The 'Other' Laughs Back: Humour and Resistance in Anti-racist Comedy

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ABSTRACT
This article outlines the 'reverse discourses' of black, African-American and Afro-Caribbean comedians in the UK and USA. These reverse discourses appear in comic acts that employ the sign-systems of embodied and cultural racism but develop, or seek to develop, a reverse semantic effect. I argue the humour of reverse discourse is significant in relation to racism because it forms a type of resistance that can, first, act rhetorically against racist meaning and so attack racist truth claims and points of ambivalence. Second, and connected to this, it can rhetorically resolve the ambiguity of the reverse discourse itself. Alongside this, and paradoxically, reverse discourses also contain a polysemic element that can, at times, reproduce racism. The article seeks to develop a means of analysing the relationship between racist and non-racist meaning in such comedic performance.

KEY WORDS
ambivalence / comedy / humour / reverse discourse / rhetoric

Introduction
The article offers a basic typology of black, African-American and Afro-Caribbean comedy as a form of reverse discourse. This typology is constructed by showing some key rhetorical devices through which racial stereotypes are employed and attacked in comedy, and the potential influence that particular reverse discourses might have on both the ambivalences of racism and the ambivalences of anti-racism.

The article defines 'reverse discourse', before connecting the definition with the existing literature that theorizes humour as an expression of resistance or as a counter discourse. I outline the reverse discourses produced by black comedians, before giving an analysis of the use of 'nigga', a derivative of the racist epithet 'nigger', in the reversal of embodied racism. Overall, it is noted that the most successful responses to racism come from American rather than British comedians, and the key differences are outlined.

Reversal and Resistance: An Effective Counterstrategy?
Reverse humour is principally a discourse or an element of a discourse whose etymology can be traced, often in a quite evident manner, to an earlier discourse that uses identical signs but which employs these signs for a reverse semantic effect. It is a discourse that is produced, situated and directed in clear opposition to the racist meaning of the earlier discourse.

This reverse semantic focus or change of 'direction' is created by a change in the social dynamics of the speaker, and the audience or reader, which amounts to a change of context. The article discusses humour that is ostensibly comparable to racist humour, but differs, primarily, because it is the 'other' of the earlier discourse who articulates it, inflects meaning, and is often the preferred reader of the text. One consequence of this contextual shift is that debates are often provoked over the denotative meaning of the text vis-a-vis its racist connotations.

This is because, while in any linguistic utterance the preferred meaning of the speaker cannot be guaranteed, in a reverse discourse the antagonism between the potential readings often increases its polysemic potential. Such interactions or discursive confrontations may not produce a 'winner' or be 'successful', and polysemic expression may form the outcome of the utterance, thus leading to the simultaneous existence of the earlier and reversed meaning from a single utterance. 'Success' in this humour (which is unpacked later in the article) refers not just to the generation of laughter but also, on the one hand, to the perceived impact on anti-racist discourse vis-a-vis intentionality, and on the other hand, to any connotations provoked vis-a-vis racist ideology.

The problem of polysemic meaning is confronted in some studies although most do not evaluate the racist potential of reverse discourse. Berger (1998) suggests of this type of ethnic comedy that 'the situation is always perilous, for the comedians always face the risk of being thought of as ashamed of their racial or ethnic identity' (1998: 70). Berger's analysis does not develop a description of the potential effects of the humour, so while he may articulate one concern that the comedian may have, a consideration of the way in which the comedian might support various racist meanings is missing. Malik (2002) provides an alternative approach to the analysis of reversed ethnic comedy and both acknowledges and questions the use of race and ethnic stereotypes in humour. She articulates the dilemma in relation to black clown stereotypes:

> The central question has always been one of whether images of
> Blackness in television comedy 'play on' or 'play off' the long-
> established Black clown stereotype, and whether we are being invited to
> laugh *with* or *at* the Black comic entertainer. (2002: 92, original
> emphasis)

While Malik does explain this as a problem with multi-faceted considerations, she does not undertake any mapping of meaning or begin to elicit the presence of racism in polysemic discourse. By focusing on what we are being invited to laugh at, Malik points towards the preferred meaning of the text as central for identifying a particular instance of racist meaning. This should not be the focus of a consideration of meaning in a reverse discourse. Malik's articulation of a dichotomy between the direction of laughter as one 'with' or 'at' the 'other' is false – because it does not prioritize the polysemic nature of these discourses – and can be reframed. Instead, reverse comedy should be approached by arguing that while we may see the presentation of the reversed voice of the 'other' as the preferred meaning, there is a prior reliance on the sign-systems of earlier racism. These earlier meanings have the potential to re-emerge, gain purchase and act rhetorically. Any evaluation of a reverse discourse should, therefore, be rephrased as a consideration of how the images in humour both *simultaneously* 'play on' and 'play off' the long-established stereotypes. We should begin with an acceptance of the polysemic structure of the discourse and remove any overemphasis on the intentionality of the speaker, thus beginning from the position of the discourse as having a simultaneous, and paradoxical, racist and anti-racist potential.

Hewitt (1986) provides a nuanced description of the complexities of reversal processes with examples of racial stereotypes in adolescent humour. These inter-racial friendships were replete with 'racist' humour, which formed a ritual for dealing with

racist ideology in society (p. 236) and 'transformed [racism] into a plaything, in an attempt to acknowledge its social presence while rendering it meaningless' (p. 237). The polysemicity of this humour represents its transformation into 'commonsense' anti-racist critique. Back (1996) details similar interactions between adolescents that form a 'micro-critique' of racism that reverses meaning (p. 178). He explains how 'on the one side of this line is the meaning that the word … stands for in wider usage, on the other is a meaningless denotation guaranteed in play' (p. 74). It is worth noting that media comedy might be more prone to multiple meanings than micro instances, and in the examples that follow I give analysis of why certain reversals might be more 'successful' than others. Before that though, it is necessary to give a clear definition of comic meaning.

In defining this form of comic meaning, it is important to emphasize that the multiple meanings generated by the reverse comic discourse represent forms of sign-slippage via appropriation. Preceding this, sign-slippage as incongruity is a necessary constituent in all humour, which is structurally similar to metaphor and other rhetorical devices (Eco, 1986: 272; Dorfles, in Attardo, 1994: 176). Bateson (1972) describes the linguistic movement in play or parody as one that creates meta-communication. This is synonymous with non-literal meaning. Meta-communication represents a metaphorical frame where a denotive meaning can be reversed or changed. Fry describes this as essential for humour – he argues that '[i]nescapably the punch line combines communication and meta-communication' (Fry, 1963: 158, in Berger, 1998: 5). Through textual analysis, meta-communication can be shown to contain a wide range of rhetorical devices that structure the humorous expression. I use Berger's list of comic rhetorical devices (see Appendix one) to describe the tropes that structure particular jokes, or the form of meta-communication that the jokes develop.

In a reverse comic discourse a further semantic layer is added to the basic rhetorical structure of humour. While racist sign-systems can be reversed in serious communication and this forms appropriation, the placing of reversal in a comic incongruity increases the structural potential for generating semantic movement. The additional layering complicates the interaction between anti-racist meaning, racist meaning and the rhetorical effect of humour.

Humour as Resistance
The idea that humour and mockery can form resistance is a popular theme in humour studies. Early superiority theorists acknowledged it and sought to control the subversive potential of ridicule and mockery when it was directed at those in power. A notable example of the theorization of humour as resistance appears in Bakhtin's description of the carnival culture of the Middle Ages. Gurevich argues that Bakhtin 'stressed that at the heart of carnival was the idea of overturning reality, the tradition of turning the established social and religious order upside down' (Gurevich, 1997: 57). Contemporary studies provide examples of humour acting as a form of resistance in numerous situations (e.g. Benton, 1988; Dundes and Hauschild, 1988; Linstead, 1988; Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995). An illuminating example appears in Bryant (2006), who describes how humour was used as a form of resistance by Czech nationals under Nazi occupation (see Stokker, 2001, for similar examples in Norway). Importantly, and although only implicitly highlighted by Bryant, a part of the function of this resistance humour was the resolution of an ambivalence, through the

presentation of the resistance movement as unambiguously united. This example is worth examining in more detail.

Bryant describes jokes as an ideal form of symbolic resistance because, '[o]vert, easily translated political statements could lead to trouble, but jokes were too nebulous, too slippery to get one arrested. Jokes, with their ironic tones and ambiguous messages, flew underneath the radar of the Nazi authorities' (2006: 140). He also describes the existence of ambivalence in the social situation where resistance humour emerged. In Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, 'ambiguity and uncertainty… constituted the essence of everyday life for most Protectorate inhabitants' (p. 136). He goes on: 'Rather than clearly staking out a Czech or anti-Reich position, Protectorate inhabitants were often befuddled by the greys' (p. 149). Existence in Nazi-held Czechoslovakia was, therefore, not constituted by an unambivalent, unchanging resistance to Nazi occupation. Bryant theorizes the function of resistance joke telling as a 'safety valve', or 'a harmless vent that allowed Czechs to continue working in factories while maintaining a vague sense of patriotism and integrity' (p. 148). He explains that the '[j]okes were also a way of coping, staving off despair and attempting to come to terms with a world that lacked order and clarity' (p. 149). His comments suggest that a significant connection existed between the jokes acting as a safety valve and the ambivalence or lack of order in the society in which they were told.

Bauman (1991) describes order-building as the major concern of modernity, and order-building discourse as its product. I propose that joking is one way of resolving the semantic side-effect of order-building, which is, for Bauman, the creation of ambivalence (Weaver, 2007). Jokes require ambiguity or incongruity as content, and, as a rhetorical device that is similar to metaphor, have the inbuilt ability to have an impact on truth perceptions (and the perception of ambivalence), all paradoxically in a non-serious discursive realm. Hewitt (1986) and Back's (1996) individual discussions of adolescent anti-racist humour fit this argument. The humour of inter-racial friendships can be seen to mediate the ambiguity of the discourses of friendship and racist ideology. Tropes are employed here to manipulate meaning and render racist ideology meaningless (1996: 74).

Returning to Bryant, in Nazi-held Czechoslovakia a connection existed between the emergence of the humour and the ambivalence of the social situation for the Protectorate inhabitants, and humour helped to resolve this ambivalence. Evidence of this is strengthened because Bryant argues that the jokes were often transmitted from Czech resistance fighters to the government in exile in London, where the presentation of a particular unambiguous discourse of resistance would have been preferable. Although Bryant does not make the specific connection between the emergence of the resistance jokes and the ambiguity and angst that he describes in the social situation, this ambiguity would, no doubt, have proved a hindrance for the presentational aims of the resistance movement.

The Reverse Discourse and Resistance of Black Comics
This section begins with an outline of the historical scope of black performance that is included in the category of reverse comic performance. Reverse discourse constitutes a type of performance whose appearance cannot be simplistically ascribed to a particular social situation or historical period; rather, it is both as old as black

performance and the race stereotypes that it works against. Because of this, discourses of reversal are not specific to post-colonial societies (cf. Malik, 2002).

Cantwell (1992) outlines two tropes that dominated African-American minstrel performance and encouraged an explosion of stereotypes through humour (p. 271). Black performers would, first, through the trope of hyperbole, 'parody the *parody itself* ... and rise above the stereotype' (1992, original emphasis). Sotiropoulos adds:

> Black entertainers consciously used racist stereotypes in their performances in part to distance themselves from these images … they were *performing* these roles, not embracing them as representative behaviour. (2006: 9, original emphasis)

Second, through burlesque (Cantwell, 1992: 270), performers would juxtapose opposites, which included the opposite of 'negritude', and thus the potential for the reversal of such racism. For example, early 20th-century black resistance appeared in the work of minstrel comedians Bert Williams and Ernest Hogan. These performers 'celebrated black communities, denounced Jim Crow, and critiqued black elite pretension – all behind the minstrel mask' (Sotiropoulos, 2006: 4). Paradoxically, their acts also perpetuated popular racist stereotypes of black people, which had to be a part of the content for them to be allowed to perform at all. This polysemicity was noted:

> … white critics were particularly attentive to moments when black audiences in the balcony laughed but whites remained silent. These moments made all too clear that black performers had told jokes that went literally and figuratively over the heads of their white audiences. (2006: 6)

Williams and Hogan actively played up to race stereotypes for the white members of the audience, while offering alternative meanings for the segregated black audience confined to the balcony above them. Importantly, as long as the white audience kept on laughing at the presentation of basic stereotypes, the performance, which contained resistance, would also have created a monosemic racist laugh, although we should not underplay the extent to which the white audience may have appreciated the polysemic aspects of the performance as well.

There are many examples in turn of the century black US entertainment. Billy Kersands' blackface song *Old Aunt Jemima*, whose protagonist subsequently became the stereotyped face of a flour company, was originally intended to work against stereotype, not create one (Sotiropoulos, 2006: 22). In *Bandana Land*, Williams and Walker 'addressed segregated public space, white racist stereotyping, and African American exploitation of stereotypes for economic gain – themes that went unmentioned in the white reviews' (p. 66). Billy Johnson's song *No Coons Allowed* followed a favoured style of black songwriters who 'addressed African American audiences with the verse and white publishers and audiences with the chorus' (p. 95). These performers both critiqued and conformed to stereotypes and thus appealed to white and black audiences. Later 20th-century black and Jewish performance would continue this. While beyond the scope of this article, Lenny Bruce's reversal of 'nigger', Woody Allen and Rodney Dangerfield on anti-Semitism, Mel Brooks on

fascism and racism, and Flip Wilson's carnivalization of race stereotypes, all deserve analysis as reverse discourse.

Black Responses to Embodied Racism
Embodied racism is the term I use to describe the contemporary remnants of biological racism (see St Louis, 2003: 76, for a similar use of the term). An example of a typically modern and ambivalent discourse, it can be defined as racism that focuses on parts of the body but does not necessarily reproduce the discourses of biological racism in their totality or severity. In current sociology, embodied racism receives little attention, in favour of an emphasis on cultural racism as the dominant post-colonial form. This under-emphasis has led to an analytical blind spot that, in many cases, has failed to describe racism as not just the interconnection of embodied and cultural racism, but as an internally muddled and erratic set of ideas and practices. The separation of embodied and cultural racism in this article aims to highlight embodied racism and to show its connection to and contextual overlap with cultural racism, rather than to exaggerate their distinctiveness or downplay the impact of one or the other racist form. Thus the dichotomy is used here to flag up embodied racism and *could* be open to more complex readings.

Two examples of reversed embodied racism in humour are examined. The first is a reversal of the savagery/civilization dichotomy often constructed in embodied racism. This reversal was epitomized by the hugely influential African-American comedian, the late Richard Pryor. The second is a reversal of race sex stereotypes that also connect with this dichotomy as a specific subsection. This example is highlighted in the comedy of Reginald D. Hunter, a US-born comedian who performs stand-up in the UK. These examples are shown to have varying levels of success as forms of resistance and reversal, principally because of their complexity.

Pryor's critical comments on both US racial and cultural issues lead many to cite him as one of the most influential black performers of the post-civil rights era. The recognition and controversy he provoked as a comedian relates not just to his ability to make audiences laugh, but is indicative of the content and the context of the material, which is connected to his resistance to racism and to the rhetoric of his comedy in attacking the ambiguity of that racism. This is exemplified in his diversion of one of the central dichotomies of embodied racism – civilization/nature – which describes the 'other' as savage or corporeal in comparison to the civilized white European. Pryor enacts this diversion through a comic trope that matches Bergson's idea of the comic as '[s]omething mechanical encrusted on the living' (1911: 39).

Bergson argued that laughter would result if a human appears mechanized: 'The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine' (1911: 32). While ultimately incomplete as the universal theory of laughter that it was intended to be, and connected to his wider philosophical outlook that saw problems and dangers in a mechanized society, specifically as a break in 'duration', Bergson's idea is acknowledged as an explanation of one specific comic trope (see Appendix one). Pryor's comedy uses this trope effectively by depicting white Americans, in accordance with the racist dichotomy, as civilized but also as repressed and mechanized. African-Americans are depicted as natural, expressive and able to enjoy the basic pleasures of existence. The reversal is used throughout his performances.

Pryor (2004) describes the difference between whites and blacks eating dinner. White people are depicted as not making any noise when they eat – in a civilized, orderly manner but also in a robotic style – whereas blacks are depicted as eating loudly and expressing enjoyment. The metaphor is extended to portray the mechanical, unemotional voice of the white American, to Pryor's enjoyment of picking his nose and farting, and to comparisons of black and white woman menstruating (2004). The reversal is also used to describe a white machine-like denial of pleasure, especially of sexual pleasure. Pryor explains that 'white folks don't cum, that's why they fuck quiet … niggas make noise when they cum' (2004). His continued articulation and redirection of the civilization/nature dichotomy creates the image of the white American existence as incomplete, thus situating his comedy in opposition to one of the central tenets of the embodied racism aimed at black people. While we could argue that Pryor, through reusing racial categories, leaves the basis of racism undisturbed, he does provide a key site of reversal and resistance to the civilization/nature dichotomy and encourages its ambivalence through this disturbance, thus offering a rhetorical redefinition of reality.

A second example of resistance to embodied racism appears in the comedy of Reginald D. Hunter. In a recent show entitled *White Woman*, Hunter concentrates on the subject of inter-racial sex and miscegenation, which is a recurring concern in embodied racism and a specific subsection of the civilization/nature dichotomy. Hunter says:

> I remember the first time an English white woman asked me out, I reacted like a runaway slave. 'Would you like to come out with me for a drink?' 'Girl you better shut your mouth, shit woman you gonna get both us killed.' (2005)

Drawing on racist ideas of the prohibition of miscegenation, specifically from the US context, and the 'impact' of that on Hunter's identity, the joke attempts to transfer the material into a British context. This forms an incongruity through comparison and stereotype – which are comic tropes (see Appendix one). However, the extent to which the joke reverses racism is questionable, as a racist reading could assert the idea of the black man out of context as an example of him lacking civility or adaptation.

At present, Hunter's comedy, of which this is just an extract, does not develop the complexity or interconnectedness that appears in Pryor's work. While Hunter addresses racial stereotyping (Rampton, 2005) and violence against women, his work, as yet, does not possess the strong themes of reversal shown by others, and appears more obviously polysemic than that of Pryor's. So, for example, he has been known to begin a monologue by asking the audience, '[a]ny woman here ever been beaten up by a man?' (Logan, 2005). The use of such material always runs the risk of invoking racial stereotypes of savagery and sexual violence, and if it is to act as a form of reversal it needs to be situated in a specific relationship to racism, in which mockery rather than affirmation of the dichotomy becomes the most obvious meaning. Reversed meanings have a polysemic potential that can rearticulate the earlier racist meaning, and Hunter has been accused of this; *The Times* comedy critic Alex O'Connell has charged him with being 'flagrantly misogynistic and enforcing racial stereotypes of black people' (Gibbons, 2003).

Black Responses to Cultural Racism

The dominant discursive form describes cultural racism as the significant mode of racism in contemporary British society (Modood, 1997, 2005). Sociologists have used a number of terms to describe cultural racism, all of which emphasize either a particular characteristic or a particular point of emergence. Early usage of the term appears in Fanon (1967), to describe the dominant form of colonial racism. It was labelled 'new racism' by Barker (1981) because of its supposed newness in relation to biological racism, which he argued it had replaced. The 'neo racism' of Balibar (1991) represents the French nomenclature and describes a similar phenomenon. A return to Fanon's terminology appears in Modood's work, principally because he views cultural racism as something that is not particularly new and suggests it has existed for as long as, if not longer than, processes of immigration (1997: 155). The label 'differentialist racism' also appears in some accounts and highlights that cultural difference is of principal concern in cultural racism, rather than the hierarchy of difference evident in traditional racisms. All accounts describe a racism that discriminates on the basis of cultural difference rather than race difference and so implies that '*culture can also function like a nature*' (Balibar, 1991: 22, original emphasis). Because of its emphasis on culture, it is often seen as a racism that moves away from, or disguises a belief in, a biological basis to racism.

Modood suggests that cultural racism is directed at Asian ethnic groups, while black and Afro-Caribbean people are principally affected by embodied racism (1997: 156–60). Nevertheless, black comedians do respond to cultural racism too. In line with the responses to embodied racism presented here, these examples emphasize reversal and work to attack some of the inherent ambivalences of cultural racism.

In *Live and Unleashed* (1989) Lenny Henry presents examples that reverse cultural racism, most of which highlight and subvert stereotypical depictions of language use, mannerisms and dispositions between ethnic groups (see also Henry and Fuller, 1994, for similar examples):

> People react to blackness in different ways. I had a friend called Dave who was a white guy and he really wanted to be black. With his whole heart, Dave wanted to be black. All his friends were black, he had a black girlfriend, he knew all the words to the Bob Marley records, we're talking commitment here. We were so different, I'd go round to his house, knock, knock, 'Dave, coming out for a game of football' [said with a Dudley accent]. '*Well Len, my woman just put in a pot of chicken and some rice. I feel like I just want to rest tonight. Easy Lenny*' [said with a stereotypical West Indian accent]. I'd say 'alright dude'. I had a lot of white friends. I don't mind, they could hangout with me. They'd be out stealing hubcaps otherwise, you know what they're like, give them a break I say. (Henry in Henry and Fuller, 1989)

Henry directly reverses stereotypes of black linguistic competence and criminality. First, he gives a fairly straightforward and gentle mockery of cultural and racist stereotypes, by highlighting in the joke content that not all black people, or white people for that matter, speak in a prescribed fashion. In the second section of the joke a similar technique is used towards cultural stereotypes of black criminality (this is a

recurring theme in Henry's comedy; see Fuller, 1983a, 1983b; Henry and Fuller, 1989, 1994). This represents an explicit reversal of a dichotomy, rather than the deviation we saw in Pryor's work. Reversal is outlined by Berger as one rhetorical device that can structure humour (see Appendix one). While Henry attempts to show the absurdity of such stereotypes through this technique, and attacks the content of cultural racism, the examples do not remove the polysemic potential in the discourse and the jokes could also support the earlier stereotype. In the first example a racist reading might mock white men who choose a 'lesser' racial group or culture with which to identify. In the second, the reversal might simply be taken as an absurdity, rather than seeing the absurdity in the original stereotype of black criminality. Thus the rhetorical potential is ambiguous.

Henry's comedy is not as deliberately brash or vulgar as a great deal of African-American comedy and is generally aimed at a mainstream, family audience. It therefore only develops quite mild reversals of cultural racism and comment on ethno-cultural hybridity. My next example, from the stand-up comedy of the US comedian Chris Rock, attacks culturally racist attitudes to speech in a very different way.

Rock's comedy deals uncompromisingly with American race and ethnic relations, and racism, providing many examples of reverse discourse. What follows shows Rock resisting and attacking white racist attitudes to black vernacular and linguistic competence, through mimicking and mocking comments directed at Colin Powell:

> Colin Powell can't be president … whenever Colin Powell's on the news white people always give him the same compliments, always the same compliments, 'How do you feel about Colin Powell?' 'He speaks so ell', 'he's so well spoken', 'he speaks so well', 'I mean, he really speaks well', 'he speaks so well'. Like that's a compliment! Speaks so well's not a compliment okay, speaks so well's some shit you say about retarded people that can talk. What do you mean he speaks so well?… He's a fucking educated man, how the fuck do you expect him to sound? You dirty motherfuckers, what're you talking about? 'Speaks so well', what you talking about, 'he speaks so well'. What voice were you looking to come out of his mouth? What the fuck did you expect him to sound like? 'I'm gonna drop me a bomb ta-day, I be pres-o-dent', get the fuck out of here. (Rock, 1996)

Rock performs all of his comedy and film roles with a characteristic and caricatured shriek that gives his voice an added impression of contempt that is not transferred in the text. In discussing white attitudes to Powell, Rock uses repetition and hyperbole, which are included in Berger's list of comic tropes (see Appendix one), to unpack culturally racist views of black speech. Through the comparison of the white 'compliment' and typical comments about the 'retarded', Rock is able to construct a very effective incongruity. This incongruity is strengthened by the context Rock develops, and it is because of his outright mockery of white racist attitudes that the chance of reasserting the racist stereotype – or the chance of polysemic meaning – is reduced. A racist reading would need to distance itself completely from Rock's preferred meaning, perhaps by concentrating on the final line of the quote, which impersonates the stereotypical depiction of Powell. The extent that Rock, and Pryor, use techniques to stretch the incongruity, so that the stereotypes are pushed away from

the racist habitus in which they emerge, creates far more effective reversal and resistance humour, which is perhaps why they are recognized as two of the most significant black US stand-up comedians vis-a-vis their specific stance on racism. This is something that is not achieved in the British comedy of Hunter and Henry, but is also framed by the specific context of black resistance to US race relations in the post-civil rights era.

The Use of 'Nigga' in Reverse Discourses
'Nigger' is one of, if not the, most offensive of racist epithets. The word can be described as a 'master signifier' and as a means of denoting a history of oppression and violence, suggesting its denotive capacity is relatively fixed because of this racist history. That said, as with all words, its context of utterance still has an impact on the meaning that is generated (for a similar discussion see Billig, 2005: 31).

The use of 'nigger' and its polysemicity has been described in the ethnographic literature. Hewitt outlines how 'nigger' can be used to undermine racist categories and ideology (1986: 227). Giving an example of one white youth using it on another to undermine the latter's racist attitudes, he argues that it need not signify 'anything *beyond itself* about ideas, attitudes and practices with respect to race' (1986: 232, original emphasis). Back gives examples of its use between young black people as a part of a cultural code for subverting race stereotypes (1996: 117), and Hartigan describes how 'whites and blacks [in Detroit] use "nigger" with a number of inflections and a range of purposes' (1999: 112). 'Nigger' was used by whites in Detroit with starkly racist meanings but also in ways that mimic convivial uses among black people. Such examples follow Butler's comment that its use can be 'both forceful and arbitrary, recalcitrant and open to reuse' (Butler, 1997: 100, in Hartigan, 1999: 113).

Attempts at appropriation often involve the use of the word 'nigga' rather than 'nigger', which helps create a paradigmatic separation from the term 'nigger' and set up the potential for this new line of connotation. The word 'nigga' is used in film dialogue and hip hop lyrics, and has been described equally as a positive and pernicious expression. The word and debates on its use also appear in, and around, various instances of humour.

I examine its potential as a form of resistance to the literal meaning of 'nigger', other inflections of meaning, and any racist meanings that are rearticulated by the use of the word. This is a discussion of its polysemicity, of the successes and failures of its expropriation. The term is used extensively in African-American stand-up comedy, so I will take two well-known examples from Pryor and Rock and outline the differences in use. Rock uses the word in *Bring the Pain* (1996) to distinguish between types of black people:

> Now we've got a lot of things, a lot of racism going on in the world, who's more racist? Black people or white people? Black people, you know why? Because we hate black people too. Everything white people don't like about black people, black people really don't like about black people. There's some shit going on with black people, there's like a civil war going on with black people and there's two sides, there's black people and there's niggas, and niggas have got to go. Every time black

people want to have a good time, ignorant ass niggas fuck it up. You can't do shit, you can't do shit without some ignorant assed nigga fucking it up, can't do nothing, can't keep a disco open more than three weeks, 'grand opening', 'grand closing'. Can't go to a movie the first week it comes out, why? Because niggas are shooting at the screen, what kind of ignorant shit is that? 'It's a good movie, it's so good I gotta bust a cap in here.' Hey I love black people but I hate niggas, oh I hate niggas, boy I wish they'd let me join the Ku Klux Klan, shit, I'd do a drive-by from here to Brooklyn.

In embodied racism, 'nigger' is used to depict the black man as subhuman, as representing the 'other' that exists at the negative pole of all racist dichotomies. It is, therefore, always used in racism to construct the 'nigger' in relation to something that is more human, more civilized, to something that has a greater social worth. Rock, in this example, is using the term 'nigga' (although the pronunciation does not allow for a clear distinction), to construct a difference between normal or respectable, and anti-social or ignorant, black people. This represents the key paradigmatic construction in this text, which is voiced as the dichotomy between 'black people' and 'niggas'. Importantly, the construct created is a dichotomy between the moral and the immoral. Rock is describing an element of the black community that is involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, that lets the rest down. While Rock is creating a distinction between his use of 'nigga' and a racist use of 'nigger', because the latter would, in all likelihood, not want to make a conscious separation of African-Americans into two groups, there are key connections between his use of the term and the racist meaning of 'nigger'. While racisms often assert universal dichotomies, techniques can be used that excuse the ambiguity of these dichotomies. Often techniques excuse or particularize some of the 'others' as not 'other', as acceptable and 'not like the rest'. Rock's example divides African-Americans into 'black people' and 'niggas', and while Rock may say rightly so (see below) this has the effect of producing the rhetorical/comic expression of an important racist ambivalence, which is the negotiation of acceptable and unacceptable 'others' in the context of an overarching racism. Rock's group splitting is a common practice not specific to racial categorization; what makes it distinctive is that it maps onto racist ambivalence management. The extract therefore contains the double meanings of early minstrel performance that attracted both white and black audiences.

In an interview with Nelson George, Rock gives some explanation of the joke. A part of the explanation of the joke relies on its perceived truth value:

> CR: I didn't think about it in political terms, I never think about the stuff in political terms. I think about it, it's funny, is it funny … A lot of times I'd do press and um, you know, especially white journalists, and I guess some black journalists too, 'how does a black audience feel about the niggas and black part', and I'm like 'watch the special', it's a whole black audience... Thank god I came up in this era of video and DVD and everything so it's there, there's no misinterpretation of it. Where, you know, Lenny Bruce, if I'd done the same routine in the '50s. I probably couldn't have walked through Harlem because it would be all misconstrued. You know what I mean? It would have been taken all out of context.

NG: Why do you think that white people like it so much? That's always the big bone of contention, 'Well they like it so much', so it can't be, there must be something wrong.
CR: I don't know everyone's got it, you know everyone's got their own version of it in their, you know, Italians have their version of it, Jewish people have their own version of it. I definitely know gay people who go 'I'm gay, but I hate faggots'. I've heard that, you know what I mean, everyone's got their version of it... Hey it's good for me … but people politicised it more than it maybe should have been, you know it's just jokes man. (Rock and George, 1996)

In Rock's comments we can see the simultaneous assertion that the statement that 'black people' and 'niggas' exist has a truthful value to it *and* that it is not a political statement because 'it's just jokes man' – that it is not serious – all in a comic incongruity that can generate rhetorical meaning around the 'truthful' reading of the discourse. While Rock's comments are not unexpected, the comedian may not be best placed to comment on the polysemicity of humour, being so attached to intentionality. Racist meaning is generated *despite* the intentionality of the comic rather than because of it. Polysemicity is exhibited as the statement reflects a splitting of the black community, resonates with the splitting of any community, and negotiates racist ambivalence – all from the single utterance.

It has been suggested that Pryor was one of the first black performers to attempt appropriation of 'nigga' and 'nigger' (Cook, 2004). In his earlier comedy he uses the term frequently and indeterminately. In an interview he once said of this, 'one day I said "Hello, I'm Richard Pryor, I'm a nigger". I wanted to take the sting out of it. Nigger. Nigger. Nigger. It was the truth and it made me feel free to say it' (Pryor in Sullivan, 2005). Pryor's approach adheres to the general philosophy that the meaning of terminology can be wrestled with and redefined, but does not consider the re-articulation of earlier racist meaning. Despite this initial stance, Pryor famously changed his mind on the use of 'nigga' following a trip to Africa:

One thing I got out of it was magic I'd like to share with you. I was leaving and I was sitting in the hotel and a voice said to me, said 'look around, what do you see?' And I said 'I see all colours of people doing everything', and the voice said 'Do you see any niggas?' And I said 'no', and said 'you know why? Cos there ain't any', and it hit me like a shot man. I started crying and shit. I was sitting there and I said 'I've been here three weeks and I haven't even said it, I haven't even thought it', and it made me say 'oh my god, I've been wrong, I've been wrong, I've got to regroup my shit. I ain't never gonna call another black man a nigga'. You know cos we never was no niggas, that's a word that's used to describe our own wretchedness, and we perpetuate it now, cos it's dead, that word is dead. (Pryor, 1982)

Although the extract may contain an element of hyperbole designed for performance affect, from this point on Pryor's use of the word diminished. Pryor's description of the word as 'dead' matches Roland Barthes' comments on denotive signification (1977: 44), that it is the truly traumatic signs that become fixed and deny connotation. If words are 'alive' to connotation, it is the purely denotive sign that is 'dead', that no

longer moves. Although the meaning of 'nigga' has variation from context to context, it would seem that while not denying connotation absolutely, because 'nigger' is so denotive of racism, the connotations of 'nigga' are often reduced and can easily revert to the earlier meaning. It therefore remains problematic when placed in rhetorical humorous structures, something that Pryor realized when his own context of thought shifted during his visit to Africa. It is the denotive specificity of 'nigger' that prevents the use of 'nigga' being a reliable element of resistance or reversed discourse.

Conclusion
Humour and comedy are not often the focus of discussions of race, ethnicity and racism, yet black comedians have a long history of critiquing and resisting racism through their performance. Sociologists have probably ignored this topic because it forms non-serious discourse, outside of the traditional boundaries of the subject. I have shown that resistance humour is structured through devices rhetorical in nature, and as rhetoric is the art of convincing, these performances have a paradoxical seriousness that runs throughout them. The article defined reverse discourse by explaining its historical context and connecting the idea to studies that examine humour as a means of resisting dominant power relations. In line with this, I outlined how contemporary black comedians reproduce stereotypes, first from embodied racism and then from cultural racism, in order to produce resistance meaning. The central observation is an understanding of the polysemicity of this humour, and, from this, a consideration that reversal is never automatically 'successful'. In fact, reversal humour throws into doubt the very notion of 'success' in humour. As humour increases its structural polysemia through the material of reversal, ambiguity increases, fixed meaning becomes more unlikely to appear and the potential for multifarious political and ethical interpretations map themselves onto the socio-linguistic space. Revered humour is complex, multilayered and, while a key point of anti-racist critique, not always successful. While the humour of black comedians is important and often *crucial* for the explosion of stereotypes and expression of anti-racism, we should not forget that such discourse is always incongruous in its structure and thus ambiguous and double-edged in its outcome.

Appendix One
Berger's (1995: 54–5) list of 45 humour techniques.

Technique	*Category*
1. Absurdity	Logic
2. Accident	Logic
3. Allusion	Language
4. Analogy	Logic
5. Before/After	Identity
6. Bombast	Language
7. Burlesque	Identity
8. Caricature	Identity
9. Catalogue	Logic
10. Chase Scene	Visual
11. Coincidence	Logic
12. Comparison	Logic
13. Definition	Language
14. Disappointment	Logic

15. Eccentricity	Identity
16. Embarrassment	Identity
17. Exaggeration	Language
18. Exposure	Identity
19. Facetiousness	Language
20. Grotesque	Identity
21. Ignorance	Logic
22. Imitation	Identity
23. Impersonation	Identity
24. Infantilism	Language
25. Insults	Language
26. Irony	Language
27. Literalness	Language
28. Mimicry	Identity
29. Mistakes	Logic
30. Misunderstanding	Language
31. Parody	Identity
32. Puns, Wordplay	Language
33. Repartee, Outwitting	Language
34. Repetition, Pattern	Logic
35. Reversal	Logic
36. Ridicule	Logic
37. Rigidity	Logic
38. Sarcasm	Language
39. Satire	Language
40. Scale, Size	Identity
41. Slapstick	Visual
42. Speed	Visual
43. Stereotypes	Identity
44. Theme and Variation	Logic
45. Unmasking	Identity

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