

## Chapter 2

# It's No Secret Justin Wants to Be Black: Comedy Central's Justin Bieber Roast and Neoliberalism

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### ABSTRACT

*Research shows that media representations of race, gender and social class designed for consumption by the millennial generation create a world of symbolic equality via narratives of racial harmony, female empowerment and forms of exaggeration where everyone seems to have a middle and or upper middle class quality of life. In general, the changing face of diversity as represented in media has been cast as a neoliberal politic, where ideologies of free markets are extended into representing a sense of equality among individuals and their respective social groups. While scholars have investigated exaggerated representations of inclusivity in a variety of media genres, there is limited scholarship investigating the ways in which comedy serves the neoliberalist agenda. Comedy Central's Roast of Justin Bieber aired March 2015 and has been replicated in multiple forms. The current study is an in depth discourse and content analysis of the racial and gender jokes appearing in this program. It concludes that what appears to be a move beyond race is instead working against a post-race reality.*

### INTRODUCTION

Research shows that media representations of race, gender and social class designed for consumption by the millennial generation create a world of symbolic equality via narratives of racial harmony, female empowerment and forms of exaggeration where everyone seems to have a middle and or upper middle class quality of life (Gill, 2011; Nakamura, 2008; Kendall, 2011). Often, representations of inclusiveness ideationally substitute for face-to-face interactions and give the impression of pluralism and diversity in our real social environments. Furthermore, such images and narratives have the potential to distract

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media consumers from engaging in public sphere discussions on systemic inequality and the need for social change (Schiappa, et al, 2006; Winograd & Hais 2011, Gallagher 2003). In general, the changing face of diversity and equality as represented in media has been cast as a neoliberal politic, where ideologies of free markets are extended into representing a sense of equality and an even playing field among individuals and their respective social groups. And yet, neoliberal race politics directly mask growing inequalities among social groups in the USA since the 1970s (Goldberg 2008).

While scholars have investigated exaggerated representations of inclusivity in a variety of media genres, there is limited scholarship investigating the ways in which comedy serves the neoliberalist agenda (however, for a discussion of race comedy as critical project, see Rossing 2012). Our study investigates not only the ways in which dominant understandings of race, and gender identity are communicated in the contemporary mainstream comedic genre; we further seek to address the paradox of post-race norms in a comedy show where the majority of jokes are about race, bringing embedded race-gender identity stereotypes into the service of the present.

The *Comedy Central Roast of Justin Bieber* originally aired March 2015 and has since been partially replicated in multiple forms including Comedy Central website outtakes, officially and unofficially reproduced YouTube videos, twitter, and multiple celebrity news reports. The roast program serves well as a media element for analyzing the ways in which race continues to function as the elephant in the room best addressed via comedy, creating comic relief as the ideal space for processing continued racial anxiety in a post-racial world. After an extended discussion of racialized jokes, we also explore tentatively the complexities around gender and gender norms particular to the construction of Bieber as a racially and sexually controversial star, where ideas of aberrant masculinity are used comedically to marginalize the subject of the roast, Justin Bieber.

By way of conclusion, we address the social implications of racist humor within the neoliberal context. We argue that hegemonic and counter-hegemonic race and gender jokes within the international, multimedia context of the *Comedy Central Justin Bieber Roast* maintain dominant assumptions of a 'post-' world wherein continued marginalization is both laughable and inconsequential, e.g. 'we are over the race thing.' Lastly, we encourage future scholarship designed to specifically address comedy targeted to the post-generation as a means of maintaining illusions of progress and reconciliation.

The Justin Bieber Roast itself serves as a fitting subject in that we found that the large majority of jokes were about race. Watching the roast led us to ask: if Millennial audiences are indeed post-race or beyond race as a factor in how they reckon the world, then why is the Justin Bieber roast so saturated with both offensively stereotypical and critical jokes about race?

## POST-RACE TELEVISION

To be clear, because mainstream popular culture has embraced a world of symbolic diversity and inclusion, we are now in a media world where white rappers receive accolades and awards for originality, and where reality shows with multicultural casts provide the impression of equal access and interaction among various racial groups and genders; and yet these reality shows nonetheless garner their ratings through social shaming of individual cast members whose looks, body types, and stereotypical race portrayals of pathological behavior fall outside the norm (Pozner, 2010). In such television content, post-race America means that race has a new kind of mutability in which white artists might win awards for "Black Music," a label which has recently been supplanted by the term "Urban." Ironically, the movement of white and other ethnicities into territories and genres of cultural production formerly understood to be exclusively

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