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Michael L. Rosino

Humanity & Society 2014 38: 480

DOI: 10.1177/0160597614554060

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Podcast Review

Humanity & Society
2014, Vol. 38(4) 480-482
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Yo, Is This Racist? Racial Discourse and Comedic Articulations of Systemic Racism. Accessed July 12, 2014. (<http://www.earwolf.com/show/yo-is-this-racist/>)

Reviewed by: Michael L. Rosino, *Department of Sociology, University of Connecticut, CT, USA*
DOI: 10.1177/0160597614554060

Today, charges of “racism”—or the use of the label “racist”—carry an extremely negative connotation and serve as perhaps the ultimate rhetorical weapon in public discourse on racial issues.

Doane (2006:255)

Yo, Is This Racist? is a popular comedy podcast hosted by self-proclaimed “race obsessed” comedy writer Andrew Ti. It has been profiled by mainstream news outlets including National Public Radio (NPR 2013) and *The Huffington Post* (Miller 2013). The podcast is based on Ti’s successful tumblr page (yoisthisracist.com) in which he answers queries about the relative racism of various situations, events, and people. Each episode features a prerecorded race-related question from a caller which Ti and a guest, generally a comedian or entertainer, discuss in an irreverent, profanity laced, and comedic manner and ultimately attempt to address the podcast’s titular question. In this media review, I analyze the content and premise of *Yo, Is This Racist?* and address major sociological concerns that emerge from its existence and popularity.

The discussions that take place on the podcast constitute a prime example of “racial discourse.” According to Doane (2006:425), racial discourse is “the collective text and talk of society with respect to issues of race.” The most prominent modes of racial discourse include, most commonly, “color-blind” discourse (see Bonilla-Silva 2010) which ignores, minimizes, or justifies the persistence of structural racism and racial inequality and, less commonly, “systemic racism” discourse (see Feagin 2006) which acknowledges that white racial domination is fundamentally embedded in society and its institutions (Doane 2006). Using this framework, I examine the podcast’s content including the racial discourses of Ti and the show’s guests utilizing examples from specific episodes and discuss the comedic approach of the podcast as a potential mechanism for influencing public discussions of race and racism.

The label of “racist” or “racism” holds vast discursive power in the post–civil rights color-blind era and thus a touchstone of racial discourses is not only racism’s existence and prevalence but what can appropriately be labeled as racist (Doane 2006). Ti’s criteria for labeling phenomena as racist is to “just go against society” noting that “if our racist ass society thinks something is okay then it probably isn’t” and that he is “always coming down hard on the side of ‘everything’s racist’.” In the racial discourses enacted through his responses to callers’ questions that range from dealing with sociopolitical issues such as affirmative action to media, and interpersonal issues, he oscillates between articulating racism as a social and personal problem. However, unlike the “anyone can be racist” trope of color-blind discourse (Doane 2006), Ti remains cognizant of a power-reflexive conception of racism.

As educators in sociology and other disciplines dealing with race routinely experience in the classroom, candid discussions about racism potentiate uncomfortable moments and can elicit quasi-racist statements. While the show’s guests generally hold antiracist views if not a fully formed awareness of systemic racism, a curious conversational dynamic emerges in several episodes in which guests enact color-blind racial discourses or trivialize racism. In episode 3, guest Howard Kremer reduces racism to “a negative attitude or bias” through a slew of jokes such as “... you’re racist against promos.” In episode 437, while discussing interracial dating, Ti references white and male privilege by arguing that white men fetishizing Asian women can be racially problematic. His guest, Eugene Cordero, takes a more color-blind stance by implying that any criticism of interracial relationships is inherently racist. While such issues are subtle, despite a willingness to critique callers, Ti’s generally nonconfrontational approach with guests at times leads to somewhat awkward moments of misunderstanding or equivocation.

Racial discourses are not just ways of talking but mechanisms for asserting racial politics that vary in their relative influence (Doane 2006). It is therefore pertinent to explore how effectively comedy can articulate progressive racial politics. Though many comedians discuss racism, mainstream comedy arguably lends itself to color-blind discourses not only in attempts at mass appeal but in that it often deals with stereotypes and anecdotes (see Pérez 2013) including portraying racists as not only overt but stereotypical (i.e., old, southern, Klan members, etc.).¹ In contrast, *Yo, Is This Racist?* finds its best comedic moments in unearthing covert racism and acknowledging its ubiquity in contemporary society. Ti not only lampoons racists but also crafts astute observations of racism in domains such as everyday life and mass media. In one episode, he realizes that science fiction movies about robot servants (e.g., *Bicentennial Man*) are actually whitewashed slavery narratives which imply that people of color are not fully human. In another, he responds to a caller’s claim that the terms “race” and “racism” themselves are problematic and inaccurate by joking that “[only] white dudes have time to think about hypotheticals and make the issue [of racism] abstract.”

Despite moments of color-blind discourse and epistemological uncertainty, the podcast admirably endeavors to provide a forum for antiracist activism through

comedy. The mere act of discussing the ubiquity and persistence of racism and the necessity of racial justice on a sizable media platform such as comedy podcasting in an ostensibly “postracial” society could positively impact public discussions about race by producing and disseminating a humorous and potentially disarming critique of color-blind ideology and articulation of systemic racism.

Note

1. Counterexamples include Kumail Nanjiani, Hari Kondabolu, and Aamer Rahman.

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