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## Comedy's social (ir)responsibility: Saturday Night Live's response to Donald Sterling scandal

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**COMEDY'S SOCIAL (IR)RESPONSIBILITY:  
*SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE'S* RESPONSE  
TO DONALD STERLING SCANDAL****Key words:** comedy, satire, humor, semantic scripts, GTVH, racial profiling, *Saturday Night Live*

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) aired an episode whose two segments ('The Cold Open' and 'Weekend Update' sketches) served as a satirical comment to a scandal that had shaken the American sports world, i.e. release of recordings in which Donald Sterling (the then owner of NBA's Los Angeles Clippers) made a series of racist remarks about African-Americans in a telephone conversation with Vanessa Stiviano. In this article, I would like to focus on the humorous tackling of the racial tensions with SNL's response to the Sterling scandal as a case study. The aim is to analyze two segments of the episode aired on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 through the prism of Attardo and Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) with Raskin's theory of opposite semantic scripts as well as other five Knowledge Resources (KRs) postulated by GTHV in the center, and applying a social dimension to the meanings conveyed in the sketches in question.

Since April, 2014, American comedy (SNL included) has had to deal with racism on regular, almost day-to-day basis, not only because racism is an ever-present problem of American society, but also because racism dominated the news stories, which resulted (among others) in SNL's attempt to satirize Donald Sterling. In *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart repeatedly and very seriously spoke on "systemic racism" when referring to the shooting of Michael Brown in

Ferguson<sup>1</sup>, the death of Eric Garner<sup>2</sup>, riots in Baltimore<sup>3</sup> or a video recording of college fraternity members chanting a racist song<sup>4</sup>. Seth Meyers, in his *Late Night with Seth Meyers* aired on February 10<sup>th</sup> 2015, was criticized by Hillary Clinton who, when asked about Trump's presidential campaign, said,

“You know, I have to say, Seth, I no longer think he's funny, (...) I think for weeks, you know, you and everybody else were just bringing folks to hysterical laughter and all of that. Now he has gone way over the line, and what he's saying now is not only shameful and wrong, it's dangerous.”<sup>5</sup>

Chris Rock while hosting the Oscars ceremony in February, 2016 stated bluntly to the uneasy audience “Is Hollywood racist? (...) You're damn right Hollywood's racist”<sup>6</sup>. While Stewart, Meyers, Rock and many others turned to a serious tone as if sensing or actually admitting that comedy alone with its implied messages may not be enough to deal with racially sensitive issues, *SNL* stuck to what the show does best – satire, only in the case of the episode in question, as my claim is, *SNL*'s best was its worst due to misfortunate use of semantic scripts and the meanings they carried.

When Louis C.K. opened his *Louis C.K.: Live at the Beacon Theater* stand-up special, he addressed his audience with a couple of rules. One of them was that if anyone in the audience had something to say, they should leave the theater, go home and kill themselves as his (C.K.'s) performance had nothing to do with them; it was a rhetorical performance<sup>7</sup>. What C.K. did was to detach his verbal, comedic performance from opinions, beliefs and prejudices found in real life; his message was ‘do not read too much into what I'm saying, I'm saying these things just to make you laugh’. While such detachment of comedy from reality is possible in the case of stand-up performance, the fact is that, in large, comedy is a form of art and therefore it must be included in the discussion on the utilitarian role of art as opposed to the concept of “art for art's sake”. A comedians job is to make their audience laugh, whether via a stand-up performance, a TV sitcom, or even a parody. While a parodic text can aim at ridiculing the source it parodies (*Scary Movie* ridicules the conventions of a ‘teen horror’ movie like having a ‘hot cheerleader’ as one of the first victims of a serial killer), it is possible to claim that the parody's creators used the source text as a ‘creative fodder’ for their jokes. However,

<sup>1</sup> <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/ufqez/race-off>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/a9bg2k/the-eric-garner-grand-jury-decision>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/svt15r/baltimore-on-fire>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/riop51/the-brotherhood-of-the-traveling-chants---to-catch-a-prejudice>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/11/hillary-clinton-talks-trump-with-seth-meyers-i-no-longer-think-he-s-funny.html>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/feb/29/chris-rock-at-the-oscars-youre-damn-right-hollywoods-racist>.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2112999/?ref\\_=nm\\_fimg\\_wr\\_8](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2112999/?ref_=nm_fimg_wr_8).

the abovementioned, comedy's distance from reality does not apply to satire. Political satire, as the *SNL*'s sketches in question ought to be viewed as, aims at criticism through mockery of real-life events and people. Given the above, satire, by its nature, is a 'committed rhetorical act'. Żygulski demonstrates the connection between satire and reality when writing about comedy as a tool of resistance against totalitarian rule:

"In the practice of political life, it is a fact long known that within a country, comedy is the oppositions favorite weapon [...]. Comedy [...] is intellectual weapon, often used as a substitute of a different weapon that one does not possess. Since its (comedy's) function is critical and not constructive, comedy is used to point out flaws, deficiencies, shortcomings, and incompetence and ridiculing them." [Jędrzejko 1997, 81; translation XXX]

Satire, just like any form of art, creates meanings and messages within the scripts it uses. The meanings and messages are received by audiences of various cultural competences and different levels of detachment from the jokes' subject matter. This situation results in polisemic reception of any joke. Given the above, satire must take into account what messages it creates (regardless of the script it uses) and acknowledge their potential impact on recipients.

Raskin, in his original, 1979 theory of opposing semantic scripts, focuses on the linguistic aspect of HOW humor is created through semantic scripts while leaving the WHAT we laugh at untouched. Although Raskin's interest lies in the linguistic mechanisms, he does mention the aspect of content. "It is argued (...) that our understanding of a sentence or a calculation of its semantic interpretation (meaning) depends on the two sources, the lexicon and our knowledge of certain things about the world we live in." [Raskin 1979, 329]. The existence of semantic interpretation opens any text (jokes included) up to polysemy understood as "having or characterized by many meanings"<sup>8</sup>. It is the semantic interpretation of the meaning of the satirical sketches in question that is the focus of my study which aims at applying structural analysis of individual jokes in order to distinguish a collective hypertext stemming from the juxtaposed content of thematically connected jokes.

The main hypothesis of this study is that, while the opposite semantic scripts mechanism, as well as other Knowledge Resources postulated by GTVH that are required to create individual jokes, generate humor regardless of the joke's content (whether a joke is funny, offensive, sexist is subjective), the KRs involved in individual jokes also generate a hypertext which reveals itself through a juxtaposition of the contents of jokes diffused over a number of separate, yet, in terms of content, connected sketches. Moreover, the meanings carried by individual jokes and by the hypertext can differ in message, i.e. there can be a difference between the meaning of an individual joke and the

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=polysemy&submit.x=35&submit.y=21>.

collective meanings of the hypertext. The awareness of the existence of the hypertext bears a significance when it comes to satirical jokes on sensitive, real-life issues as it may happen (as in case of the *SNL* episode in question) that what was to be ridiculed in individual jokes, in the hypertext will be complimented (white people). Analogically, what was to be defended will be diminished (black people).

The above-mentioned KRs found in Raskin and Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) refer to, both, the comedian and the audience and their focus is on the structure and the content of the joke. Attardo and Raskin distinguish six KRs that are necessary for humor to occur and "must be tapped into when creating a joke" [Ruch, Attardo, Raskin 1993, 124]. The KRs are:

**1. Script opposition (SO)** – "cognitive structures (that) may constitute what is loosely labeled (...) "common sense" and may represent (...) knowledge of a number of certain routines, standard procedures, basic situations, etc., or (...) knowledge of what people do in certain situations (...)." [Raskin 1979, 329] The conditions are that: a) the two or more scripts must overlap i.e. "the joke must be interpretable, fully or in part, according to two different scripts" [Ruch, Attardo, Raskin 1993, 124] and b) the scripts must be opposed "according to a list of basic oppositions, such as real/unreal, possible/impossible, etc." [Ruch, Attardo, Raskin 1993, 124]

**2. Language (LA)** – the actual verbalization of the joke, resulting in its text.

**3. Narrative strategy (NS)** – the narrative organization in which the joke is cast, e.g. framed narrative, a dialogue, a riddle, etc.

**4. Target (TA)** – the butt of the joke.

**5. Situation (SI)** – "The situation of a joke can be thought of as the 'props' of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc." – introduces the context.

**6. Logical mechanism (LM)** – the manner in which two scripts of a joke are put together: juxtapositions, errors in reasoning, reversals, etc. [Ruch, Attardo, Raskin 1993, 124-125].

What follows is an analysis of the Knowledge Resources (KR) used to create the two sketches that referred to the Sterling scandal as well as the meanings the scripts carried. In the analysis, each joke is divided according to the opposite scripts (SO) marked by numerals ((1) and (2), (3) and (4)...) and described through the prism of those KRs that are connected with the content and meanings created within the joke (LA, TA, SI). The structural analysis is followed by the content analysis in order to present the collective message of the hypertext created by the individual jokes. Since the study focuses on *SNL*'s satirical comment to real-life events, first, I present a brief account of the 'Sterling scandal' and the people who were involved in it.

The whole story started with a photograph posted on Instagram by Vanessa Stiviano. In the photograph, Stiviano and her friend pose with an NBA legend, Earvin "Magic" Johnson (African-American). One might say that it was just another Instagram selfie with a celebrity, unless one is Donald Sterling (Jewish-American). When this billionaire, the then owner of the NBA's Los Angeles Clippers saw the photograph, he was displeased, to say the least. It must be noted at this point that, at the time when the photograph was posted, Stiviano was involved in an intimate relationship with Sterling. However, it was not the intimacy that Sterling was concerned with; it was Johnson's skin color. In a conversation over a telephone, Sterling basically told Stiviano he did not want her to flaunt with black people. Stiviano removed the photograph in question from her Instagram profile, however, the conversation itself was recorded and, through an unknown source, the recording came into possession of TMZ – a celebrity news/gossip website (Stiviano claims she had nothing to do with it). TMZ published the recording of the conversation between Sterling and Stiviano on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014. In the recording, the following racist remarks uttered by Sterling can be heard:

(...) It bothers me a lot that you want to broadcast that you're associating with black people. Do you have to? (...) You can sleep with [black people]. You can bring them in, you can do whatever you want. The little I ask you is not to promote it on that ... and not to bring them to my games. (...) I'm just saying, in your lousy f\*\*\*\*\* Instagrams, you don't have to have yourself with, walking with black people. (...) – ...Don't put him [Magic] on an Instagram for the world to have to see so they have to call me. And don't bring him to my games. (...)<sup>9</sup>

What followed the release of the recording was a torrent of criticism towards Sterling by virtually everyone in and around the NBA whether in writing or spoken on air, on the radio, television, and the Internet.

What was emphasized, was Sterling's ignorance and his 'plantation owner' mentality. In an interview on *CBS This Morning*, Oprah Winfrey referred to Sterling's remarks as reflecting his "plantation mentality in the 21st century" which exact same words had been used by Elgin Baylor (former star of the Los Angeles Lakers and a Clippers vice-president of basketball operations in the years 1986-2008) in his lawsuit against Sterling in 2010<sup>10</sup>. Winfrey's opinion has its confirmation in opinions expressed by Sterling in the infamous conversation with Stiviano:

(...) STIVIANO: Do you know that you have a whole team that's black that plays for you.

<sup>9</sup> Transcript by TMZ found at: <http://www.tMZ.com/2014/04/26/donald-sterling-clippers-owner-black-people-racist-audio-magic-johnson/>.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/29/oprah-donald-sterling-plantation\\_n\\_5232019.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/29/oprah-donald-sterling-plantation_n_5232019.html).

D. STERLING: Do I know? I support them and give them food. And clothes. And cars. And houses. Who gives it to them? Do I know that I have – who makes the game? Do I make the game or do they make the game? Is there 30 owners that created the league? (...)"<sup>11</sup>

Before the first game that followed the publication of the recordings, Sterling's team, the Clippers (mostly African-Americans) came out to the pre-game warm-up wearing the t-shirts inside-out with the team's logo covered as a sign of protest against Sterling. A similar form of protest was performed by the players of the Miami Heat, who, in the spirit of solidarity, also wore their t-shirts inside-out and put on black socks and headbands.<sup>12</sup>

The newly appointed NBA commissioner Adam Silver, after a brief internal investigation, imposed upon the Clippers owner the most severe penalty in the league's history: a life-time ban from the NBA and a \$2.5 million fine. During a press conference that took place on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Silver announced:

"The views expressed by Mr. Sterling are deeply offensive and harmful; that they came from an NBA owner only heightens the damage and my personal outrage.(...), effective immediately, I am banning Mr. Sterling for life from any association with the Clippers organization or the NBA. Mr. Sterling may not attend any NBA games or practices. He may not be present at any Clippers facility, and he may not participate in any business or player personnel decisions involving the team. He will also be barred from attending NBA Board of Governors meetings or participating in any other league activity. I am also fining Mr. Sterling \$2.5 million, the maximum amount allowed under the NBA constitution. These funds will be donated to organizations dedicated to anti discrimination and tolerance efforts that will be jointly selected by the NBA and its Players Association."<sup>13</sup>

Silver also added that he "will urge the Board of Governors to exercise its authority to force a sale of the team and will do everything in my power to ensure that that happens."<sup>14</sup>

The scandal revived the national debate in America on racism in sports dominated by black athletes, and Sterling kept making controversial public announcements in various programs. For example, in an interview with Anderson Cooper on CNN's *360° with Anderson Cooper*. In an interview with Cooper, Sterling attempted to offer an apology for his "mistake", however, when asked whether he had apologized to Johnson, he stated "If I said anything wrong, I'm sorry, (...) He's a good person. I mean, what am I going to say? Has he done everything he can do to help minorities? I don't think so. But I'll say it, he's great. But I don't think he's a good example for the children

<sup>11</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1405/12/acd.01.html>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.si.com/nba/point-forward/2014/04/28/miami-heat-protest-donald-sterling-clippers-bobcats>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.nba.com/2014/news/04/29/adam-silver-news-conference-transcript/>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nba.com/2014/news/04/29/adam-silver-news-conference-transcript/>.

of Los Angeles.”<sup>15</sup> *Sports Illustrated* deemed it “the clumsiest public apology in history.” [Jenkins 2014, 70]

The scandal erupted at the worst possible time. Sterling-owned Clippers team were in the middle of the first round of the NBA Play-Offs competing against Oklahoma City Thunder. The predominantly African-American team members, shocked by their owner's slurs, lost the series. Also, in the aftermath of the scandal, Leon Jenkins, who at the time of the scandal, served as the president of the Los Angeles chapter of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) resigned from his job. As it was revealed, in 2009, Jenkins had honored Sterling with a Life Achievement Award for Promoting Civil Rights. As it was later revealed, the same year Sterling reached a settlement in court in a case against him for discrimination.<sup>16</sup> Surprisingly to some, on May 15th, 2014, Jenkins was to honor Sterling with another Life Achievement Award at the organization's 100th Anniversary Gala. After the scandal had broken out, NAACP decided not to grant the award to Sterling and rejected his donation of \$10 million. Soon after, Jenkins announced that in order to “(...) separate the Los Angeles NAACP and NAACP from the negative exposure I (Jenkins) have caused the NAACP, I respectfully resign my position as President of the Los Angeles NAACP.”<sup>17</sup>

All the events described above took place prior to May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014 when the episode of *SNL* in question was aired. Therefore, what happened to Sterling after May 3<sup>rd</sup> is of no interest to this study. The two *SNL* sketches, which are the focus of this study” aimed at satirical criticism of Sterling by making use of stereotypical jokes on Sterling himself and other individuals involved in the scandal. The supposed intention of the sketches that featured stereotypical versions of white and black characters that were based on real-life individuals was to criticize and ridicule Sterling's racist views in a comedic manner.

The episode in question opens (as always) with the ‘Cold Open’ section, which, in this case, is a sketch featuring a fictional press conference organized by Adam Silver and Donald Sterling, therefore the SI KR of this fragment is ‘Mock press conference after a scandal involving racism’.

First speaks, Taran Killam as NBA's commissioner, Adam Silver:

“(1) Thank you for being here. After hitting Mr. Sterling with the toughest possible penalty, I hope that we've brought this ugly chapter to a close. This has been a terrible time for all of us in the NBA but, (2) frankly, it's been a great time for me, commissioner Adam Silver. I have gotten more high-fives from random black people this week than any week in my life. And I have learned many wonderful, new handshakes.”

<sup>15</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/11/us/donald-sterling-interview/>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/02/us/los-angeles-naacp-sterling-controversy/>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.naacp.org/press/entry/naacp-statement-resignation-of-los-angeles-president-jenkins>.



- (1) – Real: Difficult time in the NBA, everybody’s a ‘looser’.  
 (2) – Exaggerated Real: Great time for the commissioner, Silver’s a ‘winner’.  
 LA – very formal  
 TA – none, or Silver’s awkwardness towards ‘black’ culture.

After his opening puns, Silver/Killam introduces Donald Sterling to announce that he (Sterling) is going to sell LA Clippers – no jokes. Sterling/Moynihan, who is welcomed to the stage by a nervous laughter of the audience (laughter induced by Moynihan’s comedy chops, rather than the character he is portraying), opens with:

“(3) Thank you Adam Silver, (4) who I thought was one of us.”

- (3) – Real: Silver and Sterling are Jewish.  
 (4) – Unreal: Silver is a traitor.  
 LA – sarcastic  
 TA – Sterling expecting “Jewish” solidarity from Silver.

“(5) Ladies and gentlemen. Oh God! This whole week has been such a terrible ordeal, you know, for so many people, but let’s just focus on the real victim here. It’s me. My reputation has gotten a real black eye, (6) which we all know, is the worst kind of eye.”

- (5) – Expected: Sterling’s reputation got a “black eye”.  
 (6) – Unexpected: ‘black’ equals ‘bad’  
 LA – wordplay on the adjective ‘black’  
 TA – black people

“(7) And through all this pain, I have decided to sell the Los Angeles Clippers for the bargain price of one billion dollars. I know, that sounds like a lot of money (...) but, remember, the NBA has already fined me \$2.5 million (8) so I’m only gonna be clearing like 998 mills so it’s nothing.”

- (7) – Penalty – Sterling is forced to sell the team and pay a fine.  
 (8) – Award – Sterling’s wealth will grow. The “plantation owner” aspect of Sterling’s personality.  
 LA – Dismissive expression of financial superiority  
 TA – Ironic outcome of the penalty; Sterling will prosper on his racism.

“(9) Now, I hope to use every penny to repair my relationship with the black community, especially with Magic Johnson (10) who’s clearly one of the good ones.”

- (9) – Real: Sterling did offend Magic Johnson.  
 (10) – Unreal: there are only few “good, black people”.  
 LA – clumsy apology  
 TA – black people

“(11) So I've been learning about your history, today I watched *Roots* on TV (12) and let me tell you that Questlove is a very talented boy.”

(11) – Plausible: attempt to overcome ignorance

(12) – Less plausible: Sterling confuses *Roots*, the TV series with *The Roots*, a music group whose leader a man called Questlove is

LA – wordplay on the proper noun 'Roots'

TA – Sterling's lack of interest in African-American culture/heritage.

“(13) I have also agreed to put up 3 million dollars to do my own version of the Million Men March, so this June, Donald Sterling's Million Men Cruise will take thousands of black men on a wondrous journey to the beautiful Ivory Coast of Africa (14) to never come back.”

(13) – Expected: attempt of redemption

(14) – Unexpected: attempt of removal

LA – purposefully misleading

TA – black people

Moynihan/Sterling informs the audience that he has parted ways with his half black mistress, Miss Stiviano, and invites to the podium a girl named Keyla – a character based on Sterling's PR-stunt girlfriend, Raquel Lee<sup>18</sup> – who is “three-quarters black.” The character played by Sasheer Zamata says:

“(15) Listen, I know you're all like 'She don't have no dignity!'. (16) You know what I do have? A new Lexux IS convertible!”

(15) – Expected: moral poverty

(16) – Unexpected: material prosperity

LA – mock dialogue, stereotypically 'black' – “don't have no”

TA – Keyla's ethics.

“(17) You think I care what you all think of me? (18) I have sex with this. (points to Sterling) Feels like a leather tent collapsed on me. (19) But I'm paaaid. Later haters.”

(17) – Plausible – lack of shame

(18) – Less plausible – shame

(19) – Plausible – lack of shame

LA – offensive, arrogant

TA – Sterling's physique and Keyla's ethics.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2692224/Donald-Sterling-new-girlfriend-Raquel-Lee-leave-Beverly-Hills-restaurant-separately-billionaire-called-wife-pig-court.html>.

Sterling's next guest is Dennis Rodman, a former NBA player who in real life, in March 2014, "befriended" the North-Korean leader, Kim Jong-Un, and called him a "good guy"<sup>19</sup>. Jay Pharoah as Rodman goes:

"(20) Hey, hey, listen. This (Sterling) is a good man, he's real cool, you all gotta stop this (21) I know because I'm, above all, a good judge of character,"

(20) – Expected: One friend defending another

(21) – Unexpected: The one friend (Rodman) is delusional.

LA – protective, stereotypically 'black'

TA – Rodman

"(22) and this is one of the greatest men I've ever met." (23) (at this point Rodman/Pharoah touches Sterling's/Moynihan's shoulder, to which the reaction of the later one is that of disgust.)

(22) – Affection – Rodman defending Sterling

(23) – Rejection – Sterling disgusted by physical contact with Sterling.

LA – non-verbal

TA – Sterling

"(24) right up there with my main man, Kim Jong-Un." (Rodman/Pharoah starts speaking mock-Korean, the subtitles read: (25) "I love you, soul brother.")

(24) – Real: Rodman did call Kim Jong-Un a "good guy".

(25) – Exaggerated: Rodman and Kim Jong-Un are soulmates.

LA – emulated Korean

TA – Rodman and Kim Jong-Un

Rodman/Pharoah blows a kiss and leaves the podium. Sterling thanks Rodman and states:

"(26) Also, I am so hurt that this ordeal has damaged my close relationship with the LA chapter of the NAACP. Oh my gosh, I love the NAACP, (27) and not just because they are the only people who freely let me use the word 'colored'."

(26) – Expected: Sterling likes NAACP.

(27) – Unexpected: Sterling likes NAACP for racist reasons.

LA – apologetic and politically incorrect

TA – NAACP and Sterling

Finally, Moynihan/Sterling invites to the podium, the president of LA NAACP Leon Jenkins, played here by Keenan Thompson, to

(28) award Sterling with the second Life Achievement Award after accepting Sterling's donation of \$10 million. (29) A clearly embarrassed Jenkins/Thompson says:

<sup>19</sup> <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2013/03/04/kth-dennis-rodman-controversial-new-friend/>.

“...look...come on...it's 10 million...I mean...come on...look...What? I'm not gonna take the money? You all wanna go to college!...look....”

(28) – Expected: Jenkins honors Sterling.

(29) – Unexpected: Jenkins is embarrassed to honor Sterling.

LA – awkward, ashamed, ‘black’

TA – Jenkins

The ‘Cold Open’ segment ends with a trademark shout of “Live from New York, it's Saturday night!” and is followed by a series of unrelated sketches, some of which feature African-American characters, mostly only by name, as in the sketch ‘Beygency’ in which a man is hunted by a mysterious organization for not quite liking one of Beyonce's songs. After the mid-show, musical performance by Coldplay, comes the ‘Weekend Update’ segment, which is a mock-news sketch featuring satirical comments to various events of the previous week. At ‘Weekend Update’ the Sterling scandal and its characters are referred to again. The SI KR of the first three jokes is ‘Mock news broadcast after a scandal involving racism’.

The segment starts with one of two hosts, Collin Jost, informing the audience that:

“(30) LA Clippers owner, Donald Sterling, was banned for life from the NBA for making a series of racist remarks, (31) after which, I'm guessing, he made a few more.”

(30) – Actual – Sterling was penalized.

(31) – Potential – The penalty made Sterling even more racist.

LA – formal, news-like

TA – Sterling

Jost follows this joke with another, this time on Stiviano:

“(32) V. Stiviano, the ex-girlfriend of Donald Sterling continues to insist that she did not release the recordings of Donald Sterling's racist comments (33) Though, I don't know if I'd trust the woman whose name sounds like she got it from how often she is a defendant.” (on the screen the viewers can see a file marked ‘THE PEOPLE V. STIVIANO’).

(32) – Actual: Stiviano denied releasing the recordings to TMZ.

(33) – Suspicious: Stiviano cannot be trusted.

LA – formal, news-like turning into personal and mocking

TA – Stiviano

Right after the Stiviano joke, Jost's co-host, Cecily Strong, informs the viewers that:

“(34) President Obama’s approval rating this week fell to all-time low of 41%, (35) though his jeans are still at all-time high.” (The punch line of the joke is accompanied by an image of Barack Obama wearing jeans reaching almost his armpits.)

(34) – Plausible: Obama’s disappointing as president.

(35) – Less plausible: Obama is a bad dresser.

LA – formal, contrastive “low/high”

TA – Barack Obama

After a few non-Sterling and non-race jokes, Jost delivers the news that Lupita Nyong’o, a black actress who had won an Oscar for her performance in a slavery-themed movie *12 Years A Slave*, was chosen by ‘People’ magazine as ‘2014 Most Beautiful Person in The World’. What is striking, is the fact that Nyong’o’s image does not appear on the screen, unlike in the case of previous pieces of news when the audience was presented with the images of Sterling, Stiviano and Obama. While the dainty Nyong’o’s image is not presented on the screen, the audience is introduced to Leslie Jones, an African-American comedian of a rather gargantuan posture. The SI KR of this segment is ‘Mock “Image expert” commenting on black beauty after a scandal involving racism’.

The loud, vivid and expressive Jones, serves the role of an ‘image expert’ who is to comment on Nyong’o’s most beautiful title. Jones, in her first words, congratulates Nyong’o and states she is waiting for the People magazine put out the “Most Useful List” as she would shine there. When asked by Jost to elaborate, Jones, referring to Jost as ‘delectable Caucasian’, offers a hypothetical situation:

“(36) If you walked into a club and saw me and Lupita standing at the bar who would you pick?” Not waiting for the answer she states that Lupita would be Jost’s choice and continues: “(37) Let me ask you this, if you was on a parking lot, and three Crips [Los Angeles gang, with primarily African-American members] is about to whoop your ass, who you gonna pick then?” Jost agrees that it would be Jones.

(36) – Expected: Lupita is more attractive to men.

(37) – Unexpected: Jones is more useful to men.

LA – expressive, ‘black’

TA – Jones and Jost

Jones goes on:

“(38) And that’s my point, the way we view black beauty has changed. Look at me, see, see, I’m single now (39) but in the slave days, I would’ve never been single. I’m six feet tall and I’m strong, Colin, STRONG!”

- (38) – Expected: Jones doesn't match modern beauty standards.  
(39) – Unexpected: Jones would have been better off in the "slave days".  
LA – expressive  
TA – Jones

When confronted by Jost, whether she would prefer to be a slave, Jones replies:

"(40) No, that's not what I'm saying, I do not wanna be a slave. Hell, I don't like working for you white people right now (41) and you all pay me."

- (40) – Expected: Black person doesn't like white employers.  
(41) – Unexpected: White employers pay the black person.  
LA – expressive, 'black'  
TA – White employers

"(42) I'm just sayin that back in the slave days, my love life would have been way better. (43) Master would've hook me up with the best brother on the plantation, and every nine months I'd be in a corner having a super baby. Every nine months I'd be just poppin' them out, just: Shaq, Kobe, LeBron (all NBA stars), Kimbo Slice (boxing fighter), Sindhbad (comedian)."

- (42) – Expected: in the past men would have looked at Jones differently.  
(43) – Unexpected: Jones's physique would guarantee her regular sexual encounters.  
LA – expressive, gestures, 'black'  
TA – none

"(44) I'm saying I would be the number one Slave Draft pick. All of the plantations would want me. I'd be on television like LeBron announcing which plantation I was gonna go to. (45) I would be like: I'd like to take my talent to South Carolina. I do believe that there's gonna be a lot of opportunities there for me."

- (44) – Possible: Jones would have been a slavery star like LeBron in basketball – a valuable commodity.  
(45) – Impossible: mockery of LeBron's 2010 "the Decision"<sup>20</sup> – a slave could choose where to live.  
LA – expressive, 'black'  
TA – none

The sketch ends with Jones exclaiming, "Now, I can't even get a brother to take me for a cheap dinner. I mean, damn, can a bitch get a beef bone? CAN A BITCH GET A BEEF BONE?!" The conversation between Jost and Jones

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<sup>20</sup> [http://espn.go.com/blog/truehoop/post/\\_/id/17853/lebron-james-decision-the-transcript](http://espn.go.com/blog/truehoop/post/_/id/17853/lebron-james-decision-the-transcript). – In 2010, in a one-hour ESPN Special, LeBron James announced what was dubbed "The Decision" that he would be leaving Cleveland Cavaliers team and joining the Miami Heat.

closes the ‘Weekend Update’ segment, which is the second, and last, sketch in the episode that refers directly to, either the Sterling scandal itself, or the issues of race in general.

The intention of the two *SNL* sketches in question was to satirize actual events, people and behaviors within a context of racial inequality, differences and tensions. Although the jokes used in the sketches were aimed at ridiculing stereotypical and prejudicial attitudes towards African-Americans, the hypertext created by juxtaposing the content of the jokes combined with the Knowledge Resources that *SNL*’s audience and viewers were equipped with reveal the following typology of the characters presented in the two sketches in question.

**Table 1**

Typology of characters in the ‘Donald Sterling’ sketches

WHITE CHARACTERS	BLACK CHARACTERS
<p>Speak proper English</p> <p><b>Adam Silver</b> – winner who rejects ethnic solidarity with Sterling for a greater cause, defender of justice, knight in a shining armor, “basketball’s righteous chief [Jenkins 2014, 74]”</p> <p><b>Donald Sterling</b> – ossified racist, ignorant, repulsive and despicable; yet wealthy and influential mogul with a ‘plantation owner’ mentality</p> <p><b>Collin Jost</b> – pretty boy</p> <p><b>‘White employers’</b> – foolish but in the controlling position</p>	<p>Frequently use stereotypical, ‘black’ English</p> <p><b>Keyla</b> – morally corrupted gold-digger</p> <p><b>Dennis Rodman</b> – delusional mad man, befriended America’s enemy</p> <p><b>Leon Jenkins</b> – embarrassed but submissive sell-out</p> <p><b>Vanessa Stiviano</b> – not to be trusted regular defendant</p> <p><b>Lupita Nyong’o</b> – invisible, most beautiful person</p> <p><b>Leslie Jones</b> – most useful person yearning for slave days who dislikes her employers</p> <p><b>Barack Obama</b> – disappointing president and bad dresser</p> <p><b>African-American athletes</b> – products of genetic matching (eugenics)</p>

The typology presented above seems to confirm the claim that a hypertext resulting from a juxtaposition of ‘diffused jokes’ can result in a meaning opposite to the intended one, especially when, next to HOW a joke is created and WHAT we laugh at, the element of WHEN is taken into consideration. For example, when Leslie Jones’s sketch is seen separately and out of the racially sensitive context, the fact that an African-American woman “praises” slave days is could be seen as a ‘humor enhancer’ defined by Triezenberg as

“(…) a narrative technique that is not necessarily funny in and of itself, but that helps the audience to understand that the text is supposed to be funny, that warms them up to the author and to the text so that they will be more receptive to humor, and that magnifies their experience of humor in the text.” [Triezenberg 2008, 537-538]

clearly informing the audience that what she is saying is so absurdly outrageous that it cannot be taken seriously. However, the decision to use the very monologue that Jones had performed during her audition to become a member of *SNL* cast in a sketch that appeared during a segment or even the whole show marked by an attempt to criticize racist behavior, an African-American longing for slave days is not only controversial but even distasteful.

The problem is not in the individual sketches or jokes but in the fact that they occurred in one, sixty-minute episode as a bundle of topic-related narratives resulting in a hypertext that was broadcast in a time-context of a heightened sense of outrage towards Sterling's racist remarks. When viewed separately, the sketches discussed in the article are funny and satirical. However, "(...) absurdity and ridicule can be read in different ways and in thinking about comedy we need to ask whether it is always possible to distinguish between the caricature and the subject being caricatured. How does one ensure that this difference is recognized by the audience?" [Weedon 2004, 127]

There is humor in the abovementioned sketches, just as there was humor in the *Jump Jim Crow* song and dance performed by Thomas Dartmouth Rice in his early nineteenth century minstrel show, and there are racially profiled stereotypes as well. While Jim Crow comedy was, by twenty first century standards, openly racist, the *SNL* characters, who, unlike in the case of Jim Crow played by the white Timothy Rice, were played by African-Americans offer a convoluted racial profiling. The audience laughed at Jim Crow, however, behind the laughter there was racism that made Jim Crow remembered as a synonym of laws sanctioning racial segregation rather than a piece of comedy.

The Jim Crowian aspect of humor used in the sketches in question is reflected in the reaction expressed on the YouTube comment section of the Leslie Jones clip. A user nicknamed 'Ify O' wrote, "It's not funny- it's like making a mockery of Jewish internment prisoners being subjected to illegal experimentation; negligible and insensitive."<sup>21</sup> It must be noted, however, that a large number of comments on Leslie Jones's performance were positive which is in agreement with the fact that each joke/sketch is a subject to semantic interpretation.

The reaction of the Internet users to the episode, expressed in various forums and comment sections, ranged (as it usually does) from sheer delight to utter disgust. While most of the comments are of no importance to this case study (comments like "Funny s\*\*t!" or "Total boredom"), there were instances of the viewers expressing their mixed feelings or even uneasiness with the content of certain sketches, especially the two segments described hereupon. For example on the *Previously.TV* forum, a user nicknamed 'Toaster Strudel' wrote: "**Cold Open:** That was funny... because these were all truths. Taboo,

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvPC2vdzus4>.



perhaps, but true. Keenan's bit acting uncomfortable taking 10 million and giving the guy another lifetime award: "Come on. Look. Guys. Ten million" – was hilarious.<sup>22</sup> and "Leslie Jones (who?) was delightful, please bring her back anytime."<sup>23</sup> 'Toaster Strudel' enjoyed the show but he/she did mention the 'taboo aspect' of the Cold Open sketch, i.e. racism. The racist undertones resulted in Andrew Long writing on *SNL*'s Facebook wall, "I actually liked it. Opening skit got me nervous but it was actually funny."<sup>24</sup> A user of the <http://www.tv.com/shows> forum nicked 'HelloStuart' also expressed the ambiguous reception of the racially charged jokes and wrote:

"The Donald Sterling controversy was cringe-inducing and a delicate matter for conversation, so tonight's cold open hit that wound right in the gash. Granted, it dragged in places and featured some unnecessary elements, but the tone was right there. (...) Speaking of race humor, hello Leslie Jones! For a rare instance in which a writer drops by Weekend Update, LJ made a polarizing first impression. Commenting on Lupita N'yongo's appearance in *People* magazine's Most Beautiful issue, the tall, curvy Jones declared herself "the #1 slave draft pick" and how she would conceive the "Lebron, Kobe and MJ" of indentured servants."<sup>25</sup>

While the comments above refer to particular jokes and performances, there were also voices expressing disapproval of the way *SNL* dealt with the sensitive issue of racism in America; these comments suggest that a reading of the hypertext took place. An example provided is fragment of a discussion from the comment section to the 'Cold Open' sketch:<sup>26</sup>

**Samuel Childers:** For one, Snl doesn't understand anything about anybody's humor except white people. They think because they gave us a handful of black people that we are going to start laughing it up! This is not the case. We are funny without the dumb ass stereotypical skits they give black people!! We are black, we know, and you don't have to keep reminding us!!! We live it everyday and we know better than anyone what it feels like to be an outcast in our own country!!!! Stop giving your black actors stereotypical roles that says, "Hey in case you didn't know, I'm black!!!!!"

**Tianna Sanford:** You obviously don't understand the purpose of satire.

**Samuel Childers:** Let me be clear, I have no problem with satire, but what I am saying is do we really need to see the black woman actually play "the loud black woman?" It would have been different if she played Donald Sterling's girlfriend who is obviously not white but would have her pretend that she is because he said to her you are suppose to act like a white/latin woman. It would have been funny to see that because *SNL* could have played on the fact that he is racist but his girlfriend is clearly what he doesn't like."

<sup>22</sup> <http://forums.previously.tv/topic/5738-s39e19-andrew-garfieldcoldplay/#entry60309>.

<sup>23</sup> <http://forums.previously.tv/topic/5738-s39e19-andrew-garfieldcoldplay/#entry60309>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/snl/timeline>.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.tv.com/shows/saturday-night-live/live/forums/episode-discussion-thread-andrew-garfield-coldplay-05-03-2014-455-3381762/?page=1>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Puk9cXDODEQ>.

The reaction of the audience to a joke and a hypertext is especially crucial in the case of a show like *SNL*, whose audience is twofold: supposedly liberal citizens of multi-cultural New York gathered in the studio from which the show is aired, and a national audience of TV viewers among whom one might find professors of African-American studies, as well as members of Ku Klux Klan. The uncertainty of who the audience is exposes the jokes to reactions that may range from "Oh, that's hilarious" to "Yep, them n\*\*\*\*rs are just like that." Given the possible range of responses to racially- or stereotypically-based jokes, the question of how the hypertext created by polysemic messages conveyed in individual jokes may be read, poses yet another question on comedy's social responsibility.

The question is even more substantiated given the fact that seemingly detached from reality comedy, and especially committed satire are a voice heard in public debate and in the process of shaping public opinion. This comedic voice acquired even greater social responsibility in recent years as comedians like Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert or Bill Mahr who in their programs deal with social and political matters have become to some extent authorities whom the audience had given a mandate to explain the reality of current events. It especially visible in case of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, which according to a poll conducted by Brookings Institution and the Public Religion Research Institute turned out to be a more credible source of news than MSNBC<sup>27</sup>. When it comes to a situation when *The Daily Show* (a comedy show mind you) becomes more credible in presenting news than a whole station designed to provide the public with objective information on the world events, poses a question of responsibility of the comedians using cultural stereotypes.

*Saturday Night Live* is, obviously, a comedy program and all its content, including racial stereotypes, is meant as a joke and satire. One should not take seriously what is said and acted out in the sketches and, to the show's credit, they evidently took a stand against racism represented in the Sterling persona. Yet, "(...) whatever writers may think, and whatever their intentions, it is impossible to detach the comic from the political, especially where questions of race and ethnicity are concerned." [Weedon 2004, 131] Even if the sketches referring to Sterling and racism are just jokes for joke's sake (which they are not as the specific context of the jokes makes them read as a satire and a commentary to a particular 'real-life' event), they are a voice uttering a certain message that can be heard by various types of audiences.

Unfortunately, the hypertext created by the voice of the *SNL* episode aired on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 is one that confirms the negative, stereotypical images of African-Americans. By no means do I advocate political correctness or even censorship to be forced upon comedians, after all part of their job is, by making

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<sup>27</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/10/jon-stewart-more-trusted-msnbc-poll\\_n\\_5479859.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/10/jon-stewart-more-trusted-msnbc-poll_n_5479859.html).

us laugh, to confront our own beliefs and prejudices as indicated by Bergson's superiority and Freud's compensation theories of humor. Nevertheless, comedy's line of defense "These are just jokes, nothing more" can no longer be used in a reality in which a comedian is more trustworthy in delivering the news than a corporate broadcaster.

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## Summary

### COMEDY'S SOCIAL (IR)RESPONSIBILITY: SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE'S RESPONSE TO DONALD STERLING SCANDAL

In April 2014, an American network TMZ released recordings of a telephone conversation between Donald Sterling (the then-owner of the NBA's Los Angeles Clippers franchise) and his mistress Vanessa Stiviano. In the conversation Sterling made a number of racist remarks while criticizing Stiviano for posting a photo of herself and Earvin Magic Johnson (African-American, former star of Los Angeles Lakers) on Instagram. What followed was a torrent of criticism towards Sterling, a life-time ban from the NBA and a \$2.5 million fine imposed upon Clippers owner by newly appointed NBA commissioner Adam Silver, national debate on racism in sports dominated by black athletes, and Sterling's continuous controversial public announcements. In the heat of the scandal, Sterling was scrutinized, condemned and ridiculed in countless press articles, radio broadcasts, and television shows – among others *Saturday Night Live*. The *SNL* episode that aired on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 opened with a parody of press conference organized by Adam Silver and Donald Sterling. This sketch, as well as other sketches, performed that night featured a number of African-American characters. The obvious intent of the episode's jokes was to contribute to the criticism of Sterling in a humorous fashion. However, an analysis, based on Raskin, Attardo and Willibald's General Theory

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of Verbal Humor (GTVH), reveals a hypertext hidden within a juxtaposition of the negative images of African-Americans and the positive images of whites presented in the episode. The abovementioned hypertext poses a question on the social responsibility of the comedians who, when creating 'controversial' material, operate in a culturally biased context.

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