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Racial Victimage in Hawaii: The Role of the Comic in Reducing Violence

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While other papers on this panel discuss ways that society and government might change in order to reduce violence, my paper aims to provide some insights into a popular phenomenon which already serves to reduce violence between members of different racial groups. I propose that the comic serves in particular contexts to reduce or to obviate inter racial aggression in certain cases which jokes may even encourage inter racial solidarity. The study of racial jokes offers insights into the complexity of race relationships in Hawaii, and it provides a view quite different from the polarized views on whether Hawaii is a melting pot or a racist society—it is, of course, both. It is my sole purpose to explain this paradox by an analysis of the incidence of jokes.

The Nature of Scopogaying

Every society, every group, from a family to a nation, experiences failure. Every society has its scapegoats and shortcomings as measured against its cherished values. In Hawaii, for example, we constantly encounter failures to uphold our most cherished values. There is the sense of a group to attain its goals or to measure up to its self-image. An example of this sense is the group's culture rather than to the way the group itself is constituted. The attribution of blame for shortcoming, for failure, for scarcity, and so forth involves the creation of scapegoats by that same people or group of people that can take the blame off the rest of us so that we can continue trying to attain the good life without questioning the basic values that are necessary to our sense of coherence. There are several kinds of scapegoats. One is the tragic scapegoat. He or she is often the target of racial vilification, front and center examples periodically in our newspapers. They are given names, they are written about or mentioned on the walls of public latrines. There is the everyday carping of average persons—and I use the term "average" in the sense of personal motive, i.e. the violence is committed on a stranger. But he or she is usually a representative of a class of persons, and therefore the violence is symbolic or sneer, and at least from one point of view, sensible. But I wish to focus on the other kinds of scapegoats that are not so obvious to most of us, and which in some ways oviate the kind of aggression that ends in the tragedy of physical harm. I am talking about the comic, the one who serves as the butt of jokes and ridicule. There is a range of comic types extending from the tragic to the purely foolish. Near the tragic end of the continuum we find the pathetic scapegoat, one who takes up himself and by doing so convinces himself in the eyes of the group. Often it is a person in high position who offers to exonerate himself as a fool in order to win acceptance or to maintain the peace. I will give examples of such pathetic scapegoats later as it relates to the main focus of my paper, namely the role of the comic in Hawaii. My purpose is to discuss the comic serves to diffuse the tensions which strain relations among the various racial groupings that make up our society. However, because this is a more complex focus, I shall need to say something about the nature of those racial tensions which constrain the aloha spirit.

"...it is the human genius of laughter that turns anger into pleasure..."

Ethnic Groups and Tensions in Hawaii

There are many people who describe Hawaii as a "racist" society. Some use the term "instinctive racism" to refer to a widespread and often misused phenomenon. We are told that this term must not be applied to any other society. It is manifest in a wide range of expressions. It is expressed in jokes written on the walls of public latrines. It is expressed in the everyday carping of average persons—and I use the term "average" in the sense of personal motive, i.e. the violence is committed on a stranger. But he or she is usually a representative of a class of persons, and therefore the violence is symbolic or sneer, and at least from one point of view, sensible. But I wish to focus on the other kinds of scapegoats that are not so obvious to most of us, and which in some ways oviate the kind of aggression that ends in the tragedy of physical harm. I am talking about the comic, the one who serves as the butt of jokes and ridicule. There is a range of comic types extending from the tragic to the purely foolish. Near the tragic end of the continuum we find the pathetic scapegoat, one who takes up himself and by doing so convinces himself in the eyes of the group. Often it is a person in high position who offers to exonerate himself as a fool in order to win acceptance or to maintain the peace. I will give examples of such pathetic scapegoats later as it relates to the main focus of my paper, namely the role of the comic in Hawaii. My purpose is to discuss the comic serves to diffuse the tensions which strain relations among the various racial groupings that make up our society. However, because this is a more complex focus, I shall need to say something about the nature of those racial tensions which constrain the aloha spirit.

Jokes and Humor

Jokes are funny in so far as they combine two elements: a rationalized form of laughter that encourages people to express the incident of positive laughter that spreads the laughter and intensifies them. The process involves the combination of man's creative humor which does not necessarily go together. The unexpected metaphors in the parables and antitheses through a basic human capacity for laughter. In the process, the fundamental sense of humor, so turn turns into laughter, and to let the perception of the aloha spirit provide comic relief instead.

The Role of Ethnic Jokes: A Case Study

Nowhere is the need to work in unison and to depend on the aloha of your fellow man more crucial than in the police departments. It is relevant that these men also have a sense of humor. It is important that they understand the importance of unification. It was a student of mine, who, as a local filmmaker, depicted the lives of the police. He reported a very high incidence of inter racial jokery among the members of his station crew, all of diverse ethnic backgrounds. He described the usual pattern of harassment and jokery around the station, and much of it included the exchange of crude racist insults—what could have been derisory if the jokes were not couched in the form of jokes designed

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to release humor rather than anger—or to put it in psychological terms, to transform aggressive impulses into laughter and fellow-feeling. 

Aggression, as it actually hinges on the ability of each to respond spontaneously to the other's most visceral needs, then, transcends the limitations which social roles (especially masks) place on interaction. Response has to be based on the kind of interaction which is possible rather than on the emotional distance which racial identity imposes. The same need for human intimacy and spontaneity is manifest in the long hours which these men spend living together. Hence, joking, as an efficient means of ridiculing racial boundaries, is intense. In other words, where we find a natural tendency to interact on the basis of racial identity (i.e., racism), while at the same time, there is a compelling need to transcend it in order to survive, we will find the racial joke a most adaptive means of bridging these divides. The joke enhances the cooperative tendencies in the group. The local fire department exemplifies this point most poignantly, and I think it represents a microcosm of the larger need common in the spirit of aloha has always had survival value quite apart from its obvious moral value.

Let me summarize my argument thus far: in certain contexts such as in the local fire station (or in Hawaii in general) the racial joke serves almost to all those who presume to take a racial role. I am also saying that Aloha to the one who chooses to take race as a basis for interaction, and that we are by definition, "racist." On the other hand, the racial joke allows us to become human by poking fun at racial boundaries, i.e., by poking fun at those (fools) who presume to take racial role. The joke serves as a smokescreen to disguise the crux of my argument which I hope will make these contexts in which racial jokes serve to release humor.

Who Can Joke About Whom?

Here I will specify roughly some of the constraints that serve to dispel racial tension and promote aloha. The question here is whether the aloha spirit does not extend to the haole—except for the tourists who pay for their experience true vis-à-vis aloha, and therefore in a sense to leave behind the world of local politics, political, military, and racial domination. In the process, whole segments of the aloha culture; they must shed the attributes of their white role. One way the aloha joke is intriguing is that the joke has to do with the language, jokes, and taking the role of comic, scapegoat as a joke does. The joke then feels strongly compelled to shed their dominant racial role, therefore, the aloha joke remains itself go in a pathetic way. Steve Spence, a feature writer for the Honolulu Advertiser, described the way a white youth amused his

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Edmund F. Sebestyen

"In Hawaii, there seems to be a scale of ability to make racial jokes which has the whites in their dominant held.

The white student, as a first order of self-decorating (perhaps self-deceiving) humor and of the scale, and the Portuguese in their unstructured or linear order. The white student, as a second order, the self-revealing humorous order of the scale. In between, in order of their ability to be funny...are the Hawaiians, Filipinos, Chinese and Japanese."

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local classmates in order to survive amongst them:

A big haole guy in back (of the classroom) who has successfully avoided becoming a punching bag for tough locals by pretending to be insane (i.e., acting the role of dumb haole) is amusing the tough guys by sanding the freckles off his nose and saying that the arm will begin to bleed. (parentheses are mine)

The white lad literally removes his racial blamishes to have done some of the strained relations between himself and his local classmates. By blading he proves he is human and a fool to the aloha in the eyes of the group in a pathetically harmless way and he obviates redemption by more tragic means.

The voyage of the Hokuale's provides another dramatic touch. How a white may find acceptance by offering himself as a source of ridicule to local aloha. The voyage of the Hokuale's provides a source of local visits of the National Geographic special, the first voyage of Hokuale's provides some inkling of the racial tocrations that are writ across Hawaii at large. Even more for the fire department crew of Hokuale's were crowded and pressed together as on an open and picturesque journey of thousands of miles on the open sea. One of the most difficult tasks of keeping the native plants alive by storing them in the tiny dockhouse. To gain access to the dockhouse, he had to gain some degree of acceptance from the small group of Hawaiians who had usurped the dockhouse for their own use. According to Finney's account:

"Our keeper of plants and animals has a way with him so no one gets him. But he accepts it with good grace, and we have learned to in-ject some humor into our divided situation. (Italics are mine)"
The rule that whites are not funny has one very practical element as well: there is something that every white coming to Hawaii must learn about the behavior of the local people, a behavior that severely constrains my own discussion of joking—it is that the majority of the local people are deeply concerned with dignity in terms of the system of social roles and status that are the source of dignity, a white joke on a local group in a local situation can be very unconstrained. And if it is told in public, it can lead to serious, even tragic consequences.

Corollary 2: The proposition that whites are not funny is of course only true for the white role. As whites, however, they are seen as guest roles in Hawaii. I know of no culture on earth that lacks for jokes and humor. White Europeans derived (American) culture is packed with humor; and so is Chinese, Japanese, and others that, because of their experience of the particular social system, give them humorless roles. And this applies to all the European Portuguese—are not intrinsically more funny than whites, Chinese, or Japanese?

Rule 3: Portuguese are supposed to be funny: Individuals who identify themselves as Portuguese can tell jokes with abandon, and anyone can tell a so-called “Portuguese joke.” The jokes on Portuguese have become ubiquitous in local joke lore, and they are told with less or no cost to themselves than are any other jokes. Perhaps there is a relationship between this factor for the additional fact that the jokes themselves have almost nothing to do with Portuguese in any substantive sense—they are highly standardized moron jokes to which any social (or racial) label can be attached. This is one in which a person does things contrary to conventional sense, and the social accounts for this phenomenon in Hawaii? Why do the Portuguese joke so much? What is the source of so much generalized ridicule? Or does this have anything to do with the Portuguese the comic stereotype of Hawaii?

First I want to reemphasize the second conclusion about the lack of anything intrinsically funny or ridiculous about Portuguese people on the entire island. For the most part of Portuguese culture provides so many insights into the cosmopolitanism of Portuguese society, the jokes themselves, unlike other racial jokes, tell us nothing about Portuguese. The social roles and high prestige of all these moron jokes associated with the Portuguese label like the cosmopolitan (theoretically, the non-role) which they are associated with, are in the context of contemporary Hawaiian society. Before trying to analyze this role in contemporary jokes, it is useful to re-examine the historical shifts of the Portuguese role in Hawaii.

The Portuguese were brought, as you recall, from the Madeiras or the Azores just before the turn of the century; and as Lawrence Fuchs put it:

“The vast majority of Portuguese entered the luna class either as supervisors or as skilled and semiskilled workers. Portuguese were hired not for the same work than their Oriental counterparts, but for the work at a much higher rate. These rates were not as great as the differences that separated them from the haole.”

Fuchs goes on to point out that:

“The wage gap between haole and Portuguese was symbolic. No matter how hard the Portuguese might try... they were not usually accepted by haoles. Non-acceptance by the Hawaiians and haoles constantly forced the Portuguese to show superior to the Orientals.”

As Lunes, i.e. as implementers of the white race roles, they were seen as the “common sense” that everyone has a nice neat racial identity. As Lunes, Portuguese were more by nature, more by nature, and vis-a-vis the white settlers, while their very livelihood depended on the abuse of those (aids) workers who labored under them. The Portuguese, while directly responsible for the abuse of the racial hierarchy, were not really part of, or protected by the restrictions of the racial structures or become a group which controlled any legitimate niche in the political economy. Most importantly, they were unable to clearly define their ethnic identity to the extent they strove, failed to become, and yet, as individuals, did become white. The Portuguese thus remained in limbo, ambiguous, in between, or “outside” the structure and organization of ethnic group relations in Hawaii. Caught in between the “normal” or “common sense” social order and the structure of race relations in Hawaii, wherein the person who tries to remain indeterminate, is also by definition a “racial” or “inter-racial” or “half” person who is the paradox of being human: Our humanity, our aloha is revealed most poignantly when innocent fools are made to suffer the crucifixion or the ridicule of our fellow man.

Conclusion

In Hawaii, as in other places today in the white world, interclass joking is common. Scholars have failed to find the appropriate model to analyze it. They have offered models ranging from the most basic and limited to the more complex. I think the most appropriate model is the joke.

In Hawaii, there is a wall of public restictions on humor and culture that is almost as a legitimate basis for labeling, role taking, etc. This is called aloha. In our daily life, we continue to talk to people, to take racial roles as a “common sense” basis for social order. Where people apply labels or take roles as a result of aloha, they are also not to be seen as “racist.” The overall effect of interclass joking is to transform those who attempt to take racial roles into fools, i.e., to humiliate them. Here, it is precisely because the Portuguese are structurally and organizationally anomalous that they are assigned to the role of comic scapegoat; although other groups may be scapegoated in more specific contexts. In this case, I have identified several racial anomalies such as the “part-time” and “pro- androgynous” roles needed for not only the comic relief they may offer but for the pure humanity they represent as well. Thus, it is important to identify the irreducible fact that race is truly a joke.