of politics. Or as Corner and Pels terms it, "...a politicized media.."[631] and a "...mediatised politics."[632] In the first instance, "...media's independence is seen to be almost entirely circumscribed by the controls of the political system...As independent agencies, the media have

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[629] *Ibid,* 2.
[630] See: Urban Dictionary. http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=i'm+down. (accessed: November 22, 2007). "'I'm down.' 1.To be cool with. 2.Saying that you understand."
[631] *Ibid,* 4.
[632] *Ibid.*

been `shut down.'"[633] In the second instance "...the realm of politics that has become colonized by media logics and imperatives, losing its specificity and integrity. Politics has become an adjunct to show business."[634] It is clear that Cohen's comedy attempts to speak more to the latter trend. As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, Cohen's humour offers a series of ambiguous political messages that gesture to the social, psychic and political ambivalences of identity within contemporary culture. However, as I have also argued with reference to Cohen's relationship with Kazakhstan, and his play upon existing racist, Orientalist stereotypes, *Da Ali G Show* and its spin off films also act as a form of "politicized media." While I do not have the space in which to offer a detailed discussion concerning the corporate sponsorship and advertising that Cohen receives, it should be noted that in addition to tapping into the existing anxieties towards `race' on the part of audiences, Cohen's work is governed by a wider sphere of corporate politics. This is especially true since *Da Ali G Show* went from being released on the BBC to being released on HBO, and since Cohen now appears in two films produced by major Hollywood studios.

While I have been discussing the ambivalence of *Da Ali G Show* in terms of `race,' I believe these ambiguities are present in Cohen's ironic commentary on mass media and political culture. Firstly, by deceiving politicians into appearing

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[633] *Ibid.*
[634] *Ibid.*

on his mock talk show, Cohen exploits and mocks the desire of politicians to be "cool." What is being mocked are not only individual political actors who want to connect with "the youth," but an increasingly pop form of politics. Secondly however, Cohen's comedy also works by mocking political actors because of their lack of understanding of popular culture. By playing with language and emphasizing hip hop and street slang, political figures are revealed to be out of touch with contemporary culture. Here, the bourgeoisie intellect of politicians is disparaged and the language of the popular is seen to triumph. Ali himself also acts as an ironic commentary on the gaps between pop and politics. As mentioned, by (mis) appropriating Black popular culture in its most commodified forms, Ali points to the gap between the hip hop generation and the civil rights generation. The character can be said to mock a generation whose subcultures have become commodified and cut off from grassroots politics. However, the character may, in certain instances, speak to the proliferation of hip hop among white middle class youth and the challenge this may offer to normative notions of upper class whiteness. Finally, the greatest irony lies in the fact that if pop and politics were not intertwined, Cohen could not gain access to politicians who agree to be interviewed by Ali in an effort to permeate youth culture.

Ali G, Kitsch Culture and the Politics of Celebrity

Ali G's ironising of politics does not exist in a vacuum, but rather speaks to the increased connection between politics and pop. The very fact that "Ali" can dialogue with political figures and undercut their authority using slang speaks to the interweaving of political and popular cultures. As Gilroy notes, what Ali G reveals is that politicians are desperate to be "down with the youth."[635] This desperation points to the ways in which increasingly popular culture is inseparable from youth culture. This has largely been caused by the targeting of youth by major corporations who now see young people as ideal consumers with spending power and leisure time.[636] This has also been brought about by the overwhelming ageism of dominant late capitalist Western culture, in which being young is increasingly idealized by mainstream media and market forces.[637] What Ali G may be mocking is not only the desperation of political figures, but an overall desperation on the part of Western consumers to stay young and trendy forever. By mocking politicians in their efforts to appear to be "cool" and by constructing "Ali" as politically ignorant, Cohen's humour might be offering a wider commentary on the ridiculous investments our culture makes in youth.[638]

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[635] Paul Gilroy, "Ali G and the Oscars," *Open Democracy*. http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Film/article_459.jsp. April 4, 2004. (accessed. October 10, 2007).
[636] See: Miles, Steven. *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World.* (London: Open University Press, 2000), 127-147.
[637] *Ibid,* 106-127.
[638] For a good discussion concerning conceptions of age, aging, and ageism in Western cultures see: Morganroth Gullete, Margaret, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

As argued in the previous chapter concerning Borat, the humour of Ali G may therefore tap into anxieties not only concerning `race' but concerning morality within Western culture. As with his third character Bruno, he may also be offering a mockery of the ways in which style often comes to trump substance in contemporary political and social life. Cohen exploits the increasingly "mediatised" political world in order to mock it from within. Ali's satirical interviews may therefore speak to the impact that media and politics are having on one another.

Popularity Contests and Politics: Celeactors and Kitsch Culture:

The popular representation of celebrities bleeds into the political representation of nation states. We are, after all, living in a time in which Arnold Schwartzenegger made famous for his role as "the Terminator" in an action movie of the same name, is now a governor of the state of California.[639] Cohen's comedy speaks to this reality and profits from it. In his work *Celebrity*, Chris Rojek discusses the politics of celebrity status in North America and Europe. Rojek argues that "Ali G" is a celeactor. He states that,

> The celeactor is a fictional character who is either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutionalized feature of popular culture...celeactors are adjuncts of the mass-media. They cater to the public appetite for a character type that sums up the times.[640]

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[639] "Arnold Schwartzenegger." Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Schwarzenegger. (accessed: December 3, 2007)
[640] Rojek, Chris. Celebrity (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 23.

While there is often an urge within popular culture to know the celebrity as a real person who stands apart from the characters they play, celeactors are famous as fictionalized characters. As Rojek points out, the celeactor therefore becomes a repository for the cultural moment in which they rise to fame. Furthermore, Rojek points out that because of their completely fictional status, celeactors often act as foils in public culture, being used to deflate and challenge authority. He states that "Celeactors are invariable satirical creations. Their purpose is to deflate the sanctimony of public figures or to highlight allegations of moral bankruptcy in public life."[641] Rojek further argues that Cohen speaks to an increasing trend within mass media of what he terms kitsch culture. "Kitsch culture" is an example of post modernism in practice. Rojek states that,

> kitsch culture" is a culture "...in which the conventions of normative order are established by the operations of manufactured novelties and planned sensations orchestrated by the mass-media. In setting the constructed nature of cultural identity and interaction as an a priori of normative public encounters, kitsch culture tacitly denies reality.[642]

This denial of reality is present in the world of Ali G, where racial, linguistic and political sensibilities are turned on their head.

As with my previous discussion concerning Borat and the absurd, Ali G's political satire functions largely through the creation of a world that is outside of

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[641] *Ibid.*
[642] *Ibid.*

the frames of normative reality. Cohen creates a series of interviews that have been orchestrated and are aired within the frames of mass media. In so doing, he is able to construct an alternate political reality that challenges the official discourse of politics. The very fact that major political leaders willingly participate in Ali's spoof talk show proves that the gap between pop and politics is closing. Furthermore, what their participation proves is that increasingly political leaders are also becoming celeactors who are intent on carving out a media persona for themselves. As Rojek states, "The comedy lies not only in Ali G's strident sincerity but also in the jaw-dropping credulity of the powerful often rich people he interviews who take the Ali G character at face value."[643] The humour of Ali G may therefore be driven by the ways in which major political figures are duped by the kitsch culture of Ali.

Furthermore, the humour may also function by drawing attention to the ways in which increasingly "Politics" is defined by mass media, consumer culture and celebrity. For example, in an interview for National Public Radio Cohen stated that much of the humour functions by exploiting the desire for celebrity on the part of interviewees. He states, "I think the power of television is amazing. When they're in the room with me, somehow because the camera is there their guard is down. And they'll answer almost anything, just so they end up looking

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[643] *Ibid,* 24.

good on camera."[644] Cohen may therefore be playing with and mocking not only those he interviews, but a wider culture in which image, identity and politics are increasingly conflated.

Cohen creates an alternative 'kitsch' world in his spoof interview show in which audiences are aware that a joke is being played on the political figures whom he interviews. Within this world of kitsch, audiences are usually aware that Cohen is an actor playing the fictional "Ali" and that his references to the language of the hip hop generation and commodified patois are devices used to mock his interviewees. However, what Rojek does not discuss are the politics of kitsch culture, particularly in its treatment of marginal bodies.

Ali G and Agylene: Parody and Prejudice:

For example, Rojek makes reference to Angylene, who has risen to fame throughout the United States for her appearance in a series of billboards. Even more so than Ali G and Borat, it is almost impossible to separate the character of Angylene from the actress who plays her. Her billboards are an example of 'kitsch culture' as Angylene is presented as a hyperbolic, Barbie doll like femme. They represent a blurring between reality and fiction.[645] Yet while Angylene, like Ali G may act as an exemplary post modern figure whose persona is completely

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[644] Robert Seigel, "Fooling Serious Interviewees, All for a Laugh." Interview with Sacha Baron Cohen on National Public Radio. July 23, 2004. Online edition. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3613548. (accessed: November 24, 2007).
[645] *Ibid,* 22-23.

manufactured, the politics of her persona are ambiguous. Like Ali, Angylene is an example of a hyperbolic performance of a stereotype. Yet, the character she performs is an archetypal white, heterosexual, able bodied, middle class feminine subject. While this performance, like Ali G's, can be read as an ironic commentary on the manufactured nature of femininity, it could also be read as reinforcing dominant white heterosexual bourgeoisie notions of femininity. For example, Angylene has been compared to Barbie and states that children often mistake her for Barbie.[646] In 2003 Angylene ran for political office in the state of California recall elections. Out of 135 candidates, she placed 28th in the election.[647] Like Ali, Angylene speaks to the blurring of popular culture and politics. However, like Ali it is unclear whether Angylene should be read as an ironic post modern example of the blurring between fiction and reality, or as a disturbing example of the anti-intellectualism and superficiality of late capitalist North America. Like the drag example that I begin this work with, what is unclear in the world of kitsch, camp, and parody, is how far and in what context a representation that recreates a stereotype can do to subvert it. What is also unclear is how hyperbolic performances of Otherness will be understood by

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[646] See: "Angylene." Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelyne. (accessed: November 29, 2007).
[647] *Ibid.*

audiences who may read characters like Agylene and Ali as literal representations of gender and `race.'

In order for `kitsch culture' to work it must in many ways reproduce many normative values of the dominant culture, if even to subvert them. The norms, language, aesthetics and values that Cohen plays with in his fictional universe take their psychic, social, political meaning and weight from the wider popular and political realm. As I have pointed out throughout this work, the parody that Ali G and Borat offer tap into deeper psychic, social, political and historical anxieties concerning `race,' cultural difference and nationality. Therefore, while Ali G may be a "celeactor" whose persona and universe are fictional creations, these creations only make sense in relation to a wider discourse of `race.' As I have argued throughout this work, Cohen's play upon discourses of `race' is decidedly ambivalent. On the one hand, his play upon person/persona and his creation of an alternate "kitsch" universe can be said to subvert `race' in that it subverts a literal and essentialist reading of both the body and language. However, on the other hand Cohen's comedy can also be said to exacerbate existing anxieties and antagonisms towards the figure of the racial Other.

`Race', Parody and Civil Society

In *Da Ali G Show,* Cohen interviews various political leaders and uses humour to mock formal political structures, presenting counter discourses that

subvert dominant ways of thinking, dominant attitudes towards social and political life, and dominant ways of conceiving of the political. Furthermore, his mockery of political figures often points to a time period in which capital P, Politics are often subverted by counter culture and popular culture. However, Cohen's use of popular hip hop slang when interviewing political leaders may also be read as mocking the assumed anti-intellectualism and apathy of modern youth culture and Black popular cultures. As I have been arguing throughout this work, the same signs that could be read as subverting social hierarchies may in fact work to reinforce them. Like much of the show, the signs are continually slipping, belying any one meaning and making all subject to ridicule. The leveling of power that occurs through comedy has the potential to challenge social hierarchies. However, the mockery of all subjects can overlook disparities of power between people, reinscribing oppression.

The ironising of civil society has its roots in a long history in which oppressed groups often mocked those in authority. Hall notes for example, that while slave owning whites often "...took inordinate amusement from the slaves efforts to imitate the manners and customs of so-called `civilised' white folks..."[648], the imitations made by Black slaves often contained its own joke. Hall draws on the work of Gates who notes that,

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[648] Gates, Henry Louis quote in Hall, Stuart. *Representation*. 244.

> ...slaves often deliberately parodied their masters' behavior by their exaggerated imitations, laughing at white folks behind their backs and 'sending them up.' The practice—called signifying—is now recognized as a well-established part of the black vernacular tradition.[649]

I believe that the tradition that Gates speaks of has been popularized through the mainstreaming of Black culture, within popular culture. Hip hop, reggae and dancehall culture for example have brought the parodying and ironising of dominant white middle class norms through word play, into the mainstream. The dissemination of Black culture through popular culture has caused urban (and increasingly suburban) youth of many races to borrow from Black vernacular as a means of mocking and dismissing authority.

The Politics of Black Popular Culture:

In his work *Small Acts: The Politics of Black Cultures,* Paul Gilroy discusses the importance of popular culture in the lives of urban Black youth in Britain. Gilroy argues that popular culture takes on special significance in the lives of Black youth who are often excluded from the world of formal politics. He argues that Black popular culture acts as a means through which disaffected youth can form their own vernacular, codes, and space in which to articulate their political and social realities. Popular culture, for many marginalized people acts

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[649] *Ibid.*

as a means through which dominant ways of speaking, seeing and knowing can be challenged.[650]

Similarly, in his work *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, Russell A Potter looks at the potential for `play' within linguistic and cultural discourses to act as a tool of resistance. Potter suggests that "...play—and not only in obvious forms, such as parody and satire—is potentially a powerful mode of resistance. Play certainly can be an idle distraction, but it can also be the mask for a potent mode of subversion."[651] Potter goes on to argue that "...hip hop culture in particular, and African American culture in general is precisely such a form."[652] He further states that,

> ...when one sees postmodern culture as marked by the `free play of signification' or a politicized struggle for meaning in the face of indeterminacy, hip hop is a paradigmatic instance, at once carnival and contest, it is a cultural crossroads through which everyone passes—whether in a Lexus with the windows rolled up and the a/c on, or in a Jeep loaded with Sneakers blaring out phat bass lines.[653]

Potter goes on to discuss the relationship between the historical oppression of Blacks and what he terms "resistance postmodernism" within Black cultural expressions like hip- hop. Potter states that,

> ...`resistance postmodernism,' as I hope to articulate in this book, is not simply a theorization of a more political postmodernist stance; it proposes(against the grain of many self-announced `resistance

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[650] Gilroy, Paul, *Small Acts* (London: Serpents Tale,1996).
[651] Potter, 2.
[652] *Ibid.*
[653] *Ibid,* 195.

> postmodernists') that the material and social forms resistance takes in specific cultural context exceed and may well be indifferent or even hostile to some of the academic formulations of postmodernism. And, in the case of black cultural histories, the reason for this hostility lies not solely or even primarily in what is too readily construed as a reactive hearkening towards a pre-modernist worldview, but in a deeply historical and resonantly informed *vernacular* articulation of *anti*-modernism.[654]

The vernacular of Ali G challenges the liberal universals of upper class white western political figures not through the language of academic postmodernism, but through a Black vernacular tradition. This tradition undercuts the status quo through understandings of the world based in hip hop culture, deriving from Black linguistic traditions that stand in opposition to dominant whiteness.

In their interviews with Ali G, upper class, white, often conservative politicians pass through the carnival of hip hop vernacular often unaware of the ways in which they are mocked by Ali's street slang.

'Race' and Uses of Black Vernacular:

It is significant however, that in Ali G's use of hip hop vernacular, both the character and Cohen are white. As has been discussed, this has caused controversy among Black spectators. As also discussed throughout this thesis, this has also raised questions concerning the economic and political underpinnings of Cohen's parodies of hip hop culture. However, Potter states that hip hop's,

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[654] *Ibid.*

> ....signifyin(g) lingo, continually shifting and expanding, serves as a kind of permeable membrane, admitting anyone willing to listen and learn; indeed some rappers such as Chuck D and Ice-T have argued that hip hop is at its most revolutionary when it enters the ears of white teenagers.[655]

Perhaps Ali G's use of Black vernacular to undercut dominant white political actors speaks to how hip hop culture and vernacular have proliferated among white youth, in ways that may, in certain instances, work to rupture whiteness.

What is key is that at times Ali G does borrow from Black vernacular in ways that subvert dominant political institutions and figures. However, at other times, his acts of signifyin(g) fail and he himself is seen to be the object of ridicule. This continual "sign-slippage," rather than making a definitive political point seems to reflect on the larger ironies of an age in which mass media has made such strange interactions between the pop and the political possible.

Firstly, I want to look at how Black vernacular can be used as a means of undercutting notions of liberalism that reinforce dominant, oppressive notions of 'race' and class. Secondly, I want to ask what the limits are in uses of this vernacular by characters like Ali G who often appropriate these forms of speech as empty signifiers, as cultural commodities that have been hollowed out of all political and historical meaning. Potter states that,

> ...European and black traditions...stand on different sides of a specific historical ideological formation, one which rationalized slavery in the name of 'higher' pursuits, and underpinned the vast ethical disaster of

[655] Potter, 16.

> raising an `Age of Reason' on the profits of an unjustifiable trilateral trade in slaves, sugar, and rum....[656]

Potter goes on to discuss the ways in which Black cultural traditions have often stood in opposition to modernity and capitalism, as slavery was founded and based in both. He states that,

> Black history carries the subversive truth that contemporary rationales for poverty, ghettoization, and trickle-down economic policy that justify the increasing wealth of a few on the backs of a growing black underclass are also part and parcel of this ongoing capitalistic hegemony, and black arts are the signal for the return of these repressed realities.[657]

In light of Potter's reading of the subversive potential of Black culture to reveal the hypocrisy of the Western, liberal capitalist state, what does it mean that increasingly, white youth are gaining their understandings of the world from Black cultural expressions like hip hop?

The Ambivalence of Appropriations:

As discussed earlier, Ali's inability to quite grasp Black culture acts as a mockery of white appropriations of Blackness. However, his use of this vernacular also acts as a means through which he challenges the rationale and worldview of dominant white speakers whom he interviews. Urban white youth who borrow syntax, speech pattern, and political understandings from African American subculture do so haphazardly and as Ali shows us, often in comic ways

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[656] Potter, 7.
[657] *Ibid.*

that only reveal their white privilege. However, in attempting to appropriate Black culture, they may in certain instances, tap into a way of thinking and speaking that places them in opposition to the grammar of liberal capitalist modernity, through which Blacks have been exploited. While Ali is laughable in his failed attempts to approximate Blackness, sometimes his use of hip hop vernacular taps into a history of Black working class resistance that undercuts the racial and class based authority of those he interviews. Gilroy states that,

> In his original incarnation as spoof ethnic TV presenter entrapping a string of guests whose desperation to be "down with the 'yoof'" was only matched by their complete ignorance of the cultural codes he was so patently misusing, Ali G offered a series of possible viewing positions. Apart from the idiotic Ali and the person being duped, there is a third position in which we, guided by the sly Ali, can move across cultural codes and between linguistic games. There, we can accept his invitation to become literate, if not exactly fluent, in an updated British culture.[658]

What Ali G might offer is insight into how the speech patterns, language and worldview of modern British youth culture is increasingly hybridized, borrowing from a range of cultural and subcultural influences. By using this language to mock heads of state, what Ali may be offering is a sly mockery of old school nationalisms.

However, it is important to point out here, that Ali G represents a middle class suburban British subject who is appropriating urban, African American youth culture. While Ali uses the language of hip hop to undercut the authority of

[658] Gilroy, Paul "Ali G and the Oscars."

political figures, his authority is also undercut by the failures of Black American subculture to correspond to British social life. As Gilroy notes,

> It is significant that the central unifying joke underpinning all Ali G.'s work is supplied by an antipathy towards the stultifying US styles and habits that have all but crushed local forms of the black vernacular in the UK and replaced them with the standardised and uniform global products of hip hop consumer culture.[659]

He further states that, "Likeable Ali shows that the globalised American thug life is ridiculously inappropriate to the life of marginal young Brits. He makes the sad commitment to ghetto fabulous tastes and behaviours appear absurd. Britain had better find another way to go."[660] While the language of African American hip hop vernacular is used to challenge hegemonic whiteness, Ali G does not offer an easy celebration of the globalization of American hip hop. Rather, he offers an ambivalent statement concerning the relevancy of white middle class politicians, and the relevancy of mass marketed hip hop to British youth.

Is You Mashed? Ali interviews Pat Buchanan

In the second season of *Da Ali G Show,* Cohen interviews American politician Pat Buchanan, while playing the character of Ali. Ali G begins the interview by talking to Buchanan about American electoral politics. He asks Buchanan if he thinks that it's problematic that Americans have to endure the candidacy of an elected official for four years. Buchanan responds by stating that,

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[659] *Ibid.*
[660] *Ibid.*

"They have to live with it for four years. Or they get their congress to throw them out" Ali responds by stating,

> But sometimes people lie to get in. Like when me went for me interview at the Staines McDonalds. Me said I'd work well hard, but the moment me got in there, me was eating like 15 McChicken sandwiches a day and selling a little bit of Mcganja on the side. And the only time they actually chucked me out was when dem found me wearing the Ronald McDonald costume, bonein' me Julie in the back.[661]

Buchanan responds by stating that, "Your organization has rules whereby they can throw you out. Similarly the United States government has rules and can throw people out."[662] Ali G mocks formal institutions of politics and political power by inserting his own knowledge of work, based in suburban youth experience into the discourse. His examples make a mockery of politics, by dirtying the often sanctimonious discourse of formal politics with everyday street vernacular. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, explicit namings of the body often work to challenge the puritanical voice of the state.

The interview continues with Cohen asking Buchanan whether he believes that religion should be taught in schools. Buchanan responds by stating, "If it is voluntary, yes. If it's mandatory, no."[663] Ali continues, "Is there a way to make the way they teach religion more interesting?" Buchanan responds, "The movie, The Passion of the Christ, I think would be a good way to teach children about

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[661] *Da Ali G Show*, Da Complete Second Season, Episode 3, "Interview with Pat Buchanan." (New York: HBO Television, 2000).
[662] *Ibid.*
[663] *Ibid.*

religion." Ali responds, "I heard that it ain't as good as Lethal Weapon Three." "No," says Buchanan, "I think it's slightly better than Lethal Weapon Three."[664] By inserting discourses of popular culture into the dialogue, Ali is able to level the relations of power between himself and Buchanan, while also mocking educational, religious and political institutions. "Ain't it basically a rip off of Gladiator?" asks Ali in relation to the Passion of the Christ. "No it's not at all, it's about the death of Jesus Christ," says Buchanan. "But it's like that kind of thing, isn't it?"[665] Popular culture offers a vehicle through with the sacred nature of certain discourses are leveled with everyday popular vernaculars, through comparison. Mass culture acts as a means through which religious figures like Christ exist on the same cultural and filmic landscape as those of Gladiator and Lethal Weapon. Similarly, the world of mass media offers the chance for comedic figures like Cohen to dialogue with political leaders like Buchanan.

The frames of reference and figures of idolatry available and desired by audiences no longer come from the worlds of formalized politics and religious institutions alone. Instead, pop culture acts as a means through which heroes, leaders, discourses and codes of behavior may come from celebrity culture and from practical forms of consciousness. With regard to Ali G, the humour lies in Cohen's ability to mock political leaders by virtue of Ali G's lack of knowledge

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[664] *Ibid.*
[665] *Ibid.*

and indifference to all that was supposedly once sacred in American life. The humour also functions by tapping into a moment in which mainstream understandings of politics, social life, and ethics are troubled by competing discourses of counter culture. For example, the skit ends with Buchanan laughing and Ali asking him, "Is you mashed? For real man, you keep giggling, did you smoke a little something before you got here?"[666] Buchanan, playing along at this point says, "Yes, okay, I did," at which point Ali says, "Respect,"[667] and reaches out to give Buchanan a pound.[668] In mainstream discourses of civility and ethics, criminality, deviance and drug use are frowned upon and pathologised. However, in Ali's world, governed by the discourse of gangsta rap, such behaviour is not only considered necessary, but is valorized. This gangsta code is used to make sense of political figures and to mock discourses of political and social morality.

In an interview on National Public Radio, Cohen commented on his skit with Buchanan. He states that he set up the interview by asking prepatory questions which constructed "Ali" as a fool. Before the interview aired, "Ali" asked Buchanan to spell out his name. When he was finished spelling out

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[666] *Ibid.*
[667] *Ibid.*
[668] See: "Fist Pound." Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pound_%28greeting%29 (accessed: November 21, 2007). A fist pound, (also fist bump, pound it, pounds, knock's, bones, the rock, respect knuckles, knucks, daps, tater, bro, or props as in proper recognition) is a type of friendly gesture similar to a hand shake or a high five. It is performed by two people tapping their fists lightly.

Buchanan, Ali said, "No I's meant, how do you spell Pat?"[669] What is important is that Cohen states in this interview that the humour of Ali's skits with politicians functions by playing up the stereotype of idiocy and deviance that politicians often have of contemporary youth.[670] Ali G's interviews can be said to work by poking fun of the ageism, classism and racism of upper class, white, politicians. [671] As I have mentioned in this work, the humour of *Da Ali G Show* can be read as revealing the inane nature of the stereotype through its hyperbolic repetition. 'Ali G' works not only to mock the stereotype of an ignorant youth, but through hyperbole, he mocks the politicians who so easily believe in this stereotype.

Parliament Posse: Performance and the circulation of meaning

The ridicule of official politics through street vernacular was apparent from the inception of *Da Ali Show*. The first guest on *Da Ali G Show* was disgraced British MP Ian Hamilton. Hamilton was embroiled in scandal after being accused of taking bribes from Mohammed Fayed, the owner of Harrod's. When he appears on the show, Cohen asks him if his "parliament posse...think of him in the same way?"[672] Following which, Ali asks Hamilton if he wants a puff of marijuana, which Hamilton accepts. The next guest to appear in the segment is

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[669] Robert Seigel, "Fooling Serious Interviewees, All for a Laugh." Interview with Sacha Baron Cohen on National Public Radio. July 23, 2004. Online edition. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3613548 (accessed: November 24, 2007).
[670] *Ibid.*
[671] *Ibid.*
[672] *Ali G, Aiii.* (London: 2 Entertain Video, 2000).

Mohommed Fayed. Cohen asks him why he does not have a British passport. Fayed responds by stating, "...because politicians have no dignity, honour, and are corrupt."[673] Ali then leads Fayed in a free-style rap. The corrupt world of official politics is made sense of through the lens of gangsta rap culture. What Cohen's humour seems to be doing is mocking politicians and party politics on the whole, through the lens of urban street vernacular. This mockery and the assertion of street culture and language also act as a means of leveling, through which politicians are seen to be not so different from the everyday thugs that Ali valorizes and emulates. In his work "Speak Whiteness: Staging `race,' performing responsibility" Adrian Kear states that performance is "...an economy in which fantasies circulate, histories exchange and ethics revaluate."[674] The space of performance, according to Kear often taps into unconscious fantasies, desires and repressions. Furthermore, the regime of `race' has particular saliency in spaces of performance and in discussions of the unconscious. Kear states that,

> ...the historical conjunction of colonial relations of power and psychoanalytic theorization of unconscious desire invests the latter with particular importance in the analysis of the psychic and social identifications produced within this racialised `regime of representation'.[675]

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[673] *Ibid.*
[674] Adrian Kear. "Speak Whiteness: Staging `race,' performing responsibility" Psychoanalysis and Performance. Ed. Patrick. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 184.
[675] *Ibid,* 192.

The site of performance throws up the ambivalence that rests at the heart of colonial interactions. On the one hand the `regime of racial representation' that Kear speaks of brings to light the social and psychic investments that are made in `race.' However, Kear also points out that performance challenges this by offering the possibility of circulating meanings, fantasies and gazes. This relates to the earlier discussion in Chapter 5 in relation to Althusser.

The scene in which racial naming takes place, on the one hand solidifies discourses of `race' through acts of naming and seeing. However these scenes also offer up the possibility of subversion as the subject who is called upon may disidentify with the names that are placed on them, or may return the gaze with which they are met.[676]

In his work *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha discusses the relationship between voyeurism, acts of looking, and the racial stereotype. He states that,

> ...the drive that represents the pleasure in `seeing', which has the look as its object of desire, is related both to the myth of origins, the primal scene, and to the problematic of fetishism and locates the surveyed object within the `imaginary' relation. Like voyeurism, surveillance must depend for its effectivity on `the active consent which is its real or mythical correlate (but always real as myth) and establishes in the scopic space the illusion of the object relation'...[677]

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[676] For a more detailed, nuanced and extremely thought provoking discussion on the politics and practices of "disidentification," see: Munot, Jose Esteban, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[677] *Ibid.*

The myth that drives the stereotype always carries the possibility of failure, as the object of the gaze could potentially look back or look away. The voyeur takes both pleasure and power in their act of looking. However, this pleasure/power turns on the myth of consent: the belief that the object of their gaze is enjoying and consenting to being held in this regime of visibility. What threatens this act of looking is the potential for the object of the gaze to meet the colonizers eye, or to look away in an act of refusal. The space of performance I believe, offers the space in which this ambivalence of power and voyeurism can be challenged.

Hip Hop and Returnin' the Gaze:

As discussed earlier in relation to hip hop culture, popular vernacular acts as a means through which those who are objectified by the gaze of dominant powers can play with the language which names them. Similarly, sites of comedic performance act as a means through which the imagined consent of the subordinate in the eyes of the dominant can be met head on, through mockery. Rather than playing the humbile, servile, ignorant youth who is in awe and afraid of the power and discourse of dominant white political actors, the space of performance offers Ali G the chance to mock official discourses of politics through street vernacular. This mocking acts not only as an individual and isolated act of defiance, but as one in which the formal rhetoric and power of politics is challenged by the vernacular of a generation who could care less.

Furthermore, the larger mockery lies in the staged event which is designed to dupe interviewees. Politicians believe that they are being asked to "educate" the youth, who are assumed to be politically apathetic and ignorant. However, the joke is on them, and they are mocked for their ageism.

Ali G works to deflate the egos of politicians by mocking their inability to keep up with changing patterns in language, style, and values among their constituents. In his essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" Frederic Jameson argues that postmodernism lends itself to pastiche. Jameson discusses the replacement of parody with pastiche in a post modern age. He states that,

> ... Modernist styles...become postmodernist codes: and that the stupendous proliferation of social codes today into professional and disciplinary jargons, but also into the badges of affirmation of ethnic, gender, race, religious, and class-fraction adhesion, is also a political phenomenon, the problem of dominant (or hegemonic) ideology of bourgeois society, the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm.[678]

The heterogeneity of speech patterns and the erosion of a traditional national voice or national culture in many ways lend itself to political irony, as the world of Politics with a capital `P' meets the world of pastiche politics. The authorial voice of English is undercut by the hybridized voices of late capitalism, which

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[678] Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" *Media and Cultural Studies Key Works.* Ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001).

borrow style, code, value and syntax from a host of sources. It is this moment of disjuncture between the world of hard politics and the world of pop politics that Ali G's satire gestures to.

Putting the `cool' in coolie: `race' and the politics of `cool'

In interviewing various noteworthy figures in political and social life, Cohen uses the disjuncture in speech pattern, attitude and information between Ali and the subject he interviews to mock the apathy of youth culture, the arcane nature of high Politics and the ironies of the moment in which we live. In their work *Cool Rules: Anatomy of An Attitude,* Dick Pountain and David Robins trace the origins of the word, concept and aura of "cool." Pountain and Robins argue that the concept of "coolness" originated with African American culture as a form of resistance to slavery and later forms of systemic and institutionalized racial violence. Pountain and Robins state that,

> ...in the days of slavery Cool was part of a `survival mentality,' a defence mechanism invented to cope with continuous exploitation, discrimination and disadvantage: it deployed ironic detachment and emotional passivity to enable its bearer to withstand the domineering orders, abuse and insults of the overseer without succumbing either to depression or to a rage that might incur flogging or even execution.[679]

The authors define `cool' as a three tiered way of being in the world that often involves a sense of ironic detachment, emotional passivity and disregard for

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[679]Dick Pountain and David Robins. *Cool Rules: Anatomy of An Attitude.* (New York: Hushion House,
2000), 147.

mainstream rules. They trace the concept of and tenants of `cool' to anti-colonial resistance among African Americans, but argue that this worldview has now become popularized among white middle class youth. Pountain and Robins state that middle class white people are adopting and appropriating the defense mechanisms of racially marginalized people due to "...profound changes to the socialization process that have taken place in Western countries as a consequence of affluence. In particular,"[680] the authors note that "...commentators have noted how the insecurity of poverty is being replaced by other causes of anxiety, stress and depression."[681] Pountain and Robins discuss the erosion of familial and communal networks among white middle class youth. They argue that youth of variant backgrounds may turn to subcultures and adopt a `cool' persona as a means of guarding against the isolation and depression brought about by the individualism and competition that drives late capitalism. Pountain and Robins state that,

> ...cool is precisely one such mechanism that people use to short-circuit maladaptive comparisons and avoid depression...By acting Cool you declare yourself to be a non-participant in the bigger race, for if you don't share `straight' society's values then you can stop comparing yourself to them. Cool cannot abolish social comparisons entirely, but it can restrict their scope to your immediate peer group.[682]

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[680] *Ibid,* 149.
[681] *Ibid.*
[682] *Ibid,* 152.

Ali G appears at a historical and social moment in which many white middle class youth are opting out of the standards of dominant whiteness and instead derive judgments from and establish norms using Black popular culture. The gap in speech, meaning and value between this generation, often termed `wiggers' and those of their parents is great. I would argue that aside from speaking, dressing, moving, and acting differently, the hip hop generation also conceives of politics differently than their parents may have.

Politricks: Ali G and the Politics of `Cool.'

In the episode "Ali and Newt Gingrich" in the first season of *Da Ali G Show*, the character of Ali interviews the leader of the House of representatives of the United States government, Newt Gingrich. The episode begins with Ali giving "shout outs," "Inglewood in the house, Compton in the house, Langley Village in the house."[683] The joke functions by exploiting the difference between the social realities of American urban ghettos from which hip hop culture emerges and the British suburbs that many youth who appropriate this culture reside in. What it further speaks to is the irony of a moment in which marginalisation has become a fashionable signifier that many claim without any experience of

[683] *Da Ali G Show. Da Complete First Season. Episode 2.* "Ali G interviews Newt Gingrich." (New York: HBO Televison, 2000)

systemic oppression. In *Cool Rules*, Pountain and Robins argue that victimhood has become popularized within our era, and that claiming oppression actually carries social value. They state that "To discover that one is a `victim' is to make oneself special, to remove oneself from the ranks of the ordinary, and that is also the prime motivation of Cool."[684] Ali G taps into a social moment in which many of the identities that emerged from 1960's social movements in North America and Europe have become popularized in commodity culture. Far from the realities of marginality, to claim difference now has a social value through a romanticized outsider status that allows privileged speakers to flirt with the titillation of Otherness. However, rather than celebrating this co-option, by hyperbolizing the gap between the performance of marginality made by Ali G and the realities of systemic oppression, Cohen gestures to the ridiculous gap between fashionable marginality and historical disenfranchisement.

The episode continues with Ali introducing the political subject matter of the programme. He states that, "...young people hear the word politics and they immediately switch off,"[685] at which point we see him standing in front of huge, metallic letters that spell out the word "Politics." "I wish I'd been told that before I got these fucking massive letters built."[686] He continues, "So to bring politics

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[684] *Ibid.*
[685] *Ibid.*
[686] *Ibid.*

into the 20th century me headed down to Washington."[687] Cohen's humour functions to mock a generation divorced from political life. However, rather than mocking the apathy of youth culture with conservative moralism, he also works to use the gap between youth culture and mainstream politics to mock the irrelevance of political figures to the masses.

From Bob Hope to Ali G: Political Comedy in Context:

When we first see Ali with Newt Gingrich, he is shown asking Gingrich to spell his name. Like the spelling out of "Buchanan's" name, this works to construct Ali as a fool. However, it is also clear that Ali is completely unaware of who Gingrich is and that Gingrich seems offended by his lack of celebrity.[688] Gingrich's authority as a political figure is undercut by Ali's lack of familiarity with him. In *Because I tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, Stephen Wagg discusses the relationship between comedy and politics in North America and Great Britain. Wagg argues that while pre-civil rights comedians like Bob Hope often used comedy to entertain military troupes and to support nationalist projects, post civil rights comedy often acted as a critique of political life. Wagg argues that comedians like Lenny Bruce, Richard Prior, Joan Rivers, and Roseanne Barr often used comedy to give voice to marginalized

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[687] *Ibid.*
[688] *Ibid.*

groups, using racial, gender, and sexual difference to undercut conservative politics. Wagg states that this comedy,

> ...exalted the politics of the personal; it undertook to tell it as if it was for the people, be they black, liberal, female or of some other minority outside the consensus of mainstream America...the new comedy tended to address audiences who ordinarily had constituted `the other' in the comedy of Bob Hope.[689]

I would argue that Ali G represents another generation of comedy which speaks to a further turn in political and social life. Post-1960's comedy came out of identity based social movements which attempted to give voice to marginalized groups that stood in opposition to the state. However, Pountain and Robins argue that commodity culture has successfully made marginality `cool', causing mainstream actors to take on marginalized voices and positions. The figure of Ali G therefore not only serves to mock political actors like Gingrich, by revealing them to be irrelevant to youth culture, but through Ali G's own bumbling persona, the emptying out of signifiers of racial and class based oppression are seen to be laughable. Gingrich is mocked for being a conservative, regressive and obtuse political figure. However, Ali G is also a mockery, as his buffoonery speaks to a generation of white middle class consumers who are attracted to the aesthetics of oppression, while having no real experience of marginality or understanding of political processes.

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[689] Stephen Wagg, *Because I tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference.* 56

In reference to contemporary comedy and political life Wagg states that "...in a political environment frequently styled as `postmodern', the comedian, now widely acknowledged, in the case of impression management, as truth-teller and iconoclast, may carry more public credibility than the politician."[690] The comedy of Ali G taps into this postmodern environment by revealing politics and political actors to be unfashionable, unfamiliar and inaccessible to contemporary youth. The icons of hip hop culture are seen to be more relevant, desirable and trusted by youth than those of mainstream politics.

The history of political humour is both long and complex. Morreall states that "Humour has been entwined with politics since ancient times, when the pharaohs in Egypt and emperors in China first appointed court jesters." [691] Drawing on more contemporary examples, he further states that "In the United States, political jokes on television are monitored by politicians to gauge the success or failure of their campaigns."[692] Morreall distinguishes between humour used by politicians and humour about politicians. He states that "...the former...is usually objectionable, while the latter is often commendable."[693] Morreall argues that politicians often use humour to dismiss or dissuade criticism,

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[690] *Ibid,* 271.
[691] Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983. 56.
[692] *Ibid.*
[693] *Ibid.*

to convince the public of their political opinions and to generate support against their political opponents. He states that

> ...humour is often used in political advertisements and speeches to block legitimate practical concerns and cognitive concerns about politicians and their policies. Its purpose is to belittle or trivialize an issue which should command our attention, so that we will not think about it and act upon it.[694]

Morreal argues that conversely, comedy about politicians often has a subversive political effect. While humour within political campaigns is used to mock public critiques, comedians often use humour to encourage these critiques. Morreall argues that,

> If humour can be misused to get voters to overlook serious problems, it can also be used to reveal those problems and trickery that covered them up. If politicians sometimes use humour in propaganda, comedians also undermine that propaganda. Speaking negatively, then, the ideal kind of humour in politics would seem to be humour that is not used as a trick, to trivialize something important, or to get people to swallow vicious beliefs and attitudes. Speaking positively, the ideal political humour would emerge as playful moments in honest discussions between people who care about one another, like the humour in conversations between friends. What we need is more of the humour court jesters offered, to benefit their monarchs and their countries.[695]

One could argue that Ali G is a modern court jester figure, poking fun at the hypocrisy and nonsensical attitudes of contemporary politicians. However, what I believe is more convincing is his use of a brand of post modern political humour

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[694] *Ibid,* 57.
[695] *Ibid,* 58.

which Morreall does not discuss. Rather than simply mocking politicians, I believe Ali G works to mock the idea and ideals of formal politics itself.

By juxtaposing the speech patterns and worldviews of modern youth culture to formal political culture, politicians are revealed to be out of date and ignorant to the workings of contemporary youth culture. Furthermore, the concept of formal politics in which one is represented and governed by national political leaders is shown to be irrelevant to modern youth who idealise the figures of global popular culture not local politicians.

For example, in his interview with British Tory MP, Sir Rhodes Bryon, Cohen draws on the slang of modern youth culture to mock `Sir Rhode' as being old fashioned, both in terms of his political beliefs, and his inability to relate to modern youth culture. Ali asks Rhodes about corporal punishment in schools. It is significant that, as Lockear and Pickering note, this is one of his "pet subjects." He asks, "Do you believe kids should get caned?"[696] Lockyear and Pickering state that "`Sir Rhode' was snared by the single literal meaning of the word caned; being ignorant of its synonymous use for getting stoned on marijuana, he agreed in earnest."[697] Ali then responded, "Wicked man, you believe kids should be caned, even in school."[698] Rhodes then agreed whole heartedly, unaware of the

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[696] Lockyear and Pickering, 186.
[697] *Ibid.*
[698] *Ibid.*

double meaning of the word caned, stating "Yes, even in school." Lockyear and Pickering state that in this instance, "Popular culture rose in splendid ascendancy over official cultures…"[699] Ali continued by asking, "Don't you think if you get caned in school you can't concentrate as well?"[700] Rhodes responded, "Well, I was caned and I've concentrated all my life."[701] Ali was then empathetic in his response, "YOU were caned! Respect, man!"[702] The interview finished with `Sir Rhode' being completely unaware of the language game that he had so clearly lost.

Lockyear and Pickering argue that this was one example of how Cohen's comedy functions through the interviewee's unawareness that in the world of Ali's double edged syntax, they only hold "…one semantic string."[703] Through a play upon language and impersonation, both of which 'Sir Rhode' was unaware it was "…as if this upright pillar of the Establishment was a lifelong participant in the drug culture he so opposes. The comic absurdity was complete."[704] The absurdity also functioned by mocking the politicians complete disengagement from the modern youth whom he misguidedly aims to regulate.

Anti-intellectualism, blackness and the reinscription of racism

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[699] *Ibid.*
[700] *Ibid.*
[701] *Ibid.*
[702] *Ibid.*
[703] *Ibid,* 187.
[704] *Ibid.*

As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, the continuous sign slippage apparent in comedy allows for a reading of Ali G, not as mocking a stereotype but as mocking those who are associated with the stereotype. While Ali G may point to the ironies of late capitalist youth culture, and may unmask politicians of their bourgeois pretensions and their belief in hyperbolic stereotypes of youth culture, he may also reinforce powerful denigrations of Blackness. One could read Ali not as a mockery of white politicians or linguistic generation gaps, but as a mockery of the assumed anti-intellectualism of Black youth culture. For example in the segment "Ali G and War" Cohen interviews General Brent Scowcraft, the American National Security Advisor between 1982-1989. There are deep ambivalences in how the humour of this skit functions:

> Ali G: When you was involved in the Vietnam war, did you ever think of changing sides?
> Scowcroft: No, never thought about changing sides
> Ali G: Would you have switched sides if them would have offered you a thousand dollars more a week?
> Scowcroft: No
> Ali G: No. A week.
> Scowcroft: No—(interrupted by Ali G)
> Ali G: No. A week. A week. Not a year. A week.
> Scowcroft: No amount of money! Would you push your mother off a cliff for a
> thousand dollars a week?
> (Ali G pauses for a few minutes, thinking)
> Ali G: No.
> Ali G: What about if they offered you like top of the range Lexus. A new one.Twenty inch rims. And like a massive necklace, made out of bling bling with your name like done out of diamonds. Bling. "General Scowcroft"(He gestures to an imaginary necklace). Massive.

Scowcroft: I would no longer be me if I did that.[705]

One could read the humour in this sequence as functioning based on the disjuncture between Ali G's individualistic and economically driven ethics and Scowcroft's rather dated, blind American patriotism. However, one could also read this skit as mocking the assumed materialism of Black youth culture.

Audiences could find humour in this skit because it allows them to release anxieties and aggressions towards the assumed greed, stupidity and apathy of hip hop culture, and by association, young Black men. As hooks notes,

> More than any other group of men in our society black males are perceived as lacking intellectual skills. Stereotyped via racism and sexism as being more body than mind, black males are far more likely to be affirmed in imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy for appearing to be dumb...In childhood it was obvious to everyone in our all black neighbourhood that the thinking black man was perceived to be a threat by the racist world...Well-educated black men have learned to act as if they know nothing in a world where a smart black man risks punishment.[706]

Given the tenacity of anti-Black racism and the ways in which the anti-intellectualism of Black men has been valorized by popular culture, Ali G may tap into these racist associations. This laughter may therefore also work to valorise a romantic version of older forms of conservative political nationalism, as

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[705] "Ali G interviews Brent Scowcraft." *Da Ali G Show. Da Complete Second Season.* Episode 2, War. (New York: HBO, 2002).
[706] Hooks, bell. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity.* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 33

compared to the assumed apolitical and individualist nature of the hip hop generation.

Furthermore, what is abstracted in Ali G's use of hip hop vernacular to critique authority figures, is the historical experience of marginalisation out of which these speech patterns and worldviews were born. While Ali improperly repeats what he has learned in commercialized hip hop, bearing a trace of the resistance to the status quo that this music contains, his repetition remains hollow. His glamourisation of "ghetto ethics" is born out of middle class consumerism. While this might be laughable, it can also work to make a mockery of the salient experiences of racism and classism that might cause certain Black subjects to deviate from spheres of formal labour and schooling. For example, in his memoir *The Ice Opinion* rapper Ice T discusses the relationship between racism, poverty and crime. He writes,

> Crime is an equal-opportunity employer. It never discriminates. Anybody can enter the field. You don't need a college education. You don't need a G.E.D. You don't have to be any special colour. You don't need white people to like you. You're self employed. As a result, criminals are very independent people. They don't like to take orders. There's no applications to fill out, no special dress codes...There's a degree of freedom in being a criminal.[707]

What Ice T's description of crime as `freedom' is informed by is the prevalence of wage slavery, racism, unemployment, and underemployment that African

[707] Ice T quoted in hooks, *We Real Cool.* 26.

American men continue to experience. Ali G's gangsta aspirations may be laughable precisely because they are not informed by this context. Yet, in offering up hip hop and gangsta culture as a figure of mockery, Cohen's humour risks minimizing the severity of oppression that this culture and these ethics are born out of.

Analysing Ali's interview with Scowcroft from the perspective of 'race,' the joke may work to tap into latent anxieties towards the imagined young Black male body, which in a racist imaginary is constructed as intellectually wanting, materialistic and apolitical. These racist stereotypes hearken back to the days of slavery when Black bodies were associated with physical labour and constructed as animalistic. Furthermore, the mockery of the anti-intellectualism that is sometimes celebrated within hip hop culture, fails to account for the systemic racism and poverty that inform these realities. Hooks notes that,

> Nowadays in the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarch culture, most boys from poor and underprivileged classes are socialized via mass media and class biased education to believe that all that is required for their survival is the ability to do physical labour. Black boys, disproportionately numbered among the poor, have been socialized to believe that physical strength and stamina are all that really matter.[708]

By offering up the stereotype of Black physicality and anti-intellectualism as a potential source of comedy, Cohen risks reinscribing this essentialist, racist trope. Furthermore, the mockery of Ali G's appropriation cannot in any way contain the

[708] Hooks, We Real Cool, 34.

alienation experienced by young Black men in America which may, in certain cases, cause physicality to be celebrated over intellect. As was discussed in the previous chapters concerning Ali G, the buffoonery of Blackface actors has historically been used to reinforce a deeply racist stereotype of Blacks as intellectually inferior and therefore unable to govern their own communities.[709] This rhetoric is still with us in the policing of urban Black communities in the West, and in the policing of Back bodies in the developing world by the neo-colonial paternalism of Western governments, NGOs and media. While Ali G may work to undercut the authority of wealthy white political figures, the ambiguities of comedic discourse also risk reinscribing these authorities. Ali G may be read as mocking the idiocy of some white middle class subjects who appropriate Blackness and the stereotype of contemporary youth culture, however he could also be read as offering an outlet in which laughter taps into deep seethed stereotypes of Blackness.

Finally, as I have discussed throughout this work the serious implications of the ironies that Cohen gestures to could potentially be lost in our laughter. If Ali G is poking fun at the consumerism and apathy of middle class youth culture, he does so in ways that offer little room for a serious consideration of the social and political implications of this. If he is mocking the antiquated and outmoded

[709] See Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft*, 1-30.

language of official state run politics and white upper class politicians, again, this mockery leaves little space for introspection. If he is mocking the stereotype that politicians have of youth culture, his mockery may only momentarily subvert this stereotype. As Cohen is actually a white, Western, Cambridge educated upper class subject and not a young, urban, hip hop youth, the stereotype may be reinscribed once laughter subsides. Finally, as with the character of Borat and its relationship to Kazakhstan, Ali G's interviews tap into a moment in which media and aesthetics increasingly define global politics. Through mockery and farce, Cohen may play with the deep ironies of the growing overlap between visual and political representation. However, again, like Borat's influence on Kazakhstan he is also exploiting the media based, sound-byte culture in which we live.

To Summarise:

In this chapter, I have argued that Ali G's interviews with major political figures offer a challenge to formal politics through hip hop vernacular. I have also discussed the ways in which Ali G serves as a statement concerning the relationship between popular and political culture. Finally, I have argued, that like the rest of Cohen's comedy, meaning is never fixed. Ali G may also be read as a modern day buffoon, who exemplifies white liberal and white supremacist readings of hip hop culture and by extension Black culture, as anti-intellectual,

materialistic and apathetic. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the meaning of Sacha Baron's Cohen's comedy is decidedly ambivalent.

Conclusion

The last laugh

Sacha Baron Cohen's *Da Ali G Show* is part of a series of complex comedic traditions that reflect upon the ambivalence and ironies of 'race.'

The character of Ali revisits histories of Blackface minstrelsy, but complicates these histories by openly mocking the figure of the minstrel. Furthermore, Ali's minstrelsy is complicated by a cultural moment in which meanings of Blackness are continuously at play between histories of empire, and the commodification of Black urban culture.

Aiii: Ali G summarised

Sacha Baron Cohen's role as a Jewish comedian revisits a long history through which Jewish entertainers often assimilated to a Black-white binary by ambivalently adopting the signifiers of Blackness. Ali's appropriations of Black popular culture can be read as being symptomatic of the complexities of the construction of Jewish men as effeminate in anti-Semitic discourse. This was a construction Jewish male actors often assuaged through the dominant masculinist stance of both Blackface and comedy[710]. Cohen's performance however, complicates the ability of Jewish entertainers to ever fully assimilate to a Black-white binary, as his authorial masculinist Whiteness is continuously mocked.

[710] I have not offered a detailed discussion of the relationship between masculinity and the comic due to confines of time and space. For further reading see Purdie, Susan. *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

However, the character of "Ali G," at least in its inception could also be read as mocking British Asian youth culture. This mockery may justifiably centre around poking fun at the sexism, heterosexism, and classism of middle class, straight, male dominated Desi subculture. However, the joke works to ignore the extent to which racism may cause young British Asian men to gravitate towards Black diasporic signs and signifiers. As an affluent white subject, Cohen's mockery of British Asians could be seen as being rooted in white privilege. Furthermore, the decision to make "Ali G" into the white "Allistair Graham" may also speak to the tenacity of 'race' and racism. The public declaration of Ali G as white, at the height of the West's "War on terror" may speak to a time of deep seethed racist paranoia in which Brown bodies are associated with terrorism.

Finally, while Cohen's comedy may point to the ironies of a moment in which Black popular culture has been commodified and sold en mass, humour may minimize the severe consequences of this cooption. The success of *Da Ali G Show* may also act as an example of this cooption. Cohen has garnered a great deal of press, fame and money for mocking appropriations of hip hop. Yet, like white record producers and musicians who appropriate Black culture, it could be argued that he has become wealthier at the expense of the much needed

acknowledgement of Black artists everywhere.[711] While it may be somewhat funny that white(and Brown) middle class youth are borrowing from working class Black vernacular, it is also rather tragic that movements based in anti-racist resistance and Black pride have been popularized in ways that often do not benefit Black communities.[712]

It's like doing it with my sister: the bad taste of Borat

The second character explored in this work was Cohen's fictionalized Kazakh reporter, Borat. Like Ali G, the Borat character is fraught with political, social and psychic ambivalence. Borat revisits histories of immigrant humour, through which new immigrants attempted to assimilate to Western culture using comedy. However, the character complicates these narratives by continuously failing to conform to dominant cultural norms. The character also speaks to changing meanings of `race' throughout North America and Europe, where cultural difference comes to mark subjects as racially other. By violating the liberal rules of speech, Borat also reveals the psychic anxieties that exist toward the bodies of assumed racial and cultural others. Finally, through a hyperbolic repetition of the `race' based stereotype, Borat can also be read as a tool that reveals the racism of those he encounters. The exposure of psychic anxieties,

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[711] For a more detailed discussion concerning the marginalisation of artists of colour see: Doy, Gen, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity And Postmodernity* (London: Tauris, 1999), hooks, bell, *Art on my mind: visual politics* (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995).
[712] See Tate, Greg. *Everything But the Burden: what white people are taking from black culture* (NewYork: Broadway Books, 2003).

aggressions, and desires towards `race' and racialised bodies on the part of white Americans, mocks Western liberal ideas of colour-blindness.

However, as discussed, the humour of Borat has shifted from the character's original appearance on the BBC to the feature length Borat film. While the original BBC sketches used the character as a tool to unmask the pretensions of upper class white, Western culture, the Borat film often works by mocking the figure of the foreigner. The fact that Cohen's comedy has helped to create an international image for the country of Kazakhstan is also both disturbing and telling. While Cohen may be ironising and playing with notions of identity, his national, racial and class based privileges cause his comedy to have serious international implications. Given the precarious position of Kazakh national identity and the tenuous political and economic position of the country, mocking this country through the character of Borat, can be read as being deeply irresponsible.

Examining how the Borat film was made and allegations concerning the exploitation of villagers in Glod, Romania, also points to the gross privileges that inform Cohen's work. These allegations speak to the limits of a cultural text to act as a form of political subversion, if it is produced through exploitative means.

The possibility that Borat could be read as a Muslim character is also dangerous given the political context in which the film is being viewed. The rise

of Islamophobia throughout the world, ongoing wars against Middle Eastern, Muslim countries and Israel's occupation of Palestine provide the global political context in which the Borat film was both made and received. These disturbing global realities threaten to offer up the character of Borat as a figure through which audiences can release anxieties and aggressions towards the foreign, immigrant Muslim male body, by mocking the assumed licentiousness and deviance of this figure. While this may not necessarily have been Cohen's primary intention, the possibility that this character offers an outlet for aggressive Islamophobia is deeply irresponsible, particularly within our current political climate.

Da Ali G Show stands both within and outside of histories of political comedy, through a constant slippage of signification and a refusal to spare anyone mockery. Ali G's hyperbolic portrayal of an ignorant hip hop loving youth could be read as mocking the ageism, classism, and racism of the political figures who take him to be authentic. However, the assumed anti-intellectualism of the hip hop generation could also be read as mocking urban Black youth culture and young, Black men.

Addressing Da Gaps: Why this matters

This thesis drew on psychoanalytic and post structuralist cultural

theory to consider the ambivalences, discordances and politics of racialised humour through the lense of *Da Ali G Show.* My work addresses gaps in scholarly writings concerning the comedy of Sacha Baron Cohen, by making questions of `race' based performativity, psychoanalysis, gender and sexuality central to my analysis. While a growing body of writing concerning *Da Ali G Show* has emerged in recent years, much of it has looked at comedy from a structuralist and semiotic perspective. Furthermore, there has been little attention paid to how gender and sexuality intersect in Cohen's comedy.[713] Finally, while Gilroy gestures to the language of psychoanalysis in his reading of Ali G, he fails to engage with psychoanalytic writing on the comic in any great detail. My work therefore adds to and challenged gaps within this body of writing.

Secondly, my work also addresses gaps in literatures pertaining to race and the comic by examining how racialised comedy functions linguistically and psychically, in ways that may speak to the ambivalence of discourses of `race.' Rather than looking at racialised comedy as being good or bad, right or wrong, I offer a more nuanced argument that examines `race' based humour as a site of ambivalence. In so doing, my work addressed questions of `race' and the comic

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[713] See Paul Gilroy. "Ali G and the Oscars" *Open Democracy* http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Film/article_459.jsp, April 4, 2004, (accessed. October 10, 2007), Howells, Richard. "Is it Because I is Black? Race, Humour and the Polysemiology of Ali G," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television.* 26: 2, Weaver, Simon. "Comprehending Ambivalence: Ali G and conceptualizations of the `other'" *Connections 4.* Online. http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sociology/connections/weaver.pdf November 1, 2004 (accessed December 7, 2006).

using contemporary post structuralist and psychoanalytic theory. While there has been writing that discusses the ironies and farcical nature of the colonial project[714], my work deals with contemporary comic production, using the insights of post colonial theory to address contemporary `race' based performance.

Thirdly, my work addresses the lack of serious attention that cultural theorists have paid to the comic, specifically comedy concerning `race.' While there have been sections of books and essays in collections that deal with `race' and the comic[715], I believe studies of `race' and popular culture have failed to look at the comic in great enough detail. Rather than looking at `race' based comedy as an incidental aspect of television or film production, my work examined humour, comedy and jokes as needing special attention apart from other forms of visual and media representation.

Finally, by using psychoanalysis and post-structuralist theories of performativity and identification, my work adds to a growing trend within contemporary social sciences and humanities scholarship to cross theoretical, disciplinary boundaries. Like the work of many contemporary scholars, my work exists at a crossroads between post colonial studies, feminist/queer theory,

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[714] See Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 84-132, Crooks Seshadri, Kalpana, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian analysis of race* (London: Routledge, 2000), 79-103.

[715] See: Malik, Sarita, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (London: Sage, 2002), 91-108. Gilroy, Paul, *Post-colonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press 2005), 121-163, Lockyear, Sharon and Michael Pickering, *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (London: Palgrave, 2005), 25-63, 180-198.

cultural studies and psychoanalysis.[716] The use of different forms of analysis and ways of making sense of the world offer a way of reading `race' as a site of constant negotiation and ambivalence. This is not to discount the continued tenacity of racism, but rather to see this tenacity as nonsensical in its inability to correspond to a static signifier or essential truth.[717] Drawing on psychoanalysis and post-structuralist feminist/queer theory is a means of making sense of the enduring presence of racism despite the always inauthentic nature of `race'.[718] Drawing on multiple theories is also a means of addressing the failures of post-colonial scholarship to fully consider issues of gender and sexuality, not only as after thoughts or footnotes, but in ways that challenge the epistemologies that this scholarship is grounded in.[719]

And the jokes keep coming: future research and the `race' based joke

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[716] Other recent works that cross disciplinary, theoretical boundaries in dealing with `race,' include: Gopinath, Gayatri, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2005), Munoz, Jose Esteban, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1999), Pellegrini, Ann. *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Gilroy, Paul, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), Gilroy, Paul, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 145.

[717] See: *Race the Floating Signifier: Featuring Stuart Hall,* Executive Producer, Director and Editor. Sut Jhally. Co Producer. Joanna Hughes (London: Media Education Foundation, 1997). See Christopher Lane, "The Psychoanalysis of Race: An Introduction" in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*. ed.
Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 1-41.

[719] See: Lewis, Reina. "Introduction" in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory.* ed. Reina Lewis (London: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 1-25.

As precarious as laughter is, as precarious as `race' is, so too is the production of academic discourse an exercise in uncertainty. There are undoubtedly a litany of mistakes, oversights, errors in judgement that might have made the reader wonder at times if I was in fact joking. Maybe at certain points, I was. However, this dissertation is only a beginning, an entry point into a larger ongoing inquiry into the ways in which `race' and racism are negotiated and produced through popular culture. While I have focused here on a discursive reading of Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy, this work is part of an emerging project which will examine the genealogy of `race' based humour, performance and popular culture in North America and the United Kingdom. Rest assured, I will amuse myself with filling in the gaps and silences of this work for some time.

A part of this ongoing work will be a greater attention to the role of the audience in making meaning out of popular `race' based texts, and specifically `race' based comedic texts. I realise that paying attention to the reception of Cohen's work by differently situated audiences could lead to valuable insights regarding the relationship between audience, identity, and text. I also realise that attention to the different national contexts in which Cohen's work is received would offer an entry point into thinking about how `race,' gender, sexuality, and class operate through competing national discourses, such as those in North

America as opposed to the United Kingdom. These are all issues that I plan to grapple with in forthcoming scholarly works.

Last Laugh: the implications, interventions, and insights of `race' based humour

Da Ali G Show is a multi layered comedic text that offers potential to *both* trouble and reinscribe essentialist discourses of `race,' gender and sexuality.

If categories of Otherness were immutable, believed and fixed we would not need to ridicule them as a means of maintaining distance and distinction. Furthermore, if the linguistic and social order through which `race' has taken shape were fixed, we would not be able to rupture this order by playing upon racial signs and signifiers in comedic ways. Similarly, if our own sense of autonomous self-hood was fixed, we would not be anxious in the face of supposed difference.

However, while the comedy of *Da Ali G Show* may work to reveal the continuous play of meaning and slippage of signs that make essentialist claims somewhat funny, laughter does little to permanently address the continued tenacity of `race' based thinking in contemporary social and political life. In drawing on psychoanalytic explanations of comedy, it becomes clear that laughter reveals our anxieties concerning the breaking of social taboos and conceals these inhibitions through the very temporary release that the joke provides.

Furthermore, as I have tried to make clear throughout this work, the meanings behind our laughter are never fixed. Working at the level of the unconscious, the origins of laughter may be unknown to even those doing the laughing. The comedic texts of Sacha Baron Cohen construct a discourse that is fraught with ambivalences concerning `race'. In these ambiguities, we may laugh at the ironies of `race' based discourse. However, we may also laugh as a means of reinforcing essentialist notions of `race' through the mockery of the imagined Other. The inability to fix meaning within comedic discourse can be subversive and can trouble the ways in which `race' based discourses are fixed onto the body. However, the inability to fix meaning can also offer the potential for racist violence to be reinscribed. We cannot know the "true" motivation behind Cohen's comedy or our reactions to it. Therefore, while I have argued that the characters of Ali G and Borat offer *the possibility* of subverting essentialist understandings of identity and bourgeois codes of civility, this possibility may not be realized. If the joke works to reveal anxieties and aggressions, it may also work to manage the anxieties of racism momentarily, leaving racist discourse in place once laughter subsides.

Laughing at *Da Ali G Show* and its subsequent spin off films may work to reinforce racism by constructing the figure of "the other" as laughable, as outside the bounds of psychic and social empathy. However, laughing at `race' may also

hold out the possibility of creating new ways of speaking about 'race' and new ways of living as racialised subjects. To 'take the joke' as one that mocks the inauthenticity of 'race,' might not mean taking on a history of racial subjugation but taking on a history in which discourses of 'race' have always been laughable.

If anything, allowing oneself to 'take the joke' opens up a discourse of 'race' and racial subjectivity, that challenges bids to autonomy which would deny the ways in which we are formed and reformed relationally through language, history and power. Judith Butler concludes her writings on hate speech with a story of a student who,

> ...reports of reading a book and thinking, I cannot ask the questions that are posed here because to ask them is to introduce doubt into my political convictions, and to introduce doubt into my political convictions could lead to the dissolution on those convictions.[720]

Similarly, I recall situations in which politics have masked laughter, in which righteous certainty has ruined great jokes. The point is not to dissolve ones commitment to progressive politics in a fit of laughter. The point is to understand that the joke and the laughter it produces exist within a complex set of comedic, linguistic, social and psychic histories, discourses, and processes that continue to function, whether we laugh or not.

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[720] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech,* 162.

Furthermore, in disallowing or censoring speech acts that cause us discomfort, we inadvertently support the existing order of difference, by virtue of our unwillingness to conceive of new ways of imagining `race'. As Butler states,

> Whether it is the censorship of particular kinds of representation or the circumscription of the domain of public discourse itself, the effort to tighten the reins on speech undercuts those political impulses to exploit speech itself for its insurrectionary effects.[721]

Da Ali G Show generates laughter by playing upon a whole host of racial signifiers and tropes, and by tapping into the psychic anxieties that are revealed when we play with these signifiers. In the world of *Da Ali G Show*, humour functions based on the continual slippage of signs that are otherwise held in place by a socio-linguistic order which invests in the sanctity of `race'.

The real joke lies in the tenacity of `race' based thinking. The real joke lies in our interpellation into a racial order that causes us to laugh with recognition at how ridiculous it is that we continue to invest in `race'. Yet, as I have tried to demonstrate, the ability for comedic discourses to actualise their potential is always undercut by the material and political realities that govern their production and reception. One of the deep ironies of contemporary operations and understandings of `race' lies in the reinscription of essentialism in the face of oppression. While `race' may be funny, nonsensical and laughable, racism is not. The ambivalence of *Da Ali G Show* therefore lies in a mockery of `race' which

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[721] *Ibid.*

may subvert the grounds upon which racism rests, and reveal the psychic anxieties that `race' based discourse generates. However, the joke can also be read as mocking the saliency of racism, and profiting off of this saliency by tapping into latent aggressions towards the body of the racial other.

The ambivalence of *Da Ali G Show*, I argue, is an ambivalence that haunts many acts of `race' based humour, art, and performance. To laugh about `race' may gesture to the instability and anxiety that haunts the racial stereotype. To perform `race' in hyperbolic and inauthentic ways may gesture to the constructed and performative nature of racial identity, thereby troubling essentialist mappings of identity onto the body. However, this performance may also be read as mocking racism, and offering an open door through which ridicule and violence toward racialised bodies can slip in. To laugh at `race' may allow for a mockery of racism and racialised Others, depending upon how one takes the joke. The ambivalence of the `race' based joke and humour on the whole lies in the lack of control that one has over how the joke will be received, and the social and psychic aggressions, anxieties and desires that the joke both manages and reveals.

Maybe a laugh is like a sigh. A form of release that connotes pleasure. We can for a moment give up the facade of polite speech and the pretense of liberal rational society. There is joy in this. Yet perhaps like sighing we are also

informed by the knowledge that the break is temporary. We laugh loudly for a moment, we sigh deeply for a moment. And then the world keeps on turning.

Yet, while our laughter is temporary, its persistence may be promising. Maybe it signals that despite our best efforts we are not so sure about ourselves and the serious world in which we live. Perhaps the possibility for humour lies in the memory of laughter. The new markings that a joke carves out on the world. Walking by a bougie[722] white man on the street dressed in FUBU attire, I can't help but laugh as I am reminded of Ali G. Thinking of my own self righteous anti-racist tirades born largely out of a middle class education, I realise that I can't always take myself so seriously either. The mark is made. Racism, colonialism and oppression are not funny. However, the investment in pure, authentic and essential racial identities is. And I can't stop laughing.

[722] 'bougie' is an abbreviation of bourgeoise that I first encountered through hip hop music and slang.

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