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Intersectionality of Humor

Race has always been a societal issue of pressing relevance; however, it has recently re-emerged into the spotlight as comedians, especially comedians of color, use race humorously. However, Youtuber Jon Cozart uses race a tad differently in his *Progressive Christmas Carols*. As a white man, Cozart lacks the ability to use race as a form of self-mockery. He instead attacks the institutional foundations of white privilege present in locations the masses don't often think twice about, specifically Christmas carols. Cozart's *Progressive Christmas Carols*, takes many classic carols such as *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, and *Mr. Grinch* and satirizes them from the point of view of a progressive millennial, bringing up progressive issues such as abortion, tax reform, and evolution, but focusing on race in an attempt to convince his audience to realize the underlying racial biases present in holiday carols predominantly sung by conservative, protestant Americans.

Cozart's ability to use pop music to portray racial problems approaches a fundamental disconnect within the conversation of race. If Cozart were to use a more aggressive form of music, such as rap, his point would be taken as an attack on the American system. However, in passing his point along humorously through a musical, Cozart is able to make a statement on race in America without being threatening. Due to the United States' long history of using humor to refer to politics, Cozart uses a very specific form of satire to comment on the current state of American affairs. In fact, Dr. Nicholas Holm a Senior Lecturer at Massey University states that

this satirical humor Cozart presents has become a central aspect of the operation of American politics proper (Holm 642). Furthermore, the satire comedy used by Cozart has been utilized “to draw attention to the inconsistencies, incongruities and oppressive practices of the state,” such as the institutionalized racism of millions of Americans or the problematic topic of police brutality (Holm 642).

The racial problems facing millions of young people of color are put on full display by Cozart, as he references the underlying racial tones present in many beloved white, European-ethnocentric Christmas songs. Despite Cozart’s music is relatively easy to follow for people of all educational backgrounds and ages, in fact stating that he’s “[modernizing] these jingles for the massive bourgeoisie,” there exists a certain prerequisite of knowledge to understand the rhetorical points he attempts to make (Cozart). People who don’t have a comprehensive understanding of American political culture or the racist history of the United States will fail to comprehend many of the jokes Cozart makes. An example of one of these jokes can be seen when he satirizes Mr. Grinch. In this song, he references how the Whos are afraid of the Grinch for his green skin, akin to why white Americans are afraid of African-Americans. Throughout the course of this song he states that the Grinch’s heart is $\frac{3}{5}$ ths as big, and while that partially refers to the fact that the Grinch’s heart grew three sizes at the end of Dr. Seuss' story, it also refers to the fact that the Constitution of the United States affirms that black people are worth $\frac{3}{5}$ ths of a person. According to Holm, this humor is attempting to “actively [engage], [challenge] and [unsettle] social, cultural and political norms" (Holm 645-646). This humor speaks to the struggle which African-Americans have had to endure for generations and attempts to mediate it. By doing this, Holm argues, that the humor critically calls out and

remediates the prejudices implicit to the status quo of the nation “through playful means” to prevent defensive maneuvers by those who oppose it (Holm 644).

Defensive maneuvers against issues of race are often practiced by white Protestant communities when confronted with the issue of race. Cozart knows this, and leans into the awkwardness by delving into a divisive issue of race present within Christian communities: the skin color of Jesus Christ. Cozart instantly springs into this sensitive topic with his satirization of *Mary, Did You Know?* stating “Mary did you know that your baby boy is white” (Cozart). This comes after Cozart jokes that Jesus supports the NRA, tackling the ideal figure of the lord and savior perpetrated by conservatives. However, this controversial statement is likely to elicit provocative responses from different churches depending on the ethnicities of their congregation. This is due to the fact that predominantly White or Hispanic Catholic and Protestant Churches show Christ as a white, or tan figure. While mainly Lutheran, African American churches have stated that the Redeemer was black. Dr. Williem H. Oliver, Head of the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology at the University of South Africa, states that the race of the Messiah became an issue in more recent times as “groups of people wanted to defend [and] promote their own skin color” (Oliver 95). In the United States and Europe, this turned into a fight for control. Europeans “proclaimed a white Jesus to the people of Africa” to legitimize their conquest and subjugation of the natives (Oliver 95). Black communities in America did the same thing during the 20th Century, promoting the idea of a Black Jesus during the Civil Rights Movement as a unifying figure. With this line of questioning, Cozart essentially attempts to poke fun at the idea that any one culture could possibly attempt to claim right over Jesus Christ solely based on the idea that they supposedly had the same skin color. This is especially prevalent considering the idea that many Churches can’t effectively cater to people of a different race.

Christena Cleveland, an associate professor at Duke University's Divinity School states that this is especially true for white ministers who "can minister to people of color without truly seeing them as equals" (Cleveland 36). They instead seeing them as people they have converted to the 'true faith'. This fight over the color of Jesus' skin further affects race relations in the United States as it serves for a battleground for race superiority, and leads to a sense of dismissive attitudes against other races by overwhelmingly religious individuals.

This sense of religious prejudice is further exacerbated with the satire of *Mr. Grinch*. In this portion of the song, Cozart compels the audience to compare the racism faced by the Grinch in Whoville, to that faced by African-Americans within the United States. Cozart begins by relaying the most obvious point to the viewer, the disparity between the entirely white population of Whoville and the green complexion of the Grinch. Cozart states "that [his] greenish epidermis determines [his] success," referring to the fact that with white privilege, the color of one's skin often directly correlates to one's corporate success (Cozart). In fact, Pew Research center proved in 2016 the existence of an institutional difference based on skin color, attesting that a black man on average makes 73 cents to a white man's dollar (Patten). Cozart delves further into institutionalized racism stating that within Whoville, "Racist Whos constrain [the Grinch] to the issues they continue to suppress" (Cozart). Here Cozart is relaying the difficulties the Grinch finds within the streets of Whoville to the issues facing much of the African-American community. Among these issues is the wage gap referred to earlier, as well as the fact that African-American are much more likely to find themselves imprisoned than white men. 21% of low-income black men have been arrested, and black men born in the top 1% are arrested just as frequently as white men who make circa \$36,000 a year according to a University of California, Los Angeles study (Matthews).

Although up to this point Cozart has stayed away from heavy racial topics; however, he tackles the elephant in the room at the conclusion of his song. He states that the Grinch gives “the Whos a fright” (Cozart). Here Cozart is referring to the implicit biases white Americans have for their black counterparts. There are countless stories of white people’s unfathomably intrinsic distrust of people of color. There are the famous examples of this distrust like the story of Emmett Till a 14-year-old boy lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after a white woman stated that he had grabbed her waist. There are more recent examples as well, such as when two black Philadelphia men last year were thrown out of a Starbucks for standing in line. Despite these stories, Cozart reminds us that there are stories like Till’s that have much more graphic endings in the 21st century. Cozart warns the Grinch to not “walk the streets of Whoville you might fight a cop the Whos will not indict” (Cozart). Here, he is obviously implying the deaths of hundreds of black men at the hands of white police officers. In cases of police brutality, as Cozart points out, the cop is nearly never indicted. A CNN article asserts that there are approximately 1,000 police shootings a year. In the twelve years between 2005 and 2017, only 80 of those cops were indicted and a mere 35% were convicted. While many high-profile cases like that of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old boy who was shot and killed by police, go on without indictments. Even cops who are indicted rarely get convicted. Of the cases that produce indictments, the most famous is that of Philando Castile, who was shot by a cop after a routine traffic stop while his girlfriend live-streamed the entire event on Facebook. The police officer Jeronimo Janez was indicted on second-degree manslaughter but was found not guilty after deliberations.

Despite the points presented here, Holm reminds us that satire “only operates as humour insofar as it retains an implicit belief in the system that it apparently attacks” (Holm 650). While we may protest against cops, the government and American history for their injustices and

systems of oppression, no one is attempting to stage a coup d'etat. While we may disagree with the system we still have implicit respect and understanding for the regime. In conclusion, Cozart is attempting to make relevant the implicit connections between Christmas carols and the institutionalized racism in this country. It is only by realizing this racism, and the continuation and propagation of it through common songs that we will be able to heal and begin to move forward as a nation.

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