

Laughing Along Racial Lines: Humour in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa's transition to a democratic state in 1994, with its liberalised free-speech policies and race-based reforms, had an immediate and transformative effect on comedy. There was a massive increase in the establishment of comedy clubs and festivals, the production of comic media-like sitcoms and films, and more recently, the expansion of new forms of online and digital humour (via YouTube channels and podcasts), as well as the racial diversification of comic talent. Amid this comic revolution, this article identifies the specific, distinctive character of post-apartheid comedy in South Africa, exploring the ways in which the content, style and delivery of humour produced by Black comics differ from those constructed by White comics. It contends that, while the former increasingly engage with issues of race, culture and politics with unprecedented candour, such taboo-breaking moratorium is antithetical to (most) contemporary White comics, whose performances—across various platforms—are marked by jocund humour and political (albeit not always socio-cultural) disavowal. Furthermore, it explores the extent to which these race-based comic trends are influenced by, respond to and negotiate both the vestiges of the past and current racial-social-political discourses. Albeit in a vastly distinct way, this article concludes that the humour produced by these comics—irreverent and subversive versus conservative and facetious—nevertheless allows them (and by extension society) to negotiate the vestiges of the past and the disquiets of the present in order to serve the overarching drive of promoting social cohesion and healing.

Keywords: comedy; humour; post-apartheid; race; South Africa

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Introduction

Comedy during apartheid was constrained by several swingeing state apparatuses that served to censor dissentient content, such as the Publications Act of 1974, which censored or banned media or artwork considered to be obscene, sacrilegious, injurious to social relations, or pejorative towards Afrikaners or the State (Hachten and Giffard 1984, 156; McMurtry 1993, 192). Relatedly, the “State of Emergency” in 1985 further allowed the government to mediate and control press coverage on anti-apartheid opinion and news (South African History Online 2015). Additionally, comedy (in its various manifestations) largely performed an explicitly ideological function by personifying the values, mores and viewpoints of the apartheid regime and Afrikanerdom (Afrikaner Nationalism). Performances were mainly presented by Whites, articulated in the Afrikaans vernacular (and to a lesser degree, English) and characterised by an idealised conservative and Calvinist worldview (Karam 1997, 1–3).¹ Comedy in its televisual and cinematic guise, in particular, played a major role in the state’s propagandistic machinery by portraying Afrikaners as wholesome, heroic and heart-warming characters (Botha 2012, 12) and negatively depicting Blacks as inept buffoons, barbaric, inferior or in servile positions (Britz 2017, 31; Karam 1997, 6–7). In addition to indoctrination, mediated comedy also largely functioned as a form of escapist pacification; that is, a means of distracting society from the brutality of the apartheid regime and the socio-political tumult of the country. Amid this repressive and exclusionary autocratic system, non-Whites were largely discounted from representation and expression within the mainstream media paradigm. Furthermore, the comedy scene was limited to the radio, a small number of performance spaces, some theatrical plays, and a few television programmes and films.

The move towards a democratic South Africa in 1994 had an immediate and transformative effect on comedy. There was a massive increase in comedic performance spaces such as comedy clubs, festivals, sitcoms, TV sketch shows, films, and more recently, the expansion of new forms of online and digital humour via YouTube channels and podcasts, as well as the racial diversification of comic talent. The dramatic reconfiguration of the social, political and ideological order in the country—from White

1 Of course, political comedy did exist, especially during the 1980s as a result of mounting resistance against the apartheid regime, the zenith of which was the violent Soweto student uprisings of 1976. Such political comedy, however, was mainly limited to the theatre. Examples include the plays of Robert Kirby and Pieter-Dirk Uys, as well as Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon’s *Woza Albert* (1981) and David Kramer and Taliep Petersen’s *District Six* (1987–1989). While there is no denying that these individuals and works functioned as a form of protest theatre, it could also be argued that their limited reach and accessibility likely negated any form of active resistance and thus rather functioned as a “safety valve” to insulate and defuse political grievances. That is, these productions were played specifically to White audiences and not in the townships where they could engender dissent; thus, inadvertently sustaining the status quo. Simultaneously, Black political stage productions were often co-opted by the state and turned into artistic commodities to promote the (false) narrative that conditions in South Africa were not truly despotic (Steadman 1985, 26).

minority to Black majority rule—also gave rise to a variety of comedic trends and discourses beyond the bounds of any singular race, ethnicity or worldview as in the apartheid past.² This article, however, restricts its focus to the exploration of the differentiation—in terms of style, approach and delivery—between the humour produced by Black comics and that constructed by their White counterparts.³ Furthermore, it pays close attention to how these race-based comic trends are influenced by, respond to and negotiate both the vestiges of the past and the current racial-social-political discourses. The texts selected for analysis are by no means representative of the entirety of comic expression vis-à-vis Black and White comedians, but are taken to be evocative exemplars of the kind of comedic fare characteristic of Black and White comics.

Laughing Black: A Politically-active Comedy Culture among Black Comics

The fast-growing comedic infrastructure in post-apartheid South Africa paved the way for an explosion of comic talent. In particular, the removal of apartheid censorship, media restrictions and racial-segregationist machinations led to a growing number of Black comics such as Tumi Morake, Loyiso Gola, David Kau, Kagiso Lediga and Trevor Noah, among others. As local entertainment manager Takunda Bimha notes: “For a long time, a large section of this population was suppressed in terms of expression, in terms of the arts ... It is awakening a sleeping giant” (Conway-Smith 2013). Indeed, following years of tyrannical marginalisation and exclusion within the realm of public discourse, these previously marginalised individuals were capitalising on their new-found political freedom by provocatively stretching the limits of what could be laughed about in the country, pushing the boundaries on contemporary and quintessentially South African issues such as apartheid, race, the AIDS epidemic, social inequality, class, politics and governance, and corruption and crime. Emblematic of this inclusive and liberal comic sensibility is *The Pure Monate Show* (Absolutely Delicious Scrumptious Show), co-created by stand-up comics Kau and Lediga. The Monty-Python-inspired sketch series first aired on local television stations in 2003 and represented a rawer, vulgar and unfiltered style of comedy like nothing previously seen in the country. For instance, one episode featured a parodic skit of the *Boeremag* (Afrikaans Force)—a small South African right-wing activist group with White separatist aims that was charged with treason in 2002—and their pathetic attempts at political destabilisation. The segment broke several taboos, not least of which was overtly referencing apartheid on television as well as displaying the former national flag

2 To be clear, political power is not conterminous with economic or social power for the majority of citizens.

3 Humour and comedy are closely related and often conflated. However, humour refers to that which is perceived as funny, while comedy denotes formalised texts or performances that are intentionally designed to provoke laughter (Palmer 1994, 3–7). Humour is thus the broad category under which all methods of “funniness” fall and comedy is a particular instantiation of that category.

in the background throughout the sketch. The show's audaciousness also extended beyond the politics of the past, with the cast parodying the cultural peculiarities of racial and tribal minorities, conversing about sex toys of various races, skewering Black soccer bosses for gangsterism and even lampooning public and iconic figures (Malan 2008). The unfettered freedom of expression explicated in the show is suggestive of where the social, cultural and political potency lies in post-apartheid South Africa. As Rian Malan noted in an article for *The Wall Street Journal*, had the comedians on the show been White, they would have been swiftly fired and the show axed (Malan 2008). However, this unprecedented candour proved to be too much for viewers still negotiating the country's transformation, leading to the show's cancellation in 2005 (Garrison 2011). This notwithstanding, the series set in motion the kind of impudent comedy that exists among Black comics in the country today.

Race, in particular, continues to be a defining characteristic of South African culture, and subsequently pulses through the post-1994 comedy circuit. Often intermingled with the perilous state of local politics, Black comedians frequently engage in incendiary jokes about the nation's different racial groups and their accompanying idiosyncrasies, prejudices and clichés, which simultaneously serve to highlight a number of other race-related and socio-political issues. For example, in his one-man show, *The Daywalker* (2009), Trevor Noah tackles racial politics in South Africa through the character of Julius Malema (then-President of the ANC Youth League)⁴:

I feel sorry for the older guys in the ANC. They're always having to put Julius back in his box. (*Mimics*) "Julius, calm down, calm down." He always says these outlandish things. Always about racism. The other day he came out and said: (*Mimics Malema*) "In fact, I'm sick and tired of all these White people in South Africa. They're racist. All of them. They must go. Ja." Then the older ANC guys came, you know, and said (*whispers*) "Julius! Julius! You can't just say that. They're the ones with money, man. Say you're sorry, say you're sorry, man." To his credit though, he apologised. He came out and said (*mimics Malema*): "OK, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. White people mustn't go. They must LEAVE!" (Noah 2009)

4 While Noah's name is sometimes oversaturated in the discussion of South African comedy, he deserves special mention for his contribution to laying the groundwork for a national comedy industry. For instance, he made headway for South African stand-up comedy in film with *The Daywalker*, which sold out large theatres (Nwadiuwe 2018). He was also the subject of David Paul Meyer's documentary *You Laugh but it's True* (2011), a Netflix special which sold out two nights at the Johannesburg Theatre—the largest debut show by a South African comedian (Reynolds 2019). What followed were several more widely popular comedy specials, including *Crazy Normal* (2011), *That's Racist* (2012) and *It's My Culture* (2013), among others. Noah then cemented his comedic work by becoming the first South African comedian to crack the US market, performing on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman* in 2012 and 2013, respectively (Mambana 2017), before ascending to the ranks of global comedy royalty in 2015 when he was anointed successor to Jon Stewart on America's highly rated and globally circulated *The Daily Show*.

Here, Noah's joke is contextually anchored in the popularly held perception of Malema as an uneducated and semi-literate buffoon, as epitomised by his inability to recognise the synonymy between "go" and "leave." Moreover, the anecdote functions as coded shorthand for the articulation of extant racial tensions and social-economic inequalities, despite the official pretext of a "rainbow nation." This latter point is made particularly clear by way of Malema being reprimanded for openly voicing his resentment towards Whites as "they" still hold economic power despite their loss of political power. Noah's joke indirectly speaks to a general near-absolute comic freedom among Black and Coloured comics regarding racialised (and thus political) discourse, who unabashedly mock along all racial lines.⁵ This licensure needs to be understood within the broader context of previously marginalised individuals transitioning to a stage of political power, in which case they are uniquely poised to broach race issues without inviting scorn, or, at the very least, rendering such sensitive subject matter (more) palatable.

This no-holds-barred style of comedy is further exemplified by Loyiso Gola in his one-man show *The Life and Times* (2011), where he similarly deploys hackneyed racial stereotypes to comment on the racially skewed socio-economic landscape in post-apartheid South Africa:

White people don't march for sh*t! You guys just send an email. (*Mimics typing*) "I am upset," enter; cc Mary. And when you do march, you march over the dumbest sh*t. (*Mimics marching*) "Don't cut the trees. Don't cut the trees! Save the panda bear!" I'll tell you now, there's no Black person in this room that will march for a f*cking panda bear. Imagine Julius [Malema] trying to mobilise the youth for a f*cking panda bear. (*Imitates Malema*) "But comrades we must be sure that we are only marching for the black part of the panda bear. The white part of the panda bear cannot be trusted." (Gola 2011)

Filled with expletives—characteristic of his performances—the joke delivers a double-edged critique of White people's misplaced activism and Malema's extreme racial politics. Referencing a history of apartheid-era riots, the joke at once alludes to the commonly held perception that Black South Africans favour strikes as a form of resistance and protest, while White South Africans shy away from such activities. The implication here is that Whites are impervious to socio-economic woes, which negates the need for such political demonstrations. Additionally, the metaphor of the panda bear, combined with Malema's reaction to the march, seemingly signals a history of ongoing reticence towards the White population, and further denotes a country still very much

5 I refer to racial discourse as political discourse in that political struggle(s) in South Africa has always played out (and continues to do so) via racial discourse. As Rogers Smith points out, race is political both in production and in consequence, to the extent that political actors and institutions define the boundaries of racial identities (in terms of expression, reflection, enactment), and the implications of these identities for social, political and economic life (charting processes of inclusion and exclusion of these identities in terms of government structures, the judicial system, education and state welfare, etc.) (Smith 2004, 45).

divided along lines of colour. The critical complexity of Gola's panda joke further demonstrates how this new form of politically active comedy is far from a simple expression of any approaching singular Black perspective. Instead, comedians like Gola (and Noah) have taken advantage of new-found freedoms to mount criticisms of a range of racial and social groups. For example, in another segment Gola parodies then-president Jacob Zuma's goodwill message during the FIFA 2010 World Cup in South Africa: (*Mimicking Zuma*) "'We would like to urge all South Africans to behave'; and people are like, no man, we're worried about you, motherf*cker. People are coming here and that guy doesn't f**k around, he will impregnate you. That guy will shake your hand, and bam, pregnant" (Gola 2011). The joke plays on Zuma's highly publicised sexual prowess and polygamous lifestyle, ranging from a legal battle in 2006 in which he was accused of rape, to scandalous extra-marital affairs, and the fact that he has four wives and over 20 children (Herskovitz 2012). In a related joke, Gola further comments on a case in which a female fan allegedly stripped naked and ran onto the pitch during an English Premier League soccer game: "That chick must never try that sh*t in a [South African] Premier Soccer League game. [Kaizer] Chiefs against [Orlando] Pirates. (*Mimics a player*) *Mbambe, mbambe, yiza naye*" (Hold her, hold her, bring her here) (Gola 2011). Both gags draw on the imaginary of the Black male as sexual predator to speak to a broader pervasive culture of gender violence in South Africa, and in doing so, capture the anarchic transgressive spirit.

Adding to the comic modes for Black creative expression—that were inconceivable during the apartheid era—has been the growing popularity of vernacular comedy in the past few years, which encompasses all comedy performed in a South African language other than English. Indeed, the country has several comedy events dedicated to native language routines, such as the *99% Zulu Comedy* show, *99% Xhosa*, *Strictly Vernac*, *Rock Your Mother Tongue* and *Kings of Vernac*. As of late, vernacular comedy also seems to be gaining commercial traction, as evidenced by Showmax's first vernacular show, *Trippin' with Skhumba*, which premiered in February 2019 and follows Skhumba Hlope as he takes to the road with some of the country's best-loved comedians to visit their hometowns. At the forefront of this new genre are Mashabela Galane and Noko Moswete, who crack jokes in Pedi, Sifiso Nene and Celeste Ntuli who perform in Zulu, and Siya Seya who delivers gags in Xhosa. Far more than simply a comedic trend, vernacular comedy is symptomatic of a larger national (and even global) project of decolonisation. Indeed, language in South Africa has historically been interwoven within the fabric of greater socio-political realities and wielded as a tool of domination, division and disenfranchisement—first by colonial powers and then by the apartheid regime. Although the country now recognises 11 official languages, in practice, English still dominates in politics, commerce, education, entertainment and sadly, also comedy. This, despite the fact that up to 80% of the population speaks an African language (or some combination of the nine indigenous ones) as their mother tongue (Prah 2018). Within this inequitable "linguistic market" (Bourdieu 1991), English is revered as a "high" language corresponding with terms like proper, educated and legitimate, while indigenous ones are conceived as "low" languages and viewed as primitive, aberrant

and unprofessional (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986, 17–18; Wolff 2017, 23). That is to say, the increasingly monolingual English reality of South African public discourse assists in reproducing race-oriented acuties of African native languages as inferior and subordinate and thus befitting of, and relegated to, the private realm of domesticity. The presence of vernacular comedy within mainstream media then belies such preconceived notions of linguistic capacities and limitations and concomitantly assists in validating and up-scaling African indigenous tongues. Furthermore, language is understood as a “carrier of culture” that extends beyond a means of communication to include social and cultural elements that play a vital role in forming subjectivity (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986, 13–15). Hence, vernacular comedy is imbued with cultural familiarity and racial particularity that offers an alternative to White Eurocentric values and belief systems. In this way, it opens up a critical space for alternative and inclusive narratives and histories that have long been ignored and denied representation and participation within the South African public imaginary. In light of the above, vernacular comedy can be conceived as an instantiation of radical emancipatory politics.

White Wit: Humour as Retribution and Reinvention among White Comics

The end of apartheid also transformed how comedy circulated in relation to the White population, in particular the Afrikaner community. Much of this took the form of retribution and denigration as with the rise of jokes that presented Afrikaners as “stupid White trash Dutchm[e]n” (a derogatory term for Afrikaners) and “unattractive bumpkin relics—dinosaurs from an unhappy past” (Seirlis 2011, 515–516).⁶ For example, satirist and playwright Pieter-Dirk Uys presented a touring cabaret show in 1997 entitled *Live from Boerassic Park*, which took aim at the political fossils of apartheid. He even curated a wittily themed satirical cement-statue garden of misbehaving politicians called *Boerassic Park* at his theatre—*Evita se Perron*—in the small Western Cape town of Darling. The implication here, in both cases, is that the monuments, statues or portraits of apartheid’s political leaders stand as anachronisms of South Africa’s socio-political past and no longer have any bearing on the nation’s present reality. Another case in point is stand-up comic John Vlismas’s joke about the *Boeremag* in his performance at the *Laugh Out Loud* comedy show in Johannesburg:

I want to ask these Boeremag people one question. There’s like 150 of them—and they want to take over the country—AGAIN. It didn’t work the first time. There are 50 million people they don’t like. Specifically, Black people. And 150 of them. They don’t do Maths in Brakpan. (Vlismas 2002)

6 It should be kept in mind, however, that the comic depiction of Afrikaners, which is at stake here, is a caricature rooted in the perceptions of the actions of a small group of politically far-right (ultra-conservative) people, and arguably has little to no validity for the much larger group of Afrikaners in the country who participate in cultural life at many levels, from business through education to entertainment.

Uys's and Vlismas's jokes, which frame Afrikaners as risible and outmoded, are by no means isolated gags, as intimated, but speak to a general national antipathy towards Afrikaners, which coincided with a widespread sense of alienation and displacement amongst the Afrikaner community. In response to such mockery and dissonant ethnic identity, a counter-discourse emerged in the form of *Zef*. Framed as a form of Afrikaner self-parody, the term denotes “a particular style of vulgar humour [that] ... involves a way of presenting a persona in a purposefully degrading way, exaggerating one's appearance and mannerisms as low class, ill-bred and boorish” (Krueger 2013, 158).⁷ Representative of this mode/variety of comedy is the touring stage production *The Most Amazing Show*, which debuted in 2000. Under the monikers Corné and Twakkie, comedians Rob van Vuuren and Louw Venter presented a parody of traditional apartheid-era Afrikanerdom by parading in giant porn-star-like moustaches, exceedingly short-shorts and Twakkie sporting a mullet, all of which are aesthetically, historically and problematically associated with the White Calvinist Afrikaans male and patriarchal authority. Their ridiculously mangled Afrikaans accents coupled with their inability to create an “amazing” show—to hilarious effect—inculcates an imagery of Afrikaners as uncouth and inept. The show garnered a cult following leading to the theatre production being turned into a successful television series in 2006. *The Most Amazing Show* has since made various brief re-appearances, as recent as 2020, at art festivals and theatres around the country and via live online streaming (Wheeler 2020).

The cinemascapes has also increasingly become a convergence point for such parodic renderings of Afrikanerdom, as well as an agency of escapism from a dramatically reorganised polity and society. Indeed, Afrikaans comedic films since 1994 have been primarily anchored in jocund and shallow humour, and characterised by their disengagement with racial, ethnic or class issues that do not fall within the rigid limits of Afrikaner nationalism (Britz 2017, 56). Such cinematic examples include slapstick-style comedies such as *Lipstiek Dipstiek* (Lipstick Dipstick 1994); *Poena is Koning* (Poena is King 2007); *Vaatjie sien sy Gat* (Vaatjie Sees his Ass 2008); *Bakgat!* (South African slang for “great” 2008); *Karate Kallie* (Karate Kallie 2009); *Stoute Boudjies* (Naughty Bottoms 2010); *Hoofmeisie* (Head Girl 2011); *Babalas* (Hangover 2013); and *Van der Merwe* (2017). These films diverge greatly from the conservatism of the erstwhile epoch through their scatological content, vulgarity, debauchery and often phallogocentric misogyny, as well as their representation of the White Afrikaner male as maladroit and fallible—similar to the imagery conjured by Van Vuuren and Venter—thus de-mythologising and disrupting the historical Afrikaner hero archetype as

7 The term is etymologically derived from the Ford Zephyr, an old-fashioned “souped up” car with flash wings stereotypically associated with low-working-class Afrikaners in the late twentieth century (Du Preez 2011, 102). As such, the epithet is comparable to the derogatory American terms “redneck” or “white trash,” epitomised by the likes of reality television shows such as *Here Comes Honey Boo*, *Duck Dynasty* and more recently, *Tiger King*.

presented in comedy films during the apartheid era.⁸ This “dumbing down” of Afrikaans comedic cinema (as well as Afrikaans comedic discourse in general), in line with the *Zef* phenomenon, could be read in several quite opposing ways. It could serve as a means of negating accountability for the past, escaping a heritage of shame and disgrace, and most importantly, (re)negotiating the traditional articulations of White Afrikaner (especially masculine) identity in the post-transitional nation (Truscott 2011). In other words, contemporary Afrikaner ethnic identity requires “rehabilitation” (Wicomb 2001) and personal and social “redefinition” (Steyn 2001, 151) in order to render Whiteness—in its Afrikaans incarnation—compatible with the post-apartheid milieu. More radically, however, this aesthetic form and parodic pattern of selfhood could also be conceived as a way of preserving, through spectacle, precisely what it negates (Dentith 2000, 37). That is, self-parody enables Afrikaners to seemingly reject their problematised past while preserving aspects of Afrikanerdom in the present, even if only as an ironic double. In this way, Afrikaner self-parody could be conceived as a form of transgression (Du Preez 2011, 106).

The above Afrikaans comedic texts and their manifestations of abject Whiteness also speak to a broader socio-political context in which generic Whiteness is conceived as a site of unredeemed racism and carries a negative historical connotation by virtue of its complicity with apartheid and “is no longer a nice word” (Wicomb 2001, 169). Relatedly, Leon de Kock (2006, 176) observes that “Whiteness ha[s] become so delegitimised ... that it ha[s] often been rendered ‘blank’”; and Julia Seirlis (2011, 517) notes that “Whiteness has in many ways been neutralised and neutered ... [and] rendered the ultimate unmarked category: dull and perhaps irrelevant.” John Vlismas (2000) gives credence to this assertion in one of his comic performances where he highlights the mundanity of Whiteness in comparison to Blackness, which is framed as more exciting and desirable:

I speak to women at gigs all the time. What is your name, Ma’am? “Nomphumelelo.” You just want to sleep with them immediately. It’s not a name. It’s a poem from the heart of Africa. Nom-phu-melelo. And they always have these mythical beautiful magical meanings. What does that mean, Nomphumelelo? [*in a low-pitched deep-toned voice*]. “It means she who waits bare-breasted at the kraal at dawn awaiting the return of her lord and master who is running across the plains barefoot chasing the wildebeest with his cultural weapon making the White settlers blush—for his solid return to come and fill her with his seed of Africa.” And that’s just her first name. You ask a White woman, What’s your name. “Jennifer [*in a high-pitched uncertain voice*].” That’s lovely. What does it mean? “I don’t know. It’s just a name.” Where does it come from? “My mom. I don’t know.” (Vlismas 2002)

8 Such films include, among others, those produced by Jamie Uys such as *Funny People* (1976), *Funny People II* (1983), *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) and *The Gods Must Be Crazy II* (1989), as well as Leon Schuster’s *You Must Be Joking!* (1986), *You Must Be Joking! Too* (1987) and *Oh Schucks ... It’s Schuster!* (1989).

In light of the above, Whites are increasingly laying claim to being deprived of a legitimate space from where to voice their opinions (Scott 2012, 746), or being stigmatised as racist (Ballantine 2004, 122). Black comedian Siv Ngesi acknowledges the difficulties White South African comedians face in navigating and negotiating race issues: “Me being Black does help me, but White people can tell the same jokes—but they have to tread lightly. By tread lightly I mean they must show a certain level of respect and must tell the jokes not in an aggressive, angry way” (Taylor 2013). This might account for political disengagement among White comics in general, whose humour is mostly characterised as light-hearted, quirky, “innocent” and aimed at sheer entertainment. Such humour is not restricted to television or film either, but extends to the customarily seditious realm of stand-up as well. This style of humour manifests itself discernibly in the performance of stand-up comic Chris Forrest in his one-man show, aptly titled *Chris Forrest—He’s a Really Nice Guy* (Forrest 2008):

It is good to be here tonight. I really do mean that ... um ... because I have just gone through a, a very difficult time in my life ... I, I was addicted to soap, but, but ... I’m clean now ... So, so, I was leaving [Secunda] ... and, um, and, because I’m a comedian got pulled over by a speed cop. He said to me, “You were doing 100km/hr.” I said, “Kak bru [nonsense brother], I’ve only be driving for five minutes.” He said to me, “Can you identify yourself, please?” So, I looked in the rear-view mirror and said, “Yes, it’s definitely me.” Then he tried to use the old speed cop classic. He said to me, “Were you in a hurry to go somewhere?” I said, “Well if you must know, I was on my way to the traffic officers’ ball.” He looked at me, he said, “traffic officers don’t have balls” [*long sigh*]. Anyway, that, that was wrong of me, you know, we shouldn’t be taking the piss out of those less mentally fortunate than us. And, and also, they do a job in this country because crime’s a problem, you know. You know how bad crime is ... when you pull into a police station and there’s a big sign up that says, “criminals beware. This police station is guarded by armed response.” (Forrest 2008)

Here, Forrest delivers a succession of thematically unrelated jokes, shifting from soap, to a speed cop, to a police station. His material is far from political or real-life situations, but rather he amuses his audience by presenting ridiculous unreal stories as his own experience. Significantly, Forrest crafts his stage persona as an awkward, nebbish dork with oversized glasses dressed in a suit and tie. This character is undeniably passive, not only in terms of dress and content, but also in terms of disposition and delivery. For instance, he keeps his facial expressions and body language to a minimum, often keeping his eyes lowered to the floor. Moreover, his performance is characterised by his distinctly lethargic voice and slow, apathetic, monotone and deadpan delivery. A key strategy of Forrest’s delivery is also his timing: his comedy is punctuated with long-drawn-out pauses in order to generate expectation and then surprise with the punchline of his jokes. He also relies heavily on punning, such being the case with the word “balls” to denote both a formal dance party *and* testicles. This linguistic ambiguity allows him to take a swipe at law enforcement by stating that “traffic officers don’t have balls,” suggesting they are cowards. This assertion is reinforced by Forrest’s follow-up joke about police stations having to be guarded by armed response. While such mockery

could be construed as aggressive towards this cohort, in that he frames them as incompetent, his overall disposition, delivery and use of figurative language negate such belligerence, and thus his humour is undeniably that of a blithe nature. It could be argued that Forrest's persona (like that of most of his fellow White comics who similarly embody light-hearted and apolitical humour such as Bevan Cullinan, Anne Hirsh and Julia Anastasopoulos) fulfils a self-defensive function, whereby Whiteness is presented as anodyne and harmless as a means to efface, or at least distemper, the stigma of apartheid-era White brutality. At the same time, the expression of Whiteness as insipid, lacklustre and bumbling could constitute a deliberate strategy for coping with a loss of agency and undertaking to establish a place/space of belonging in the new dispensation (Seirlis 2011, 517).

The exception to this conjecture would be John Vlismas (as evidenced by his above excerpt), Nik Rabinowitz, Daniel Friedman (known on stage as Deep Fried Man) and Conrad Koch. For instance, Vlismas's comedy is utterly irreverent, politically incorrect, sexually explicit and replete with expletives. Rabinowitz engages with politics, race and culture, but with a twist of "gentle" satire, undeniably enabled by his linguistic virtuosity (he is fluent in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa), which allows him to navigate these sensitive topics and engender a sense of relatability without inciting scorn. Friedman combines music with dry and quirky comedy to produce wildly popular satirical songs about national politics and cultures, in particular White South Africans' fears of White genocide. However, these three comedians are all Jewish, which offers a marginalised dimension to their White identity that is integral to this mode of critique. Furthermore, Koch voices his polemical views behind the guise of a satirical, racially ambiguous brown puppet—Chester Missing—which allows him to "deal with race and current affairs in a more politically conscious, but accessible way" (IOL 2014).

In addition to the legacy of apartheid, White comics' approach to comedy is undeniably shaped by broader contemporary manifestations of racialised discourses, like the recent nation-wide #FeesMustFall student movement in 2015/2016, aimed at deconstructing institutional racism at South Africa's universities in terms of decolonising the educational system and addressing racial and gender inequalities regarding staff composition. One can also not overlook the more global Black Lives Matter movement—a global, decentralised socio-political campaign protesting against police brutality and racially-motivated violence against Black people—as well as the rise of "woke culture" and "cancel culture."⁹ The suggestive limitations for socially, economically and politically dominant groups begot by such movements would explain why a number of Leon Schuster's films—dating as far back as 1986—were removed

9 The former denotes a sensibility to racial, social or gender discrimination and injustice (Gdalan 2020, 20), while the latter can be defined broadly as attempts to ostracise someone or something for violating social norms, which are often accompanied by boycotts and opprobrium against the dissenter (Pilon 2020, 8).

from the Showmax streaming platform in 2020 on grounds of their racially-insensitive use of blackface and negative comic portrayal of Black people (Richardson 2020).

Conclusion

It must be acknowledged that many comedic forms, works and individuals have been omitted from this article due to space constraints. Nevertheless, the material addressed here does contribute to a richer understanding of South Africa's post-apartheid humour traditions. In particular, it draws attention to how humour in this era is profoundly inflected and complicated by both past and present racial-political discourses. That is, the distinct rhetorical choices and aesthetic practices among Black and White comics are attributable to a paradigmatic shift in the national socio-political landscape or dimensions of power from White minority to Black majority rule. While Black comics increasingly engage with pertinent issues of race, culture and politics, and with unprecedented candour, such taboo-breaking moratorium is antithetical to (most) contemporary White comics, whose performances are more readily marked by jocund humour and political (albeit not always socio-cultural) disavowal. In the case of the former, comedy is seemingly enacted as a form of anarchic critique and social commentary against discriminatory and unjust practices (both past and present) following years of silence and oppression, as well as an instrument for the healing of historical traumas. To serve these purposes, it is boisterous, irreverent and confrontational, and no race or personage is off limits.

On the other end of the spectrum, the humour at play among White comics is redolent of a very different set of socio-political assumptions and taboos as a result of apartheid association and all its depredations, whereby White voices of dissent are increasingly (and almost automatically) labelled as racist and counter-revolutionary. Their humour is at once facetious and blithe, conceivably as a means of assuaging their loss of political power, transforming their identity-positions in order to recuperate their compromised social positions and, with specific reference to Afrikaners, circumventing the stigma of Afrikanerness and facilitating the integration of expressions of this ethnic identity into the ethos of post-apartheid multiculturalism. It could be added that self-parodic reimagining of Afrikanerdom is a means of effectively reinvigorating Afrikanerness in the public imaginary, but in a manner that supposedly renders its re-emergence beyond reproach. That is, such humour offers a functional, self-reflexive way of asserting Afrikaner identity without essentially faltering towards inferential racism or fatalism.

Albeit in vastly distinct ways, this article concludes that the humour produced by both Black and White comics serves as a means to negotiate and process the vestiges of the past, and to respond to the disquiets of the current moment in a socially acceptable manner. In this way, their humour is indubitably oriented to cultivating national healing and promoting social cohesion in contemporary South African society.

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