IRONY'S POTENTIAL AS SUBVERSIVE STRATEGY

A Case Study of Anti-Racist Stand-Up Comedy

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Abstract   In this paper, I evaluate the potential of irony to subvert racist discourse. Irony is characterised by semantic forms that engage explicit and implicit language so as to communicate oppositional or contradictory meanings for satirical or contentious purposes. This process is complicated as meaning often remains contested between the author of a statement and its various interpreters. My analysis of the stand-up comedian Aamer Rahman's work shows how irony can be used by comedians in order to subvert dominant and exploitative discourses. In particular, I illustrate how irony provides him with a tool to evoke and simultaneously distance himself from anti-Muslim racist discourses. For white audiences with an interest in deconstructing their own complicity in racism, his comedy can function as a Critical Public Pedagogy that enables critical self-reflection.

1   Introduction

Irony is a discursive strategy that abounds in culture and society. Defined as engaging the difference between an explicit, said meaning and an implicit, unsaid meaning, irony is a linguistic schema or practice that is often used for

humorous or contentious purposes. However, because of its reliance on implicit meanings, irony is particularly open to differing interpretations which are in contestation with one another (Hutcheon, 1995). Interpreters may thus often disagree on whether statements (e.g. in literary works or everyday conversations) are meant sincerely or ironically. Additionally, even when consensus to the ironic nature of an utterance is established, the resulting ironic meaning can remain contested. The semantic characteristics of irony have led to discussions on the possible social functions and ambiguities of irony: if there is so much space for differing interpretations, can it be used as an effective communicative strategy?

In this paper, I examine this question by looking at the ways in which irony can be used to subvert dominant ideologies about race and identity. More specifically, I investigate the case of the Muslim Australian comedian Aamer Rahman whose comedy is explicitly anti-racist, and the way in which he seems to make use of irony's contentious meaning-making practices in order to support his progressive political aims. Ultimately, I argue that irony, in Rahman's case, provides a linguistic schema through which dominant anti-Muslim discourses can be critically examined and combatted. It does so without forcing him to subject himself to the rules that have been designed by dominant culture. Although Rahman sees his comedy as primarily addressing other people of colour and those who already share his criticisms (Rickett, 2015), I argue that his comedy can function as a Critical Public Pedagogy for white audience members, such as myself, who belong to certain, somewhat anti-racist, discursive communities. Critical Public Pedagogy is a concept introduced by Rossing (2015), referring to the way in which popular culture can function as an educational means that enables critical reflection. Rahman's use of irony as a strategy to simultaneously evoke a discourse and create a critical distance from it, encourages and facilitates reflection on racist discourse and white audience's own participation in these.

The argument I make has a two-fold relevance: Firstly, it is an argument about the usefulness of irony, situated within debates in literary and cultural studies (Booth, 1974; Fish, 1983; Hutcheon, 1995, 1998; Jameson, 1991). I claim that irony can be employed to make meaningful points, which is contrary to interpretations of irony as disengaged. Secondly, it is an argument about possibilities to destabilise dominant oppressive discourses, situated within debates on the potential of popular culture (Rossing, 2015). My paper thus aims to contribute to these two fields by combining debates on the possibilities of irony and subversion in popular culture, aiming at a greater understanding of how processes of subversion can function through irony.

I begin by outlining the ways in which Muslims are popularly represented and framed in a contemporary Australian context. I continue by briefly introducing

Rahman and his comedy within that context. The subsequent section introduces popular culture and humour and their possibilities as Critical Public Pedagogy (Rossing, 2015), contesting popular representations of people and issues. I then look more closely at irony, its definition and characteristics, before applying these to the case of Rahman's comedy. In my analysis, I focus first on engagement with violence and second on the stereotyping of white culture. I end with a discussion of the role and responsibility of the audience, on whose assumptions and beliefs the impact of Rahman's comedy rests.

2   The Context of Australia: Images of Islam

To understand the ways in which the comedian Rahman manages to achieve subversion, it is important to have some understanding of dominant conceptu-alisations and views on Muslims and race relations in the Australian context. Officially, Australia adopted a multicultural policy in 1973, and is one of very few countries which somewhat successfully have continued along this course. This multicultural policy replaced many years of policies aimed at creating a 'White Australia', privileging migrants who were considered white. Still, scholars have argued that Australia continues to privilege those of Anglo-Australian descent, e.g. through immigration and visa restrictions or the way in which people of colour are viewed as recent immigrants (Busbridge, 2013). This seems to be in line with Rahman's experiences, who in an interview said that he is often asked where he is from, or welcomed to Australia, adding that there is "an idea of white ownership of this country" (Freeman-Greene, 2010, as cited in Busbridge, 2013, p. 474)

In contemporary Australia, much like in the US and Europe, the post-9/11 years have been characterised by increased debates over the threat of terrorism. These debates have often raised questions and concerns about the role of Islam in 'Western' society. Following Samuel Huntington's (1996) notorious 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis, Islam has frequently been positioned as contradictory to Western, and thus Australian, culture (Busbridge, 2013). Adding to the long history of Orientalism (Said, 2008), the post-9/11 narrative of an incompatibility between Islam and the West was further strengthened by the 2002 and 2005 bombings in Bali, a neighbouring island of Australia. Following these events, Australian Muslims became increasingly viewed as a direct threat to national security.

For example, Busbridge (2013) argues that in the wake of these attacks the way cultural difference is framed in Australia has shifted. While it was previ-ously framed as a regular component of a diverse and multicultural society, the focus is now on difference as dangerous, and to be "managed, controlled, con-

tained, disciplined" (Busbridge, 2013, p. 463). This logic of securitisation is coupled with the logic of domestication (Bowen, 2004): Muslims are urged to 'assimilate' and become 'Australian', and are therefore positioned as radical, dangerous, and 'un-Australian' until they prove that they are 'good', 'domesticated' and 'Australian'. They are thus "positioned in spaces of conditionality, where they must be willing to play the 'rules of the game' in order to qualify for the benefits of citizenship: The migrant is 'good' or 'bad' depending on their acceptance of this condition" (Busbridge, 2013, p. 463). Within this discourse, Australian national identity or 'Australian-ness' is presupposed as a defined and thus definable category, rather than a dynamic socially constructed "site of political and cultural contestation" (Busbridge, 2013, p. 459).

3   Introducing Aamer Rahman

Fitting a general dominance of white Australians, Australian media have been characterised as "notoriously white" (Phillips, 2012, as cited in Busbridge, 2013, p. 467). Rahman and his comedy partner Hussain's show *Fear of a Brown Planet* was one of the first popular productions in which Muslims had a space to express and represent themselves (Busbridge, 2013). In 2008, Rahman and Hussain's show debuted at the Melbourne Comedy Festival, winning the Best Newcomer Award. The show has been identified as "explicitly oppositionary" (Busbridge, 2013, p. 472), taking the inspiration for its name from the radical, black US hip-hop group Public Enemy's album *Fear of a Black Planet*. In the show, Rahman and Hussain thematise current Australian politics and culture, especially with regard to racism and anti-Muslim ideologies. Although their show was acclaimed by critics, audiences were so small that Rahman was planning to end his comedy career when he suddenly gained international fame through his YouTube clip on *Reverse Racism* (Logan, 2014). It started to be circulated widely, linked on pages such as Buzzfeed and Huffington Post, reached over 2 million views on YouTube (Rahman, 2013) and brought him much needed bookings (Logan, 2014). He has since performed in Australia, the UK, Canada and the US with his solo show *The Truth Hurts*. While popular within a certain part of Australian society, Rahman can hardly be classified as part of mainstream popular culture. In an interview with VICE, for instance, Rahman himself characterises his audience: "The majority are people of color and, out of that, maybe a quarter of them are Muslim – politically-minded Muslims. Overall, my audience is left-wing types" (Rickett, 2015). While Rahman therefore views especially his clip on *Reverse Racism* as "preaching to the converted" with the pur-

pose of "entertain[ing] people who already understand" (Rickett, 2015), I argue that although some understanding and assumptions are required of audiences, his comedy and use of irony function to reinforce and assist critical thinking about race.

4   Comedy as Critical Public Pedagogy

Many cultural studies theorists have viewed pop culture as "a site of struggle over knowledge, power relationships, and identity" (Rossing, 2015, p. 3). In popular culture, people and issues are represented and engaged in certain ways, resulting in a form of dynamic learning by and for the audience, i.e. 'public pedagogy'. According to Rossing (2015), popular culture is thus one way in which we learn dominant discourses. Focusing on the US context, Rossing argues that, dominant public pedagogy, among other things, "enables, legitimizes, and reinforces the devaluing of people of color, condones acts of violence against racial minority groups, renders this violence invisible, and creates sanctuary for White Privilege" (Rossing, 2015, p. 3). For Rossing, popular culture is a powerful force, often used to reinforce racist hegemony (Rossing, 2015). However, he also sees space for resistance within popular culture. He therefore introduces the concept of 'Critical Public Pedagogy'. This concept draws on previous conceptualisations of Critical Pedagogy by academics such as Paulo Freire (2000), Henry Giroux (2003; 2004) and bell hooks (1994). While their work has often focused on the class room in the more literal sense, Rossing (2015) emphasises the relevance of viewing popular culture as a form of pedagogy. Critical Public Pedagogy thus refers to popular culture's potential as a form of widely available education which opposes and disrupts hegemonic ways of understanding issues such as racism. I argue that Rahman's comedy functions as an instance of such a Critical Public Pedagogy, and thereby is an object of popular culture that has the potential to counteract dominant narratives on Australian and Muslim identities.

In his article, Rossing explores the ways in which racial humour manages to destabilise dominant discourse on race, focusing on humour's ability to "make visible dominant discourses, disrupt common sense, and struggle over identification and representation" (2015, pp. 3–4). In this vein, there have been a number of analyses of humour's potential. For example, both Rossing (2015) and Bell-Jordan (2007) have analysed the US comedian Dave Chappelle's show, arguing that it disrupts discourses which position the contemporary US as a post-racial society, i.e. a society in which race no longer plays a role in the lives of people, and should therefore no longer be a topic of discussion.

5   Theory of Irony

As I will argue, Rahman contests dominant images of Muslim people through his use of irony. To make that point, I follow influential literary theorist Linda Hutcheon's conceptualisations of irony from her book *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1995). She pays special attention to irony's evaluative edge. By edge, she refers to the way in which irony often 'cuts' and cannot be separated from its evaluative nature. This edge, however can cut in different ways, and can therefore be used to reinforce different ideological standpoints, both hegemonic and subversive ones.

It is important to clearly distinguish irony from comedy and humour, although they are deeply interrelated. Stand-up comedy is a way of performing humour, characterised by its professional nature (Mintz, 1985). Humour can however take a variety of other forms, from every-day conversations to stand-up comedy to literature. Irony can be used in comedy, and as a way of being humorous, but is not solely defined by this context. Instead, Hutcheon defines irony as a "discursive strategy operating at the level of language or form" (Hutcheon, 1995, p. 10), which engages a said and an unsaid meaning as relational, inclusive and differential (Hutcheon, 1995). This definition includes a number of relevant points for my analysis, relating firstly to the semantics of ironic meaning as constituted by the interplay of said and unsaid meaning, and secondly to its nature as discursive strategy.

First, irony is defined as engaging said and unsaid meanings in a relational, inclusive and differential way. Irony is often simplistically understood as an articulated, literal meaning (the said meaning) replaced with its opposite (the unsaid meaning). Hutcheon (1995), on the other hand, holds that the relationship between the literal, said meaning and an evoked unsaid meaning is more complex. Ironic meaning should therefore not be equated with the unsaid meaning. Analyses should instead thematise the way in which the two meanings relate to and interact with each other, including both of them as crucial for creating ironic meaning. Irony is thus seen as "the result of the bringing—even the rubbing—together of the said and the unsaid, each of which takes on meaning only in relation to the other" (Hutcheon, 1995, p. 56). While this means that both meanings in interplay need to be considered when analysing irony, Hutcheon does acknowledge the privileged status of unsaid meanings in challenging said meanings and thereby determining ironic meaning (Hutcheon, 1995). Additionally, the differential aspect of irony highlights that it is the difference between said and unsaid meanings that creates ironic meaning, as meaning emerges from "the thematization of this difference" (Man, 1969, p. 192 as cited in Hutcheon, 1995,

p. 62). This is in contrast to metaphor, for example, which also functions through the relation of said and unsaid meanings, which are relational and inclusive, but based on similarity instead of difference.

Second, Hutcheon's (1995) definition of irony as discursive strategy highlights the social and interactive nature of irony, which plays out in a discourse, involving multiple actors. She identifies an ironist and an interpreter as key players. They can both 'make' irony, exerting agency and intention. The ironist does this by producing a statement that is intended to be ironic. This statement is then interpreted by the interpreter, who might identify and thereby also create an ironic meaning, or interpret the statement as non-ironic. Additionally, statements that are not intended ironically can become ironic when irony is created by the interpreter. This impossibility of knowing the other actor's exact meaning-making practices results in a certain insecurity as neither ironist nor interpreters can ensure that they have the same understanding of an utterance. This communicative problem inherent in irony is relevant to an ironist who wishes to bring across a certain message, and to an interpreter who wishes to understand the ironist's intentions and views. While it can and has been argued that this same problem is part of any form of communication, not only ironic ones, Hutcheon (1995) holds that the particular importance of an implicit meaning in irony makes irony particularly sensitive to instable meaning. Due to this difficulty it could be argued that irony is futile in creating meaningful statements and can therefore not function as a subversive strategy. Hutcheon (1995), however, argues that shared understandings of irony or sincerity can to some extent be established because discursive communities with common assumptions exist. These discursive communities are made up of people who have certain knowledges, or opinions, or make similar experiences in society, such as Australian Muslims confronted with anti-Muslim racism. While irony usually does not create these discursive communities, its interpretation is dependent on the communities the interpreter belongs to. There is thus a way for ironic meanings to be communicated between ironists and interpreters, although complete stability is, of course, never guaranteed. My argument relies on the existence of these discursive communities which share a number of assumptions. However, I also argue that Rahman plays with the insecurity of stable meaning between him and his audience, using the insecurity itself as a way to subvert dominant discourse. My analysis of Rahman's work will therefore pay attention firstly to the relation of said and unsaid meanings, and secondly to the relation between ironist and interpreters.

6   Analysis of Rahman's Use of Irony

For my analysis of Rahman's use of irony as a way to subvert dominant discourses, I have identified two recurring themes in the material that is available online (Fear of a Brown Planet, 2009, Rahman, 2015a, 2015b). The first of these is the engagement with the logic of domestication, while the second deals with the stereotyping of white culture. While engagement with racism can be found throughout Rahman's comedy, the use of irony is particularly prominent in four of his pieces. In *Iggy Azalea* (Rahman, 2015a) and *ISIS* (Rahman, 2015b) from *The Truth Hurts*, Rahman thematises violence and the logic of domestication. In *White People* (Rahman, 2010a) and Workshops for Whitey (Rahman, 2010b) from the show *Fear of a Brown Planet*, the stereotyping gaze is reversed and engaged. I argue that in these particular pieces, irony can be understood as the discursive strategy that makes his subversion effective.

In his stand-up performances, it seems that Rahman plays with the insecurity audiences experience as they attempt to pinpoint the meaning intended by Rahman. He does this by performing in a way that at many points leave the audience wondering about his intentions – not allowing for an easy answer to the question: is he being ironic? This is an especially effective strategy in Rahman's case as it allows him to engage the logic of domestication which urges Rahman to again and again position himself as 'safe', such as by personally condemning and explicitly distancing himself from the use of violence, while at the same time refusing to position himself in that way.

6.1   Analysis of Rahman's Use of Irony: Violence and the Logic of Domestication

In his shows, Rahman repeatedly speaks about performing violence against white people, with the piece *Iggy Azalea* even addressing his wish to kill random straight white men. In this piece, he introduces the topic by referring to a tweet directed at him:

> *This one time, this guy on Twitter tweeted out of nowhere: "Aamer Rahman supports the killing of whites." I was like, "What? I support killing random white people?" I got – I got so, so upset, guys, because, honestly, I have never, ever, ever said anything like that – out loud… Um, thought it, thought it many times, I'm not gonna lie, okay? I have, I have said guys, I do sometimes think about killing random white people. (Rahman, 2015a)*

Rahman first fulfils the cultural script which requires him to distance himself from accusations of being a 'bad', dangerous Muslim, when he claims to be upset

about this accusation. He then, however, performs the role of the 'dangerous' Muslim when he 'admits' his secret wishes to kill random white people. These two roles that he performs result in the possible attribution of irony to each of these opposed statements: When Rahman defends violence, there seems to be an unsaid meaning of condemning violence. Similarly, when he condemns the use of violence, an unsaid meaning of legitimating violence can be interpreted, resulting from the opposition of the two roles. This ambivalence is reinforced when Rahman continues by bringing forward reasons for and thoughts on killing random white people. For example, he speaks about cultural appropriation by white Australian rapper Iggy Azalea, the way cultures have been wiped out by European colonisation, and adds that he does not want to joke about violence against women, and would therefore only target straight, white men:

> When I think about Western culture, when I think about the culture that has wiped out countless other cultures throughout history, on the premise that it is the most superior way of life on the planet, when I think about the fact that that culture basically now exists to promote and worship people like Iggy Azalea, I do think about killing white people, okay? (Rahman, 2015a)

The piece then culminates in Rahman comparing killing these white men to a community initiative, suggesting that the audience and he could go from house to house, together killing white people after the show (Rahman, 2015a). The criticisms of colonialism and cultural appropriation are presented in a humorous way. Nevertheless, these criticisms are likely to be shared by a large part of the audience – which is suggested to mostly be made up of people of colour. Their loud laughter suggests they understand the pains and frustrations of being confronted with white dominance, and its manifestations in everyday life, leading to anger at white culture.

Rahman thus juxtaposes performances of the 'dangerous' Muslim, the 'domesticated' Muslim, as well as criticisms of cultural appropriation and colonialism. The mutual incompatibility of his statements suggests that there is an extent of irony involved. While assumedly, audience members would not understand this plan to kill random white people literally, the ironic meaning that is invoked is unlikely to be the exact opposite. Instead, like Hutcheon (1995) argues, the ironic meaning is to be located somewhere between the literal meaning, such as that of promoting violence against an oppressive group and the unsaid meaning which could read that obviously Rahman is not planning to kill white people. While these two meanings seem to be present in Rahman's performance, the exact ironic meaning remains open to contestation – possibly leaving

white parts of the audience on edge, as violence is never explicitly condemned. He remains unapologetic and even jokes about possible white audience members' feelings of alienation and intimidation, however, never voicing a calming statement that is free from the possibility of irony on the part of the ironist as well as the interpreter (Rahman, 2015a).

Violence, and the way Muslims are positioned with regard to their view on it, is a recurring theme of Rahman's comedy. In his piece on ISIS, he speaks about another social media status directed at him: a Facebook friend wrote an angry post about Muslims beheading people, referring to ISIS. This status update however also included a jab at Rahman, because "he isn't saying anything about it" (Rahman, 2015b). In reaction to this, Rahman still refuses to condemn violence by Muslims, but instead ridicules the accusation, saying that "sorry, I didn't realise I was giving off a 'maybe-I'm-down-with-ISIS' kinda vibe" (Rahman, 2015b). Here, the unsaid meaning, invoked by the initial 'sorry', could be exactly the apologetic way of handling such an accusation which the narrative of domestication suggests – namely to explicitly condemn ISIS, thereby again reacting to the idea that every Muslim potentially is a threat, until they explicitly distance themselves and make an effort to seem safe to the white Australian public.

While this uncertainty might be criticised for refusing to take a clear stance, and refusing to finally position himself within the discourse framed by white Australian politics, it can also be seen as an intentional and successful way of refusing to fit himself into an oppressive discourse. This discourse frames Muslims as potentially threatening, and being in a position of conditionality in which they have to prove themselves worthy, which Rahman refuses to do, thereby rejecting the rules of the discourse itself. This rejection is made possible through the characteristics of irony as contested between ironist and interpreters: Rahman uses, and plays with, the insecurity of stable meaning between himself, the ironist, and interpreters, the audience. By making both statements that explicitly condemn violence and statements that explicitly promote violence, Rahman leaves his audience wondering about the extent of irony that should be attributed to each of these contradictory statements. This urge to determine Rahman's exact position towards violence then highlights the pressure put on Muslims to position themselves. Rahman refuses to securely confirm his intentions, leaving interpreters wondering about the extent to which he condemns violence against white people, and thereby managing to position himself outside of the discourse. This is achieved precisely because the meaning-making practices of irony allow the speaker to withhold their intentions.

6.2 Analysis of Rahman's Use of Irony: Reversing the Discomforting Gaze

Another common use of irony in Rahman's comedy is his way of stereotyping and ridiculing white culture. His former comedy-partner Nazeem Hussain sees this as a way of 'democratising' comedy, by adding jokes about white people to the common jokes about other ethnic groups (Busbridge, 2013). However, it can also be seen as a way of highlighting the problems of generalising from one member of an ethnic group to others. In his piece on *White People*, Rahman addresses the white part of the audience, telling them he has a question for them, in a relatively casual, calm voice. His question however turns out to be "What the hell is your problem?" (Rahman, 2010a). Asking the collectivity of white people such a question seems bizarre, perhaps especially to a white audience. Nevertheless, similarly stereotyping questions or even assertions are commonly posed about other cultures. An example of this stereotyping gaze that is frequently directed at Muslims can be found in a letter by the former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, published in an Australian newspaper. In this letter, Abbott speaks about "the massive problem within Islam", asserting the "clear superiority of our culture", thereby implying the existence of a homogeneous Muslim culture (BBC Australia, 2015). Rahman's question directed at white people then functions in a similar way, as it homogenises and stereotypes white culture.

By dissecting and criticising white culture in this and other pieces, Rahman thus returns the "discomforting gaze" (Busbridge, 2013, p. 473) often directed at non-white cultures. This stereotyping gaze that is normally directed away from white culture becomes perceptible for white people, highlighting its problematic character as it assumes a homogeneous group identity. According to this logic, a random individual is viewed as responsible or is even held accountable for other people's actions and ways of thinking and speaking, simply because they are assumed to be part of a certain (ethnic) group. This problem is also highlighted when Rahman speaks about performing revenge attacks on random white people after the violent nationalist, anti-immigrant Cronulla Riots in Sydney in 2005, via email: "I sent these psycho revenge emails to random white people, I was like 'HEY! What did you do that for?'" (Rahman, 2010a). Rahman thereby reverses the thought pattern of generalisation and attribution of responsibility for an action to a random individual, who was not involved in this action, but happens to belong to the same ethnic or religious group.

Here again, Rahman allows for some ambiguity to remain: In how far is his stereotyping of white people meant ironically? While his pieces do point to the ways in which it is inappropriate to over-generalise and hold individuals accountable for actions they had nothing to do with, his criticisms of white culture seem genuine. Especially in his piece called *Workshops for Whitey*, Rahman

criticises the commonly experienced problems of the way people of colour are often treated by white people, by presenting the titles of workshops he pretends to hold: "Don't compliment me on my English", "Just because I'm at the petrol station doesn't mean that I work here" and "Why do you clutch your handbag when you see me?" (Rahman, 2010b). In this case, his stereotyping of white culture appears to be meant sincerely, leaving audiences to negotiate conflicting meanings. Rahman thus refuses to take the edge off his statements, declining to offer comforting words for white parts of the audience, which would again put white people as the central addressees whose feelings matter the most. Instead, Rahman's ambiguous use of irony leaves his exact intentions and views relatively contestable. The one thing that does become very clear is his rejection of racism, and his dismantling and ridiculing of dominant discourses of domestication and stereotyping. He thus uses irony to target dominant discourse without participating in them – refusing to categorise himself as 'good' or 'bad' Muslim and refusing to provide new ways to generalise about Muslims and people of colour, fully pointing the examining gaze at whiteness. By performing a critical discourse instead of participating in dominant ones, Rahman thus provides an alternative way of examining Australian culture and politics. This is especially enabled by his use of irony, as it allows him to remain at a distance from dominant discourses while also thematising and criticising them.

6.3   Analysis of Rahman's Use of Irony: Impact and Discursive Communities

As it was not possible to empirically ascertain the impact of Rahman's comedy on white Australians, I focus on my own reactions to his acts. My position is that of a white, non-religious German, living within Western Europe. I therefore do not belong to the discursive community that experiences what it is like to be a person of colour or Muslim in Australia, or anywhere else. Instead, I am part of the dominant group that is in need of a Critical Public Pedagogy about race, as a way of addressing our racism. While I do have a strong interest in overcoming my own complicity in racial discrimination and prejudice, I also cannot say that I am free of such prejudice. In fact, many of the things Rahman says about white people, e.g. the fact of clutching your hand bag when seeing a man of colour, are actions that I have performed, regrettably. Many of the thought processes that Rahman criticises come very natural and easily to me, and take a conscious effort to reject as false and oppressive. For example, in passages of his show in which Rahman thematises violence (Rahman, 2015a, 2015b), I perceive myself trying to figure out if he is a 'safe' or a 'dangerous' Muslim. This need of mine to securely position Rahman reflects the logic of domestication. My expectations are ultimately rejected by Rahman, as he does not give clear indications regarding the

meaning intended by him. As I have argued above, this rejection of clear positioning is enabled by the use of statements which leave the extent of intended irony and sincerity unclear. The way I subconsciously attempt to classify Muslims is thereby disrupted and made visible, creating a situation in which it becomes possible to reflect on the ways Muslims are commonly perceived and represented. This reflection can then enable or strengthen a rejection of dominant discourse, which is replaced by a deeper understanding of the ways in which racism against Muslims functions, and the ways in which we are personally participating in this form of oppression.

This way of understanding Rahman's comedy is likely to be shared by a number of other white people. Together, we constitute a larger discursive community with similar ways of interpreting, resulting from "shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and communicative strategies" (Hutcheon, 1995, p. 87). The shared beliefs in this case relate to an interest in dismantling own participation in racism. The discursive community then functions as the basis on which Rahman's work is understood by us. From the perspective of this discursive community, Rahman's show can be seen as highly educational. His engagement and simultaneous ironic distance to dominant, racist discourse continuously affronts the viewer's subconscious participation in this discourse, making their own participation obvious, while also immediately providing a criticism of the discourse. For example, when Rahman points the stereotyping gaze at whiteness, this results in a feeling that it is inappropriate to generalise from some white people's actions to all of white people, and is thus perhaps intended in an ironic way. However, for those who realise their own participation in some of the actions that Rahman criticises, such as complimenting people of colour on their English, the generalising statements about white culture might no longer seem entirely ironic. Again, Rahman's refusal to make obvious the extent of intended irony leaves viewers questioning their participation in an oppressive white culture, as well as reflecting on the ways in which stereotyping functions. Rahman's way of thematising anti-Muslim and other racism in Australia thus disrupts dominant, internalised thought patterns and gives the opportunity to reflect upon and challenge own complicity in the discourse that is criticised.

7   Conclusion

As I have argued, Rahman uses the characteristics of irony to create stand-up comedy that manages to bring to attention dominant ways of speaking and thinking about Muslims, in an unapologetic way, not especially catered to the

needs of white people, thereby disrupting these dominant discourses and high-lighting their flaws. He refuses the demand to position himself as a 'good' Muslim, who is asked to continuously reject violence and criticisms of white culture. This distance is enabled by irony as the intended meaning emerging out of the said and the unsaid cannot be determined clearly, and (white) audiences' wish to position Rahman is thereby disappointed. Audience members who have an interest in dismantling their own racism thereby have the chance to challenge their own participation in discourses that require Muslims to assert and re-assert their position as unthreatening.

It is however also clear that his comedy is no panacea to racism in society, and those who do not want to question their own attitudes are very unlikely to do so just because they see Rahman's critical comedy. Nevertheless, comedy like his can reach the possibilities that Rossing (2015) formulated for the Critical Public Pedagogy of racial humour: to "make visible dominant discourses [and] disrupt common sense" (Rossing, 2015, pp. 3–4). Rahman's comedy can nudge those already critical with regard to racism deeper into criticism of stereotyping and domestication discourses, ideally helping them to identify and point them out to others in everyday life. Through his ironic approach to dominant discourses on race, Rahman thus manages to make visible the flaws of these discourses, enabling anti-racist learning on the part of white audiences.

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