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Beyond the Victim—Perpetrator Paradigm: Overcoming 'Single Stories' through Humor?

ABSTRACT In "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie cautions against one-dimensional conceptualizations of identity, namely, "single stories." While such reductionist portrayals of identity are problematic, they are nevertheless frequently used to classify people along the lines of victims and perpetrators. Even when the status of victimhood is not enforced from the outside as a means to take away agency but self-imposed to gain political power, the consequences of using such reductive labels are potentially disastrous. After all, when showing people in only one way "over and over again, […] that is what they become" (Adichie 2009). The problem with these "stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie 2009). However, identities are manifold and can be influenced by historical circumstances, culture, gender, class, interests, and more. Accordingly, this chapter will focus on how humor, with its inherent transgressiveness, can disrupt and overcome single stories. The analysis will include the play *alterNatives*, the ethnic comedy *The Infidel*, and the short film *Tribes*.

KEYWORDS cultural complexity, humor, identity politics, single stories, stereotypes

Introduction

What are "single stories," and why should they be overcome, whether through humor or otherwise? Single stories refer to a myopic mindset that is translated into a misleading representation of an individual, a location, or a community. Coined by the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her 2009 TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story," the term describes flat and one-dimensional understandings of identity, such as the "starving or uneducated African" or the "abject Mexican immigrant." As the title of

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Adichie's talk suggests, such stories are highly problematic, even dangerous, given that they overshadow the complexities of identity and history for the sake of a simplistic label. A juxtaposition that frequently accompanies such limited perspectives is a politically motivated and reductionist portrayal of identity in terms of victims or perpetrators. While these and other classifications can be imposed externally, as in the above example, this is not necessarily the case. A self-attribution of the victim role, for instance, is a common strategy to gain political power or sympathy. Nevertheless, a lack of enforced external classification does not erase the problem arising from these essentialist portrayals of communities or individuals, namely, the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes. The problem with stereotypes is not "that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie 2009, 13:11–13:23). What this implies is that when "a people [are shown] as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, […] that is what they become" (Adichie 2009, 09:28–09:36). In this vein, both externally and internally attributed victimhood can result in confined identity constructs that are difficult to escape, even when they no longer serve the purpose they were meant to originally.

A discussion revolving around blame and accusations as typical for victim–perpetrator constellations is inevitably deeply rooted in what has become known as identity politics. Identity politics is a "slippery term" (Lichtermann 1999, 136) that has been stretched so far as to include a variety of causes that are only marginally related to the way in which Renee Anspach used it in 1979 when referring to "self- and societal conceptions of disabled people" (Bernstein 2005, 47). While several sources attribute the coinage of the term identity politics to Anspach (Bernstein 2005; Sapkota 2014; Sawitri and Wiratmaja 2021), outside academia the term "was first popularized by the 1977 manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, an organization of queer, Black feminist socialists, and it was supposed to be about fostering solidarity and collaboration" (Táíwò 2022, 10–11). In said manifesto, it was literally connected to an externally imposed victim position that was meant to be overcome:

> This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. (Blackpast 1977, n.p.)

As the following decades have shown, this concept would create a stir in various areas. Since its introduction, the term identity politics has been

> widely used throughout the social sciences and the humanities to describe phenomena as diverse as multiculturalism, the women's movement, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements, separatist movements in Canada and Spain, and violent ethnic and nationalist conflict in postcolonial Africa and Asia, as well as in the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe. (Bernstein 2005, 47)

While the above list may seem extremely diverse at first glance, the obvious common denominator is that all these examples revolve around understandings of the individual within and apart from the community, with each of these movements having emerged from neglected, marginalized positions. To put it another way, these struggles are born out of victim positions that were then utilized to foster unity and derive strength to overcome unfavorable circumstances. This is also true for the Combahee River Collective, whose experiences uniting "these activists—the consistent sidelining and devaluation of their political priorities within different political organizations—were foundational to the stance they developed, which they christened 'identity politics'" (Táíwò 2022, 11).

However, the increase of the use of the term identity politics has also generated critical voices on this politically motivated focus on group affiliation, raising questions such as Paul Lichtermann's "[m]ust identity politics devolve into group selfishness?" (1999, 101). As this question implies, strict and politically motivated identity constructs can entail the creation of fixed frontlines that make it difficult to negotiate between seemingly opposing positions or opinions. This divisional tendency has not gone unnoticed by the originators of the term, either, as elaborated by Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò in connection with Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the collective:

> In the decades since the founding of the Combahee River Collective, instead of forging alliances across difference, some have chosen to close ranks—especially on social media—around ever-narrower conceptions of group interests. Smith says, diplomatically, that many of today's common uses of the concept are "very different than what we intended." (2022, 12)

The reality of identity politics followed by the collective was permeated by entanglements with other cultures with similar plights, which is why the "collective's principled stance on identity politics functioned as a principle of unity, rather than division" (Táíwò 2022, 11):

> [W]e also drew many women of color or who were not Black to us. We had connections with Latinas. We had connections with Asian women […] And they drew us too. Because it wasn't just like one way. When we'd find out

> about things that were happening, we would get ourselves there as well. (Beverly Smith in Táíwò 2022, 11)

Echoing a similar sentiment as Adichie and both Barbara and Beverly Smith, Amartya Sen warns that "the neglect of the plurality of our affiliations and of the need for choice and reasoning obscures the world in which we live" (2007, xiv). This is not only problematic because obscuration can lead to a misrepresentation of people and places, but also because it can potentially lead to violence. Accordingly, even self-imposed single stories can be detrimental, since they falsely portray identities as static and unchanging. What would be a more accurate assessment is that identity "is built up and changes throughout a person's lifetime" (2000, 23), as Amin Maalouf puts it. In other words, identities are in a constant state of transformation. Likewise, our "spheres of knowledge," to use Drew Hayden Taylor's term, which directly influence our perception and presentation of identity, can also be transformed.

Taylor discusses these spheres of knowledge in connection with humor and its limits. After all, humor can potentially be aggressive or oppressive, and thus, reactions to comedies and the like can often culminate in discussions of cultural appropriation or political correctness. In this sense, humor and identity politics may be seen as not-too-distantly related cousins. According to Taylor, the political correctness of a joke can be measured on a ladder of status, meaning people with a higher status are not allowed to joke about people of a lower status. In Taylor's words: "Successful jokes are filled with helium, not lead" (2005, 71). Furthermore, humor can also work in a lateral direction. If the vertical movement is reversed, with a dominant cultural group making fun of an oppressed one, it turns into discrimination. By invoking this theory, I do not wish to buttress the claim that certain forms of humor should be censored. Rather, this theory can be used to examine the tendencies of the humor portrayed. In fact, Taylor himself jokingly describes politically correct humor as boring, given that humor frequently resides at the boundaries of what is considered culturally appropriate. This is where the aforementioned spheres of knowledge come in:

> Within your sphere of knowledge is your life. Everything you have learned, […] everything you have come to understand lies within your sphere. […] In relation to cultural appropriation, it can be argued that you should write only about something within your own sphere of knowledge. Otherwise, you're intruding on another person's (or culture's) sphere. […] The same principle can be applied to the world of politically correct humour. […] Yet there are exceptions. When people take the time to acquire additional knowledge, do their research […] then their spheres of knowledge can grow. (Taylor 2005, 73–4)

This means that if a person lives in a different country or culture than they were born in, for instance, the scope of content they can use to create humor grows, as opposed to one's birthplace or the like giving one the authority to discuss a particular matter. At the same time, however, even when a group or person is linked with a variety of identity categories and impacted by various cultural backgrounds, this fact does not automatically give them representative power. Kwame Anthony Appiah aptly clarifies this by stating that "[h]aving an identity doesn't, by itself, authorize you to speak on behalf of everyone of that identity. The privilege of representing a group has to be granted somehow" (2018a, 19). The reason for this lies in the likely degrees of difference between those belonging to a certain form of individual or collective identity. In Appiah's words, "[w]hile identity affects your experiences, there's no guarantee that what you've learned from them is going to be the same as what other people of the same identity have learned" (Appiah 2018b, n.p.).

What the previous discussion goes to show is why humor—especially when connected to (mis)representations of identity, which it so frequently is—can be considered such a minefield. There are countless examples throughout history where humor 'went wrong,' in some cases even with dire consequences. One of the works chosen for this chapter's analytical part, the play *alterNatives*, for instance, has resulted in a bomb threat against a theater where it was to be staged. As my aim for the following analyses is not to explain how the humor works on a mechanical level but, rather, on an ideological one, the implications of using a particular form of humor are more important than the deconstruction of its underlying structure in this chapter. As opposed to serious discussions about ideologically heavy topics, which can result in irreconcilable disagreements, humor has an advantage in broaching such issues. The alleged lightheartedness that is nowadays attached to humor can make tough topics easier to digest, or help facilitate overcoming unconscious beliefs and assumptions. To say it in the words of Thomas King, a First Nations humorist: "You can get in the front door with humor. You can get into their kitchen with humor. If you're pounding on their front door, they won't let you in" (*Redskins* 2000, 23:54–24:00).

The examples I have chosen below reject the notion of a single story in regard to the representation of personal and social identities. While the topics they raise are edgy and controversial, they do so in the frame of humorous joviality, not serious criticism. However, the possible consequences evolving from the discussion of these topics cannot actually be dismissed as unreal or uncritical in any sense. My examples poke fun at rigid conceptualizations which presuppose a certain 'essence' as the basis

for identity while also emphasizing inherent constructionist processes involved in the creation of identities in the first place. Both of these strategies become evident in the portrayal of a multiplicity of affiliations and perspectives as well as in the humorous critique of narrow representations of identity. This is shown by emphasizing the struggle and ridiculousness of reductionist identity attribution through a series of misunderstandings and misrepresentations between the perceived self and the Other.

Misrepresented Identities in *alterNatives*

Drew Hayden Taylor's *alterNatives* relies heavily on ridiculing stereotypes to reveal the baselessness of the idea of authentic identities. Thematically, the play centers around a well-meant, yet problematic, dinner party organized by Colleen Birk, "a 'non-practicing' Jewish intellectual who teaches Native literature" (Taylor 2009, back cover), who is in a relationship with Angel Wallace, "an Urban Native science fiction writer" (Taylor 2009, back cover). Her underlying motive for organizing the get-together is her desire to meet Angel's former friends and self-fashioned "alterNative warrior[s]" (Taylor 2009, 8)—activists involved in Native identity politics—Bobby Rabbit and Yvonne Stone. The final couple in the group consists of Dale Cartland and Michelle Spencer, Colleen's friend and her husband, who are characterized as a "vegetarian veterinarian" and a "vegetarian computer programmer" (Taylor 2009, 8), respectively. The way in which the six characters are described already hints at the underlying contempt for the belief in the existence of authentic identities, given the various parties represent "clichéd extremes of both societies" (Taylor 2009, back cover).

Moreover, as the descriptions of the various characters imply, ridiculing these stereotypes allows for the creation and dismantling of various victim–perpetrator juxtapositions. We have the possible victim–perpetrator juxtapositions of Natives versus non-Natives, Jews versus non-Jews, vegetarians versus meat eaters, and activists versus passive bystanders who might as well be oppressors. However, none of the characters fulfill the expectations these seemingly one-dimensional roles may raise. In the following pages, the subversion of three single stories will be examined in particular: The victim roles of Jewish and Indigenous people, the perpetrator role of anthropologists, and the opposition of 'good' vegetarians with 'evil' meat eaters.

First, the professor, Colleen, does not actually follow her Jewish faith and is therefore not put in the victim role in connection with her religion. Instead, she (perhaps subconsciously) tries to force her Native Canadian

partner, the writer Angel, into the role of the victim, as she repeatedly tries to convince him to read literature presenting a victimological perspective of Indigenous identity. This is thematized by the latter when Dale is surprised to find *How a People Die*, a book Colleen also teaches in her classes (Taylor 2009, 46), "hidden underneath some fish sticks" (2009, 37) in the freezer. When questioned about the logic behind this cold storage, Angel amusingly replies "[w]here else would you put a dead people but in a freezer" (Taylor 2009, 37), explaining: "All these books you keep giving me have either some quaint legend or contain yet another adventure in an oppressed, depressed and suppressed Native village. If I'm told that I'm oppressed one more time, I'll end up a drunk. Cheers" (Taylor 2009, 37). With this statement, Angel not only criticizes such a narrow perspective of Indigenous identity but also invalidates and ridicules it with the help of another stereotype, Indigenous alcoholism, showing that a focus on the single story of oppression can lead to depression. In this way, not only the inaccuracy of those reductionist stories is revealed but also the intertwining of such beliefs with the everyday lives and convictions of the characters. Thus, the Indigenous victim position is portrayed as deeply entrenched even in higher education. However, it is not through a moralizing statement that the misrepresentation is dismantled but through the use of various forms of humor. The scene abounds with examples of incongruity humor and self-deprecation on Angel's part, in the latter case resulting in a perpetuation of a victim identity when he refers to the single story of Native alcoholics. However, on a more meta level, it clearly represents an offer of feeling superior to an audience that may understand itself as not being prone to such narrow assumptions about identity. And if the opposite is the case, these embedded beliefs can be unraveled in a light-hearted manner, without a moralizing finger being pointed at those who may have believed in them.

Ironically, the attribution of the victim role is not one-sided and not only external, since Angel has been using Colleen and their relationship to absolve himself of the guilt of having told invented stories about his Native people to anthropologists who came to study his culture on his reservation when he was a child. The later activist Bobby was also involved in this. What takes the invention of identity through stories to an entirely different level is Angel and Bobby's childhood involvement in the creation of *The Legends of the Ontario Ojibway*, another book Colleen teaches. When anthropologists visited their village, telling the kids they would give them fifty cents for "every legend [they] told them, […] as long as [Bobby and Angel] promised they were authentic, handed down to [them] by their ancestors" (Taylor 2009, 128), the two 11-year-olds saw it as an opportunity

to make money by inventing legends. There was "[n]ot an ounce of truth in those stories" because their "legends were none of [the anthropologists'] business" (Taylor 2009, 129). As it turns out, the joke is not on the anthropologists, however, but on Indigenous identity, given these stories ended up "being presented as factual and authentic" (Taylor 2009, 129). Thus, in another twist of irony, "Native teachers are teaching this book to Native students," and it is "going to out-live" (Taylor 2009, 130) them all. Accordingly, even completely invented stories and traditions can become single 'truths.' Angel describes this behavior, which Bobby appears not to consider very problematic, as superiority humor that hurts people, citing it as the reason he left his former friends (Taylor 2009, 130–1). Furthermore, Angel's dismissal of these stories as an adult points towards the transformability of identities, showing him as capable of not revising but reevaluating former mistakes and drawing consequences from them. In this sense, his identity is portrayed as a changeable narrative which has to contend with the consequences of a self-attributed faulty single story—an example of unconscious self-victimization. Bobby and Yvonne, on the other hand, are presented as consciously perpetuating subject positions of being victims, their lives deeply entrenched in an oppositional understanding of identity politics.

In a different twist on allegiances, here not of a culturally predetermined kind, Dale's vegetarianism is revealed to be a form of identity that was forced onto him by Michelle, who literally connects her love for him to this lifestyle choice (Taylor 2009, 29), implying the cliché that vegetarianism is connected to being a good person. On the flip side, meat eaters take on a negative role. Because of this narrow perspective Michelle subscribes to, it comes as quite a shock to her that Dale eats a piece of meat later in the play (Taylor 2009, 84). Michelle blows the incident completely out of proportion, asking: "What if I die, Dale? What will you do? Eat me?" (Taylor 2009, 88). While these questions illustrate that she sees herself as a victim whose partner has gone over to 'the dark side,' these exaggerations also make her and her narrow-mindedness the target of the joke. Yet it is not Dale who ultimately gets assigned the role of the perpetrator, but Bobby. Not only does Dale claim that Bobby *made* him try the meat (Taylor 2009, 84) but Michelle later repeats the accusation (Taylor 2009, 88). Bobby, on the other hand, jokingly describes himself as the victim, "the injured party" (Taylor 2009, 88), as he almost burned his hand in the moose pan because of Michelle's scream. Bobby's self-attributed victim role is then further confirmed when Michelle claims it would have "serve[d] [him] right" (Taylor 2009, 89) to get injured, to which he replies "[a]dvocating injury to a fourth world citizen. How politically incorrect" (Taylor 2009, 89). In this

case, however, it is not Bobby who becomes the butt of the joke but, rather, Michelle, as his exaggeration of the circumstances again ridicules her behavior. Moreover, the idea of overly inflated victim positions in terms of identity politics is ridiculed as well, giving the audience the opportunity to laugh at the implied parochialism of such positions. As the play continues, the roles of victim and perpetrator, the single stories as seen from Michelle's perspective, are reversed. Bobby eventually openly criticizes the idea of enforcing vegetarianism by telling Michelle it is wrong "when you pressure people. Don't impose it on the rest of the world" (Taylor 2009, 110). This comment not only applies to the situation at hand but appears to resonate with the play in many ways. After all, the characters seem to constantly attribute identity categories and concomitant expectations of behaviors. The underlying supposition that there is a certain essence or authentically pure form of identity is repeatedly ridiculed and dismantled. Thereby, fixed borders between victims and perpetrators as well as between self and Other disintegrate almost immediately after having been erected and are shown to be substantially dependent on narrative constructs.

Breaking Down Rigid Fronts in *The Infidel*

My second example confronts the idea of self with a perceived Other in terms of ethnicity. In *The Infidel: A Comedy of ~~Epic~~*[1] *Ethnic Proportions*, this entanglement is taken to a completely new level. The comedy revolves around the protagonist Mahmud Nasir, a Muslim from the East End of London, who finds out he was adopted after his mother dies (*The Infidel* 2011, 11:32). What makes this fact problematic for him is that the name his birth parents gave him is Solomon 'Solly' Shimshillewitz, which means he is of Jewish origin. While he is not a particularly devout Muslim (given he drank alcohol before and does not pray regularly, for instance), he considers his religion to be an important cornerstone of his identity. Hence, Mahmud's first reaction to finding out his adoption history is utter disbelief, but once he does know about his secret past, it seems as if a veil has been lifted. Although he has trouble believing it at first, thinking that he even looks exactly like a Muslim, he is forced to recognize his mistaken preconceptions and reductive assumptions when he meets four orthodox Jews at the entrance to a synagogue. Like him, they are middle-aged, bald

1 The crossed-out "Epic" is part of the title as displayed on the English DVD cover (see The Internet Movie Database).

men who are somewhat overweight (*The Infidel* 2011, 17:00–17:25). Thus, physically, they are eerily and incongruously similar to Mahmud. In this scene, the joke is not only on Mahmud's understanding of himself and his cultural background but also on the idea that physical features clearly denote a particular heritage. In terms of theoretical conceptions of ethnicity, the movie hence puts forth an anti-essentialist understanding of ethnic identity which "emphasizes the fluid and contextual meaning of 'ethnic phenomena'" (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 15) and thus rejects the idea of a single story. A further implication is that beliefs (or narratives), whether of a religious or other kind, can overshadow realities and shape them so that they can completely obliterate certain complexities.

Mahmud's inability to deal with his newfound self leads to him befriending the initially antagonistic character (cf. *The Infidel* 2011, 08:35) Leonard 'Lenny' Goldberg, a Jewish cab driver originally from America, and the only Jew Mahmud seems to know. When Lenny finds out about Mahmud's unearthed past, he laughs at Mahmud for having the most Jewish name ever ("Why didn't they just call you Jewy Jewjewjewjew and be done with it?" *The Infidel* 2011, 29:40)—this being an example of superiority humor that works top-down from Lenny's perspective but also functions in a self-deprecatory manner, since he is making fun of his own culture. Nevertheless, Lenny also offers Mahmud important information to advance his search for his lost identity by telling him that a man by the name of Izzy Shimshillewitz used to live around the neighborhood. In an effort to recollect himself and retrace his unknown past, Mahmud calls every Jewish old folks' home in the area and eventually manages to locate his father. However, a rabbi prevents Mahmud from entering his father's room, claiming Izzy is a devout Jew who would have a heart attack if a Muslim man claimed to be his son, a statement which indicates that the fronts between the two religions are equally rigid from either side. When the rabbi asks Mahmud what he knows about Jews, he can only come up with stereotypes his colleagues used earlier, such as having big noses or liking money. This implies that, even though Mahmud is now aware of a further piece of the puzzle that is his identity, he has not yet interrogated his own uncritical assumptions about Jews. Hence, the rabbi sends Mahmud on a mission, saying "what you need to do, and quickly, is think about what it means to be a Jew. And then […] We'll think about letting you in" (*The Infidel* 2011, 32:33–32:47). In this scene, Mahmud could be said to be taking on the role of the victim and the perpetrator simultaneously. On the one hand, he clearly mischaracterizes and lumps together all Jews by describing them with prejudiced single stories. On the other hand, he is excluded from the Jewish community despite being Jewish himself, which suggests at least

a tendency towards victimization. Of course, the latter may be temporary and is triggered by his own questionable actions.

Ironically, when Mahmud enlists Lenny to help him become or at least seem more Jewish, he simply learns to follow other single stories than the one he mentioned to the rabbi. To be more Jewish, a compilation shows Mahmud having to: read a book on serious illness, eat Jewish food, learn how to say 'oy' and 'vey,' listen to Jewish music while feeling its tragic weight, dancing, and wearing a kippah. The last item on the list appears to be the most challenging for Mahmud, as there are several parts in this scene in which he fights Lenny when he is to put the headwear on Mahmud. Interestingly, most of these markers of Jewishness Mahmud is trying to acquire do not center around the Jewish religion *per se*. This is somewhat amended in Lenny's last-minute briefing for Mahmud right before the bar mitzvah:

> [T]hings not to mention: Hitler, Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Hitler, the fact that you're actually a Muslim. […] There may be one or two [prayers], but when in doubt, just do this. [mumbling] […] Have you memorized some Yiddish? […] Just sprinkle in a few words during the conversation—You know, "schlep," "kvetch," "traipse."[2] (*The Infidel 2011*, 44:14–44:45)

This mixing of languages does not work very well for Mahmud. Therefore, when being asked how he likes the event, he resorts to describing it as "very Jewish" when his absurd description of it being "very geschmack […], very traipse" (*The Infidel* 2011, 46:00) results in questionable looks. What this shows is that entering an ethnic community can be difficult despite belonging to it by birth, and it points to the performative aspect of belonging to a community in the first place. Nevertheless, Mahmud's failing Yiddish is quickly forgotten when he is asked to sign a petition for the North London Ladies Eretz Yisrael Guild, which states: "We, the undersigned, believe that the state of Israel […] is unfairly demonized by BBC, ITV, Channel 4, and all other forms of the UK news media […] despite being […] a shining example of democracy and fairness, which simply wants to live […] in peace with its neighbors" (*The Infidel* 2011, 44:14–44:45). Here, the state of Israel is portrayed as a self-perceived victim which is presented as a perpetrator from the outside. Mahmud manages to get out of signing the petition by faking a cramp. This is followed by a prayer, for

2 When Mahmud surmises that the last word is actually English, Lenny simply replies that it "sounds Yiddish" (*The Infidel* 2011, 44:14–44:45). After all, the questionable experiment they both embark on is all about appearances.

which Mahmud puts on a half-burned kippah, again raising questionable looks from the other guests.

The burned religious garment hints at the fact that, throughout the film, Mahmud is not only pushed towards his Jewish side through circumstance, but being a 'real' Muslim is also a major strand of the narrative, with him ending up with ambiguous ties to two extremist religious positions. Thus, the film repeatedly subverts attributions of the status of victim and perpetrator by showing Mahmud unwittingly taking part in identity politics, eventually even in a manner that tends towards radicalism. While it would be an overstatement to describe the film as a thorough representation of complex identities, it still goes beyond the portrayal of single stories, as it plays with the interchangeability of the roles of the victim and the perpetrator, for instance, and their determination by context.

The previously described bar mitzvah scene stands in stark opposition to Mahmud's participation in a 'Support Palestine' rally, which he attends for his son, Rashid, who is hoping to marry the stepdaughter of the famous fundamentalist preacher, Arshad El-Masri, who claims that a "good Muslim should disassociate himself from all disbelievers" (*The Infidel* 2011, 39:38). Whereas the rally seems to include people from various ethnic backgrounds, they do not appear very tolerant, as evidenced when Mahmud removes his taqiyah, due to the hot weather, and reveals a kippah underneath—a moment which fittingly seems to encapsulate Mahmud's identity dilemma. The reaction of the demonstrators is anger, which is why Mahmud pretends to have brought the kippah in order to burn it. He does so, and the action is filmed by El-Masri's men and uploaded on his website. This is the moment when Mahmud is caught quite literally between the fronts, forced to pick one over the other out of desperation. The scene not only illustrates the problematic consequences an exclusionary form of identity politics can entail but also reveals the emotional basis of hatred that goes along with more radical positions. The amusement is induced by emphasizing the impossibility of this choice and the situation in which Mahmud finds himself.

Burning the kippah does get Mahmud praise from El-Masri and his acceptance of the families connecting through marriage when El-Masri, his wife, and his "funny men […] come to see if [Mahmud's family] is Muslim enough" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:01:52). But burning the religious symbol also results in the police and a crowd of offended demonstrators showing up in front of Mahmud's house, understanding his actions as those of a perpetrator of bigotry. The police tell Mahmud that he is "under arrest on suspicion of having performed actions in contravention to the racial and religious hatred act of 2006" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:08:17–01:08:25). Being put on the

spot, Mahmud reveals that he is Jewish, which leads the police to follow the same logic as Taylor's ladder of status on politically correct humor: "I suppose it's all right then, sir. […] [I]t's like that Jackie Mason fella. He can take the piss out of Jews 'cause he's a Jew. We wouldn't arrest him for it, would we?" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:09:57–01:10:04). Hence, what is implied is that lateral humor, about one's own people or those of similar standing in society, is permitted disrespect. While this seems to be a clear-cut case for the police, one of the bystanders claims Mahmud "doesn't even look Jewish," another disagrees, while a third describes Mahmud as "basically a Schvartse" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:10:08–01:10:11), which is "the Yiddish word for 'black' […], [e]quivalent of the English word, nigger" (Urban Dictionary 2011, n.p.). The obvious incongruities in the different interpretations of Mahmud's physical appearance here again underline the understanding of ethnic identity as a social construct, while also foregrounding the context-driven understanding of identities. In terms of humor, the audience is invited to laugh at the incongruous behavior of not only Mahmud but also the police and the bystanders. As opposed to Appiah's warning concerning representational agency when it comes to one's social identity, here, the assumption on the part of the police is that belonging to a certain identity group does allow you to speak for the whole community, even if this results in a negative or reductionist portrayal of a culture or ethnicity.

The claim which interprets Mahmud as being a black person stems from the father of the boys whose bar mitzvah Mahmud crashed earlier. While the father is offended by Mahmud's "religious hatred," his comment ironically ends up getting him arrested by the police for "inciting religious hatred" himself. Again, it seems the categories of perpetrator and victim become senseless and are thus subversively overcome by utilizing a humorous incongruity. In Taylor's terminology, the problem with the father's behavior lies in the fact that his sphere of knowledge not only excludes him from making statements about black people but, when considering the ladder of status, his comment can be described as a descending movement on said ladder, thus exemplifying downwards racism rather than upwards humor.

While Mahmud's coming to terms with his transcultural allegiances is at the center of the film, he is by no means the only 'hybrid' character. The major twist of the movie revolves around the fundamentalist preacher El-Masri, who can supposedly "trace his lineage back to Ibrāhīm ibn al-Walīd, ibn ʿAbdallāh, [an] Imam of Medina of the eighth century" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:04:58). However, El-Masri's ethnic background and thus identity is completely invented, as he was born in 1962 to Scientologist parents in Manchester with the name of "Jimmy Monassa, later to be known as Gary

Page, [Mahmud's] favorite pop star" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:32:36–01:32:38) who faked his death "to avoid a few tax issues and nonpayment of child support to five kids from five different women" (*The Infidel* 2011, 01:32:53–01:32:59). Hence, El-Masri's 'old life' can be seen as incongruous with his new one as a fundamentalist preacher, as he clearly did not use to practice what he now preaches. Accordingly, not only Mahmud but also El-Masri manage to incorporate a version of an Other within themselves, albeit in the latter case only for a short time and under very questionable circumstances. In both cases, this is achieved by speaking a different language (or pretending to do so), wearing a specific form of dress, and adhering to certain customs. Through the juxtaposition of the hybrid identities of Mahmud and El-Masri, the orientalist opposition of East versus West is invalidated. Yet, by depicting and naming various stereotypes about Muslims and Jews, the film may not only dismantle but also perpetuate them, despite its emphasis on the perspectival attribution of the categories of victim and perpetrator. Hence, the success of the complexity of edgy jokes such as these is also largely dependent on the ideological framework of the audience.

Dismantling *Tribes*

The last example I have chosen is Nino Aldi's short film *Tribes*. This film locates the Other within the self in a different manner. At the same time, it juxtaposes literal victims of a crime and its perpetrators only to quickly dissolve this stark opposition again.

The premise of the film already sounds like a joke: An African-American (Jemar), an Arab-American (Amed), and a white man (Kevin) try to rob a subway. As the title suggests, the film ridicules tribalism (Lanier 2020, n.p.), with allegiances always being put into opposition. This is triggered by Jemar not wanting to rob 'his people,' telling a black teenager and an older African-American woman that they are "good" (*Tribes* 2020, 01:36–01:47). Following this, none of the robbers want to rob 'their people.' But when Kevin claims he does not want to rob 'his people,' the other robbers react by saying "we definitely gonna jack your people. […] [T]hey're the ones behind all the suffering" (*Tribes* 2020, 02:48–02:51). Accordingly, they understand themselves as victims of systemic racism. When Kevin brings up a different victim narrative and retorts that "[his] people suffer every day because of [the other robbers' people]" (*Tribes* 2020, 02:51–02:52), all other white people on the subway widen their eyes and shake their heads to openly disagree with Kevin's politically incorrect statement. Therefore, it seems, Kevin paradoxically and incongruously does not have the

backing of 'his people.' Again, we are reminded of the fact that belonging to a certain community does not automatically mean you get to speak on their behalf, especially when your single story only constitutes half the picture. While Kevin's claim would go against Taylor's ladder of status, as it punches down the ladder, the fact that Kevin becomes the one ridiculed by not being supported by anyone else shows that the humor does go up the ladder after all. It is the moral superiority offered to the audience which is the basis for the amusement.

To keep the robbery going, Amed suggests they only "jack who isn't like any of us" (*Tribes* 2020, 03:01–03:04), which results in another incongruity when Kevin adds "like the immigrants" (*Tribes* 2020, 03:05). Amed disregards this suggestion by saying "they're kinda my people" (*Tribes* 2020, 03:11–03:13), a claim Jemar quickly negates, as Amed is from Queens. Amed, however, fortifies his argument by explaining that his whole family consists of immigrants, thereby claiming a transcultural form of allegiance for himself. When Kevin replies with the primordialist notion that one "can't have more than one people" (*Tribes* 2020, 03:19), an African-American passenger refutes this by bringing up her mixed DNA, which includes not only Nigerian but Native American DNA (*Tribes* 2020, 03:21–03:27). Although the proof for multiple identities inherent within one individual comes at a biological level, which may imply that a cultural broadening of one's spheres of knowledge is not possible, the short film ultimately does not stick to this essentialist understanding of 'one's people' in terms of blood relations. Instead, Jemar's incongruously academic-sounding monologue conceptually widens this notion of belonging, as he claims that

> what we see as self-identity goes far beyond genetics or geopolitical demarcation. The American founding doctrine of placing an individual above the collective results in a multifaceted society in which a person can identify with a myriad of subgroups based on factors like regional history, ancestral migration, moral values, or social-economic status, often as a means to elevate themselves above those they deem unfamiliar in opposition. I mean, you know, motherfucker! (*Tribes* 2020, 03:47–04:21)

The last sentence completes the incongruous opposition between street and academic vocabulary. At the same time, the curse word functions as a relief to the seriousness of the topic. Yet, even with this more open concept of belonging, it quickly becomes obvious that determining who one's people are may be a difficult endeavor. In order to decide whom to rob, the three thieves force the passengers at gunpoint to repeatedly divide into two different groups which could also be described as examples of victims and perpetrators: immigrants versus immigrant haters, homosexuals

versus homophobes, rich versus poor. Eventually, this drifts into ridiculous oppositions, such as Starbucks or Nascar Starbucks, paper or plastic, and dualism or nihilism. (The last example actually does not impel anyone to move, which leads Jemar to conclude that none of them read.) Contrary to the robbers' hopes, however, trying to separate the passengers into groups does not clarify who should be robbed and thus become the victims. Rather, forcing the passengers to choose a side illustrates how entangled these communities—and, thus, forms of belonging—really are. None of the passengers can be described with 'a single story,' which further cements the underlying emphasis on the complexities of identities, even when it comes to identity politics. Accordingly, even some heterosexuals end up siding with the homosexuals, since they also "identify with the struggle of being an oppressed minority (*Tribes* 2020, 05:24–05:29). Likewise, one of the passengers is revealed to be a gay man, who is also an immigrant to the US (of presumably Russian decent) but hates immigrants nonetheless and could be described as a personified incongruity. The back-and-forth between picking one side or the other leads the robbers to realize that in none of the oppositions presented are they on the same side. That is, until they come up with "more of a materialist tribalism" (*Tribes* 2020, 07:22), namely, guns or no guns. While this finally separates the robbers from the rest, it also makes Amed realize that "I'm part of something much bigger. All these people, they're not me, but it turns out they kind of are me. We're all connected, I just been choosing not to see. Taking from them hurts me, it hurts in here [pointing at his heart]. I mean, you know, motherfucker!" (*Tribes* 2020, 08:10–08:45). As in the previous monologue, an incongruity is created, although this time between the friendly sentiment of Amed's message and the curse word at the end. Unfortunately, the insight comes too late. At this point, the subway has already stopped, and laser targets are visible on the robbers. Hence, the last example of incongruous humor comes in the form of the opposition "fucked over here, unfucked over there!" (*Tribes* 2020, 09:34–09:37), thereby ironically putting the robbers into a self-induced victim position from which they most likely cannot recover.

Conclusion

To conclude, in all three cases presented above, the complexity and multiplicity of allegiances are emphasized and, thus, the various apparently absolute oppositions are portrayed as senseless, which results in the ridiculing of absolutist understandings—and, thus, single stories—of identity,

culture, and ethnicity. The entanglements between the various communities and individuals are so immense that, in a sense, the Other might as well be the self. In this vein, the underlying oppositional tendency of identity creation is revealed to be a construct rather than an unchanging reality. Accordingly, neither the films nor the play subscribe to a rigid understanding of belonging that presses an individual or a group into certain containers of allegiance. Rather, they underline not only that allegiances are frequently connected with political or other strategies of self-assignment but that they are also highly dependent on performance, interpretation, and context. Hence, the comedic examples demonstrate that identities are greatly dependent on perspective and narrativizations. What this shows is that there is always more than a single story.

In terms of humor, the way in which single stories constantly blank out a variety of complexities is repeatedly highlighted. Whether reductionist understandings of identity can be overcome by humor, however, depends largely on the audience that decrypts the amusing depictions with which it is confronted. Jokes and other forms of humor can frequently not only be understood in one way, and thus do not exemplify single stories either. What might be a joke to some may be an insult to others. Furthermore, even in being humorously dismantled, stereotypes and beliefs run the danger of being reproduced, depending on who the audience of said humor is. If certain intricacies of humor are misunderstood or not even detected, the possibility remains of laughing at the alleged 'truth' of the stereotype rather than its dismantling. Yet such possible setbacks do not take away from the potential that humor offers for engaging difficult topics with relative ease, thereby creating at least the possibility of transforming narrow mindsets in a playful manner.

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