

University of Warsaw
Institute of English Studies



Kamil Chrzczonowicz

**OPEN-SOURCE BLACKNESS: ANTI-ESSENTIALIST HUMOR
IN THE SATIRE OF THE NEW BLACK RENAISSANCE**

Doctoral dissertation supervised by
dr hab. Ewa Łuczak, prof. UW

Warsaw, 2021

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
THEORY: HUMOR, RACE, AND IDENTITY	8
Humor, Irony, and Satire in the American Public Sphere	10
Emotional and Intellectual Dimension of Black Humor	19
(Cognitive) Diversity and The Science of Multiple Subjectivities	26
Contemporary Discourse on Race	40
The Path to The New Black Renaissance.....	52
LITERATURE: <i>ERASURE</i> BY PERCIVAL EVERETT	68
The Forceful Racialization of Art	69
Fighting Against the “Racial Optic”	81
De-essentializing Black English.....	99
A Need for the Comic Perspective.....	107
CINEMA: JUSTIN SIMIEN’S <i>DEAR WHITE PEOPLE</i>	112
Satirical Taxonomy of Racial Micro-Aggressions.....	115
Humor and Irony in Race-Related Campus Activism.....	133
<i>Dear White People</i> in the Context of Black American Film and Comic Tradition	146
Intergroup Contact, Parasocial Relationships, and Race Representation.....	158
DIGITAL HUMANITIES: MULTIMEDIA SATIRE BY BARATUNDE THURSTON....	165
Rewriting Race and Identity through Humor and Technology	166
Translating Scholarship into Satire	187
Embodying Multiperspectivity.....	197
CODA: REDEFINING BLACK IDENTITY THROUGH HUMOR	210
Works cited	221
Dissertation abstracts	236

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation looks at the satire of three African-American comic authors – Percival Everett (1956-), Justin Simien (1983-), and Baratunde Thurston (1977-) – to analyze how they employ humor to reconceptualize the contemporary understanding of African-American identity. Their work is examined in the context of a new and developing, twenty-first-century idea of racial anti-essentialism: one defined by Thurston as Open-Source Blackness (OSB).¹ The subsequent chapters investigate three realms of narrative expression: literature (Everett’s novel *Erasure*, 2011),² cinema (Simien’s feature film *Dear White People*, 2014),³ and digital humanities (multimedia satire of Thurston, 20014-2020).⁴ The analysis is set against the backdrop of the New Black Renaissance (NBR) – a flourishing of African-American popular art made possible by the cultural and technological changes of the last two decades.

Everett, Simien, and Thurston are relatively niche and have not attained the mainstream prominence of some of the most famous historical or contemporary African-American comedians. At the same time, their ex-centric position affords them more leeway for artistic and intellectual experimentation. Everett’s novel *Erasure* (2001) appears as the first significant, racially anti-essentialist rebellion of a black satirist in the new millennium. It is a book-length protest song: a novelistic declaration of creative independence manifested through narrative complexity, humorous ambiguity, and cathartic irreverence. This dissertation treats Everett as a progenitor of notions that came to fruition in the second decade of the new millennium: ideas of black artistic freedom unconstrained by racial essentialism or institutional gatekeepers. Simien’s film *Dear White People* (2014) has been chosen as a subject for analysis because it

¹ Thurston, Baratunde. *How to Be Black*. Harper Collins, 2012. P. 221.

² Everett, Percival. *Erasure*. U P of New England, 2001.

³ Simien, Justin. *Dear White People*. Lionsgate, 2015 (originally released in 2014). DVD.

⁴ Thurston. *How to Be Black*; ---. “Hacking Comedy.” *TEDx Talks* (YouTube channel). Published Aug 27, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2YYoewX>; ---. “An Unconventional Look at the Future of Technology.” *Google Developers* (YouTube channel). Published 10 May, 2019. <https://youtu.be/wPFnprOY7A8>; “Comedy Hack Day.” *Cultivated Wit*. Published Feb. 16, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/ycbvk3jv>.

gathers and popularizes these ideas in the concise form factor of film comedy. The movie encapsulates multiple issues identified by contemporary race discourse as crucial to young Americans of color; it addresses campus activism, colorblind discrimination, microaggressive behavior, or unconscious bias – and does so with satirical verve and academically-informed argumentation. Simien’s approach is original both in its breadth and execution: it is non-essentializing but self-assured; unapologetic, but open enough to allow for ambiguity inherent in humor. Thurston’s work has been selected for its sheer uniqueness – not only with respect to other black comic authors but also to American satire in general. Thurston calls himself a “futurist comedian” – he is both a practitioner of the art of satire and a theoretician of its development in the Digital Age. What distinguishes him from other comic authors is his ethos of multimodality. Heavily influenced by his digital media and information technology expertise, Thurston envisions an emergence of new, interactive genres of comic texts. What is more, not only does he forecast their appearance, but he also facilitates their creation as the organizer of Comedy Hack Days (2015-), hackathons dedicated to creating new types of satirical software.

The three authors analyzed in this study adopt an interdisciplinary approach with regard to their art. As it will become evident, all of them use terms or ideas originating from academic theory, natural sciences, as well as popular and high-brow culture. This dissertation adopts a similar approach with regard to its secondary sources. Consequently, it makes use of scholarship on race, identity, and humor from literary and cultural studies, as well as other disciplines: sociology, neuroscience, moral philosophy, information technology, and others. In the spirit of joining high and low culture – or questioning this binary distinction in the first place – it mixes classically academic sources with what it considers as exemplary work in the realms of journalism, blogging, and podcasting.

The comic authors analyzed in this study tackle the phenomenon of multiple cultural, social, and personal identifications contained within a single subjectivity. In order to match

their approach with an appropriate methodology, this dissertation sees various scientific disciplines as interconnected. To create an understanding of the world best-approximating reality, disciplines separated by academic institutions – structures necessitating specialization and compartmentalization – ought to maintain a constant dialogue. Just as distinct points of reference coalesce within one individual, findings from separate fields of inquiry can create a unified body of knowledge. By adopting this interdisciplinary methodology, this study aims to arrive at new insights and substantiate the claims on race, identity, and humor offered by the world of cultural studies with ideas and data obtained outside of its usual field of expertise.

The concept of Open-Source Blackness (OSB) – a key term for this study – centers around the notion of multiplicity. Its polyphonic core fits well with the open-source ethos defined by the world of information technology; the idea of open-source code, accessible to anyone with the willingness and expertise to modify and redistribute it, translates well into the realm of culture.⁵ As argued by the Open Organization, a non-profit promoting the open-source approach: “Open-source projects, products, or initiatives embrace and celebrate principles of open exchange, collaborative participation, rapid prototyping, transparency, meritocracy, and community-oriented development. . . [Open source] is software with source code that anyone can inspect, modify, and enhance.” By way of analogy, OSB claims that the “code” of African-American identity, one readily accessible through language and art, can be freely modified and shared by black individuals.

It is a matter of fact that people with certain phenotypical traits cannot choose *not to be racialized* in America. In the context of the US, a person is usually seen as black due to their complexion: the white majority racializes non-white people as “ethnic”; at the same time, it tends to perceive itself as devoid of race (i.e., “deracinated”). The contemporary consensus in the fields of natural sciences is that race is not a biological reality – primarily, it is a social

⁵ “What is open source?” *opensource.com*. Accessed Aug. 14, 2019. <https://red.ht/1OB9j3X>.

construct.⁶ Following up on this anti-essentialist stance and taking it a step further, OSB argues that people can freely define what their racial identity means for them, their communities, and the American culture at large. “Essentialism,” as defined by Critical Race Theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, “entails a search for the proper unit, or atom, of social analysis and change” – i.e., a set of traits and predicaments shared by all members of a given race.⁷ Everett, Simien, and Thurston abandon this search to advocate for an approach that celebrates African-American individuation and heterogeneity; in that, they echo the principles of anti-essentialism, a notion that no race “has a single, easily stated, unitary identity.”⁸

Twenty-first-century black popular culture undergoes a period of reflowering. The current burgeoning of African-American creativity amounts to what can be reasonably perceived as the New Black Renaissance. This idea has been first proposed by Cheryl Contee, a satirical blogger and Thurston’s interviewee in *How to Be Black*. NBR’s rise has been facilitated by the use of tools and spaces made available by new technologies – independent platforms for publishing, streaming, and content creation. As argued by Contee:

the scope of this Renaissance is much bigger than it was in the 1920s . . . In the 1920s, when you’re talking about Harlem or Paris, it was a very small group of intellectuals, artists, poets, singers, dancers that were in conversation with each other, and ultimately it had a ricochet effect over time in the popular culture. But right now, [with the help of technology and social media,] we’re starting to drive that culture in a contemporary way, and in a way that they couldn’t before, because they couldn’t really reach that many people.⁹

Contee made her claims in 2012 – since then, black comic creators only continued their ascension in the artistic, intellectual, and commercial ranks of American culture. The communicative and expressive potential of the two main constituents of the New Black Renaissance, technology and humor – both of which are inherently open to new ideas – makes their further ascension not only possible, but very likely. “I can see it, too, and my skin tingles

⁶ See, for example, Sussman, Robert Wald. “There Is No Such Thing as Race.” *Newsweek*. Published Nov. 8, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2swDHGT>.

⁷ Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. NYU Press, 2001. P. 63.

⁸ *Ibidem*. P. 10.

⁹ Qtd. in Thurston. *How to Be Black*. Pp. 222-223.

at the thought,” declares Thurston, referring to comments made by Contee with enthusiasm and anticipation.¹⁰ He defines NBR as a “collaborative resurgence of black culture” – an uprising of values, aesthetics, and modes of expression formed or amplified in the first two decades of the twenty-first century and gathered under the umbrella term of Open-Source Blackness.¹¹

The discussion on race, humor, and identity as represented in Open-Source Blackness starts in Chapter One, which provides the theoretical and historical context for the subjects at hand. Chapter Two tracks the first signaling of OSB values in Everett’s *Erasure* (2001) – a turn-of-the-century novel about a writer unable to voice his anti-essentialist stance on art and selfhood in the pre-New Black Renaissance cultural scene. Chapter Three discusses Simien’s movie *Dear White People* (2013) to analyze the consolidation and amplification of OSB ideas in the popular medium of film comedy. Chapter Four examines the technological and narrative innovations of Baratunde Thurston with the hope of getting a glimpse into the future of the movement.

This study aims to draw out the outline of Open-Source Blackness from the selected texts of Everett, Simien, and Thurston. The purpose of extracting such a theory is to find a common thread connecting OSB texts on the level of ideas – especially when it comes to their use of humor in the context of black identity. It is important to note that OSB and the New Black Renaissance have been mentioned only in passing in Thurston’s *How to Be Black* (2012). This dissertation elaborates on these terms with the hope of proposing a useful framework for future analyses of multidisciplinary, anti-essentialist African-American satire in literature, film, and digital media. The discussion commences in the next chapter, devoted to the cognitive and affective dimensions of humor, the contemporary American discourse on race and identity, and the cultural phenomenon of the New Black Renaissance.

¹⁰ In doing so, he also admits that what makes him creatively engaged in his work is precisely the phenomenon described by Contee: tools of research and communication made available by the Internet, the eagerness to discuss new conceptions of black identity, and the sheer intellectual pleasure of expressing them through humor. (Ibidem).

¹¹ Ibidem.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORY: HUMOR, RACE, AND IDENTITY

Humor, parody, satire, irony, and comedy have a similar popular understanding. However, the definitional alterations between them matter when it comes to literary and cultural analysis. What follows, then, is a short differentiation between key terms in Humor Studies, the purpose of which is to help the readers navigate through the sections that follow it.

As it is understood in this dissertation, to engage in humor is to assume a position of comic distance with regards to life: to look at oneself and the world by adopting an outsider's perspective of a benign investigation. This idea has been developed by philosopher Simon Critchley, who likens humorists to anthropologists, as they both aim to relativize people's cultural preconceptions.¹ *Parody* is an imitation with critical, ironic distance. It tackles means of representation – conventions of language and genre. Parodying a given text of culture can be a performative way of reflecting on its narrative and aesthetic principles. Such understanding of parody has been promoted by, among others, literary critic Linda Hutcheon.² *Satire*, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with ideas and values expressed by individuals and texts of culture. To be satirical is to be engaging in a critique of beliefs and attitudes through ridicule. Satire's purpose is positive transformation – it aims to correct people's lapses in reasoning through social pressure applied by laughter. Such conceptualization of satire has been proposed by, among others, literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin and media scholar Jonathan Gray.³ To engage in *irony* is to say one thing but mean the opposite; existentially, it is to work towards an intended outcome and inadvertently cause an inverse effect.⁴ Comedian George Carlin noted that this

¹ Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. Routledge, 2002. Pp. 65-66.

² Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. U of Illinois P, 2001. Pp. xii, xv; ---. "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. P. O'Donnell et al. Johns Hopkins U P, 1989.

³ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. U of Texas P, 1981; Gray, Jonathan et al. *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. NYU Press, 2009. Pp. 3-36.

⁴ Winokur, Jon. *The Big Book of Irony*. St. Martin's Press, 2007. P. xv.

concept's popular understanding is often mistaken, as it frequently confuses irony with an unfortunate coincidence.⁵ Finally, *comedy* is used in this dissertation in its broadest sense: i.e., as any text of culture intended to entice laughter.⁶ Parody and satire, both of which use irony to meet their respective artistic ends, are considered comedy only if they mean to make one laugh. It is worth noting that this might not be their primary goal – frequently, irony's, parody's, and satire's sole aim is to provoke reflection, not necessarily to induce amusement.⁷

Humour noir – as defined by French surrealists, most notably André Breton⁸ – tackles existential absurdities, such as life's indeterminate meaning and the inevitability of death. However, in the context of this dissertation, one should note that scholars such as Mel Watkins and Werner Sollors see overlaps between *humour noir* and African-American humor. Watkins writes that existential humor is the cornerstone of African-American parody, satire, and comedy – in that, the cruel absurdity of life under oppression and discrimination laid the foundation for what later came to be understood as *humour noir* in the US.⁹ In turn, Sollors points out that anthropologists of oral folk culture had made a note of existentialist jokes by African-American slaves long before the definition of black humor was put to paper by French surrealists.¹⁰

There are three “classical” theories of humor: superiority (1), relief (2), and incongruity theory (3); the first was popularized by Thomas Hobbes, the second by Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, and the third by Immanuel Kant and Henri Bergson. Respectively, they claim that people laugh when they look down on those perceived as inferior (1), when they want to relieve pent-up physical and psychological tension (2), or when their expectations are

⁵ Carlin, George. *Brain Droppings*. Hyperion, 1997. P. 116.

⁶ See, for example, Stott, Andrew. *Comedy: New Critical Idiom*. Routledge, 2005.

⁷ Gimbel, Steven. *The Philosophy of Humor*. The Teaching Company, 2018. Pp. 8-13.

⁸ Breton, André. “Introduction: Laughter in the Dark.” *Anthology of Black Humor*. Ed. André Breton and Mark Polizotti. City Light Publishers, 2001. Pp. v-xi.

⁹ Watkins, Mel. *On the Real Side: A History of African-American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*. Lawrence Hill Books, 1999. Kindle loc. 7619-7644.

¹⁰ Sollors, Werner. “Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition.” *Bulletin of American Academy* (Summer, 2010). P. 40.

insightfully or inventively defied (3).¹¹ Benign Violation Theory, the most recent conceptualization of humor that gained widespread popularity, was developed by psychologist Peter McGraw in his 2014 book *Humor Code*. It claimed that people laugh “when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously” (for example, we giggle when we are being tickled – i.e., when we experience a non-threatening violation of our personal space and bodily autonomy).¹² It is essential to point out that theories of humor focus primarily on *why* certain mental states invoke the characteristic, involuntary, bodily response of laughter; in doing so, they often discuss the social, cultural, and political implications of humor only in passing – a gap that will be addressed in the subsequent sections of this study.

The following subchapters expand the theoretical context necessary to understand humor as a narrative vehicle, epistemological device, and philosophical concept. To fully accentuate the conceptual dimension of racial identity presented by Open-Source Blackness, they also elaborate on the idea of ethnicity articulated in the Critical Race Theory – i.e., the most prominent academic discourse on race in the last twenty years. Finally, they talk about the historical and recent developments in black comedy to position the work of Everett, Simien, and Thurston within the tradition of African-American humor and the New Black Renaissance.

Humor, Irony, and Satire in the American Public Sphere

As argued by journalist and cultural critic Megan Garber, many contemporary satirists in the United States play the role once accredited to journalists, philosophers, or opinion leaders. People tune in to their voice – delivered in the form of a stand-up show, satirical news program, Internet video, television series, or a movie – not only to laugh but also to learn about the world. Their jokes function as delivery vehicles for socially conscious, politically engaged, culturally

¹¹ Hurley, Matthew M. et al. “Brief History of Humor Theories.” *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*. MIT Press, 2011. Pp. 37-56.

¹² “Benign Violation Theory.” *Humor Research Lab*. Accessed May 18, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3wh5WYU>.

subversive messages. “This is comedy at only the most superficial level,” claims Garber, “what it is, really, is cultural criticism.”¹³ To further prove her point, Garber references the legacy of Richard Pryor, Joan Rivers, and George Carlin – post-Civil Rights era stand-up pioneers who paved the way for difficult national conversations about race, gender, and politics. Following their example, numerous performers started to infuse their comedy with socially conscious critique. As it was aptly put by Garber:

Comedians have taken on the role of public intellectuals. They’re exploring and wrestling with important ideas. They’re sharing their conclusions with the rest of us. They’re providing fodder for discussion, not just of the minutiae of everyday experience, but of the biggest questions of the day. . . . Comedians are fashioning themselves not just as joke-tellers, but as truth-tellers – as intellectual and moral guides through the cultural debates of the moment. And the public, with the help of the media, are happily taking their lead.¹⁴

As argued by literary critic Wayne Booth, the practice of irony – a mode of speech of numerous satirists and comedians – can lead to a more conscious engagement with social, political, or cultural reality. Booth claimed that in irony, an “assumed or asserted fact is shown not to be true, an idea or belief to be untenable, an expectation to be unwarranted or a confidence to be misplaced.”¹⁵ This property of irony invites the reader to deconstruct the text’s surface meaning. When authors use irony intentionally, they leave certain “signposts” or “markers” for readers to interpret; as readers recognize those signs, “an assumed community of values is activated between reader, author, and text.”¹⁶ First, based on (extra-)textual information, readers construct the author’s mental image. Then, seeing the contradiction between this image and the text, they start to reevaluate its meaning:

In the split second of recognition where one set of meanings is “destroyed” – there is displacement – and reconstruction begins. The old “house of meaning” is barely dismantled when the reader begins building another “house of meaning” to meet the demands of irony. Usually, the ironic meaning is placed in a superior position above the rejected “literal” meaning. It is from this superior vantage point that the reader

¹³ Garber, Megan. “How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals.” *Atlantic*. Published on May 28, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2VcBDSP>.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ “Wayne C. Booth. *A Rhetoric of Irony*, (1974).” *Wayne Booth’s Rhetorology Home (uwaterloo.ca)*. Accessed Aug. 12, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2KFWok7>.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

joins the author, and a host of readers, in the smug knowledge that they “got it.” A community is then created through the use of irony.¹⁷

Booth argues for understanding “irony as intimacy, a way in which ironist and reader get together in a delicate dance of reconstruction of meaning,” and claims that joint reconstruction of irony forms communities of meaning.¹⁸ Notably, a significant part of American society seems to share Booth’s view. In 2009, a US magazine *Foreign Policy* compiled its ranking of the world’s top 20 public intellectuals; when the paper provided its readers with the chance to amend the list, the voting public did not select an intellectual in the traditional sense of the word. The top write-in candidate was Stephen Colbert, a satirist and host of the highly-ironic parodic news show *The Colbert Report*. The editors of *Foreign Policy* acknowledged their readers’ choice with the following note:

Colbert so deftly and hilariously skewers the politically powerful that he has become one of young America’s go-to sources for genuine news and analysis. With deadpan delivery and a disregard for the line between parody and politics, Colbert is the ironic man’s talking head.¹⁹

As comic performers continue to blur the lines between comedy and cultural criticism, Americans – especially the younger generations – increasingly follow their lead.²⁰ Perhaps, as claimed by Booth and Garber, it stems from the faith in the transformative power of irony and the moral purpose of satire. Another reason for the increasing popularity of comic discourses is that the contemporary cultural landscape overflows with informational chaos;²¹ in this context, the inherent brevity of jokes allows for consuming information in a refreshingly time-efficient manner.

Booth and Garber’s somewhat idealistic perspective on comic discourses finds itself at odds with the recent critiques of satire in American media. Its harshest opponents argue that it

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Amburn, Brad. “The World’s Top 20 Public Intellectuals.” *Foreign Policy*. Published on Oct. 7, 2009. <https://bit.ly/37vEOvn>.

²⁰ See, for example, Kakutani, Michiko. “Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?” *New York Times*. Published Aug. 15, 2008. <https://nyti.ms/36e8vRk>.

²¹ See, for example, Wylie, Christopher. *Mindf*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America*. Random House, 2019.

is ineffectual, or even worse, counterproductive. This particular line of argumentation gained momentum after the Electoral College triumph of Donald Trump. Despite being mocked on virtually every comedy show in the US, Trump managed to win the bid for the country's presidency in 2016. In the aftermath of the election, *Atlantic's* Caitlin Flanagan investigated "How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump," arguing that "sneering hosts alienated conservatives and made liberals smug."²² In a similar vein, *New Yorker's* Ian Crouch examined "Saturday Night Live and the Limits of Trump Mockery," and asked, "Is Late-Night Political Comedy Useless?"²³ According to Flanagan and Crouch, satirical shows in the US make use of the public conflict over politics, and either 1) strengthen it (e.g., Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal*, famous for its indignant monologues), 2) trivialize it (e.g., *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, who invited Trump and portrayed him as amicable), or 3) capitalize on it (e.g., *Saturday Night Live* which, despite being ideologically opposed to Trump, invited him to host the show to boost its ratings). As a result, argue Flanagan and Crouch, 1) people feel too polarized to participate in constructive debate, 2) no longer feel the need to engage, or 3) become cynical about the whole democratic process.

Interestingly, social psychologist Paul Bloom offers an explanatory path that gives the heightened emotional disengagement described by Flanagan and Crouch a positive interpretative spin. In *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (2016), Bloom argues that emotional distance induced by, e.g., comic detachment can be more ethically sound than empathetic engagement. His argument goes against the claim that the employment of humor in public discourse leads to social and political inaction caused by the emotional release of laughter. As argued by humor theorists, satire aims to strengthen cognitive mechanisms of rationality by deconstructing arguments and pointing out their logical mistakes and

²² Flanagan, Caitlin. "How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump." *Atlantic*. Published May 1, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2VeQr3q>.

²³ Crouch, Ian. "Saturday Night Live and the Limits of Trump Mockery." *New Yorker*. Published Feb. 12, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3minLCq>; ---. "Is Late-Night Political Comedy Useless?" *New Yorker*. Published Nov. 10, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2VjNZZb>.

inconsistencies.²⁴ In order to do that effectively, it has to maintain a more or less detached – compassionate, but not empathetic – comic distance from the subject of its analysis. “Intellectually, a white American might believe that a black person matters just as much as a white person, but he or she will typically find it a lot easier to empathize with the plight of the latter than the former,” states Bloom. “In this regard,” he claims, “empathy distorts our moral judgments in pretty much the same way that prejudice does.”²⁵ What follows from Bloom’s argument is that the attitude of emotional detachment stemming from the comic perspective has a significant intellectual and moral value; as it stimulates rational deliberation, it can lead to more conscientious, principled ethical choices – both in the realm of the personal, political, and their intersections.

Emotional distance brought forth by the comic perspective seems especially useful in the debate on American racial relations. The US discussion on race frequently seems like a rhetorical minefield – a discursive space loaded with potentially explosive charges of personal trauma and historical resentment.²⁶ In an environment such as this, it seems nearly impossible not to trip over one’s words and ignite the fuse of individual or collective indignation. As argued by satirist Christopher Lander, here is where humor might prove itself as a useful critical and communicative tool:

The role of satire in talking about race is essential . . . I spent a lot of time in graduate school, and what I found so much in an academic setting is that people are petrified to say the wrong thing. . . . I know from teaching in grad school for four years that a lot of undergrads are still kind of figuring out things and some of them are very angry at race. . . . they have all this pent-up rage that they won’t talk about because they’re petrified of being seen as racist. So when you bring this up in a context of humor, there’s so much more comfort, on their side, to talk about it, and to let it out.²⁷

²⁴ For example, as argued by G. K. Chesterton, “[t]he essence of satire is that it perceives some absurdity inherent in the logic of some position, and . . . draws the absurdity out and isolates it, so that all can see it.” (Qtd. in Gray et al. *Satire TV*. P. 12).

²⁵ Bloom, Paul. *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. Ecco, 2016. P. 31.

²⁶ See, for example, Marantz, Andrew. *Antisocial: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation*. Viking, 2019; Taibbi, Matt. *Hate Inc.: Why Today’s Media Makes Us Despise One Another*. OR Books, 2019; Eddo-Lodge, Reni. *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.

²⁷ Qtd. in Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 230.

In contrast to Bloom, Lander sees humor as a form of emotional alleviation rather than mental detachment. According to him, humor helps to ease the struggle of difficult conversations. This view finds support in contemporary research on laughter conducted in the fields of natural science. It contends that jokes serve not only cerebral exploration but also psychological and physical relief – a conclusion that echoes the early-twentieth-century theories of Freud.²⁸ As argued by Jong Eun Yim, the author of a theoretical review of the therapeutic benefits of laughter:

Decreasing stress-making hormones found in the blood, laughter can mitigate the effects of stress. Laughter decreases serum levels of cortisol, epinephrine, growth hormone, and 3,4-dihydro-phenylacetic acid (a major dopamine catabolite), indicating a reversal of the stress response. Depression is a disease, where neurotransmitters in the brain, such as norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin, are reduced, and there is something wrong in the mood control circuit of the brain. Laughter can alter dopamine and serotonin activity. Furthermore, endorphins secreted by laughter can help when people are uncomfortable or in a depressed mood.²⁹

Laughter has been tied with a noticeable reduction of stress hormones and observable changes in the brain's reward center; thus, it has been useful in many types of cognitive-behavioral therapy. At present, many mental health specialists see it as a non-pharmacological aid in traditional types of treatment aimed at decreasing levels of depression and anxiety.³⁰

Philosopher Simon Critchley calls humor a “practically enacted theory”: a way of theorizing and philosophizing about life through the practice of joking about it.³¹ “Humor interests me,” he says, “because it’s a *praxis*, an actually existing social practice, it’s something that we do and understand; but it’s a practice which has this capacity for reflection built into it.”³² As argued by Critchley, jokes are miniature thought experiments; Yim adds that laughter can render them beneficial with regard to both physical and mental health – a fact that furthers people’s motivation to conduct them more frequently. Satire attaches significant cultural value

²⁸ See Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1990 (first published in 1905).

²⁹ Yim, Jong Eun. “Therapeutic Benefits of Laughter in Mental Health: A Theoretical Review.” *The Tohoku Journal of Experimental Medicine*. Volume 239, Issue 3. Tohoku Medical U P, 2016. P. 243.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Critchley, Simon. “Humour.” *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying: Conversations with Carl Cederstrom*. Polity Press, 2010. Pp. 77-101.

³² Ibidem. Pp. 77-78.

to reflection in the service of laughter, making people adopt a more analytical approach to life – even if only to appear witty.³³ Due to the inherent vibrancy and brevity of the joke form, comic language permeates American popular culture unlike any other type of speech that advocates for the social, cultural, and political benefits of critical thinking.³⁴

In his recent book, *In the Event of Laughter: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Comedy* (2019), cultural critic Alfie Brown looks at the phenomena of laughter through Alain Badiou's idea of the "event." Badiou defines "event" as something that breaks from the usual order of things: an unexpected occurrence that changes the overall trajectory of public thought and debate. "Arguing that laughter is an 'event,'" Brown explains, "means seeing this process . . . as something that occurs a great many times each day to a great many."³⁵ According to him, satire "brings the subjects involved (those telling the jokes, those laughing and those targeted) into new ideological structures which are produced, entrenched, naturalized and enforced by the process of laughter."³⁶ Humor is never apolitical because it is always relational – it corresponds to a power structure already in place and remains inseparable from the context it has sprung in. "This means that laughter can be radical or conservative, ideological or liberating, left-wing or right-wing, depending on the structures it responds to and reconstructs," clarifies Brown. "It also means," he elaborates, "that laughter always contains the possibility to *unsecure*, showing how precarious subjectivity is."³⁷

Another point raised by Brown concerns the relationship between humor and the psychoanalytical concept of "afterwardness" – action with a retroactive effect. Brown claims that the "event" of laughter can indeed function retroactively; it can become a reinterpretative tool of historical reflection. To clarify this point, Brown quotes Ian Parker's explanation of the

³³ Critchley. *On Humour*. Pp. 65-66.

³⁴ See, for example, Day, Amber. *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*. Indiana U P, 2001.

³⁵ Brown, Alfie. *In the Event of Laughter: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Comedy*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. P. 3.

³⁶ *Ibidem*. P. 82.

³⁷ *Ibidem*. P. 3.

inner workings of “afterwardness.” “This is a peculiarly psychoanalytic conception of time,” Parker claims, “a looping back and activation of what has already occurred, and the investment of that first event with a significance.”³⁸ Importantly, the public has to perceive some things as normative to recognize and appreciate a comic transgression. A well-crafted joke uses this accord to make its punchline – sudden defiance of expectations drawn from the values that the audience sees as normative. “Laughter,” argues Brown, “ought to be read in light of this, in order to explore how it changes the place into which it erupts, reorganizing the world but making it appear as though things have always been that way, as if laughter was merely a response to what was already there”³⁹ Parker calls it turning the world “into *what it will later always already be* [sic!].”⁴⁰

The affective and perceptual effects of shared laughter are consistent with the findings of cognitive psychologists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, the authors of *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone* (2017). Sloman and Fernbach argue that the individual mind is ultimately unreliable – prone to mistakes, logical fallacies, and failures of memory. That is why they claim that “intelligence resides not in individual brains but in the collective mind,” and advocate for a strong community of knowledge gathered in cultural texts, social environments, and public discourses.⁴¹ “Individuals rely not only on knowledge stored within our skulls,” they point out, “but also on knowledge stored elsewhere: in our bodies, in the environment, and especially in other people.”⁴² In this respect, a shared sense of humor – for example, an irony that a community can recognize and laugh at together – is a significant part of collective “groupthink.”⁴³ Reframing certain concepts through laughter shines a new light on seemingly entrenched ideas. It is especially important in the context of the following set of

³⁸ Qtd. in *ibidem*. P. 4.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ Qtd. in *ibidem*.

⁴¹ Sloman, Steven and Philip Fernbach. *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*. Riverhead Books, 2017. P.5.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem*. P. 173.

findings from the field of cognitive psychology – namely, the claims that people often create their worldviews through inadvertent acculturation, not deliberate reasoning. As argued by psychologists Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald in *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (2013), this mechanism stands responsible for people’s typical inability to see their cultural biases. Using a metaphor from the world of optics, they define these perceptual lapses as “blindspots.” According to Banaji’s and Greenwald’s argument, acculturation limits our field of vision when it comes to ideas absent from our usual environments.⁴⁴ People internalize values from their communal, ideational surroundings – in such a context, due to its potential for (de)familiarization, humor can become a powerful instrument of critical intervention and cultural (de)sensitization.⁴⁵

Black humor serves a specific function in the American public discourse. “The comic-as-cultural-critic-and-social commentator does not merely celebrate or valorize the culture from which he or she emerges,” explains cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson, “they honestly explore it and thus help explain black culture’s internal contradictions, stress its positive features, and acknowledge its detrimental characteristics.”⁴⁶ Comics assume a role of a rogue, a jester, a fool – according to Bakhtin, an insider with “the right to be ‘other’” – which allows them to look at their community with an eye of an outsider.⁴⁷ By reworking various conceptions of African-American culture – i.e., examining, reaffirming, or questioning their tenets through jokes – satire unmask the precariousness and conditionality of the idea of racial identity. As a result, it frees the concept of ethnicity from essentialist notions and opens up a possibility for individual and communal redefinition – one of the central tenets of Open-Source Blackness and a prospect often denied to racialized subjects throughout history. Humor was one of the ways

⁴⁴ Banaji, Mahzarin R. and Anthony G. Greenwald. *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. Delacorte Press, 2013. Pp. 32-52.

⁴⁵ Critchley. *On Humour*. P. 88.

⁴⁶ Qtd. in Haggins, Bambi. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*. Rutgers U P, 2007. P. 6.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

in which African-Americans have reclaimed their sense of selfhood. As argued in the next section, framing the emotional and intellectual facets of black humor as complementary – and not, as it has been often suggested, mutually exclusive – helps to understand the complex nature of African-American satire and expands the concept of black identity as expressed through comic art.

Emotional and Intellectual Dimension of Black Humor

As it has been explained in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012), the pre-modern world of Africa and North America flourished with rituals organized around the idea of expressing collective emotion. Synchronized dancing, trans-like chanting, and laughter were used to embody a set of beliefs; they also bound groups together through collective performance.⁴⁸ The author of *The Righteous Mind*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, pointed out that European colonizers tended to express disdain towards these rituals. Interpreting them as an expression of “savagery,” they misconstrued what these collective expressions truly stood for: an attempt to forge group identity through a form of visceral, “muscular bonding,”⁴⁹ a communal way of fostering “love, trust, and equality” in the universal language of the human body.⁵⁰

Haidt repeats the above facts after Barbara Ehrenreich, a cultural historian and the author of *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (2007). In a telling fragment of her book, Ehrenreich described the reaction of European explorers towards native expressions of communal bliss as that of “horror and revulsion”:⁵¹

To Europeans, there was an obvious explanation for the ecstatic practices of native peoples around the world. Since these strange behaviors could be found in “primitive” cultures almost everywhere, and since

⁴⁸ Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*. Vintage, 2012. P. 259.

⁴⁹ Haidt borrows the term “muscular bonding” from historian William McNeill, and explains it in the following way: “the process of muscular bonding – moving together in time – was a mechanism that evolved long before the beginning of recorded history for shutting down the self and creating a temporary superorganism. Muscular bonding enabled people to forget themselves, trust each other, function as a unit, and then crush less cohesive groups.” (Ibidem. P. 257).

⁵⁰ Ibidem. P. 260.

⁵¹ Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*. Metropolitan Books, 2007. P. 4.

they were never indulged by the “civilized,” it followed that they must result from some fundamental defect of the “savage mind.” It was less stable than the civilized mind, more childlike . . . and vulnerable to irrational or “autosuggestion.” In some instances, the savage mind was described as “out of control” and lacking the discipline and restraint that Europeans came to see as their own defining characteristic.⁵²

The European outlook on non-Western “savagery” described by Ehrenreich applied to Africans and their descendants in America. As pointed out in Watkin’s *On the Real Side: A History of African-American Comedy* (1999), early American writing was rife with antipathy towards collective expressions of black laughter. It could be found, for example, in the writings of Washington Irving, who remarked upon “the obstreperous peals of the broad-mouthed laughter of the Dutch negroes, who, like other negroes, are famous for their risible powers.”⁵³ The same aversion was evident in the writings of James Fenimore Cooper, who once described a communal celebration organized by black New Yorkers as a kind of a swarm: “collected in thousands . . . beating banjoes, singing African songs, drinking, and worst of all, laughing in a way that seemed to set their hearts rattling within their ribs.”⁵⁴ Watkins said that Cooper’s words epitomized the then-contemporary “contempt for black laughter.”⁵⁵ It is evident in Cooper’s tone of patronizing disapproval (“ . . . worst of all”), as well as his use of naturalist, animalistic imagery to illustrate black expressions of joy (“ . . . that seemed to set their hearts rattling within their ribs”). The contempt exemplified by Irving and Cooper was also visible in academic writing. For example, Frederick M. Davenport, political science lecturer at Hamilton College and a Republican member of the United States House of Representatives from New York, argued at the beginning of the nineteenth century that black people are biologically inclined to be susceptible to mob psychology. He said that “the last thing the superstitious and impulsive negro race needs is a stirring of the emotions [through collective experiences].”⁵⁶ These, of

⁵² Ibidem. P. 7.

⁵³ Qtd. in Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 139.

⁵⁴ Qtd. in ibidem. Kindle loc. 150.

⁵⁵ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 148.

⁵⁶ Qtd. in Ehrenreich. *Dancing in the Streets*. P. 7.

course, included political and cultural events – among them comedy shows, which are inherently a mix of both.⁵⁷

White apprehension towards black laughter – one described by Ehrenreich and exemplified by Irving, Cooper, and Davenport – found its comic expression in the old African-American folktale of the “laughing barrel.” The tale told the story of white masters trying to control their slaves’ laughter by ordering those who felt the urge to laugh to plunge their heads into the barrels installed on the plantation. It was an act intended to keep the bewildering black laughter out of sight and earshot, thereby limiting its power to convey resistance. As argued by Ralph Ellison, the laughing barrel helped whites “[save] face before the confounding, persistent, and embarrassing mystery of black laughter.”⁵⁸ Unwittingly, it also created an evocative visual metaphor for black humor’s power and the fear thereof.

Ehrenreich pointed out that many white Westerners must have noticed similarities between the stigmatized, “native” expressions of collective joy and their own communal practices. For example, philosopher T. K. Oesterreich – a “cataloger of ‘primitive’ ecstatic behavior,” as Ehrenreich called him – found said parallels in the European tradition of the carnival (famously theorized upon by Bakhtin).⁵⁹ During carnival, “sober people costumed themselves, drank to excess, danced through the night, and otherwise inverted the normal staid and Christian order,” explained Ehrenreich.⁶⁰ Carnival’s tradition resurrected the spirit of ancient Dionysian celebrations – ones taking their name from the Greek god of winemaking and ritual madness.

According to several cultural critics, the Dionysian myth laid the foundation for the European tradition of trickster humor. For example, as argued by Karl Kerényi, “Dionysian

⁵⁷ See, for example, Milner Davis, Jessica (ed.). *Satire and Politics: The Interplay of Heritage and Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

⁵⁸ Qtd. in Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 169.

⁵⁹ Ehrenreich. *Dancing in the Streets*. P. 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

ecstasy had the same function as trickster myth: it abolished the boundaries.”⁶¹ Tricksters, Stefanie Tanner claims, symbolized “an affirmation of life in the face of pain” – they processed their suffering through humor, a discourse which, “whether as performance or in written form, have both been used successfully by marginalized ‘others’ to test the margins of safety and to let off psychic steam.”⁶² This theory corresponds with the African tradition of trickster humor transplanted to the US along with the slave trade. The purpose of African-American trickster humor was to suspend communal norms and invert social order. It also aimed to abolish boundaries and inhibitions by bringing everything to the level of familiarity. In this way, African-American humor disrupted hierarchies of power, expressed affirmation of life in the face of suffering, tested the boundaries of discursive and behavioral safety, and released pent-up aggression in a socially acceptable manner.⁶³ Importantly, however, the trickster figure seems to be intercultural: it is present in African, Native American, and Chicano folklores.⁶⁴ The downtrodden of the world, irrespective of their country of origin, have developed similar coping mechanisms in reaction to their respective traumas. This observation leads one into the realm of evolutionary psychology; it establishes humor as a human universal: an instrument developed for its capacity to alleviate suffering, catalyze imagination, and spur new ways of thinking about the world.

In the seventeenth century, as the notion of selfhood began to gain traction in the West’s intellectual circles, pre-modern collective expressions of emotion and group identity began to fade away; Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution only made their erasure faster.⁶⁵ One of the communal expressions that survived the rise of Western individualism, however, was

⁶¹ Qtd. in Kovel, Joel. “On Racism and Psychoanalysis.” *Psychoanalysis in Context: Paths between Theory and Modern Culture*. Edited by Anthony Elliot and Stephen Frosh. Routledge, 1995. P. 210.

⁶² Tanner, Stefanie Ricki. *The Female Trickster: The Mask That Reveals, Post-Jungian and Postmodern Psychological Perspectives on Women in Contemporary Culture*. Routledge, 2007. P. 151.

⁶³ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 645-1322.

⁶⁴ A detailed discussion of the trickster figure in Native American culture can be found, for example, in Allan J. Ryan’s American Book Award winner *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (1999).

⁶⁵ Pinker, Steven. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. Viking, 2018. Pp. 1-29.

group laughter. Despite the passage of time, it continues to serve the same socially adhesive function as collective expressions of emotions from the past: i.e., it is a cultural and physical activity that binds groups together by reasserting their shared values and identity.⁶⁶

The present and historical forms of communal laughter can be interpreted in the framework of “hive activity.”⁶⁷ This concept, delineated by Haidt, draws from eco-criticism and evolutionary psychology to create a metaphor for the human capacity for cohesive group behavior. “My hypothesis,” explains the author of *The Righteous Mind*, “is that human beings are conditional hive creatures. We have the ability (under special conditions) to transcend self-interest and lose ourselves (temporarily and ecstatically) in something larger than ourselves.”⁶⁸ The phenomenon of laughter fits perfectly into Haidt’s theory. Satire is hive-like (involved in the collective and working towards its betterment), conditional (it needs a specific context to thrive and have its intended impact), intentional (people gather to laugh and thus collectively challenge, confirm, or correct their values), and transgressive (having the potential to transcend people’s self-interest, even if only temporarily, through communal mirth). Contemporarily, as age-old forms of collective expression continue to fade into cultural oblivion, laughter induced by satire might be one of the few remaining means “to flip the hive switch” – that is, to inspire a sense of communal identity and “shared intentionality.”⁶⁹

Even though it was initially negative, over time, the perception of black laughter started to change. Slave masters began favoring the “amusing,” “lighthearted,” “grinning” slaves over those who openly displayed their woe and anguish. Unsurprisingly, slaves quickly used this fact to their advantage – i.e., they entered the role of tricksters, using humor to gain better treatment

⁶⁶ Martin, Rod. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Academic Press, 2006. Pp. 3-32.

⁶⁷ Haidt. *The Righteous Mind*. P. 259.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹ “[H]uman cognition veered away from that of other primates when our ancestors developed shared intentionality,” writes the author of *The Righteous Mind*, commenting upon evolutionary theories of human mental and civilizational progress. “At some point in the last million years, a small group of our ancestors developed the ability to share mental representations of tasks that two or more of them were pursuing together.” Today, “[s]hared intentionality generates moral matrices.” These, in turn, influence social norms and steer the course of development of particular communities. (Ibidem. Pp. 238, 254).

from those who held power over their lives. It was a starting point for the development of the multifaceted nature of African-American humor: its “public” version was jovial and childlike, while its “private” side was more biting, cerebral, and satirical.⁷⁰ “The difference between private and public black humor during slavery,” argues Watkins, “was not just a matter of style but also of assertive content.”⁷¹ Watkins argues that it was a stand-up comedian Richard Pryor who first successfully connected the public and private domains of black humor and introduced them to the American mainstream culture.⁷² Pryor’s humor combined the visceral anger and joy of the oral tradition of black comedy with its more literary, intellectual, sociopolitical bite. It thus belied the false binary opposition between the reactive emotionality and the sound logic of satire drawn out by mid- and late-twentieth-century critics of black comedy. Such criticism was mounted to discredit African-American satire – for example, Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man* was initially reviewed as too emotional and thus insufficiently perceptive or discerning.⁷³

Interestingly, in the second half of the twentieth century, findings in neuroscience debunked the myth of the binary disjunction into the emotional and the cerebral type, and thus helped to facilitate a new understanding of the highly complex nature of African-American humor. In *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), neuroscientist and philosopher of mind Antonio Damasio advanced what came to be known as “the somatic marker hypothesis” – a theory claiming “that emotion was in the loop of reason, and that emotion could

⁷⁰ Watkins’ book, *On the Real Side*, centers around the split between the public and private version of black humor and tracks their respective development throughout centuries. As argued by Watkins: “When they adopted subterfuge and the masking of real feelings as the central means of coping with slavery, African-Americans set in motion a social and psychological dynamic that has had far-reaching consequences. Most obviously, it established a split in their social behavior; alternate forms of deportment for integrated settings (public) and in gatherings among trusted blacks (private) became a reality in slave communities. This is reflected with typical folk pointedness in the following slave aphorism: Got one mind for white folk to see ‘Nother for what I know is me.’” (Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 771).

⁷¹ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 1100.

⁷² Ibidem. Kindle loc. 10084-10958

⁷³ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 7634.

assist the reasoning process rather than necessarily disturb it, as was commonly assumed.”⁷⁴ Damasio based his research on patients with emotional disorders. He found out that despite their intellectual capabilities being fully intact, they had problems making even the most straightforward decisions when it came to their personal lives (for example, they were able to process complex data but could not decide on what to eat for breakfast). This observation led Damasio to conclude “that the reasoning system evolved as an extension of the automatic emotional system, with emotion playing diverse roles in the reasoning process.”⁷⁵ In other words, his argument stated that logic never works alone and that emotions constitute an inseparable part of the reasoning process. “When emotion is entirely left out of the reasoning picture, as happens in certain neurological conditions,” Damasio argued, “reason turns out to be even more flawed than when emotion plays bad tricks on our decisions.”⁷⁶ That is why satire, understood as a form of expression that engages both the sentiment and the savvy to deliver its socially corrective message, proves to be a useful discursive tool. The emotional and physical qualities of African-American satire do not preclude its rationality – they complement or even facilitate it, belying the notion of the binary nature of humor.

By conveying collective exhilaration, cerebral groupthink, and corporeal unity – all of them encapsulated by a shared experience of laughter – African-American satire strengthens Damasio’s argument about the entanglement of feeling and reason. It also serves as *praxis* to the theories developed by modern scientific methods. In doing so, it frames the concept of black identity as ever-evolving – i.e., prone to definitional changes sparked by new discoveries. As argued by neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris, such a lack of closure is unavoidable when it comes to the issue of selfhood:

⁷⁴ Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Penguin Books, 2005. Kindle loc. 158.

⁷⁵ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 174.

⁷⁶ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 185.

We need not look far in science to find ideas and opinions that defy easy synthesis. There are many scientific frameworks (and levels of description) that resist integration. . . . Does this mean that we can never hope to understand what is really going on in the world? No. It means the conversation must continue.⁷⁷

Harris claims that open-endedness is inherent to certain realms of human reflection and asserts that “consensus as a scientific goal only exists in the limit, at a hypothetical end of an inquiry.”⁷⁸ Accordingly, the conversation on the intersections of humor, race, and identity continues in the next subchapter, dedicated to the conceptions of multiple subjectivities in the realm of humanities and natural sciences, the issue of race representation and (cognitive) diversity, as well as the relationship between scientific investigation and comic inquiry.

(Cognitive) Diversity and The Science of Multiple Subjectivities

According to the methodology of “new synthesis” developed by Edward O. Wilson, scholars across disciplines ought to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to their work. A biologist by training, Wilson stepped out of his primary field of study to advocate for an interdisciplinary scientific effort: an endeavor conjoining philosophy and natural sciences to explain human moral psychology.⁷⁹ Following Wilson’s methodology, Haidt cited various neuroscientific research to support Damasio’s thesis that reason is not only dependent upon emotion, but in many ways, it is its servant: i.e., it provides justifications for one’s feelings to keep one’s sense of control, subjectivity, and psychological continuity intact.⁸⁰ Harris was yet another scholar who adopted Wilson’s approach to discuss the phenomenon of the “narrative-self.”⁸¹ In his work, he argued that the notion of singular, unified selfhood falters upon closer inspection. The following section of this study elaborates on this theory with the hope to substantiate the anti-

⁷⁷ Harris, Sam. *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. Free Press, 2011. P. 66.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*. P. 67.

⁷⁹ For example, he quoted the research of cognitive psychologist Peter Wason, who claimed that “judgment and justification are separate processes,” and social scientist Howard Margolis, who argued that “human beings produce rationales they believe account for their judgments. But the rationales (on this argument) are only ex-post rationalizations.” (Haidt. *The Righteous Mind*. P. 64).

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*. P. 382.

⁸¹ See Harris, Sam. *Free Will*. Free Press, 2012; ---. *Waking Up*. Simon & Schuster, 2014.

essentialist claims of Everett, Simien, and Thurston – arguments that portray African-American identity as a multifarious, polyphonic entity engaged in a perpetual process of change and development.

As revealed by the studies of split-brain patients, the human brain's left and right hemispheres make decisions independently. This phenomenon has been observed thanks to functional MRI scans measuring neural activity in subjects that, due to administered treatment for severe epilepsy, had their left and right hemispheres surgically separated.⁸² "In a divided brain," wrote Harris, "the hemispheres are unlikely to perceive self and world in the same way, nor are they likely to feel the same about them."⁸³ "Most evidence suggests that the two hemispheres differ in temperament," he continued, "and it now seems uncontroversial to say that they can make different (and even opposing) contributions to a person's emotional life."⁸⁴ While Haidt used similar findings to argue about the function of reason and emotions in the human decision-making process, Harris interpreted them to posit that there is no such thing as a unitary, stable self. As argued by him: "the disconnected right hemisphere is independently conscious and . . . the divided brain harbors two distinct points of view. This fact poses an insurmountable problem for the notion that each of us has a single, indivisible self."⁸⁵

According to Harris, there is no particular region of the brain in which the "self" – one's identity – is being stored. Consequently, our seemingly coherent sense of subjectivity is dependent upon multiple processes co-occurring in both hemispheres of the brain. Working together, they create what Harris calls "an illusion of self" – a narrative structure of subjectivity. The self is simultaneously a construct (as it provides a sense of psychological continuity and

⁸² The experiment was conducted by limiting the field of vision of split-brain patients, an approach that made it possible to deliver information to the left and right hemisphere separately. The left hemisphere was informed about the right hemisphere's decision through a field of vision not accessible to the left hemisphere. The right hemisphere carried out the decision it has made via a limb not controlled or seen by the left hemisphere. When the left hemisphere – one responsible for logic and language processing – was made aware of the right hemisphere's action, it made split-brain subjects confabulate a *post-factum* justification for said action and verbalize it in an attempt to narratively unify the two separate "selves." (Harris. *Waking Up*. P. 69).

⁸³ Ibidem.

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

coherence) and a process (as it needs undisturbed brain activity to be maintained and propelled forward). According to Harris, the notion of self is built by our brains on a moment-to-moment basis – a fact that we can be made aware of by functional MRI scans and various techniques of self-contemplation. The self is also malleable: subject to change through intentional thought processes sparked and sustained by people’s cultural environments.⁸⁶

As argued by historian and futurologist Yuval Noah Harari, the Western notion of an “authentic” self is founded on the liberal belief that every person is an “in-dividual”: in that, quite literally, every human being possesses a single, indivisible essence. “True, this inner core is wrapped in many outer layers. But if I make the effort to peel these external crusts,” says Harari, impersonating the liberal archetype, “I will find deep within myself a clear and single inner voice, which is my authentic self.”⁸⁷ First, Harari questions this assumption by using the research on split-brain patients discussed by Harris.⁸⁸ Then, he juxtaposes the liberal belief in undividable subjectivity with the view represented by modern natural sciences, which postulate that people are, in fact, “dividuals”: i.e., their subjectivity is divisible and constitutes “an assemblage . . . lacking a single inner voice or a single self.”⁸⁹ What follows from this supposition is that people can change identifications with time and place, as well as switch between them when talking to different people. In the world of humanities, this concept came to be known as “relational identity”; it was portrayed in depth by Rebecca Walker in *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001). In the memoir, Walker illustrated the ever-changing nature of selfhood using a flight metaphor. “I am the passenger,” she wrote, referring both to her physical presence at an airport and the nature of human consciousness.⁹⁰ “I do not have to belong to one camp, school, or race, one fixed set of qualifiers, adjectives

⁸⁶ Ibidem. P. 72.

⁸⁷ Harari, Yuval Noah. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. Harper, 2017. P. 333.

⁸⁸ Ibidem. P. 292.

⁸⁹ Ibidem. P. 333.

⁹⁰ Walker, Rebecca. *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. Riverhead Books, 2001. Pp. 3-4.

based on someone else’s experience,” she continued, referring to the broad spectrum of ethnic identifications she felt connected to at different points in her life.⁹¹ “I am transitional space, form-shifting space,” concluded Walker, metaphorizing her mind and sense of cultural identity as a “place of a thousand hellos and a million goodbyes.”⁹²

The shifting, relational, transitional nature of selfhood discussed by Harris, Harari, and Walker also manifests itself in linguistics, where it has been described as “code-switching.” One can hear it, for example, when Latino people switch between English and Spanish. “The concept perhaps seems less familiar when done between dialects of the same language,” points out linguist and cultural critic John McWhorter, “but this, too, is extremely common.”⁹³ “For example,” he continued, “what an unfortunate number of Americans think of as black people slipping into ‘errors’ when they speak is, in the scientific sense, people code-switching between standard and Black English, the latter of which is an alternative, and not degraded, form of English.”⁹⁴ As explained by McWhorter, the linguistic reality of black Americans alternates between at least two selves – one articulated through vernacular, the other voiced by standard English. This phenomenon echoes Harari’s notion of people as “dividuals,” and suggests that identities manifest themselves on multiple levels of social and individual existence – a fact that prompted sociologist Emile Durkheim to categorize our species as *Homo Duplex* instead of *Homo Sapiens*.⁹⁵ The term “Sapiens” derives from a Latin word meaning “wise”; it was meant to accentuate the individual cognitive capabilities of each member of our species. Durkheim argues that the term *Homo Duplex* is a more accurate one, as socialized individuals throughout history have used their cognitive abilities first and foremost to absorb knowledge accumulated by their elders and forebearers. In other words, the *personal* insight denoted by the word

⁹¹ Ibidem.

⁹² Ibidem.

⁹³ McWhorter, John. “It Wasn’t ‘Verbal Blackface.’” *Atlantic*. Published April 9, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2uVk5xy>.

⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁹⁵ Qtd. in Haidt. *The Righteous Mind*. P. 261.

“Sapiens” is often facilitated by people’s cultural environment – a repository of *group* knowledge. According to Durkheim, this makes human selfhood inherently duplicitous: i.e., simultaneously dependent upon the individual and the collective.⁹⁶

A personal sense of humor is born out of one’s social environment – i.e., it always draws from, embraces, or opposes ideas and values of a given community. As such, it works on the personal and group level at the same time, reflecting the dynamic described by the Durkheimian concept of the Homo Duplex. People are cognitively formed by their environments, which allows them to absorb centuries of human knowledge within a single lifespan. However, the downside of this phenomenon is that individuals often inherit age-old biases held by their cultures. The task of satire, defined by Critchley as similar in its goal to cultural anthropology, is to relativize people’s cultural perceptions and point these biases out.⁹⁷ The way humor accomplishes this task is through the process known as defamiliarization. Echoing Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of estrangement – an argument that the primary purpose of art is to make the public see ordinary things in an unusual way – Critchley appointed defamiliarization as the chief principle of humor. Thanks to defamiliarization, what has been perceived as the natural order is often revealed to be an outcome of a tacit social agreement – one that can be breached and, if necessary, relegated to the proverbial dustbin of history.⁹⁸ Suppose a given idea is found out to be unsalvageable; in that case, one can simply laugh it away, thereby commencing the process of unlearning it – i.e., freeing oneself from its narrative and psychological grasp.

Taken together, the facts uncovered by neuroscience substantiate the notion of the polyphonic, malleable sense of self advanced by the world of humanities: sociology (Haidt, Durkheim), philosophy (Harris, Critchley), history (Harari), linguistics (McWhorter), and non-fiction (Walker). Studies of the human mind give data-based, scientific validation to the dynamic and diverse nature of black identity portrayed in Everett, Simien, and Thurston’s

⁹⁶ Ibidem. P. 369.

⁹⁷ Critchley. *On Humour*. Pp. 65-66.

⁹⁸ Ibidem. Pp. 18-19.

comic fiction. As split-brain research reveals the paradoxical and non-unitary nature of the human mind, it also strengthens the work of cultural critics who made claims about the narrative power of humor and irony to articulate ambiguity and multiplicity contained within people's sense of selfhood. For example, it supports claims made by scholars like Kwame Anthony Appiah, who advised his readers to "live with fractured identities; engage in identity play . . . and, above all, practice irony"⁹⁹; or humor theorists such as Stefanie Tanner, who argued that "most serious of themes can sometimes be presented only through humor . . . bridging seemingly contradictory and paradoxical elements."¹⁰⁰

According to Tanner, "humor's ability to explicate a contradictory tone, to harvest paradox . . . can be used either to take control, to maintain power, or to overthrow authority."¹⁰¹ While talking about authority, Tanner means both literal and epistemic power – i.e., the cultural influence over people's perception of self and the world. As argued by Critchley, humorous discourse poses a considerable challenge to the epistemic power of the Western concept of identity – specifically, to the notion of the "authentic self." In *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (2008), Critchley rejects the tragic paradigm of the authentic self as established by continental philosophy, most notably by Nietzsche and Heidegger. As explained by Critchley:

the problem with the tragic paradigm is that it implies a heroic model of authenticity. For me, authenticity is not something to be salvaged from the wreckage of Heidegger's existential analytic. . . . On the contrary, I want to argue for a notion of ordinary inauthenticity at the core of subjective experience . . . My question to the tragic-heroic paradigm is very simple: might there not be other ways of sublimating ethical experience than tragedy? More specifically, might there be forms of sublimation that express a less heroic concept of the ethical subject that is truer to the picture of ethical subjectivity that I want to advance? More specifically, still, might not humour be one of those forms? The picture of human finitude that I would like to propose is better approached as *comic acknowledgment* rather than *tragic affirmation*.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Amy Gutman. *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*. Princeton UP, 1996. P. 104.

¹⁰⁰ Tanner. *The Female Trickster*. P. 152.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem.

¹⁰² Critchley, Simon. *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. Verso, 2008. Pp. 77-78.

In Critchley's view, tragic heroes "authenticated" their identities through suffering; it gave their lives existential meaning and narrative depth. The way American culture often legitimizes black identity by its proximity to victimhood echoes the tragic paradigm of the "authentic self" described by Critchley.¹⁰³ To illustrate this claim, one might look at the example of Barack Obama, who has been accused of racial "inauthenticity" on numerous occasions. The premise for these accusations was that Obama's middle-class upbringing, relatively light complexion, and Ivy League education deprived him of the opportunity to get in touch with his racial essence: i.e., his "authentic" black self. It is because of this outlook, for example, *The Daily News* columnist Stanley Crouch wrote that Obama had not "lived the life of a black American"; it is due to this view, Alan Keyes – African-American political activist and Obama's opponent in the 2004 Illinois Senate race – used the fact that Obama was not descended from slaves to accuse him of not being "authentically" black.¹⁰⁴

The tragic paradigm of African-American identity frames "real" blackness as a sense of self forged in the fires of hardship. One of the most recent iterations of this belief can be found, for example, in Damon Young's memoir *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Blacker* (2019). The title takes an adage by Nietzsche and replaces the word "stronger" with "blacker," meaning to signify strength in the face of adversity. However, it also involuntarily associates blackness with struggle. This optic leads to perceptions such as those exemplified by Joe Biden's verbal gaffe from August 2019. "Poor kids are just as bright and just as talented as white kids," said Biden, campaigning for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination.¹⁰⁵ "The reason even Biden's fans are cringing at this remark," writes McWhorter, "is that it implies an equation between being poor and being a person of color, and perhaps also that all high-achieving

¹⁰³ See, for example, McWhorter, John. "Jussie Smollett Story Shows Rise of Victimhood Culture." *Atlantic*. Published Feb 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3eREpGb>; ---. "How 'White Fragility' Talks Down to Black People." *Atlantic*. Published July 14, 2020. <https://bit.ly/36KxKtR>.

¹⁰⁴ Qtd. In Staples, Brendt. "Decoding the Debate Over the Blackness of Barack Obama." *New York Times*. Published Feb. 11, 2007. <https://nyti.ms/31wn51r>.

¹⁰⁵ Qtd. in McWhorter, John. "What Joe Biden's Latest Gaffe Reveals." *Atlantic*. Published Aug 9, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2P5m6Ej>.

students are white.”¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, McWhorter claims that many Americans unconsciously share the assumptions underlying Biden’s blunder:

Biden’s underlying schema was the one minted in the era of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* [1967], where being accomplished, poised, and well-spoken was seen as remarkable in a black man; in white men, by contrast, those traits were seen as signs of basic middle-class maturity. That movie was a good while ago now, as was Biden’s birth, and few would tar him as a bigot for harboring these quiet assumptions, which were once common. . . . [Today, the enlightened American is asked to maintain a sense of black Americans as burdened people]. If it’s really so wrong of [Biden] to operate upon a thumbnail sketch of white kids as rich and kids of color as poor, then many might consider assessing the essentialism in their own mental schema.¹⁰⁷

McWhorter argues that the type of essentialist thinking equating blackness with hardship remains operational in the contemporary American cultural and political landscape. Importantly, one can witness its reflection not only in the products of twentieth-century mainstream American culture – e.g., in films like *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967) – but also in the work of contemporary, prominent black intellectuals. McWhorter sees instances of such thinking in Derrick Bell, a late Critical Race Theorist and the first tenured African-American professor at Harvard Law School, who described modern black Americans as incessantly oppressed – ever the “faces at the bottom of the well.”¹⁰⁸ He also identifies traces of essentialist thinking in Ta-Nehisi Coates, a widely celebrated essayist describing black America primarily through the lens of historical oppression and the ever-present anxiety derived from DuBoisian double consciousness.¹⁰⁹

Similarly to Critchley, McWhorter resists the tragic paradigm of personhood: the notion that suffering somehow legitimizes one’s identity, making it “real” or “authentic.” He also supplements the argument of Critchley, a British philosopher, with an intimate understanding

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁸ Qtd. in ibidem.

¹⁰⁹ What is interesting, is that some humor theorists find a meaningful connection between Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness and the comic perspective. “In *The Souls of Black Folk*,” writes Watkins, “W. E. B. Du Bois alluded to a perceptual peculiarity that underlies much black behavior and directly influences blacks’ view of themselves and others: ‘It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’ . . . Du Bois, of course, was writing about the grave circumstances facing black Americans at the turn of the century. But what he calls ‘twoness,’ viewing reality from dual perspectives – the controversial as well as the unexpected or unconventional – is advanced by many theorists as a crucial aspect of creating humor.” (Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 330).

of American racial dynamics. Informing his perspective with the contemporary and historical sociocultural context of race in the US, McWhorter calls for anti-essentialist thinking – a plea echoed in the ethos of Open-Source Blackness. Everett, Simien, and Thurston see the notion of an “authentic” racial self as ultimately constricting. Understanding “real” blackness as one formed by the tragedy of oppression – or even by the triumph of perseverance in the face of adversity – leads to essentialist definitions of identity, as well as to accusations of “acting white” directed at African-Americans who do not fit this mold. In the past two decades, this topic has been discussed in several books, most notable of which include: Erin McNamara Horvat’s *Beyond Acting White: Reframing the Debate on Black Student Achievement* (2006); Karolyn Tyson’s *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White After Brown* (2011); as well as Devon W. Carbado’s and Mitu Gulati’s *Acting White? Rethinking Race in Post-Racial America* (2013). All of them claim that designating certain phenomena – e.g., academic ambition, emotional vulnerability, and other attitudes difficult to adopt in situations of economic hardship – as unbecoming to “real” blackness might stunt the emotional and intellectual growth of people who aim to conform to false notions of racial authenticity. One of the most important countermeasures to essentialist thinking advocated for by the authors above is a diverse representation of blackness in American media.

The term “diversity” is now common parlance in the US: most educational institutions and corporate entities declare it to be a part of their agenda. For example, Harvard University’s Office of Diversity Education & Support provides consultations with trained professionals for students and faculty “looking for support around issues of identity and belonging”¹¹⁰; and Google has a Chief Diversity Officer who publishes an annual report with statistics on ethnic and gender differentiation within the company’s structure.¹¹¹ As observed by Anna Holmes,

¹¹⁰ “What We Do.” *Harvard College Office of Diversity Education & Support*. Accessed Jun. 22, 2019. <https://diversity.college.harvard.edu/what-we-do>.

¹¹¹ In its mission statement, Google declares: “We endeavor to build products that work for everyone by including perspectives from backgrounds that vary by race, ethnicity, social background, religion, gender, age,

writer and co-host of Baratunde Thurston's and Tanner Colby's *Show About Race* (2015-2017),¹¹² even though the idea of diversity is widespread in contemporary American culture, evoking it is often a mere stand-in for real systemic change. "When the word is proudly invoked," she writes, "it acquires a certain sheen. It can give a person or institution moral credibility, a phenomenon that Nancy Leong, a University of Denver law professor, calls 'racial capitalism' and defines as 'an individual or group deriving value from the racial identity of another person.'"¹¹³ According to Holmes, many companies and institutions try to market themselves as diversified, yet do not implement any significant changes to their employment models. "It's almost as if cheerfully and frequently uttering the word 'diversity,'" she quips, "is the equivalent of doing the work of actually making it a reality."¹¹⁴

Even if one shares Holmes' skepticism about institutional efforts aimed at increasing diversity, one has to admit that they do contribute to a nationwide discussion about racial inclusion and representation in the country's politics and popular culture. Michelle Obama, the former First Lady of the United States, offered an apt summary of this discussion in one of her speeches:

For so many people, television and movies may be the only way they understand people who aren't like them. And when I come across many little black girls who come up to me over the course of these seven and a half years with tears in their eyes, and they say: 'Thank you for being a role model for me. I don't see educated black women on TV, and the fact that you're the First Lady validates who I am.' . . . There are folks who now know black families — like the Johnsons on *Black-ish* or the folks on *Modern Family*. They become part of who you are. You share their pains. You understand their fears. They make you laugh, and they change how you see the world. And that is particularly true in a country where there are still millions of people who live in communities where they can live their whole lives not having contact or exposure with people who aren't like them, whether that is race or religion or simply lifestyle. The only way that millions of people get to know other folks and the way they live . . . is through the power of television and movies.¹¹⁵

disability, sexual orientation, veteran status, and national origin" ("Making progress on diversity, equity, and inclusion." *Google Diversity*. Accessed Jun. 22, 2019. <https://diversity.google>).

¹¹² Locker, Melissa. "'The Show About Race': the podcast that gets real in not-so-post-racial America." *Guardian*. Published Aug. 27, 2015. <https://bit.ly/38QTAOL>.

¹¹³ Holmes, Anna. "Has Diversity Lost its Meaning?" *New York Times*. Published Oct. 27, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/2GXjVfk>.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁵ Qtd. in Nate, Jones. "Michelle Obama Explains Why Representation in Pop Culture Matters." *Vulture*. Published Aug. 23, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2N4Tytz>.

Statements by Obama refer to diversity as it is commonly understood in the US: a varied representation of the ethnic and gender spectrum in the realm of culture, business, and politics. However, some black public intellectuals criticize this understanding of diversity as too superficial. For example, commentators such as McWhorter¹¹⁶ or Coleman Hughes¹¹⁷ see it as an effort to group people by their phenotypical differences. Their ideological opponents, most notably Coates¹¹⁸ and Ibram X. Kendi,¹¹⁹ argue that race-based generalizations are drawn from reliable statistical data and are necessary to help historically marginalized groups. While the debate about racial categorization and diverse representation remains contentious, one type of diversity remains uncontroversial and draws relatively universal praise: cognitive diversity.

Alison Gopnik, a developmental psychologist and one of the leading researchers on human mental growth, makes several vital claims on the importance of intellectual variety on individual and group levels. As she points out, neuroscientists differentiate between “exploratory” and “exploitative” modes of thinking; the former is considered one of the key mental mechanisms that prompt cognitive diversity. As explained by Gopnik:

Exploring possibilities, whether they are possible personalities, theories, technologies, or cultures, allows for innovation. It gives you alternatives in the face of a new environment. But, of course, you also have to act, right now, in this environment. Exploration won't help you then . . . One way to solve this problem is to alternate between periods of exploration and exploitation. A particularly effective strategy is to start out exploring, and then proceed to exploit. You begin by randomly generating lots of variation and then zero in on what works.¹²⁰

The exploratory mental model helps one creatively wander into the unknown – imagining something and possibly arriving at a new approach or perspective through trial and error. People excel at this mode of thinking in their earliest stages of cognitive development, that is, during their childhoods. The older we get, the more entrenched we become in the mental models developed during late adolescence and early adulthood – stages of life requiring pragmatism

¹¹⁶ McWhorter, John. “The Virtue Signalers Won’t Change the World.” *Atlantic*. Published Dec. 23, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2V7kV66>

¹¹⁷ “Should America Pay Reparations for Slavery? Ta-Nehisi Coates v Coleman Hughes.” *Guardian*. Published June 19, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2XqaHBL>.

¹¹⁸ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “The Case for Reparations.” *Atlantic*. Published Jun 1, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2j2mgr4>.

¹¹⁹ Kendi, Ibram X. “The American Nightmare.” *Atlantic*. Published June 1, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2IAZCIh>.

¹²⁰ Gopnik, Alison. *The Gardener and the Carpenter*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2016. Pp. 30-31.

and productivity rather than imaginativeness. Switching from exploration to exploitation increases people's effectiveness; it lets them take advantage of the governing rules of systems they find themselves a part of (e.g., an education system, a job market, or a polity). To attain meaningful change – imagine oneself and others outside of the realm of possibilities prescribed by a given system, culture, or society – one has to revert to an exploratory mode of thinking. This mental model entails more risk of error and failure, but it is the only one that offers critical and creative potential for transformative change. It is also the model that is effectively prompted by humor.

The comic perspective accentuates a mismatch between the notion of a stable self and the phenomenology of human subjectivity. According to developmental psychologists (Gopnik), neuroscientists (Harris), as well as cultural theorists (Appiah), the human experience of self is more of a process – a flow of sensory perceptions and thoughts – than a construct. As such, human subjectivity renders itself capable of encapsulating complexities and contradictions beyond the scope of simple, clear-cut definitions. Most importantly, it remains open to modification – a fact that finds itself at odds with what Critchley described as the conception of the tragic subject: an entity largely incapable of change, even when surrounded by new circumstances and confronted with previously unknown information.¹²¹ Critchley views the finality of human life, as well as the unanswerability of its most fundamental questions, as inherently absurd. He argues that adopting such a perspective might lead one down two conceptual paths: “comic acknowledgment” or “tragic affirmation.”¹²² Both of them recognize human inadequacy in the face of philosophical questions on life's finality and its ultimate meaning. However, “comic acknowledgment” meets its insufficiency with a sense of humor – that is, it tackles its limitations with a mental model of exploratory play.

¹²¹ John Morreall, another notable philosopher of humor, echoes this particular argument of Critchley in his deliberations on the tragic vs. the comic. (See Morreall, John. *Comic Relief: Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Wiley-Blackwell: 2009. Pp. 73-82).

¹²² Critchley. *Infinitely Demanding*. P. 79.

The tragic paradigm of authenticity presupposes the existence of a one “true” self. In contrast, the comic perspective questions the notion of the single, indivisible subjectivity and keeps itself open to redefinitions. Its inherent lack of finality mirrors modes of thinking described as “anti-essentialist” by McWhorter and “exploratory” by Gopnik. When set against this conceptual background, humor appears as more than a mere narrative tool. It is an outlook questioning previous conceptions of self and the world; it is a framework used to perceive, conceptualize, and interact with reality. It meets human finality with a sense of defiant investigative play – i.e., it sees the inconclusiveness of life’s meanings as an opportunity to seek new conceptual grounds.

“Science is a body of knowledge, but even more important than that, science is really a means of querying the world”¹²³ – claims Samuel Abramson, a complexity scholar and the author of *The Half-Life of Facts* (2013), a study of how cultures and scientific disciplines (re)formulate what they consider to be true. Arbesman argues that one of the most effective ways to spread the mental model of scientific thinking among the general public is to recognize “that everything we know is constantly in draft form.”¹²⁴ Significantly, this type of thinking is advocated for by humor theory as well. For example, Bakhtin describes the process of comic defamiliarization as if it was taking place in a laboratory:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. . . . As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment – both scientific and artistic – and into the hands of free experimental fantasy.¹²⁵

The scientific approach laid out by Abramson finds its reflection in the comic method described by Bakhtin; both thinkers find the core of their concepts in the ethos of (re)examination: “querying the world,” as the former said it, or “[turning] it upside down, inside out,” as the

¹²³ Qtd. in „Future-Proof Your Knowledge.” *The Knowledge Project with Shane Parrish*. Internet podcast. Ep. 15. Published Nov. 28, 2016. <https://fs.blog/samuel-arbesman>.

¹²⁴ Ibidem.

¹²⁵ Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination*. P. 23.

latter put it. Knowledge is like radioactivity, argues Abramson, building up to an elaborate metaphor; as such, we can expect it first to disperse and then to dissipate:

If you look at a single atom of uranium, whether it's going to decay – breaking down and unleashing its energy – is highly unpredictable. It might decay in the next second, or you might have to sit and stare at it for thousands, or perhaps even millions, of years before it breaks apart. But when you take a chunk of uranium, itself made up of trillions upon trillions of atoms, suddenly the unpredictable becomes predictable. We know how uranium atoms work in the aggregate. . . . It turns out that facts, when viewed as a large body of knowledge, are just as predictable. Facts, in the aggregate, have half-lives: We can measure the amount of time for half of a subject's knowledge to be overturned.¹²⁶

Facts change – they get disproven, updated, or replaced due to the incessant processes of questioning, reexamination, and innovation. Complexity science, the systematic method of tracking the (re)formulation of knowledge, did not yet exist as a discipline in times of Bakhtin. However, being a careful student of history, he was undoubtedly aware of the phenomenon described by Abramson. Media scholar Jonathan Gray summarized Bakhtin's approach to humor and its relationship with knowledge in the following way: “Bakhtin staunchly denies that humor and laughter are not serious . . . he sees the continual reflection, analysis, and ridicule of social norms as enacted by humor as a necessary device, warding off the entrenchment of any norm into becoming wholly acceptable and beyond rebuke.”¹²⁷ Comic perspective fosters scientific thinking because it is inherently open-ended: it presupposes a lack of finality of its proposed ideas. Our understanding of the world needs to change for humanity to make progress, says Abramson; ridicule ensures that no dogma or mental model can be beyond rebuke, claims Bakhtin. Scientific thinking and comic perspective work towards the same goal: continuous (self-)reflexivity. This characteristic makes them particularly useful when thinking about the concept of race: an idea that has been proven erroneous as a legitimate biological variable yet remains real as an element of many black Americans' social and cultural landscape.

¹²⁶ Arbesman, Samuel. *The Half-Life of Facts: Why Everything We Know Has an Expiration Date*. Current, 2013. Pp. 2-3.

¹²⁷ Gray et al. *Satire TV*. Pp. 9-10.

Contemporary Discourse on Race

American discourse on race of the last twenty years has been dominated by a relatively new analytical framework – Critical Race Theory (CRT). The first-ever open workshop dedicated exclusively to CRT took place in 1989 in Madison, Wisconsin. The theory was established by academics such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Jean Stefancic.¹²⁸ At first, it was dedicated to the realm of law, where it argued for the existence of institutional racial bias in the American criminal justice system. As the theory developed, it extrapolated its expertise into other social, cultural, and political areas. As argued by Angela Harris, a scholar in the field of CRT, the movement “has exploded from a narrow subspecialty of jurisprudence chiefly of interest to academic lawyers into a literature read in departments of education, cultural studies, English, sociology, comparative literature, political science, history, and anthropology.”¹²⁹ In order to present the necessary critical framework for understanding the work of Everett, Simien, and Thurston, this subchapter discusses the central ideas of CRT; it also deliberates on the most important controversies surrounding the movement.

The central argument of the theory concerns the interplay of race and power in the US. Drawing on the notions developed by Michel Foucault, CRT scholars see the historical relationship between white and black Americans as a struggle to establish and maintain social, cultural, and political power. They describe this relationship as a relation of the powerful and the powerless, the oppressor and the oppressed. In the process of defining what they see as inherent racism of the American structure of power, CRT scholars question the professed color-blindness of the country’s institutions. As pointed out by Delgado and Stefancic, unlike the Civil Rights movement, which opted for incremental change within the already established power structures, CRT questions the very foundations of “neutral principles of constitutional

¹²⁸ Harris, Angela. “Foreword.” *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. NYU Press, 2001. P. xix.

¹²⁹ Ibidem. P. xx.

law.”¹³⁰ The main reason for that line of argumentation is that the institutions tackled by CRT have not been colorblind throughout history (mostly to the disadvantage of people of color). As such, CRT deems equality before law granted under the 1964 Civil Rights Act as insufficient in addressing the racially discriminatory practices of the past centuries. CRT scholars claim that the country needs to adopt color-conscious practices to adequately redress injustices of the past.¹³¹ According to this argument, all future endeavors in the realm of politics, culture, and social work ought to recognize the country’s racial history, identify those who suffered the most from past injustices, and aim to raise their standard of living. CRT calls for addressing racial disparities in housing, education, healthcare, employment, political engagement, and cultural representation. Opponents of this approach claim that it cultivates a mentality of victimhood¹³² and works against the ideals of aspirational color-blindness embraced by many past leaders of the Civil Rights movement¹³³ and several contemporary public intellectuals.¹³⁴

The second important feature of CRT is its activism.¹³⁵ As pointed out by Delgado and Stefancic, the movement “sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial

¹³⁰ Delgado and Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory*. P. 3.

¹³¹ As argued by Adia Harvey Wingfield: “the dominant language around racial issues today is typically one of colorblindness . . . Many sociologists, though, are extremely critical of colorblindness as an ideology. . . . Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, for example, has written extensively about the idea of colorblindness, charting the ways that it functions as an ideology that legitimizes specific practices that maintain racial inequalities – police brutality, housing discrimination, voter disenfranchisement, and others. . . . [Some suggest] the academic left wastes time dissecting the concept of colorblindness, and would be better served focusing on more pressing, systemic processes of inequality. But a careful read of sociological literature in this area finds that . . . [colorblindness] offers a way to avoid addressing these exact social problems.” (Wingfield, Adia Harvey. “Color-Blindness Is Counterproductive.” *Atlantic*. Published Sep. 13, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2npVAU0>).

¹³² For example, Coleman Hughes argues: “Reparations, by definition, are only given to victims. So the moment you give me reparations, you’ve made me into a victim without my consent.” (Hughes, Coleman. “Testimony on Reparations.” *Quillette*. Published June 20, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2ZNUVTJ>).

¹³³ Most notably, by Martin Luther King, Jr., who famously professed: “I have a dream [to] one day live in a nation where [people] will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” (King, Martin Luther, Jr. “I Have a Dream.” Speech delivered at the March on Washington, 1963. *archives.gov*. <https://bit.ly/2fmjJXA>).

¹³⁴ One of its most eloquent proponents, Conor Friedersdorf, argues that “critics of colorblindness mostly don’t engage the more sophisticated version of the viewpoint: a recognition that race matters very much to the world as it presently exists, coupled with the beliefs that colorblindness is a goal that we ought to strive toward and that, all else being equal, race-neutral policies are preferable in a pluralistic country, even if various race-specific remedies are still necessary today.” (Friedersdorf, Conor. “The Left’s Attack on Color-Blindness Goes Too Far.” *Atlantic*. Published Sep. 4, 2015. <https://bit.ly/33tKt1u>).

¹³⁵ This dimension of CRT corresponds with the activism inherent to satire. “The purpose of satire is not negativity but positive change,” claims Gray; “by comically playing with the political, one can gain a greater sense of ownership over it and, in turn, feel more empowered to engage it.” (Gray et al. *Satire TV*. P. 11-12).

lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better.”¹³⁶ The third foundational principle of CRT is what it calls “interest convergence.” It claims that anti-black racism in the US is advantageous to both white elites (materially, as it helps them accumulate wealth) and white working-class people (psychologically, by making them feel better about their low place on the social ladder). As a result, white Americans might disapprove of racism in principle, but actively dealing with this problem would go against their interests.¹³⁷ Some critics point out that this dynamic was made explicit during Trump’s presidency, as he repeatedly aimed to energize his political base through white identity politics. For example, as argued by political journalist Tim Alberta, the post-electoral support of Trump by the conservative establishment in Washington, D.C., served as a closing argument in a debate about whether the Republican Party as a whole would embrace white identity politics.¹³⁸ Most of Trump’s inflammatory statements constitute what CRT scholar Ian Haney López defines as “dog whistles” – seemingly colorblind comments charged with racial undertones.¹³⁹ “Dog whistles” give president Trump plausible deniability and allow him to refute justifiable accusations of racism. Trump’s “dog whistles,” collected in the *Atlantic*’s “Oral History of Trump’s Bigotry” (2019),¹⁴⁰ include attempts to illegitimize Obama’s presidency by questioning his place of birth, label immigrants from Mexico as rapists and drug dealers, as well as telling four brown-skinned congresswomen to “go back . . . [to] places from which they came.”¹⁴¹ Tellingly, Trump’s statements do not

¹³⁶ Delgado and Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory*. P. 3.

¹³⁷ Ibidem. P. 7.

¹³⁸ Alberta, Tim. “How White Identity Politics Won the Republican Civil War.” *Ezra Klein Show*. Internet podcast. Published Jul 18, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2YGX2YB>.

¹³⁹ López, Ian Haney. *Dog-Whistle Politics: Coded Racism and Inequality for All*. Lecture delivered at Brown University. Published Aug. 23, 2017. <https://youtu.be/H6A3NQiJpH0>.

¹⁴⁰ As argued by David A. Graham et al.: “Trump has assembled a long record of comment on issues involving African-Americans as well as Mexicans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Muslims, Jews, immigrants, women, and people with disabilities. . . . In 2016, Trump described himself to *The Washington Post* as ‘the least racist person that you’ve ever encountered.’ [However, instances] of bigotry involving Donald Trump span more than four decades.” (Graham, David A. et al. “An Oral History of Trump’s Bigotry.” *Atlantic*. Published June 1, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2WRRSY1>).

¹⁴¹ Ibidem.

seem to throw off his most ardent supporters – a fact that only seems to support Alberta’s thesis about Trump’s strategic employment of white identity politics.¹⁴²

Another core principle of CRT defines race as a social construct, not a biological reality. This is probably one of the least controversial theses proposed by scholars in the field. Race has been disqualified as a legitimate factor in human genetics.¹⁴³ The consensus among leading scientists is that biological variation *within* groups perceived by the US culture as single races is generally more significant than that *between* such groups. Importantly, this finding has been replicated across disciplines¹⁴⁴ and is no longer a point of contention between scholars in various fields of natural sciences.¹⁴⁵ Of course, biological differences exist between individuals and populations, but applying the group variable of skin color or phenotype to study them has long been considered misguided.¹⁴⁶

The contemporary discussion around race’s biological reality has centered around commercial DNA research and its growing popularity.¹⁴⁷ Relatively recently, private companies behind websites such as *23andme.com* started offering an affordable service of

¹⁴² As argued by political reporter Elaina Plott: “to accuse a politician of holding virulent racist beliefs is also, if only implicitly, to condemn his or her voters of harboring those same tendencies. . . . But rather than distancing them from Trump, the accusations have only seemed to strengthen their support of this president.” (Plott, Elaina. “We’re All Tired of Being Called Racists.” *Atlantic*. Published Aug. 2, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2OPO9Hy>).

¹⁴³ As argued by Sarah Tishkoff et al.: “racial classifications are inadequate descriptors of the distribution of genetic variation in our species. . . . Because disease genes may be geographically restricted due to mutation, genetic drift, migration and natural selection, knowledge of individual ancestry will be important for biomedical studies. Identifiers based on race will often be insufficient.” (Tishkoff, Sarah A. and Kenneth K Kidd. “Implications of Biogeography of Human Populations for ‘Race’ and Medicine.” *Nature Genetics*. Volume 36, 2004. Pp.21–27. <https://go.nature.com/33skBmI>).

¹⁴⁴ As argued by Chiara Romuald et al.: “The genetic uniformity of the human species contrasts with what is observed for other large mammals . . . whose populations tend to be more diverse.” (Romuald, Chiara et al. “Patterns of Human Diversity, within and among Continents, Inferred from Biallelic DNA Polymorphisms.” *Genome Research*. Volume 12, 2002. Pp. 602-612. <https://bit.ly/2TorRvh>).

¹⁴⁵ The past development of race science, a discipline that gave rise to the American Eugenics movement, has been attributed to a misapplication of Darwin’s theories of natural selection by misinformed or ideologically motivated researchers. As pointed out by Chou: “In the biological and social sciences, the consensus is clear: race is a social construct, not a biological attribute. Today, scientists prefer to use the term ‘ancestry’ to describe human diversity.” (Chou, Vivien. “How Science and Genetics are Reshaping the Race Debate of the 21st Century.” *harvard.edu*. Published Apr 17, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2MUM7zD>).

¹⁴⁶ As argued by Noah A. Rosenberg et al.: “General agreement of genetic and predefined populations suggests that self-reported ancestry . . . does not obviate the need to use genetic information in genetic association studies.” (Rosenberg, Noah A. et al. “Genetic Structure of Human Populations.” *Science Magazine*. Volume 298, 2002. <https://stanford.io/2OOAX5G>).

¹⁴⁷ Chou. “How Science and Genetics...”

sequencing one's genome and mapping one's biological ancestry. While some criticize this enterprise for perpetuating the belief in the biological reality of race, research published by companies such as *23andme* has one significant benefit: it belies the myth of "racial purity" by portraying it as unattainable.¹⁴⁸ *23andme* studies the ancestry of its research subjects in a twofold way: first, by sequencing their genome, and then, by pointing to the geographical place of origin of their respective lineages. What can seem like a return of race science formulates a thesis directly opposed to that of Eugenics: it says that we are all hybridized and thus interconnected on a biological level. This message stands in accord with the current state of knowledge in the realm of human genetics, which concludes that race matters only as a phenotypic variable – i.e., it is only skin-deep. "In 1950, UNESCO issued a statement asserting that all humans belong to the same species and that 'race' is not a biological reality but a myth. This was a summary of the findings of an international panel of anthropologists, geneticists, sociologists, and psychologists," points out science journalist Robert Wald Sussman. "Since that time," he continues, "similar statements have been published by the American Anthropological Association and the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, and an enormous amount of modern scientific data has been gathered to justify this conclusion."¹⁴⁹ The fact that the US culture has not caught up with a proposition formulated more than half a century ago exemplifies the inherently slow, multigenerational pace of cultural change. It also points out that cultural perceptions are often based on persisting myths, and that eradicating those might prove more difficult than sequencing the human genome.

Another vital claim of CRT is that people of color have a unique, personal experience of being racialized; thus, their perspective on race is more informed than that of their white counterparts. Delgado and Stefancic admit this claim is controversial, as it stands at odds with the principle of anti-essentialism, another important tenet of CRT.¹⁵⁰ For years, American

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁹ Sussman. "There Is No Such Thing as Race."

¹⁵⁰ Delgado and Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory*. P. 9.

popular culture perpetuated the “magical Negro” trope – i.e., it portrayed black individuals as those whose race afforded them a kind of moral wisdom to impart to white people in need of guidance.¹⁵¹ Most recently, this trope appeared in the Oscar-winning movie *The Green Book* (2019). While the film has been praised for its positive portrayal of interracial friendship,¹⁵² some accused it of conveying a condescending attitude towards its protagonist of color.¹⁵³ The most ardent critics of the picture claimed that it excused the historical discrimination of black people in the US by portraying it as something that led to the development of their moral character.¹⁵⁴ Interestingly, this debate parallels CRT’s discussion about the inherent uniqueness of black voices. Some critics see this proclamation as presumptuous with regard to racial discrimination and its influence on the “black perspective”; they claim that logic, argumentation, and research supersede anecdotal observations based on lived experience.¹⁵⁵ Other scholars argue that the experience of living as a racialized person allows black people to pick up on subtle social cues and attitudes impossible to capture through statistical surveys, anthropological studies, and other traditional methods of research.¹⁵⁶

While CRT aims to emphasize the role of race in culture, politics, and identity construction, some scholars question the legitimacy of this concept altogether. “American social distinctions that are marked using racial vocabulary,” writes Ghanaian-American philosopher and cultural critic Kwame Anthony Appiah, “do not correspond to cultural groups.”¹⁵⁷ As argued by him, racial groups as they are categorized today in the US – i.e.,

¹⁵¹ Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham. “The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film.” *Journal of Black Studies*. Volume 40, No. 2, 2009. Pp. 135-152. <https://bit.ly/2KuwCR6>.

¹⁵² Muszyński, Łukasz. “Wyjazd Integracyjny: Recenzja Filmu ‘Green Book’ (2018).” *Filmweb*. Published Feb. 7, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2KEGOFx>.

¹⁵³ As argued by Lawrence Ware: “The screenplay essentially turns [the protagonist] into a black man who thematically shapeshifts into whoever will make the story appealing to white audiences.” (Ware, Lawrence. “How ‘Green Book’ Gives Short Shrift to a Gay Life.” *New York Times*. Published Feb. 18, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2KEb0h>).

¹⁵⁴ Obenson, Tambay. “‘Green Book’: The Feel-Good Oscar Contender Has a ‘Magical Negro’ Problem.” *IndieWire*. Published Nov. 23, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2OZQdrk>.

¹⁵⁵ “Black Conservatives Debate Black Liberals on American Politics (Extended Version).” *Vice*. Internet video. Published Mar. 4, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2TplXKo>.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁷ Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 32.

according to their skin color or ancestral background – do not share similar material conditions or understandings of the world. Traditional racial delineations in the US, claims Appiah, lack proper contextualization. At best, they are imprecise; at worst, they are almost entirely devoid of factors justifying their existence as legitimate signifiers of group distinction.¹⁵⁸ According to Appiah, there is no such thing as “the black experience” – being black in the US can mean many different things, as it intersects with the lived experience of gender, class, and cultural preference at a particular place and time. Consequently, Appiah concludes, group commonalities cannot be assumed upon mere phenotypical traits.

Even though racial categories as they are used in the US are often misapplied, they nevertheless continue to affect the lives of people perceived as “ethnic” – i.e., defined in contrast to “deracinated” whites, who are generally seen to be devoid of racial characteristics inscribed to Americans of color.¹⁵⁹ Extending this very argument, Appiah brings about the concept of witchcraft to draw a pointed analogy. Neither witches nor races have ever objectively existed. Still, both – with varied intensity – had functioned culturally and prompted violence sanctioned by those holding power. “[W]e may need to . . . talk of ‘witchcraft’ to understand how people respond cognitively and how they act in a culture that has a concept of witchcraft, whether or not we think there are, in fact, any witches,” points out Appiah.¹⁶⁰ Analogously, Americans need to talk of race, whether or not they believe there are, in fact, any racial distinctions among Homo Sapiens. The conceptual equivalence between the notions of race and witchcraft put forth by Appiah found its continuation in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2014). Its authors, historians Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, argue that the idea of race became so entrenched in American culture that it is hardly questioned anymore. As they elaborate:

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem. P. 6.

¹⁵⁹ Halewood, Peter. “Laying Down the Law: Post-Racialism and the Deracination Project.” *Albany Law Review*. Vol. 72, No. 4, Winter 2009. <https://tinyurl.com/ycmseeas>.

¹⁶⁰ Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 38.

racecraft invokes witchcraft, though not for the reason that may come first to mind. . . . Far from denying the rationality of those who have accepted either belief as the truth about the world, we assume it. We are interested in the processes of reasoning that manage to make both plausible. Witchcraft and racecraft are imagined, acted upon, and reimagined, the action and imagining inextricably intertwined. The outcome is a belief that “presents itself to the mind and imagination as a vivid truth.” So wrote W. E. H. Lecky, a British scholar of Europe’s past who, looking back from the nineteenth century, tried to understand how very smart people managed for a very long time to believe in witchcraft.¹⁶¹

Racecraft caused a stir in the field of Ethnic Studies. The evidence of its impact can be seen, for example, in Toni Morrison’s *Origin of Others* (2017). As it was commented upon by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his introduction to Morrison’s book:

the closest cousin to Morrison’s work is probably *Racecraft*, the book . . . that argues Americans have sought to erase the crime of racism, which is active, with the concept of race, which is not. When we say “race” as opposed to “racism,” we reify the idea that race is somehow a feature of the natural world and racism the predictable result of it. Despite the body of scholarship that has accumulated to show that this formulation is backwards, that racism precedes race, Americans still haven’t quite gotten the point. And so we find ourselves speaking of “racial segregation,” “the racial chasm,” “the racial divide,” “racial profiling,” or “racial diversity” – as though each of these ideas is grounded in something beyond our own making. The impact of this is not insignificant. If “race” is the work of genes or the gods, or both, then we can forgive ourselves for never having unworked the problem.¹⁶²

As it was put by philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe in her “intention under description” theory, people’s identities and actions are “conceptually shaped.”¹⁶³ People think of themselves using (arche)types offered by the culture at large and comport their conduct accordingly. When one is assorted into a particular group along the lines of skin color, what follows is an expectation to internalize the cultural definitions and behavioral models associated with a given race. As elaborated by Appiah:

we expect people of a certain race to behave a certain way not simply because they are conforming to the script for that identity . . . but because they have certain antecedent properties that are consequences of the label’s properly applying to them. It is because ascription of racial identities – the process of applying the label to people, including ourselves – is based on more than intentional identification that there can be a gap between what a person descriptively is and the racial identity he performs: it is this gap that makes passing possible.¹⁶⁴

African-Americans in the US have little to no choice whether to identify as black; the only exception are the light-skinned and mixed-race individuals able to pass for white. Racial

¹⁶¹ Fields, Karen E. and Barbara J. Fields. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. Verso, 2014. P. 19.

¹⁶² Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “Foreword.” *The Origin of Others*. Toni Morrison. Harvard U P, 2017. Pp. x-xi.

¹⁶³ Qtd. in Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 78.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*. P. 79.

identity is engraved onto individuals on the basis of their skin color. As argued by writer and essayist Thomas Chatterton Williams in *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race* (2019), the anachronistic, highly dubious “one-drop rule” is the *modus operandi* of racial categorization in the US to date.¹⁶⁵ One way to escape the outside imposition of racial identity is to decentralize the issue of race with respect to one’s selfhood. As explained by Appiah:

It does not follow from the fact that identification shapes action, shapes life plans, that the identification itself must be thought of as voluntary. I don’t recall ever choosing to identify as a male; but being male has shaped many of my plans and actions. In fact, where my ascriptive identity is one on which almost all my fellow citizens agree, I am likely to have little sense of choice about whether the identity is mine; though I can choose how central my identification with it will be – choose, that is, how much I will organize my life around that identity.¹⁶⁶

As Appiah remains aware of the interplay between external imposition and internal identification, he argues that individual disentanglement from limiting conceptions of race should be motivated by a broader cultural change. Together with Chatterton Williams, they say that as long as the notions of ethnicity are based on the idea of racial essences, the behaviorally limiting views on “acting white” or “not being black enough” will continue to entail severe consequences for people on both sides of the color line.¹⁶⁷ (As it has been proven, such accusations, whether leveled by whites or non-whites, impede the educational performance of black students in the US).¹⁶⁸

As can be inferred from the excerpts of *Racecraft, The Origin of Others*, and *Self-Portrait in Black and White*, ideas proposed by Appiah more than twenty years ago are gradually gaining prominence in the second decade of the twenty-first century. As they have been featured and developed by people such as Morrison, Coates, and Chatterton Williams – i.e., notable names in the field of cultural criticism – they can be expected to have an even more pronounced impact on American intellectual life. It is especially true since some of the more

¹⁶⁵ Chatterton-Williams, Thomas. *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2019. Kindle loc. 45-318.

¹⁶⁶ Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 80.

¹⁶⁷ Appiah, Kwame Anthony. “Interview with Thomas Chatterton Williams.” *After Words* (C-SPAN television show). Published Oct. 31, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y9anm25p>.

¹⁶⁸ McWhorter, John. “The Origins of the ‘Acting White’ Charge.” *Atlantic*. Published July 20, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y9sl9mpe>.

popular ideas developed within CRT are starting to become contested. For example, its demand for racial equity remains controversial, especially on the right side of the American political aisle.¹⁶⁹ Conservatives argue that a fair and free society needs only equality of opportunity and should not enforce equality of outcome (also known as “equity”).¹⁷⁰ The progressive side of this debate tends to see the racial discrepancies in educational or professional success as a result of past and present discrimination.¹⁷¹ Removed in time and encoded in culture and material environments in complex ways, the cumulative effects of slavery and Jim Crow on contemporary African-American lives are not easily quantifiable. They are also challenging to correct, whether through increased equality of opportunity (e.g., educational programs, cultural initiatives, economic subsidies) or equity of outcome (e.g., racial quotas for employment or college acceptance). As the ongoing debates on the hotly contested issues of reparations¹⁷² and Affirmative Action¹⁷³ continue to demonstrate, the discussion about racial equity remains far from being resolved.

One crucial tenet of CRT that many public intellectuals in the US remain skeptical about is the scale of American racism proclaimed by its most prominent scholars. For example, Delgado and Stefancic argue “that racism is ordinary, not aberrational . . . [it is] the usual way [US] society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country.”¹⁷⁴ Opponents of this view, e.g., McWhorter and Steven Pinker, maintain that this view does not correctly reflect the US’s social reality in the twenty-first century. As argued by Pinker:

¹⁶⁹ Delgado and Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory*. Pp. 23-24.

¹⁷⁰ Ondaatje, Michael L. “Counterfeit Heroes or Colour-Blind Visionaries? The Black Conservative Challenge to Affirmative Action in Modern America.” *Australasian Journal of American Studies*. Volume 23, No. 2, 2004. Pp. 31-50. <https://bit.ly/31H9Nzt>.

¹⁷¹ Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Nation's Divide*. Lecture delivered at Emory University. Published Apr. 13, 2018. <https://youtu.be/YBYUET24K1c>.

¹⁷² Lockhart, P.R. “The 2020 Democratic Primary Debate Over Reparations, Explained.” *Vox*. Published Jun. 19, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2VVtgt7>.

¹⁷³ Hsu, Hua. “The Rise and Fall of Affirmative Action.” *New Yorker*. Published Oct. 8, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2EdmaMP>.

¹⁷⁴ Delgado and Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory*. P. 7.

Among African-Americans, the poverty rate fell from 55 percent in 1960 to 27.6 percent in 2011. Life expectancy rose from 33 in 1900 (17.6 years below that of whites) to 75.6 years in 2015 (less than 3 years below whites). African-Americans who make it to 65 have longer lives ahead of them than white Americans of the same age. The rate of illiteracy fell among African-Americans from 45 percent in 1900 to effectively zero percent today. Racist violence against African-Americans, once a regular occurrence in night raids and lynchings (three a week at the turn of the twentieth century), plummeted in the twentieth century, and has fallen further since the FBI started amalgamating reports on hate crimes in 1996.¹⁷⁵

Commenting on the trends enlisted by Pinker, McWhorter asserts that “America has never been less racist”¹⁷⁶ – a statement that stands in direct contradiction to the vision of the country presented by CRT. However, Pinker and McWhorter might have to temper their optimism after the El Paso, Texas shooting on the 3rd of August, 2019 – an attack deemed an act of white supremacist terror that left 22 people dead.¹⁷⁷ Notably, the manifesto published by the El Paso killer echoed the ones left behind by mass shooters in California and Pennsylvania, revealing a disturbing rise of militant white supremacy around the US.¹⁷⁸

Scholars within CRT point out that while it is true that the standard of living for African-Americans is the highest it has ever been in US history, the income disparity between white and black citizens has grown over the last three decades.¹⁷⁹ According to the latest available data by the *Institute of Policy Studies* (2016), the median Black family (with just over \$3,500) has only two percent of the wealth of the median White family (with nearly \$147,000).¹⁸⁰ In addition, as the price of college education doubled in the last two decades, the seemingly unbridgeable income gap between whites and blacks results in resegregating American schools along the

¹⁷⁵ Pinker. *Enlightenment Now*. Pp. 214, 218.

¹⁷⁶ “John McWhorter: America Has Never Been Less Racist.” *Reason*. Internet podcast. Published Apr. 11, 2019. <https://spoti.fi/31u9NT6>.

¹⁷⁷ As argued by John Eligon: “The threat of the ‘great replacement,’ or the idea that white people will be replaced by people of color, was cited directly in the four-page screed written by the man arrested in the killing of 22 people in El Paso . . . some experts now fear the doctrine of replacement is being embraced more readily by lone wolf white terrorists and even some politicians, producing a particularly dangerous climate.” (Eligon, John. “The El Paso Screed, and the Racist Doctrine Behind It.” *New York Times*. Published Aug. 7, 2019. 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2GNE9bp>).

¹⁷⁸ As argued by Luke Darby: “In [April 2019, a] shooter attacked a synagogue in Poway, California . . . In a ‘manifesto’ attributed to him, he claimed he was responding to the ‘meticulously planned genocide of the European race’. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in October 2018, still another shooter attacked a synagogue . . . because the congregation helped with refugee relocation. He wrote online that they were trying to ‘bring invaders in that kill our people.’” (Darby, Luke. “How White Supremacy Went Mainstream in the US: 8chan, Trump, Voter Suppression.” *Guardian*. Published Aug. 11, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2yQJMB5>).

¹⁷⁹ “Racial Income Inequality: Facts.” *inequality.org*. Accessed Aug. 12, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2ZfIqfd>

¹⁸⁰ Qtd. in *ibidem*.

color line.¹⁸¹ “Racially divided schools are a major and intensifying problem for American education,” argues journalist Will Stancil.¹⁸² As reported by the National Center on Education Statistics, the number of segregated schools has roughly doubled between 1996 and 2016 (NCES defines segregated schools as those where less than 40 percent of students are white).¹⁸³ Racial income-disparity also keeps African-Americans in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, often extending the so-called “circle of poverty”¹⁸⁴ through underfunded schools, environmental hazards, underequipped grocery stores, low-quality healthcare, limited employment opportunities, lack of public transport, and the bipartisan practice of gerrymandering that severely limits the possibility of inner-city inhabitants to enact meaningful political change.¹⁸⁵ All of this, combined with the selective enforcement of law fueling the private prison-industrial complex, led legal scholar Michelle Alexander to define these circumstances of entrapment and despair as *The New Jim Crow*: an economically motivated stratification of a substantial part of American society along the age-old color lines.¹⁸⁶

Considering the continuously dire material circumstances of many African-American communities, it seems surprising that the first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a resurgence of black popular art. To understand its rise, one has to take into account the historical role of black humor, as well as its changing status and function in the media landscape of the twentieth- and twenty-first century. The subsequent section of this study addresses these topics in further detail.

¹⁸¹ As argued by Camilo Maldonado: “between the academic years ending in 1989 and 2016, the cost for a four-year degree doubled, even after inflation.” (Maldonado, Camilo. “Price of College Increasing Almost 8 Times Faster Than Wages.” *forbes.com*. Published Jul. 24, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2MWvPKa>).

¹⁸² Stancil, Will. “School Segregation Is Not a Myth.” *Atlantic*. Published Mar 14, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2A4PJ0O>.

¹⁸³ Qtd. in *ibidem*.

¹⁸⁴ Strauss, Valerie. “The Way Out of the Black Poverty Cycle.” *Washington Post*. Published May 31, 2013. <https://wapo.st/1NjA36W>.

¹⁸⁵ Ax, Joseph and Andrew Chung. “Electoral Map Bias May Worsen as U.S. Gerrymandering Battle Shifts to States.” *Reuters*. Published Jun. 29, 2019. <https://reut.rs/2Mdo1Er>.

¹⁸⁶ “Michelle Alexander: ‘The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.’” Lecture delivered at Oregon Humanities Center. Published Jan. 24, 2014. <https://bit.ly/33kgU2a>.

The Path to The New Black Renaissance

At its outset, genuine African-American satire had to be performed out of white Americans' earshot. Its humor was cathartic – it was a safety valve, sublimating negative emotion and releasing it through laughter. “When You see me laughin’ / I’m laughin’ to keep from cryin’” – wrote Langston Hughes, paraphrasing a blues song and capturing the spirit of early black laughter in two short verses.¹⁸⁷ The communal dimension of black humor was also crucial. Functioning through word-of-mouth, it transplanted the oral tradition of African storytelling to the US. Jokes and tall-tales told in the black vernacular became a secret language – the ability to comprehend its nuances functioned as a marker of social belonging, creating a dialectic community of knowledge, values, and sensibilities.¹⁸⁸

Black minstrel humor has been popular in the US throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Painting African-Americans as simpletons – cheerful, clueless, and unable to take care of themselves – minstrel shows served to justify their subservient position in the US. Some black artists, e.g., Bert Williams, have managed to smuggle a degree of genuine African-American humor into their minstrel performances. However, it is imperative to emphasize that minstrel shows were merely a white fantasy about black humor, not its faithful representation – in fact, authentic black comedy was segregated well into the nineteen-sixties. Instances of crossover – performing genuine African-American satire in front of racially mixed audiences without whitewashing it – were extremely rare.

Contemporary comic authors often function as intermediaries between the audience and the world – i.e., they help the public navigate reality by calling out the absurdities of social, cultural, and political life at a given place and time.¹⁸⁹ However, this was decidedly *not* the function of African-American comedy in the American mainstream culture before the advent

¹⁸⁷ Qtd. in Haggins. *Laughing Mad*. P. 2.

¹⁸⁸ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 120-641.

¹⁸⁹ Garber. “How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals.”

of the Harlem Renaissance (in literature) and the Civil Rights Era (in television, cinema, and stand-up comedy). Before the widespread shifts in public perception of African-American culture brought forth by these movements, white audiences generally perceived black humor in the way it had been presented in minstrel shows: as naïve and childlike. Historian Ibram X. Kendi reflects on the aesthetics and ideology of the minstrel tradition in the following way:

America's first minstrel shows appeared [in the 1820s] . . . By 1830, Thomas 'Daddy' Rice, who learned to mimic African-American English (today called 'Ebonics'), was touring the South, perfecting the character that thrust him into international prominence: Jim Crow. Appearing in blackface, and dressed in rags, torn shoes, and a weathered hat, Jim Crow sang and danced as a stupid, childlike, cheerful Black field hand. Other minstrel characters included 'Old darky,' the thoughtless, musical head of an enslaved family, and 'Mammy,' the hefty asexual devoted caretaker of Whites. The biracial, beautiful, sexually promiscuous 'yaller gal' titillated White men. 'Dandy,' or 'Zip Coon,' was an upwardly mobile northern Black male who mimicked – outrageously – White elites. . . . In the decades leading up to the Civil War, blackface minstrelsy became the first American theatrical form, the incubator of the American entertainment industry. Exported to excited European audiences, minstrel shows remained mainstream in the United States until around 1920 (when the rise of racist films took their place).¹⁹⁰

Due to the racist stereotype about black people's intellectual and moral inferiority – a belief propagated by minstrel shows – African-American comedians found themselves prohibited from questioning the *status quo*.¹⁹¹ As argued by Watkins, before the cultural revolution of the 1960s, “the few black comedians who were booked into white clubs or theatres were expected to present familiar ethnic comedy, heavily laden with dialect, that corroborated the image of naive humor established during minstrelsy. Only a decade earlier, black comics had been passed over or fired because they were not ‘Negro’ enough.”¹⁹² What Watkins means when he talks about being “not Negro enough” is that those comedians did not embody stereotypes – i.e., traits racialized as black by white audiences. As any attempt at meaningful transgression was often nipped in the bud by cultural gatekeepers, black comic authors have been made painfully aware that the mainstream public wanted to laugh *at* them and not *with* them.

¹⁹⁰ Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Bold Type Books, 2017. P. 170.

¹⁹¹ According to Kendi, throughout centuries, many Americans believed that “[n]aturally docile and intellectually inferior Black people were disposed to their enslavement to White people.” After the Civil War, the same belief justified the cultural and systemic doctrine of racial separation under Jim Crow laws. Today, Kendi argues, it often serves to rationalize the pervasive racial disparities in wealth. (Ibidem. P. 177).

¹⁹² Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 9664.

Black satire had the urge – and, more importantly, the cerebral and expressive capability – to defy what many considered deified: the idea of white America’s intellectual and moral supremacy.¹⁹³ Satire, as a genre, usually assumes a position of superiority over the subject of its ridicule. As the cultural mainstream was the frequent target of its attacks, genuine African-American satire had to exist outside of its realm. For centuries, it had been flourishing out of the earshot of white America – in oral folktales (seventeenth to early twentieth century), black literature rarely read by white audiences (mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century), and comedy clubs on the Chitlin’ Circuit (post-Harlem Renaissance but pre-Civil Rights era).¹⁹⁴

The argument that the question of race in the United States – its perception, conceptualization, as well as their historical and present consequences – is so absurd that it requires a comic approach has had its proponents since the nineteenth century. The first writer who used humor to challenge the prevalent racial ideology of his times was David Walker, the author of a seminal anti-slavery pamphlet entitled *Walker’s Appeal* (1829). Although elements of social satire made it into slave narratives before the *Appeal*’s publication, Walker was the first African-American activist and author who used it as his principal mode of expression. His pamphlet mocked a South Carolina newspaper that called Turks in a far-off land “the most barbarous people in the world” while advertising a local slave auction on the very same page (just below the article admonishing Turk’s racism). Walker highlighted the irony of that unfortunate pairing and contended that it is “really *so funny* to hear Southerners and Westerners

¹⁹³ This idea, used to justify slavery ever since its earliest days, has been perhaps best exemplified by Thomas Jefferson, one of America’s founding fathers. As pointed out by Kendi: “Thomas Jefferson emerged as the preeminent American authority on Black intellectual inferiority. . . . [He claimed that] Africans felt love more, but they felt pain less, he said, and ‘their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection.’ That is why they were disposed ‘to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labour. An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep.’” (Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning*. P. 104).

¹⁹⁴ Interestingly, the popularity of black satire often trampled over class differences, being shared by way of word-of-mouth by African-Americans from different walks of life. As argued by Watkins: “Such traditional folktales as the John and Old Master Stories as well as many . . . tales from contemporary black folklore are as well known to black professionals as they are to the street folks who created them . . . [O]ut of earshot of white colleagues, middle-class blacks often spice their conversations with tidbits from those tales or, more importantly, adopt both the patois and the tales’ implicit satiric humor.” (Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 9050).

of [the United States] talk about barbarity.”¹⁹⁵ Walker’s satirical approach proved to be too blunt for his times, taking aback both slaveholders and abolitionists (the latter, despite their support for the anti-slavery message, did not see black people as equals, and thus rejected the moral and intellectual self-assertion permeating Walker’s text).¹⁹⁶

The satirical approach pioneered by Walker gained momentum in the early twentieth century and became even more pronounced during the Harlem Renaissance. The seeds of African-American wit landed on fertile soil – one plowed by the popularity of Mark Twain’s folk humor,¹⁹⁷ the satirical scorn of H. L. Mencken, and intellectual derision of the *New Yorker*.¹⁹⁸ The harvest of black satire was plentiful and varied. It ranged from the quietly subversive folk humor of Charles Chesnutt’s *The Passing of Grandison* (1899), through the ironic identity politics of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), to the multifaceted social satire of Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* (1930). At times, the ridiculousness of American racial thinking was singled out directly, as when Johnson wrote in his *New York Age* column (1922) that some of the racial affairs in America are “so absurd that they cannot be effectively treated except in a satirical manner.”¹⁹⁹

Interestingly, in his earlier columns, Johnson encouraged black authors to read and imitate influential journalist and writer H. L. Mencken.²⁰⁰ Specifically, he urged them to replace moral persuasion with scathing satire.²⁰¹ Thanks to his function as the editor of the *American*

¹⁹⁵ Qtd. in *ibidem*. Kindle loc. 7874.

¹⁹⁶ As argued by Kendi: “[The abolitionist movement popularized the] idea that slavery – or racial discrimination more broadly – had ‘imbruted’ Black people; this oppression had made their cultures, psychologies, and behaviors inferior.” (Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning*. P. 14).

¹⁹⁷ Thanks to Twain, who imitated black comic idiom in his bestselling books and well-attended lectures, the mainstream American public unwittingly became more accustomed to black humor. (Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 9032).

¹⁹⁸ Founded in 1925, the *New Yorker* popularized an intellectual brand of humor among its relatively small, yet elite readership. The papers’ cultural editors also contributed to white audiences’ interest in the literary culture of the Harlem Renaissance. (Yagoda, Ben. *About Town: ‘The New Yorker’ and The World It Made*. Scribner, 2000).

¹⁹⁹ Qtd. in Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 7873.

²⁰⁰ Scuggs, Charles. *The Sage in Harlem: H. L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s*. The Johns Hopkins U P, 1984. Kindle loc. 1456.

²⁰¹ As argued by Johnson: “What could be more disconcerting . . . to a man posing as everybody’s superior than to find that everybody was laughing at his pretensions? Protest would only swell up his self-importance.” (*Ibidem*. Kindle loc. 1457).

Mercury, Mencken was able to appoint cerebral wit as one of the principal modes of expression for aspiring young intellectuals. As argued by Charles Scruggs, a literary historian and the author of *The Sage in Harlem: H. L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s*:

Johnson correctly assessed the tremendous appeal that Mencken and his method would have for black writers. Prose works such as J. A. Rogers *From "Superman" to Man* (1917), Walter White's *Flight* (1926), Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1929), Countee Cullen's *One Way to Heaven* (1932), Rudolph Fisher's *Walls of Jericho* (1928) . . . all more or less employed satire against the master race, although sometimes the satire turned inward, as in Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) . . . or became double-edged, as in Schuyler's *Black No More*.²⁰²

Although the authors enlisted by Scruggs explored various topics, they shared one common denominator: a comic vision highlighting the absurdity of the American racial predicament. As argued by Watkins, black satirists were especially fit to point it out, as "involvement with contradiction and chaos often leads to heightened comic sensibility, and America's racial arrangements were among its most absurdly contradictory features."²⁰³

The secretive nature of black satire started to dissipate during the Harlem Renaissance, a time of the unprecedented flowering of African-American comic writing. The epoch brought forth Zora Neal Huston, who presented the smart and playful side of black folklore humor in *Mules and Men* (1935); Langston Hughes, who embraced the socially adhesive, communal aspect of laughter in urban environments in *Not Without Laughter* (1930); George Schuyler, who protracted the cerebral claws of social satire in *Black No More* (1931); and Wallace Thurman, who turned the irony inwards to attack colorism within elite black circles in *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and *Infants of the Spring* (1932). The satire produced during the Harlem Renaissance left behind a distinguished legacy. This inheritance inspired innumerable black comic authors of the forthcoming decades: from Ralph Ellison and his conceptually intricate *Invisible Man* (1952) to Ishmael Reed and his imaginatively wild *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Importantly, this aesthetic and intellectual shift took place exclusively in the realm of ethnic literature – more specifically, in a niche cultural market of black novels, short stories,

²⁰² Ibidem. Kindle loc. 1458.

²⁰³ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 7642.

and essays. As pointed out by Watkins, the majority of white America remained oblivious to this world. Consequently, their perception of black satire has not changed in any significant way until the mainstream emergence of black stand-up comedy stars in the 1960s (Red Foxx, Bill Cosby, Dick Gregory), 1970s (Richard Pryor), and 1980s (Eddie Murphy).²⁰⁴

“The civil rights movement not only transformed multiple black ideologies – social and political practices, as well as black thought – but it also changed the nature of black comedy,” claims Bambi Haggins, the author of *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (2007).²⁰⁵ This transformation extended beyond the nineteen-sixties and manifested itself primarily in black artists’ success to create and control their public image. This effort has been particularly fruitful in the domain of stand-up comedy (e.g., Gregory’s *In Living Black and White*, 1961; Pryor’s *Live in Concert*, 1979).²⁰⁶ “Over the past forty-five years, the black comedian and African-American comedy have become progressively more central to mainstream popular culture,” wrote Haggins in the first decade of the new millennium.²⁰⁷ Just as other forms of African-American art – most notably blues, jazz, and hip-hop – have been borrowed, embraced, or appropriated by the mainstream culture, so was black stand-up comedy. Gregory and Pryor’s satire became a staple for edgy, socially conscious comedians of all colors and creeds. Nowadays, along with the “New Comics” such as Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, and George Carlin – i.e., white stand-up pioneers from the 1950s and 1960s – they are regarded as classics of both popular and socially conscious stage comedy. Many of today’s most popular African-American comedians, e.g., Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle, are seen by critics as Gregory and Pryor’s artistic and intellectual heirs.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 10084-10955.

²⁰⁵ Haggins. *Laughing Mad*. P. 3.

²⁰⁶ This sentiment was captured in the following 1963 quip by comedian and Civil-Rights activist Dick Gregory: “One of [the] greatest problems the Negro has in America today is that we have never been able to control our image. The man downtown has always controlled our image. He has always told us how we’re supposed to act. He has always told us a n****r know his place – and he don’t mean this, because if we knew our place he wouldn’t have to put all those signs up.” (Qtd. in ibidem. P. 3).

²⁰⁷ Ibidem. P. 4.

²⁰⁸ Love, Matthew. “50 Best Stand-Up Comics of All Time.” *Rolling Stone*. Published Feb. 14, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2Z1b9ar>.

Notably, due to Hollywood's institutional inner workings, the situation looked quite different in the realm of cinema. "Historically, the black comic has retained the ability to get the audience laughing while slipping in sociocultural truths. The boundless promise of the African-American comedic actor in [socially-conscious satire], however, remains for the most part unfulfilled," claimed Haggins, assessing the artistic accomplishments of black film comedy in the post-Civil-Rights era.²⁰⁹ This situation changed in the second decade of the new millennium, when black satire started to make its way to the silver screen. Initially, it got there through the independent film festival circuit. Then, thanks to its critical success and the development of various Internet streaming services, it started enjoying a wider audience.²¹⁰

In *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (2004), Herman Gray constructs a useful taxonomy of black images in the American media of the twentieth century. According to Gray: 1.) "assimilationist" programs embrace an ethos of color-blindness and define struggles of their characters as determined by their life-choices (e.g., detective comedy series *I-Spy*, 1965–1968); 2.) "separate but equal" shows portray the socioeconomic reality of black families as equal to that of their white counterparts (e.g., black upper-middle-class family sitcom *The Cosby Show*, 1984–1992); 3.) and "multicultural" television series do not whitewash their content to fit into the mainstream taste (e.g., sketch comedy show *In Living Color*, 1990–1994).²¹¹ At present, the first two categories are mostly outdated, which only indicates the progress made by black representation in the twenty-first century. Modern comedy shows that do not focus on the issue of race are rarely "assimilationist," as they nevertheless acknowledge the influence of their characters' ethnicity on their life experiences (e.g., detective comedy series *Brooklyn-Nine-Nine*, 2016–). Popular black sitcoms are rarely "separate but equal," as they emphasize the socioeconomic status of their African-American characters (e.g., black

²⁰⁹ Haggins. *Laughing Mad*. P. 4.

²¹⁰ Rose, Steve. "Black Films Matter – How African-American Cinema Fought Back Against Hollywood." *Guardian*. Published Oct. 13, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2dgsUGR>.

²¹¹ Qtd. in Haggins. *Laughing Mad*. P.8.

upper-middle-class family sitcom *Black-ish*, 2014–). “Multicultural” is the only category that fits well with the New Black Renaissance. Contemporary satirical shows (e.g., *Insecure* 2016–; *Atlanta*, 2016–) enhance the traditional genre of situational comedy with social, cultural, and political perspectives of African-American culture; they also offer their reflection on race and its relationship with capitalism, social class, and ideas of Americanness.

The current American cultural market is considerably different from the one functioning even ten or fifteen years ago. “[B]lack comics who consistently engage audiences across lines of race, class, culture, and region are relatively few,” wrote Haggins in 2007; ten years later, Dave Chappelle’s stand-up specials *The Age of Spin* (2017) and *Deep in the Heart of Texas* (2017) became the most-watched live comedy recording on Netflix, an international streaming platform available in over 190 countries.²¹² *Get Out!* (2016), a black satirical horror by Jordan Peele,²¹³ became a box-office hit and won an Oscar for Original Screenplay.²¹⁴ In 2018, Netflix started its *Strong Black Lead* media initiative promoting actors, directors, and comedians of color on its streaming platform and beyond.²¹⁵ Its competition – HBO GO, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video – started hosting black independent cinema and new African-American television satire: from *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), through *Grown-ish* (2018–), to *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019). As one might observe, in the last ten years, the African-American cultural film and television market transformed from a field of primarily subcultural relevance into a widespread pop-cultural phenomenon. The development of the Internet and social media also

²¹² Hibberd, James. “Netflix Says Dave Chappelle Specials are its Most-Watched Ever.” *Entertainment Weekly*. Published Apr. 18, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2KIrqYK>.

²¹³ To learn more about the relationship between horror and comedy in black American cinema, see, e.g., “Jordan Peele’s Comedy and Horror Aren’t That Far Apart.” *Vulture*. YouTube video. Published Mar. 20, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2TqTYK0>.

²¹⁴ What is more, *Moonlight* (2016) and *Green Book* (2018), other movies centered around the African-American experience, won the Best Picture Award and effectively ended the 2014–2015 *#oscars-so-white* controversy. (Shepherd, Jack. “Jordan Peele’s ‘Us’ Breaks Box-Office Record, Lands Highest Grossing Opening Weekend for Original Horror.” *Independent*. Published Mar. 25, 2019. <https://bit.ly/301trWa>; Bowen, Sesali. “Every Black Person Who Has Won an Oscar.” *Refinery29*. Published Feb. 22, 2019. <https://r29.co/2DVld8p>).

²¹⁵ Bennet, Jessica. “Netflix Further Commits to Diverse Storytelling With ‘Strong Black Lead’ Initiative.” *Ebony*. Published June 26, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2MgrKkC>.

changed the status of black literary satire, which evolved from a niche area of interest to a growing force on the US cultural market.

For many decades, African-American literary satire has been treated as special interest literature, generally devoid of broad cultural or commercial appeal. “Until the late 1960s,” writes Watkins, “the vast majority of Americans were unaware of black literature.”²¹⁶ Prior to the Civil Rights movement’s victories, works by non-white authors have been a rare occurrence in school curricula; they were also mostly absent from public libraries. This scarcity led to a widespread erasure of African-American satire from the nation’s cultural ancestry, literary history, and collective memory. When books by black authors finally began enjoying wider availability, critics unfamiliar with their tenets and style often misread their intentions. Satirical records of black interaction with white America’s culture and institutions often invoked *humour noir* – aesthetics of existential farce founded on the aching absurdity of the US’s racial history. Quite often, the *humour noir* of African-American satire has been misinterpreted as belligerent and witless. Literary critics who adopted this outlook missed one of the central qualities of African-American satire: namely, its function as a social corrective. Sublimating anger into laughter, black humor aimed for a metamorphic effect: communal correction through ridicule aimed at the country’s past and present foibles. It was a concerted effort to build a more tolerant and tolerable nation, but many critics have mistaken this combative mockery with nihilistic resentment. If mainstream literary critics of early African-American satire had familiarized themselves with its founding principles, perhaps they would not have interpreted its seminal works as “brooding,” “crude,” “bitter” books with “little or no humor” – as it was the case with *Yale Review*’s 1952 criticism of Ralph Ellison’s just-released *Invisible Man*.²¹⁷

Until recently, seminal works of African-American satire from the Harlem Renaissance and the post-Civil Rights era had been largely forgotten. In the last thirty years, some of them

²¹⁶ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 7628.

²¹⁷ Qtd in *ibidem*. Kindle loc. 7634.

have been rediscovered by prominent black academics and writers. For example, Zora Neale Hurston's and Langston Hughes' 1930 play *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life* was staged for the first time in 1991;²¹⁸ it was also discussed in a *New York Times* essay by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in the same year.²¹⁹ A 1974 novel *Oreo* by Fran Ross – a writer on the short-lived *Richard Pryor Show* (1977) and one of the rare feminist voices in African-American literary satire of the twentieth century – was republished by Northeastern University Press in the year 2000 and popularized by Danzy Senna's *New Yorker* review in 2015.²²⁰ In 2006, satirist and graphic novel writer Mat Johnson introduced Wallace Thurman into the blogosphere by starting a website called *N*****ati Manor*, a name referring to Thurman's 1932 scathing novel *Infants of the Spring*.²²¹ Nowadays, the rediscovery of black comic tradition goes hand in hand with the growing popularity of new satirical voices. Contemporary African-American satire is especially pronounced in the genre of science-fiction (Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, 2011; Johnson's *Pym*, 2011), memoirs (Angela Nissel's *Mixed: My Life in Black and White*, 2006; W. Kamau Bell's *Awkward Thoughts*, 2018), semi-autobiographical novels (Everett's *Erasure*, 2001; Johnson's *Hunting in Harlem*, 2003), historical fantasies (Everett's *A History of the African-American People Proposed by Strom Thurmond*, 2004; Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*, 2015), coming-of-age novels (Beatty's *White Boy Shuffle*, 1996; Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*, 2009), and comic books (Johnson's *Inconegro*, 2008). Modern American readership is also accepting of black satirists coming from other countries. Bestselling authors such as Nigeria's Luvvie Ajayi (*I'm Judging You*, 2017) or South Africa's Trevor Noah (*Born a Crime*, 2017) use different cultural understandings of ethnicity to comment on the issue of race in America (for example, Noah offers a satirical reflection on the racial politics of South Africa, where

²¹⁸ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 7635.

²¹⁹ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Why the 'Mule Bone' Debate Goes On." *New York Times*. Published Feb. 10, 1991. <https://nyti.ms/2Mcfb9X>.

²²⁰ Danzy, Senna. "An Overlooked Classic About the Comedy of Race." *New Yorker*. Published May 7, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2OS1y1W>.

²²¹ "Mat Johnson." *enacademic.com*. Accessed Aug. 12, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2Z1Xgsu>.

“mixed people came to be classified as their own separate group, neither black nor white but . . . colored”).^{222 223}

The first two decades of the twentieth century saw a considerable uptick in the comic memoirist market, a genre that has been in vogue in the personality-driven cultural landscape of social media.²²⁴ This genre has been perhaps most fruitful for young black comedienne. The most notable of African-American female comic memoirs include Angela Nissel’s *The Broke Diaries* (2001) and *Mixed: My Life in Black and White* (2006); Issa Rae’s *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2015); Tiffany Haddish’s *The Last Black Unicorn* (2017); Phoebe Robinson’s *You Can’t Touch My Hair: And Other Things I Still Have to Explain* (2016); and Franchesca Ramsey’s *Well, That Escalated Quickly: Memoirs and Mistakes of an Accidental Activist* (2018). Nissel, the first author on the list, talks about resilience and ingenuity in the face of material deprivation and describes the intricacies of code-switching between the worlds of black and white America.²²⁵ Rae counters racially essentialist images of blackness with comic accounts of ordinariness: stories of growing up awkward, insecure, and full of ambition for independent filmmaking.²²⁶ Robinson describes her times as a stand-up comic and podcast host, all the while commenting upon the issues vital to contemporary black feminism.²²⁷ Haddish recounts her path from rags to riches to reignite the faith in the American Dream among black actresses who do not adhere to Hollywood’s traditional beauty standards and

²²² Noah, Trevor. *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*. Spiegel & Grau, 2016. P. 20.

²²³ Notably, black American satirists emerge with novel understandings of race as well. For example, Johnson advocates for the acceptance of mixed identity as a separate category of ethnic identification. His stance echoes that of Trey Ellis, who – in his seminal essay *The New Black Aesthetic* (1989) – argued for recognizing hybrid identities created under the influence of art transgressing the color line. However, Johnson sees mixed identity as separate from the binaries of black and white – a form of being that underscores the relativity of the cultural meaning of race and the shifting, malleable, performative nature of identity. (See Johnson, Mat. *Loving Day: A Novel*. One World, 2016; Ellis, Trey. “The New Black Aesthetic.” *Callaloo*. No. 38, 1989. Pp. 233-243. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2931157>).

²²⁴ As argued by Thomas Larsen in 2007: “I’ve been monitoring the New York Times’ nonfiction paperback bestsellers, and I find that 80 percent (12 of 15) are either memoirs or autobiographies. . . . It’s the literary form of our time.” (Larsen, Thomas. “The Age of Memoir.” *Review Americana*. Volume 2, Issue 1, Spring 2007. <https://bit.ly/2yXsEcV>).

²²⁵ Nissel, Angela. *Mixed: My Life in Black and White*. Villard, 2006.

²²⁶ Rae, Issa. *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. 37 Ink, 2016.

²²⁷ Robinson, Phoebe. *You Can’t Touch My Hair: And Other Things I Still Have to Explain*. Plume, 2016.

respectability politics.²²⁸ Finally, Ramsey recounts her successes and failures as a satirist and intersectional activist online and on television.²²⁹ An additional objective of all the authors mentioned above is to humanize the image of African-American womanhood in mainstream US culture. Black female writers imbue it with humor, nuance, and depth – all of the qualities missing from the age-old stereotypes of Sapphire, Jezebel, and Aunt Jemimah replicated throughout the twentieth century.²³⁰

The New Black Renaissance has witnessed a resurgence of black female comics beyond the memoirist market. In *Laughing Mad* (2007), Haggins examined the gendered politics of black comedy. At one point in her book, she drew out an interesting contrast between the mainstream recognition of “Kings” and “Queens of Comedy,” i.e., respective groups of black comedians and comediennes originating from HBO’s stand-up show *Def Comedy Jam* (1992-1997):

“Kings of Comedy,” Cedric the Entertainer, Bernie Mac, and D. L. Hughley, have gained varying degrees of mainstream success while remaining tied to their ‘roots’ in the ‘Def Jam persona. However, while the names of black female comics, like “The Queens of Comedy” (Sommere, Miss Laura Hayes, Adele Givens, Mo’Nique) draw audiences on the black comedy circuit (and some niche televisual spaces like BET’s “Comic View”), access to the comic mainstream [had remained difficult] for the black female comic.²³¹

The situation described by Haggins changed along with the development of new media in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when black comediennes were able to showcase their talent on various streaming platforms: from YouTube (Issa Rae, Francesca Ramsey, Akilah Hughes), through Netflix (Nicole Byer, Michelle Buteau, Gina Yashere), to HBO Go (Amanda Seales, Robin Thede, Yvonne Orji). African-American female comic performers’ cultural resonance convinced executives to hire them on broadcast and cable television. For example,

²²⁸ Haddish, Tiffany. *The Last Black Unicorn*. Gallery Books, 2017.

²²⁹ Ramsey, Francesca. *Well, That Escalated Quickly: Memoirs and Mistakes of an Accidental Activist*. Grand Central Publishing, 2018.

²³⁰ Green, Laura. “Negative Racial Stereotypes and Their Effect on Attitudes Toward African-Americans.” *ferris.edu*. Accessed Aug. 13, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2ZZbQ1f>; and Seck, Nicole. “The Hypersexualization and Undesirability of Black/African Women.” *Ruptures: Anti-colonial and Anti-racist Feminist Theorizing*. SensePublishers, 2013. Pp 91-103. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-446-8>.

²³¹ Haggins. *Laughing Mad*. P. 242.

TBS showcased the talents of Marina Franklin; Comedy Central employed Dulce Sloan on *The Daily Show* and featured her in their stand-up shows; NBC made Ego Nwodim a “feature player” on *Saturday Night Live* and gave Amber Ruffin a late-night talk show; last but not least, ABC’s *Black-ish* made a star of Tracee Ellis Ross, Yara Shahidi, and Marsai Martin. Some new black comic actresses have made it into Hollywood as well. For instance, Leslie Jones starred in *Ghostbusters*, 2016; and Issa Rae and Marsai Martin in *Little*, 2019.²³² The career of Tiffany Haddish, the most famous African-American comic actress in recent years, followed the entire trajectory drawn out above: she gained recognition on YouTube for her stand-up and talk-show appearances, released a best-selling humorous memoir, was featured on Netflix and NBC, and became a bone fide Hollywood movie star.²³³

Robin Thede became the first woman of color to assume a head-writer position in a major satirical news program (*The Nightly Show with Larry Willmore*, 2015–16). Later in her career, she wrote and hosted BET’s *The Rundown* (2017–18) and then assumed the same role in HBO’s *Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019), the first-ever variety show focused on showcasing the talents of African-American comedienne.²³⁴ Another HBO show, *2 Dope Queens* (2018), embarked upon a similar mission, but with regards to LGBTQ+ and immigrant performers. Hosted by two black comedienne, Jessica Williams and Phoebe Robinson, the show started as a relatively niche podcast. During its run, it gained popular and critical acclaim for its laid-back, inclusive atmosphere and intersectional agenda. The last episode of the podcast featured First Lady Michelle Obama, symbolizing the cultural resonance and commercial potential of independent black female comedy.²³⁵ All things considered, even though the American comedy scene is still disproportionately male, this situation has been changing for the

²³² All of the movie and television credits mentioned in this paragraph have been taken from the *Internet Movie Database (imdb.com)*. Accessed Aug. 13, 2019.

²³³ Kameir, Rawiya. “How Tiffany Haddish Became Comedy’s New Queen.” *Vogue*. Published Aug. 14, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2QBUao5>.

²³⁴ Jackson, Leigh-Ann Jackson. “Who Are the Women of ‘A Black Lady Sketch Show?’” *New York Times*. July 31, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2YHjFMq>.

²³⁵ Hosking, Taylor. “The Final ‘2 Dope Queens’ Podcast Was a Perfect Interview with Michelle Obama.” *Vice*. Published Nov. 18, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2KNPauI>.

last two decades, and one can easily define the current US cultural market as a space with the most significant number of professionally active and culturally resonant black female performers and comic writers in the history of American humor.

As one can infer from the history outlined in this chapter, mainstream US publishers, film production companies, and television executives have been underserving black audiences for decades. The situation changed with the development of social media and the gradually spreading availability of the Internet. In the recent decade, non-white readers, cinephiles, and geeks consolidated online, making themselves visible and commercially viable.²³⁶ It revitalized the (African-)American cultural market. It also made scholarship on humor more inclusive and diversified. As argued by Watkins – the author of *On The Real Side* (1999), the most comprehensive history of African-American comedy to date – past accounts on American humor mostly ignored the “complexity of black humor and its impact on America’s larger comic tradition.”²³⁷ His assessment echoes that of literary critic Clifford Thompson, who claimed that the national character as described by early works of American literature was profoundly influenced “by their authors’ determination to define themselves and their fellow white countrymen against the black ‘other.’”²³⁸ For a long time, white Americans refused to admit that black comic artists significantly influenced their culture; it was especially true when it came to satire – “an aspect of culture that, by its very nature, is primarily cognitive.”²³⁹ As argued by Watkins:

many books on American humor either avoid the contribution of blacks altogether or dismiss it in one or two short paragraphs. Biographies of leading white comedians such as Milton Berle, Groucho Marx, and Bob Hope . . . often completely ignore the work of estimate black comics with whom they performed . . . When one considers that during vaudeville some of these comedic stars worked with black performers who were routinely shuttled from one position to another on Broadway bills because white acts were

²³⁶ See Klein, Ezra. “G. Willow Wilson on Religion, Comics, and Modern Myths.” *The Ezra Klein Show*. Internet podcast. Published April 11, 2017. <https://bit.ly/31s6dZE>; Barnard, Anne. “From the Streets to the Libraries.” *New York Times*. Published Oct. 22, 2008. <https://nyti.ms/2MdyhfL>.

²³⁷ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 66.

²³⁸ Thompson’s assessment is a summary and reiteration of the argument made by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) and *The Origin of Others* (2017). (Thompson, Clifford. “Aliens and Fences.” *The Times’ Literary Supplement*. Published Nov. 21, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2H0ovJY>).

²³⁹ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 66.

intimidated by having to follow them or, worse, quite simply fired because they were too good, such deletions seem suspiciously more than an oversight.²⁴⁰

Watkins rebelled against this erasure by writing a detailed history of African-American comedy and pointing out black humor's influence on America's most celebrated satirists (e.g., Mark Twain).²⁴¹ Since his book's publication in 1999, the status of black satire in the academic publishing market went through incremental changes. Today, several volumes of scholarship treat black comic art as a significant part of American humor's history. For example, Joanne R. Gilbert's *Performing Marginality* (2004), a criticism of American stand-up's gendered politics, includes a detailed discussion of comedienne Wanda Sykes²⁴²; Paul Lewis' *Cracking Up* (2006), a reflection on the role of satire in times of sociopolitical turmoil, conducts an early scholarly analysis of the now-seminal black cartoon series *The Boondocks* (2005-14)²⁴³; and Eddie Tafoya's *The Legacy of the Wisecrack* (2009), a book that employs critical frameworks of the Great American Novel to analyze stand-up comedy, treats the work of Richard Pryor as central to its deliberations.²⁴⁴ The first two decades of the twentieth century also witnessed the release of two new academic anthologies of black humor. The first, *African-American Humor: The Best Comedy from Slavery to Today* (2002), was compiled by Watkins;²⁴⁵ the second, *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor* (2006), was edited by satirist and future Booker Prize laureate Paul Beatty.²⁴⁶ The most recent anthologies of broadly understood American humor included multiple examples of black satire as well. For instance, Regina Barreca's *The Signet Book of American Humor* (2004) and Andy Borowitz' *The Fifty Funniest*

²⁴⁰ Ibidem.

²⁴¹ The author of *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) studied African-American speech patterns and black folk humor and used them both in his literature and on his popular comic lecture circuit. (Ibidem. Kindle loc. 9037).

²⁴² Gilbert, Joanne R. *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. Wayne State U P, 2004. Pp. 73-137.

²⁴³ Lewis, Paul. *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*. U of Chicago P, 2006. Pp. 175, 182.

²⁴⁴ Tafoya, Eddie. *The Legacy of the Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form*. Brown Walker Press, 2009. Pp. 181-202.

²⁴⁵ Watkins, Mel (ed.). *African-American Humor: The Best Comedy from Slavery to Today*. Chicago Review Press, 2002.

²⁴⁶ Beatty, Paul. *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor*. Bloomsbury USA, 2006.

American Writers (2011) featured texts by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Red Foxx, Bernie Mac, and Larry Wilmore. Popular non-fiction publications on American humor have started discussing black comic authors too. Richard Zoglin's *Comedy on the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (2008) offered a chapter on Pryor and the politics of race;²⁴⁷ another comprehensive popular account, Kliph Nesteroff's *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels and the History of American Comedy* (2016) also told the story black humor's mainstream influence. When it comes to biographies of America's biggest mainstream comedy stars, they too have changed over the last two decades. For example, Tanner Colby's *The Chris Farley Show* (2008) talked about its protagonists' professional relationship with Chris Rock;²⁴⁸ and Dave Itzkoff's *Robin* (2019) described Robin Williams' fascination with Pryor.²⁴⁹ Taking all these examples into account, one may reasonably argue that American humor studies are gradually amounting to what may be one day perceived as their very own black renaissance.

No matter the field of artistic expression or scientific inquiry, the works of the New Black Renaissance embrace the creative and intellectual freedom unconstrained by racial essentialism. Open-Source Blackness considers open-ended dialogue, a constant exchange of information and ideas, one of its fundamental values. That is why science and humor – i.e., discourses of questioning and defamiliarization – have become their primary modes of communication. They keep the conversation on black identity in constant flow, safeguarding the African-American cultural discourse from becoming too self-assured in its own assertions. This conversation continues in the next chapter, dedicated to analyzing the first signaling of the ethos of Open-Source Blackness in Everett's novel *Erasure* (2001).

²⁴⁷ Zoglin, Richard. *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America*. Bloomsbury USA, 2009. Pp. 41-64.

²⁴⁸ Colby, Tanner. *The Chris Farley Show: A Biography in Three Acts*. Viking Adult, 2008. Pp. 103-174.

²⁴⁹ Itzkoff, Dave. *Robin*. Henry Holt and Co., 2018. Pp. 75-76.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE: *ERASURE* BY PERCIVAL EVERETT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the redefinition of black identity in contemporary African-American satire on the basis of Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* (2001) – the first notable twenty-first-century manifestation of anti-essentialist ethos in black comic art. In the book, Everett employs humor to scrutinize racially essentialist ideas and expose their normalization in the US culture; he also defines blackness as a polyphonic cultural identity formed and expressed primarily at the level of an individual. Using a term coined by Baratunde Thurston, the chapter describes this approach to ethnic identity as Open-Source Blackness (OSB).¹ Everett, Thurston, and other OSB authors see conceptual and experiential value in creative and ideological disunity: various aesthetic tastes and intellectual pursuits expressed through a diversity of voices. Rejecting racial essentialism, OSB treats these voices as equally legitimate in their embodiment of blackness.

The subsequent analysis of *Erasure* draws heavily from humor scholarship, especially theories of parody and irony by Mikhail Bakhtin,² as well as the concept of the “comic perspective” popularized by, among others, Mel Watkins.³ Echoing Watkins, Everett treats the comic perspective as an epistemological phenomenon – a way of thinking about oneself and the world. Similarly to Bakhtin, he uses parody and irony as a tool for cultural deconstruction and reflection to 1) counter the “single story” of blackness presented in popular urban fiction (a concept by novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)⁴; 2) battle the “pathologizing perspective” on African-American culture common in social science (an idea by ethnographer John Hartigan);⁵ and 3) challenge the racial optic of the American publishing industry and

¹ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 221.

² Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination*.

³ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 8233-8265.

⁴ Ngozi Adichie, Chimamanda. “The Danger of a Single Story.” *TED Talks* (official YouTube channel). Published Oct. 7, 2009. <https://youtu.be/D9Ihs241zeg>.

⁵ Hartigan, John. *Race in the 21st Century: Ethnographic Approaches*. Oxford U P, 2014.

mainstream US culture in general (an argument by cultural critic Shelley Fishkin).⁶ The following paragraphs discuss the most significant themes of *Erasure* – artistic freedom, typecasting, violence, Ebonics, and pulp literature – to analyze how the novel conveys a new understanding of blackness through satire and its constitutive elements: parody, irony, and the comic perspective.

The Forceful Racialization of Art

Since his debut in 1983, Everett has published more than twenty novels, four collections of poetry, and two collections of short stories. He also received numerous honors, most notable of which include the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award (2002), the American Academy of Arts and Letters Literature Award (2003), and the PEN USA Literary Award (2006-2007).⁷ Despite being one of the most prolific writers on the American literary scene, Everett attracts little scholarly attention. The first American academic monograph dedicated to his work, *Perspectives on Percival Everett* (2012), was published nearly three decades after *Suder* (1983), his first novel. Given the consistent rate and high quality of Everett's artistic output, this scholarly underappreciation seems like a glaring omission on the part of American academia and literary critics. Keith Mitchell and Robin Vander, editors of the monograph mentioned above, put it more starkly when they argue that “[the lack of attention to Everett's work] on the part of scholars in African-American *and* American literary and cultural studies has been nothing less than scandalous.”⁸

Mitchell and Vander attribute this peculiar lack of scholarly interest to the specificity of Everett's work. As they put it: “Everett never crosses the same river twice.”⁹ The unpredictability of his art renders it challenging to analyze with the available, ready-made

⁶ Fishkin, Shelley. “Desegregating American Literary Studies.” *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*. Ed. by Emory Elliot. Oxford U P, 2002. Pp. 121-134.

⁷ Mitchell, Keith and Robin Vander. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. U P of Mississippi, 2012. P.ix.

⁸ Ibidem. P. x.

⁹ Ibidem.

critical tools. Everett's writing, devoid of a consistent authorial pattern, evades easy definitions and creates a paradoxical problem: the only constant in his work is change. Another "problem" identified by Mitchell and Vander, one that quite possibly has deprived Everett of the critical attention he undoubtedly deserves, is that his work eschews racially essentialist expectations and defies "readily identifiable black experiences and black expression."¹⁰

Everett broadens his stylistic and thematic range with each new book. To give an example, his *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985) is an anti-war novel. *The Weather and Women Treat Me Fair* (1987) is a collection of short stories. *For Her Dark Skin* (1990) is a reworking of the Greek myth of Medea. *God's Country* (1994) is a western. *The One That Got Away* (1992) is an illustrated children's book. *A History of the African-American People Proposed by Strom Thurmond* (2004) is a satirical epistolary novel. *Re:f (gesture)* (2006) is a collection of poems. Employing different genres and exploring new intellectual interests, Everett attempts to diversify black literature.¹¹ "How do you believe African-Americans should break the mold of stereotypical writing?" – asks one interviewer; in response, Everett offers an unabashedly simple solution: "By writing what they want to write, the way everyone should write what they want to write."¹² Although Everett's recipe seems simple enough, the American publishing market of the early-two-thousands – the pre-New Black Renaissance period – continued to impede the development of heterogeneous African-American prose. As argued by Fishkin:

If black fiction writers are expected to focus on African-American life in the United States as seen through the eyes of black characters, white writers are expected to focus on the lives of white people in the United States as seen through the eyes of white characters. And while black novelists are expected to focus on issues of race and racism and are considered suspect when they do not, white writers are expected *not* to

¹⁰ Ibidem. P. xii.

¹¹ Literary critic Matthew Mullins attempted to enlist the range of Everett's topics in the following list: "a story about a hydrologist; a retelling of a Greek myth; an experiment in poststructuralism narrated by an infant who sounds like Roland Barthes; a co-written set of fictionalized interactions with the late senator from South Carolina, Strom Thurmond; a disjointed narrative of torture; a novel about . . . a thinly veiled version of Everett himself who is frequently frustrated by how the fact that he is black dictates readers' expectations of his work in ways that don't apply to white writers." (Mullin, Matthew. "The Unavoidable Percival Everett." *LA Review of Books*. Published May 3, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2KYcV71>).

¹² "Author: Percival Everett." *Fiction Addiction* (Internet zine). Accessed Dec. 30, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2JGCoBq>.

focus on issues of race and racism and are considered suspect when they do. Transgressive texts – books that violate these norms – are, as often as not, ignored.¹³

To prove her claim, Fishkin provides examples of books that have been largely forgotten because they had transgressed the color line. Among other titles, she discusses Sinclair Lewis' *Kingsblood Royal* (1947), Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), and Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* (1954). The first book is a novel about black people by a white writer; the latter two – the other way around. By the time of their original publication, their authors have been renowned in their respective fields.¹⁴ Today, they are considered classics of American literature.¹⁵ Despite that fact, their most transgressive books – the ones that tried to cross over the color line – have been long out of print. They are also not included in popular anthologies of American literary canon; they have fallen out of the individual writerly canons of their respective authors as well. Consequently, they often have not been studied even by scholars specializing in the works of Lewis, Hurston, and Wright.¹⁶

As argued by Fishkin, publishers and scholars ignore racially transgressive texts to the detriment of the US book market and the field of American Studies. Apart from discussing the classics' long-forgotten novels, she talks about authors shunned for crossing the color line in the twenty-first century. One such writer is the 2001 National Book Award finalist Susan Straight, "whose luminous, lyrical, and powerful portrayals of black life have been enlivening the literary landscape since the 1990s."¹⁷ Despite their subject matter, Straight's novels are not reviewed in African-American cultural magazines such as *Essence* or *Ebony*. They are not

¹³ Fishkin. "Desegregating American Literary Studies." P. 125.

¹⁴ Even though Zora Neale Hurston was popular at the height of her career in the nineteen-thirties, her status at the time of the publication of *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) cannot compare to the status of Lewis, the 1930 Nobel Prize laureate, or Wright, the best-known black author of the nineteen-fifties. Hurston has been rediscovered and gradually became a literary classic after "Looking for Zora," a 1975 essay by Alice Walker. (Mehren, Elizabeth. "The Rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston." *Los Angeles Times*. Published April 7, 1991. <https://lat.ms/37EFHB7>).

¹⁵ Lewis has been famous for his satirical portrayals of white working-class people and the American capitalist system; Hurston for her focus on African-American folklore; and Wright for his preoccupation with black urban naturalism and protest fiction. (Fishkin. P. 125).

¹⁶ Ibidem. Pp. 122-127.

¹⁷ Ibidem. P. 128.

included in anthologies of black literature, and they are not categorized as such in bookstores, libraries, and American Studies departments. The reason for that is quite obvious: Straight is white. However, she grew up in Riverside, California, in a predominantly black neighborhood, and lived there her entire life. At present, she is raising her two black daughters. Her life experience, emotional involvement, and intellectual interests incline her to write stories about African-American life. Nevertheless, in the eyes of many, her skin color disqualifies her as a legitimate author of black fiction. Monk, the black protagonist of Everett's *Erasure*, finds himself in a reversed but eerily similar situation. As it was pointed out by him in one scene in the novel:

I decided to see if the store had any of my books . . . I went to Literature and did not see me. I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African-American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read undisturbed, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African-American was my jacket photograph. I became quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing. Someone interested in African-American Studies would have little interest in my books and would be confused by their presence in the section. Someone looking for an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy would not consider looking in that section any more than the gardening section. The result in either case, no sale.¹⁸

As argued by Fishkin, the unwritten rule of American culture and academia is that artists and scholars ought to write exclusively about their respective ethnic groups or risk being miscategorized and ostracized by their peers and the public at large.¹⁹ Arguing against this notion in one of his interviews, Everett proposes to pay less attention to writers' ethnicity and more to their literary craftsmanship:

Once, to be a writer or a musician, you needed to learn your craft and have a certain talent, and then you needed to prove yourself and improve your craft each time you created something. That's gone now. It's been replaced by other impulses like this bogus notion of authenticity that bedevils music and fiction made by black people.²⁰

According to Everett, the contemporary understanding of authenticity puts too much emphasis on race. In other words, it mistakes traits attributed to a given race by the broad society for something inherent – i.e., biologically or culturally encoded. To challenge this outlook, Everett

¹⁸ Everett. *Erasure*. P. 51.

¹⁹ Fishkin. P. 128.

²⁰ Qtd. in O'Hagan, Sean. "Colour Bind." *Guardian*. Published Mar. 16, 2003. <https://bit.ly/36OgEMz>.

mocks racial stereotypes and unmask the essentialist presumptions of the reader. One of his novels, *Glyph* (2004), addresses this issue directly. On the fiftieth page of the book, its protagonist – a genius child whose race had not been disclosed until this very moment – breaks the fourth wall and asks the reader:

Have you to this point assumed that I am white? In my reading, I discovered that if a character was black, then he at some point was required to comb his Afro hairdo, speak on the street using an obvious, ethnically identifiable idiom, live in a certain part of town, or be called [the N-word] by someone. White characters . . . did not seem to need that kind of introduction, or perhaps legitimization, to exist on the page. But you, dear reader, no doubt, whether you shared my pigmentation or cultural origins, probably assumed that I was white.²¹

The narrative strategy employed in *Glyph* highlights the normative position of whiteness in American society. “Of course, in our culture,” says Everett in one interview, “if I don’t have my character comb his afro by page ten, he’s white. But that’s obviously not true.”²² Everett seems bent on this issue; he started weaving this argumentative thread as early as his second novel, *Walk me to the Distance* (1985). The book in question did not make any racial designations for its characters; concealing its protagonists’ race, Everett probed the reader’s mind for unconscious biases and unwarranted assumptions. In doing so, he anteceded a strategy famously employed by Toni Morrison in her short story “Recitatif” (1983) and novel *Paradise* (1997). Despite the surface evidence to the contrary – Morrison was very race-conscious in her most famous work, e.g., *Beloved* (1987) – this is not where the similarities between Morrison and Everett end.

“Being a black woman writer is not a shallow place but a rich place to write from. It doesn’t limit my imagination. It expands it” – claimed Morrison.²³ Nevertheless, she contended that racial labels had often been used to question, “otherize,” or otherwise disparage black writing throughout American history. “I’m already discredited, I’m already politicized, before

²¹ Everett, Percival. *Glyph*. Graywolf Press, 2004. P. 50.

²² “Percival Everett on the Myth of Race.” *ACCArtsandDigitalMedia* (official YouTube channel). Published Mar. 2, 2011. <https://youtu.be/s5RDfcoMZE>.

²³ Qtd. in Als, Hilton. “Ghosts in the House: How Toni Morrison Fostered a Generation of Black Writers.” *New Yorker*. Published Oct. 20, 2003. <https://bit.ly/2IGbTf2>.

I get out of the gate” – she argued.²⁴ That is probably why, during one controversial interview, Morrison said she would prefer to be labeled as an “American writer.”²⁵ As aptly noted by *The New Inquiry* blogger Aaron Bady, rather than promoting post-racialism or rejecting her black identity in any way, Morrison argued for a broader definition of Americanness: one that includes a range of ethnicities and does not relegate them to hyphenated subcategories.²⁶ In his oft-quoted passage about the binary construction of black identity, W. E. B. Du Bois writes about an ever-present feeling of “two-ness – an American, a Negro. Two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body.”²⁷ Morrison wanted to combine these two separate and seemingly incompatible ideas – “unreconciled strivings” – into one. Throughout his novels, Everett adopts a similar approach. He wants to open the concept of Americanness to the oft-forgotten African-American intellectual legacy (Morrison was more focused on black folk tradition and its local implications, “village” or “peasant literature,” as she has called it).²⁸ In his and Morrison’s mind, blackness – understood as a conglomerate of diverse cultures and experiential realities – expands, not limits, the imaginative and intellectual repertoire of Americanness.

Throughout his work, Everett frames himself as an artist influenced by his individual lived experience, i.e., the life of a black man in America. At the same time, he continuously refuses to be defined by his skin color. As one might expect, Everett is not the first black American writer who has protested the imposition of essentialist racial categories on art. One of the pioneers of this argument was Zora Neale Hurston – Harlem Renaissance novelist, poet,

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ “Toni Morrison.” *The Colbert Report* (official video archive). Published Nov. 19, 2014. <https://on.cc.com/2uB0tII>.

²⁶ Bady, Aaron. “As an ‘American Writer’ (Toni Morrison on Colbert).” *The New Inquiry*. Published Nov. 22, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3n9dw3C>.

²⁷ Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Public Domain e-book. Published Jan. 29, 2008. Originally published in print in 1903. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>.

²⁸ Leclair, Thomas. “‘The Language Must Not Sweat’: A Conversation with Toni Morrison (1981).” *New Republic*. Accessed Dec. 30, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2IysBN8>.

and anthropologist of black folk humor.²⁹ Her stance on this matter is perhaps best exemplified in her famous essay “Art and Such” (1938), in which she tries to convey her anti-essentialist stance through the following provocative question:

Can the black poet sing a song to the morning? Up springs the song to his lips but it is fought back. He asks himself . . . “Ought I not to be singing of our sorrows? That is what is expected of me and I shall be considered forgetful of our past and present. If I do not some will even call me coward. The one subject for a Negro is the Race and its sufferings and so the song of the morning must be choked back. I will write of a lynching instead.”³⁰

Hurston worked with Franz Boas, a pioneering anthropologist, and became an expert researcher of African-American folk humor – perhaps that is why the fragment cited above is brimming with irony characteristic to the oral tradition of black comic expression.³¹ Hurston’s writing has been steeped in black oral tradition, a form of folk art rooted in history, but celebrating free-spirited, individual expression.³² She did not want to create art as a depersonalized “unit of the Race” – as she has sarcastically put it.³³ Echoing her claims, Everett wants to sing his own “song to the morning”: i.e., to reclaim the power to pursue his idiosyncratic intellectual interests and attain creative freedom unhindered by forceful racialization.

Another writer famous for his resistance to the racial categorization of art was George Schuyler. Like Hurston, Schuyler started writing during the times of the Harlem Renaissance; unlike her, he did not consider himself a part of this or any other racially defined literary movement. Throughout his career – in his columns for *American Mercury* and his novels (most notably, in *Black No More*, published in 1931) – Schuyler consistently portrayed race as a cancerous cultural construct, a disease devouring American body politic from the inside out.³⁴

²⁹ Salamone, Frank A. “His Eyes Were Watching Her: Papa Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston, and Anthropology.” *Anthropos*. Vol. 109, No. 1, 2014, Pp. 217–224., www.jstor.org/stable/43861696.

³⁰ Hurston, Zora Neale. “Art and Such.” *Digital Public Library of America*. Public Domain e-book. Accessed Dec. 19, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2KLSn15>.

³¹ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 7976-7992.

³² Ibidem. Kindle loc. 7976-8008.

³³ Hurston. “Art and Such.” Public Domain e-book.

³⁴ In part, it might have been Schuyler’s reaction to the scientific racism of eugenics – the now-discredited movement enjoying significant academic and cultural credence during the nineteen-twenties and thirties. (See Łuczak, Ewa Barbara. *Breeding and Eugenics in the American Literary Imagination: Heredity Rules in the Twentieth Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Notably, he championed individualism to such an extent that he refused to acknowledge any long-lasting consequences of the historical, institutionalized oppression of African-Americans. This stance positioned him as a radical and rendered his voice virtually irrelevant in the American public debate on race and ethnicity after the 1940s.³⁵

Echoing Schuyler, Everett sees race – first and foremost – as a product of culture. Thus, he considers essentialist thinking as experiential and imaginative imprisonment. Like the author of *Black No More*, he claims that the oft-held academic debates about “the black experience” are largely nonsensical, as they mistakenly imply the existence of a monolithic state of being determined by one’s skin color. Similarly to Schuyler, Everett contends that the division of the US book market into “American” (meaning: white) and “African-American” (meaning: hyphenated, and thus not-fully-American) racializes black people as Other and excludes them from the literary mainstream. His claim – echoing Fishkin’s argument about desegregating American Studies and Morrison’s call to induct black writers into the American literary canon – has been recognized by scholars interested in his work. As it was put by Mitchell and Vander: “To say that Percival Everett is one of the most accomplished and prolific contemporary *African-American* authors, is also to say that Percival Everett is one of the most accomplished and prolific *American* writers.”³⁶

Everett’s struggle to free himself from externally imposed categorizations is a fight against mislabeling and pigeonholing black art in general. The paradox of the perception of his writing is that even though the overwhelming majority of his books do not directly address the issue of race, he is still predominantly described as an “ethnic” or “black” writer by publishers, scholars, and literary critics. As evidenced by Everett’s impassioned letter to the *New York Times*, this fact never ceases to baffle him. He penned the following message after the newspaper in question reviewed one of his novels, *American Desert* (2004); although this book does not

³⁵ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 7907-7921.

³⁶ Mitchell and Vander. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. P. ix.

tackle the issue of race in any substantial way, *NYT*'s literary critic Sven Birkerts turned his attention to Everett's skin color at the very beginning of his review. Incensed by this fact, Everett argued with the paper's editor:

I feel confident in stating that the color of my skin has little to do with that novel. I also feel confident in stating that I am sure that Sven Birkerts in previous reviews has not found it necessary to identify other authors as European-American or white. To tell the truth, I am simply tired of people connected with publishing and art in this culture being so amazed that anyone not-white can create a work of art that race is all they can see. I will not waste my energy discussing this kind of insidious racism, but will say only that this brand, often practiced by those who in all things else would consider themselves liberal, progressive and intellectual, makes one appreciate the overt brand of bigotry practiced by the likes of the late Strom Thurmond.³⁷

Even though his letter to the *New York Times* is quite somber in tone, more often than not, Everett expresses his racially anti-essentialist stance through ironic humor. "Are you in some way a black writer?" – asks James Kincaid, the co-author of his and Everett's mock-epistolary novel *History of African- American People Proposed by Strom Thurmond* (2004). "I am a black writer the way you are a white professor. If I get lost, and you're trying to tell the police what I look like, you will say, 'He's devastatingly handsome, tall, and black.' You might then add, 'Look for him in office supply or bookstores. He's a writer'" – answers Everett, using his signature blend of facetiousness and sarcasm.³⁸ Employing satire's potential for corrective ridicule, Everett puts forth dry quips that accentuate the problems with being a black writer in the US. "I get reviews all the time that just don't make sense. The reviewer feels they need to say, 'By the way, the writer is black'" – snipes Everett, pointing to the different perceptual frameworks applied to black and white writing by publishers, reviewers, and scholars.³⁹

Apart from being called an ethnic author, Everett is often described as an experimental writer. As argued by Mitchell and Vander, this label is usually not a compliment on the novelty of Everett's work. When applied to unorthodox black authors – such as Ishmael Reed, Colson Whitehead, Paul Beatty, or Everett – the label "experimental writer" might convey a twofold

³⁷ Everett, Percival. "The Color of His Skin." *New York Times*. Published June 6, 2004. <https://nyti.ms/2u0xvuF>.

³⁸ Kincaid, James. "An Interview with Percival Everett." *Callaloo*. Issue 28:2, 2005. P. 377.

³⁹ Bengali, Shashank. "The Wicked Wit of Percival Everett." *Conversations with Percival Everett*. Edited by Joe Weixlmann. U P of Mississippi, 2013. Kindle loc. 545.

message. On the one hand, it could mean that the writers in question employ original and innovative aesthetics and narrative methods. On the other, it may suggest that their unconventional style makes their work inaccessible to black readership as it is perceived by publishers and critics (i.e., it is too difficult or unusual to be relatable). According to Mitchell and Vander, labeling African-American authors as experimental

[has often] meant that because the work was ‘avant-garde’ (whatever that is supposed to mean), African-American readers could not identify with the characters and/or situations rendered in those texts. This often meant that black and white critics alike were quick to dismiss these experimental writers’ literary efforts as perhaps too indulgent to suit the tastes of the general (black) reading public or to satisfy black and white critics’ expectations for “authentic” black fiction.⁴⁰

Mitchell and Vander claim that the label of “African-American experimental writer” has become a covert accusation of being “not black enough” – i.e., not in contact with one’s racial essence, and thus inauthentic, culturally insignificant, and ultimately unmarketable. The term allowed publishers and critics to discriminate against original black authors while keeping up the appearance of being racially color-blind – that is, not taking the writer’s ethnicity into consideration. The employment of the so-called “dog-whistle” language had already been proven on the grounds of American sociopolitical life (e.g., Ronald Reagan’s racialized use of the supposedly color-blind term “Welfare Queens”).⁴¹ Anteceding the argument made most famously by *Get Out* (2017) – an Oscar-winning satirical horror film by Jordan Peele⁴² – Mitchell, Vander, and Everett pointed to the existence of the same phenomenon in the supposedly more progressive world of liberal education and arts.

As observed by Mitchell and Vander, “Everett has made a career of writing against proscriptions of black representations in his fiction – that black writers have to represent kind of universalized, monolithic black experience in order for their art to be considered legitimately black.”⁴³ Everett rarely overtly discusses race, thereby disregarding an expectation levied at

⁴⁰ Mitchell and Vander. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. P. xi.

⁴¹ Kohn, Sally. “Thank Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton for Donald Trump’s Dog-Whistle Ways.” *TIME*. Published Aug. 16, 2016. <https://time.com/4452596/donald-trump-dog-whistle>.

⁴² Bakare, Lanre. “Get Out: The Film that Dares to Reveal the Horror of Liberal Racism in America.” *Guardian*. Published Feb. 28, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3naYdr8>.

⁴³ Mitchell and Vander. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. P. xiv.

black authors by the American publishing industry (Fishkin's aforementioned claim that "black novelists [in the US] are expected to focus on issues of race and racism and are considered suspect when they do not").⁴⁴ Moreover, when he does appoint a black character as a protagonist of his book, it is usually a middle-class professional – a fact that bugs some of his critics. As explained by Everett:

Occasionally someone will say. "[The world described in your books is] not the Black Experience." And I laugh and say: "I'm black, and that's my experience." I know a lot of black people whose experience is that, but it's not what people want to think is the black experience – they want their black experience to be inner-city or rural South.⁴⁵

Throughout most of its history, African-American satire's archetypal character was a street-smart underdog: resourceful but economically downtrodden, intelligent yet formally uneducated trickster-like figure. A lot of comic authors employing this trope – e.g., Langston Hughes in humorous folk-essays (*Jesse B. Semple Tales*, the 1940s–1960s), Richard Pryor in stand-up (*Live on the Sunset Strip*, 1982), Dave Chapelle in television sketch-comedy (*Chappelle's Show*, 2003–2006), or Paul Beatty in prose (*The Sellout*, 2015) – created intricate and insightful pieces of social satire. However, this trope's presence helped to entrench a particular image of African-American life. Inadvertently, it has contributed to a problem articulated by Hartigan: the fact that the "public perception of the middle class in America does not include black people."⁴⁶ Portraying the world of African-American professionals in fiction helps to challenge this misapprehension. Everett has been a champion of this trope throughout his career, utilizing it in several comic novels: *Glyph* (1999), *Erasure* (2001), or *A History of the African-American People Proposed by Strom Thurmond* (2004). Interestingly, Everett does not perceive his choice of characters as a subversive one – according to him, he merely portrays the world he knows best.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, there is something culturally and politically defiant in

⁴⁴ Fishkin. "Desegregating American Literary Studies." P. 125.

⁴⁵ Shavers, Ron. "Percival Everett by Ron Shavers." *Bomb Magazine*. Published Jul. 1, 2004. <https://bit.ly/3a5Cyxa>.

⁴⁶ Hartigan. *Race in the 21st Century*. P. 86.

⁴⁷ Shavers. "Percival Everett by Ron Shavers."

his supposedly accidental yet consistent representation of the world of middle-class black professionals. It is especially true at a time when the image of black people in the American popular culture continues to be sensationalized (“they want their black experience to be inner city. . .”) or sentimentalized (“. . .or rural South”).⁴⁸

Everett often accentuates the importance of proper contextualization when discussing race in America. “There are as many different stories among African-Americans as there are among European Americans. Unless it’s some specific person, dealing with a specific issue, in a specific context,” he says, “then I don’t know what the talk about identity really is about.”⁴⁹ Once again, his remarks echo that of Morrison, who argued that the best way to avoid perpetuating racial essentialism in prose is to write one’s characters in such a way “that when you know their race, it’s the least amount of information you know about a person.”⁵⁰ Hartigan aptly defined such an approach as “bringing greater specificity to blackness.”⁵¹ As argued by Mitchell and Vander, this very stance “allows [Everett] a much wider imaginative latitude in his artistic expression of black experiences.”⁵²

Ultimately, Everett is convinced that the reading public in the United States is “sophisticated enough to be engaged by a range of black experience informed by the economic situation, religion (or lack thereof), or geography, just as one accepts a range of so-called white experience.”⁵³ This last claim differentiates Everett’s perspective from that of Schuyler, who denied the concept of ethnicity any validity whatsoever and discarded its biological, social, and cultural dimensions altogether. This outlook, presented in many of his books, is especially pronounced in *Erasure*, where Everett put it into practice in a twofold way: firstly, by portraying

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ “Percival Everett on the Myth of Race.” *ACCArtsandDigitalMedia*.

⁵⁰ Qtd. in Fishkin. “Desegregating American Literary Studies.” P. 124.

⁵¹ Hartigan. *Race in the 21st Century*. P. 142.

⁵² Mitchell and Vander. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. P. xii.

⁵³ “Percival Everett on the Myth of Race.” *ACCArtsandDigitalMedia*.

the life of his black protagonist in a properly contextualized manner, and secondly, by ruthlessly satirizing racially essentialist stereotypes afflicting (African-)American culture.

Fighting Against the “Racial Optic”

Erasure tells the story of Thelonious “Monk” Ellison – a brilliant, middle-aged author of “widely unread experimental stories and novels.”⁵⁴ As some parts of the plot are based on real events from Everett’s professional life, it can be considered semi-autobiographical. Monk is an unorthodox, highly idiosyncratic writer; his literary pursuits reflect an eclectic interest in ancient history, postmodern theory, and modern linguistics. Being what they are, Monk’s intellectual inclinations go against the demands of the American book market. Publishing houses pressure Monk to write about race issues in a way that they consider marketable – i.e., in a manner rehashing the clichéd images of plantation literature and urban fiction.⁵⁵ Seen from a broader perspective, Monk’s story symbolizes the struggle of black writers unwilling to succumb to essentialist expectations of American critics and readers. As *Erasure* portrays this struggle primarily through Monk’s failures, the book’s overall tone is that of ironic, noir humor.

Monk tells his tale of absurdity and anguish through the pages of a writerly journal – a narrative on his artistic, academic, and private life, as well as a highly digressive transcript of his fragmented and conflicted consciousness. Monk tackles various issues on his journal’s pages: he writes about depression, critical theory, religious fanaticism, economic inequality, the purpose of art in the contemporary world, and other topics of lesser and greater importance. However, one theme always gets at the forefront of his deliberations: the American belief in race and its impact on racialized individuals (i.e., people considered to be “ethnic” by the white majority in the US). At its core, *Erasure* is a story about the freedom to establish one’s own (non-)ethnic identity – that is, to have the right to individually determine the (in)significance of

⁵⁴ Everett. *Erasure*. P. 320.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*. P.70.

race in one's life. Everett illustrates Monk's personal and professional downfall to argue for the privilege of living and working outside of the confines of racially essentialist stereotypes – a right historically granted to middle- and upper-class white Americans often seen as deracinated (that is, non-ethnic or devoid of race).⁵⁶ The overall intent of the novel is to challenge what sociologist Stephen Steinberg calls the “racial optic” of mainstream American culture: the conviction by which only “blacks, not whites, must be the ‘problem’ under examination and thus the object of inquiry.”⁵⁷

As argued by Toni Morrison, American culture's racial optic stems from the Eurocentric perspective of the earliest colonists, a worldview that survived to this day. According to the idea developed in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), the Eurocentric eye defines blackness as antithetical to whiteness: it projects vices on the former and idealizes the latter by way of contrast (i.e., to characterize whiteness as rational, law-abiding, and hard-working, it portrays non-whites as impulse-driven, prone to violence, and lazy).⁵⁸ Hartigan boils down Morrison's argument to its core in the following synthesis. “In this view,” he explains, “blackness is construed relationally to whiteness as a form of otherness, via a selective vision that only recognizes aspects of black life that seem antithetical to whites' self-conceptions.”⁵⁹

Racially tinted expectations influence Monk's life in a manner outweighing all other issues. The novel addresses this problem head-on: its opening paragraphs tackle some of the most prevalent biases concerning African-Americans. Monk introduces himself by saying that

⁵⁶ Sue, Derald Wing. “The Invisible Whiteness of Being: Whiteness, White Supremacy, White Privilege, and Racism.” *Addressing Racism: Facilitating Cultural Competence in Mental Health and Educational Settings*. Edited by M. G. Constantine and D. W. Sue. John Wiley & Sons, 2006. Pp. 15-30.

⁵⁷ Steinberg, Stephen. *Race Relations: A Critique*. Stanford U P, 2007. P. 66.

⁵⁸ As argued by Morrison: “The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination. . . . [The] championed characteristics of our national literature . . . [constitute] responses to a dark, abiding, singing Africanist presence. It has occurred to me that the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of . . . that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness.” (Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Harvard U P, 1992. Pp. 5-6).

⁵⁹ Hartigan. *Race in the 21st Century*. P. 119.

he cannot dance and is terrible at basketball, but loves literature, excels at math, and had graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard.⁶⁰ All of these features deem him “not black enough” in the eyes of his family, peers, and friends. As recalled by him:

While in college I was a member of the Black Panther Party, defunct as it was, mainly because I felt I had to prove I was black enough. Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not black enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing. I have heard this mainly about my novels, from editors who have rejected me and reviewers whom I have apparently confused and, on a couple of occasions, on a basketball court when upon missing a shot I muttered “Egads.”⁶¹

Stereotypically, black people in American culture have often been portrayed as predominantly athletic, extroverted, and carnal. *Erasure*’s protagonist does not have a talent for sports; he is also rather quiet and cerebral.⁶² Everett attempts to challenge the American reader’s preconceived notions by turning them on their head through contrastive juxtaposition. This simple yet surprisingly effective strategy repeats itself throughout *Erasure* to expose the inapplicability of essentialist thinking to the realities of human individuality and intra-group differentiation.⁶³

Monk has trouble finding a publisher for his books. “The line is, you’re not black enough,” states his agent, disappointed after yet another manuscript rejection.⁶⁴ “What, do I have to have my characters comb their afros and be called [the N-word] for these people?” – asks Monk sarcastically; “It wouldn’t hurt,” replies the agent, ignoring the ironic tenor of the question.⁶⁵ As evidenced by this brief yet illustrative exchange, the American book market holds Monk’s dreamt-of artistic freedom under the seemingly unshatterable glass ceiling of racial expectations. “The novel is finely crafted, with fully developed characters, rich language

⁶⁰ Everett. *Erasure*. P.11.

⁶¹ Ibidem. P. 12.

⁶² Lemons, J. Stanley. “Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture.” *American Quarterly*. Vol. 29, No. 1, 1977. Pp. 102-116; “Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African-Americans.” *NMAAHC*. Accessed Dec. 29, 2020. <https://s.si.edu/2MibyR7>; Turner, Patricia Ann. *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*. U of Virginia P, 1994.

⁶³ Witherspoon, David et al. “Genetic Similarities Within and Between Human Populations.” *Genetics*. Vol. 176 (1), 2007. Pp. 351-359. <https://bit.ly/3aRr3cN>.

⁶⁴ Everett. *Erasure*. P.70.

⁶⁵ Ibidem.

and subtle play with the plot,” states one of Monk’s rejection letters, “but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus’ *The Persians* has to do with the African-American experience.”⁶⁶ Absurd as it seems, Everett based this fictional review on an actual one he had received from a major American publishing house after sending them a manuscript of his book on Greek mythology.⁶⁷ *Erasure* fictionalized Everett’s exchange with the publisher in the following way:

One night at a party in New York, a tall, thin, rather ugly book agent told me that I could sell many books if I’d forget about writing retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists and settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life. I told him that I was living a black life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one, that I would be living one.⁶⁸

Monk believes that his relatively mundane middle-class life should be perceived as just as authentic in its “blackness” as one marked by hardship. Putting this argument forward and advancing it throughout the book, Everett attempts to increase the heterogeneity of black conceptions of self, and contribute to the creation and popularization of comic literature representing a broader spectrum of African-American social strata. *Erasure* argues against the stereotype-infested notion of “real blackness” by exposing it for what it is: a fantasy defined by the unwillingness to see the diverse realities of African-American life.⁶⁹ For the most part, it deconstructs this trope through parody – i.e., imitation with critical, ironic distance.⁷⁰ This narrative strategy is especially pronounced in the manuscript of *My Pafology* [sic.], Monk’s caricature of a ghetto novel enclosed in-between the journal parts of *Erasure*.⁷¹

Frustrated with his literary career and overwhelmed by tragedies in his private life, Monk finds himself in the midst of a nervous breakdown. “I wouldn’t use the cliché that I was

⁶⁶ Everett. *Erasure*. P.12.

⁶⁷ “Percival Everett on the Myth of Race.” *ACCArtsandDigitalMedia*.

⁶⁸ Everett. *Erasure*. P.12.

⁶⁹ See Nguyen, Jenny and Amanda Koontz Anthony. “Black Authenticity: Defining the Ideals and Expectations in the Construction of ‘Real’ Blackness.” *Sociology Compass*. Volume 8, Issue 6, June 2014. Pp. 770-779. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12171>; Francis, Jacqueline. “To Be Real: Figuring Blackness in Modern and Contemporary African Diaspora Visual Cultures.” *Radical History Review*. Volume 103, 2009. Pp. 188–202. <https://bit.ly/3biWay8>.

⁷⁰ Hutcheon. *A Theory of Parody*. Pp. xii, xv.

⁷¹ Everett. “My Pafology.” *Erasure*. Pp. 97-191.

the captain of a sinking ship, that implying some kind of authority,” he quips, “but rather I was a diesel mechanic on a steamship, an obstetrician in a monastery.”⁷² Monk writes *My Pafology* as a joke intended to give him a sense of control and emotional relief. “Look at the shit that’s published. I’m sick of it,” he says to his agent, “This is an expression of my being sick of it.”⁷³ *My Pafology* constitutes a parodic reworking of *We’s Lives in da Ghetto* [sic.] by Juanita Mae Jenkins, a thriving urban pulp fiction author in the world of *Erasure*. Monk recalls his first encounter with Jenkins’ book in the following way:

I picked up a copy of the book from the display and read the opening paragraph: “My fahvre be gone since time I’s borned and it be just me an’ my momma an’ my baby brover Juneboy. In da mornin’ Juneboy never do brushes his teefus, so I gots to remind him. Because dat, Momma says I be the ‘sponsible one and tell me that I gots to holds things togever while she be at work clean dem white people’s house.” I closed the book and thought I was going to throw up. . . . The reality of popular culture was nothing new. . . . But this book was a real slap in the face. It was like . . . turning the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars.⁷⁴

According to Monk, Jenkins’ book peddles racial stereotypes and dumbs-down African-American vernacular; his parody intends to hyperbolize its worst features to make them overtly ridiculous.⁷⁵ However, in an ironic turn of events, *My Pafology* ends up being taken seriously and is not recognized as a parody by the publisher, critics, or readers. Printed under a false name, it becomes a critical and commercial success. In an attempt to extend the book’s financial success even further, Monk continues his subversive, trickster-like adventure under the pseudonym of Stagg Leigh – a name taken from the first black gangsta song ever written.⁷⁶

It is likely that Jenkins’ *We’s Lives in da Ghetto* was based in part on Sapphire’s novel *Push* (1996) – an urban-fiction success and a symbolic story of black girls’ victimization in the inner-city. If this was the case, *Erasure* foretold *Push*’s future critical and commercial success, as Sapphire’s book was later adapted into an Oscar-winning feature film *Precious* (2009). It also anteceded some of the critical responses to the movie. As argued by *The Root*’s culture

⁷² Everett. *Erasure*. P. 231.

⁷³ Ibidem. P. 192.

⁷⁴ Ibidem. P. 52.

⁷⁵ Monk calls it “an overly ironic, cynical, self-conscious and yet faithful copy of Juanita Mae Jenkins, author of the runaway-bestseller-soon-to-be-a-major-motion-picture *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*.” (Ibidem. P. 315).

⁷⁶ Lezard, Nicholas. “Selling out to the ghetto.” *Guardian*. Published Jan 17, 2004. <https://bit.ly/34UKn5j>.

writer Teresa Wiltz: “I’ve taken issues with [the producer of *Push*’s movie adaptation], when she says ‘we’re all Precious,’ because I feel that it denies [the protagonist] specificity of her own story. She’s a stand-in for all black people. And there are going to be people who think this is just a stand-in for black dysfunction and proof positive of that.”⁷⁷

My Pafology is a parody of a “ghetto novel” – a sub-genre of pulp literature defined by some critics as a literary equivalent of gangsta rap. Urban fiction is a subject of criticism among African-American intellectuals concerned with black representation in popular culture.⁷⁸ Authors such as Carl Weber, Teri Woods, or Vickie Stringer find themselves accused of perpetuating racial stereotypes by turning some of the actual struggles of inner-city life – e.g., high unemployment and crime rates – into easily digestible, exploitative entertainment for the masses. Despite their growing readership, ghetto novel writers continue to be considered *personae non-gratae* in intellectual circles. As pointed out by the *New York Times* literary critic Jody Rosen:

Street-lit is subject to a kind of triple snobbery: scorned by literati who look down on genre fiction generally, ignored by a white publishing establishment that remains largely indifferent to black books, and disparaged by African-American intellectuals for poor writing, coarse values and trafficking in racial stereotypes.⁷⁹

Contemporary street-lit has its roots in the ghetto novels of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, books such as Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1969) or Donald Goines’ *Whoreson: The Story of a Ghetto Pimp* (1972). After a period of downfall in the nineteen-eighties and early nineties, the genre went through a cultural revival due to Sapphire’s *Push* (1996) and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999). Street-lit experienced another rush of popularity along with the debut of JaQuavis and Ashley Coleman; their pulp novels – e.g., *Flexin’ and*

⁷⁷ Martin, Michael. “Critics Speak Out on The Movie ‘Precious.’” *NPR*. Published Nov. 18, 2009. <https://n.pr/3bdDIqJ>.

⁷⁸ See Brooks, Wanda and Lorraine Savage. “Critiques and Controversies of Street Literature: A Formidable Literary Genre.” *The ALAN Review*. Winter 2009. Pp. 48-55. <https://bit.ly/3n6UQRw>.

⁷⁹ Rose, Jody. “Ashley and JaQuavis Coleman: Kiss Kiss Bang Bang.” *New York Times*. Published May 3, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/2Qis2bC>.

Sexin (2009), *Murder Mamas* (2011), or *Guilty Gucci: A Red Bottom* (2014) – are some of the latest bestsellers on the urban books market.⁸⁰

Ghetto novels flourish on the streets of neighborhoods neglected by the mainstream publishing industry, alluring their target clientele on street-corner tables and magazine stands. Quite often, urban fiction is self-published – e.g., when the Colemans were starting out, they used to print their books themselves and sell them from a trunk of their car, bypassing the system of publishing houses and bookstores entirely (which, in the eyes of street-lit recipients, only strengthened Colemans' credibility). "Like rappers who establish their bona fides with gray-market mixtapes," says Rosen, "authors use this system to circumnavigate industry gatekeepers, bringing their work straight to the genre's core readership."⁸¹ Street-lit writers find their clientele amongst people disregarded by the traditional publishing industry. On the one hand, they rejuvenate the book market by finding new readers in communities usually ignored by the mainstream literary culture.⁸² On the other, some of the genre's defining characteristics continue to be controversial. For example, street-lit tends to glamorize crime and perpetuate gangsta culture's misogynistic tropes.⁸³ What is more, in an attempt to exert more control over their image, urban fiction writers often embrace racial stereotypes coming from the mainstream culture, redefine them as positive, and amplify them in an un-ironic fashion.⁸⁴

My Pafology is, first and foremost, a parody of urban pulp fiction's style – its most prevalent tropes, modes of representation, and language. As argued by Bakhtin, a well-crafted parody points the reader's attention to the fact that "every available style is restricted."⁸⁵ In

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁸² Guerra, Stephanie F. "Using Urban Fiction to Engage At-Risk and Incarcerated Youths in Literacy Instruction." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. Vol. 55, No. 5 (2012). <https://bit.ly/3b36lXE>.

⁸³ Adams, Terri M. and Douglas B. Fuller. "The Words Have Changed but the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music." *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 36, No. 6 (2006). Pp. 938-957. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40034353>; Weitzer Ronald and Charis E. Kurbin. "Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings." *Men and Masculinities*. Vol. 12, No. 1 (2009). Pp. 3-29. <https://bit.ly/3rNsGi0>.

⁸⁴ Andrews, Kehinde. "From the 'Bad N****r' to the 'Good N****a': An Unintended Legacy of the Black Power Movement." *Race & Class*. No. 55 (2013). Pp. 22-37. <https://bit.ly/3pIQGRi>.

⁸⁵ Bakhtin. *Dialogic Imagination*. P. 45.

a parody, he claims, “the style, the language are all put in cheerfully irreverent quotation marks, and they are perceived against a backdrop of contradictory reality that cannot be confined within their narrow frames.”⁸⁶ Echoing these principles, *My Pafology* parodies the genre of urban fiction to unmask its confinement to a specific type of language (a dumbed-down version of African-American vernacular), themes (victimization, sex, violence), and stereotypes (black people as primarily corporeal, socially dysfunctional, and inherently dangerous). By ironically hyperbolizing these elements, Everett aims to point out their expressive impotence, artistic incapacity, and representational inadequacy. In the process, he argues that African-Americans’ lives are too varied, complex, or “heteroglot” – to use Bakhtin’s term – to fit into the generically restricted narrative of a typical ghetto novel.⁸⁷

“I have nothing against ghetto novels or rural Southern novels, except that they are the only representations out there,” said Everett in one interview, underscoring the state of black representation in American literature of the early twenty-first century.⁸⁸ His claim echoed what Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “the danger of a single story.”⁸⁹ As argued by her, the power to create single stories comes from economic privilege, cultural clout, and political influence; it is the history of the defeated written by the victors. Ethnic groups incapable of taking ownership of their public image due to their marginalized status often fall victim to single stories. One way to empower such groups is to give them a platform to tell their “many stories.”⁹⁰ According to Adichie, national literature that aims to represent its people ought to encourage polyphonic miscellany, not homogeneity. Echoing this claim, Everett argues for an emergence of literary culture that Adichie calls “a balance of stories”: a state in which an abundance of narratives available in a given culture prevents one story (e.g., the one

⁸⁶ Ibidem. P. 56.

⁸⁷ Ibidem.

⁸⁸ O’Hagan. “Colour bind.” *Guardian*.

⁸⁹ Adichie. “The Danger of a Single Story.” *TED Talks*.

⁹⁰ Ibidem.

told by ghetto novels) from becoming the only story (e.g., of the black experience).⁹¹ *Erasure* aims to point out the absence of such a culture, or such a platform, in the pre-New Black Renaissance era of American letters.

Monk's literary career had been limited by the single story of blackness in the US – even *My Pafology*, his satirical protest against its prevalence, ended up being subsumed by it. Unable to see the subversive irony embedded in Monk's text, the publishing house ended up advertising it as a “magnificently raw and honest” representation of black life.⁹² Frustrated by the promotional campaign of the book, Monk criticized the way popular black prose is often marketed to the public: “Tom Clancy was not trying to sell his book to me by suggesting that the crew of his high-tech submarine was a representation of his race,” he quipped, “if you didn't like Clancy's white people, you could go out and read about some others.”⁹³ In other words, stories written by deracinated authors – i.e., writers not seen through the prism of their skin color – do not have to counter or adhere to the single stories of their respective ethnicities. As a result, they can be as universal in their humanity or as specific in their local color as their authors intend them to be.

My Pafology channels the tropes, aesthetics, and the plot of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Its poor black protagonist, Van Go Jenkins, is a chauffeur for a girl from a wealthy family. As she wants to experience “real” and “authentic” black life in the inner-city, he drives her around his neighborhood, confused by her fascination with the ghetto and embarrassed by its poverty. Eventually, taking advantage of her inebriation, he rapes her, and the story moves on to describe the police chase and Van Go's subsequent crimes (in contrast to Wright's story, the wealthy family is black, and the protagonist does not murder the girl to avoid being caught in her bedroom).⁹⁴ Interestingly, Wright's novel is not a part of the pulp, street-lit genre; it is a

⁹¹ Ibidem.

⁹² Everett. *Erasure*. P. 214.

⁹³ Ibidem.

⁹⁴ This is how Monk describes the manic, dream-like process of writing his parody: “I went to what had been my father's study, and perhaps still was his study, but now it was where I worked. I sat and stared at Juanita

somber, naturalistic, politically involved story of black persecution and its looming, violent consequences. Many scholars consider it as one of the prime examples of socially conscious, politically engaged African-American literature.⁹⁵ At the time of its release, Wright's book was a national bestseller; contemporarily, it is a part of many a school curriculum.⁹⁶ Although it has the status of a literary classic, Monk despises Wright's novel (or, at the very least, its simplistic interpretations and inartful emulations throughout the twentieth century). According to *Erasure's* protagonist, *Native Son* might have helped to entrench the trope of the violent black man in American high literary culture; it might have endowed it with literary artfulness and legitimacy it had never deserved.⁹⁷ (Admittedly, it is a controversial take, one that goes beyond critiquing street-lit to initiate a broader discussion about depictions of black masculinity in American culture).⁹⁸

In one of Monk's journal entries, D. W. Griffith – the director of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), the first Hollywood blockbuster, and a racist fantasy about Ku Klux Klan's saving grace – cordially congratulates Wright on his book.⁹⁹ *Birth of a Nation* has been conceptualized as an apotheosis of white supremacy.¹⁰⁰ *Native Son*, in contrast, intended to be a powerful statement against it.¹⁰¹ Yet, paradoxically, they both engrained suggestive images of black violence in American collective memory. That is why when Monk imagines a dialogue between Griffith

Mae Jenkins' face on *TIME* magazine. The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of *Native Son* . . . and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me . . . I put a page in my father's old manual typewriter. I wrote this novel, a book on which I knew I could never put my name: *My Pafology* by Stagg R. Leigh." (Ibidem. P. 95-97).

⁹⁵ Kinnamon, Kenneth. "'Native Son': The Personal, Social, and Political Background." *Phylon*. Vol. 30, No. 1 (1969). Pp. 66-72.

⁹⁶ In a fictionalized review of *My Pafology* by the Random House, they call it "magnificently raw and honest. . . . the kind of book that they will be reading in high schools thirty years from now." This, clearly, refers to Wright's *Native Son*, as pulp urban fiction, while popular, continues to be shunned by the American education system. (Everett. *Erasure*. P. 292).

⁹⁷ DeCoste, Damon Marcel. "To Blot It All Out: The Politics of Realism in Richard Wright's 'Native Son.'" *Style*. Vol. 32, No. 1 (1998). Pp. 127-147.

⁹⁸ See O'Brien, Daniel. *Black Masculinity on Film: Native Sons and White Lies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

⁹⁹ McEwan, Paul. "Racist Film: Teaching 'The Birth of a Nation.'" *Cinema Journal*. Vol. 47, No. 1 (Autumn, 2007). Pp. 98-101.

¹⁰⁰ Gallagher, Brian. "Racist Ideology and Black Abnormality in the Birth of a Nation." *Phylon*. Vol. 43, No. 1 (1st Qtr., 1982), Pp. 68-76.

¹⁰¹ Saunders, James Robert. "The Social Significance of Wright's Bigger Thomas." *College Literature*. Vol. 14, No. 1 (Winter, 1987). Pp. 32-37.

and Wright, he portrays it as the following, ironic exchange in which Griffith had misread Wright's noble intentions:

D. W. Griffith: I like your book very much.

Richard Wright: Thank you.¹⁰²

The popular and critical response to Wright's novel consisted of a curious blend of fear and fascination. Ralph Ellison wrote that the violent protagonist of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, represents a release of hidden impulses: ones inhibited by a survival mechanism that stopped the oppressed black man from "throw[ing] himself against the charged wires of his prison."¹⁰³ James Baldwin famously remarked that "no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull."¹⁰⁴ Thomas represented a surge of black anger and hostility simmering under the surface, always ready to boil over. Baldwin, Ellison,¹⁰⁵ and Wright¹⁰⁶ himself argued that this character represented a standard fixture in the African-American psyche: a misdirected violent resistance born out of subjugation. Everett strongly disagrees with that opinion: he treats every literary attempt at broad, race-based social diagnoses as prone to hyperbole and overgeneralization.¹⁰⁷ In that, Everett's argument echoes the one presented by Baldwin in his 1955 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" (Baldwin was famous for his criticism of Wright; however, as argued by literary scholar Jay Garcia, "[e]ven when he turned directly to what he took to be the flaws of *Native Son*, Baldwin concurred with Wright about the psychologically enervating and injurious paths set in motion by racism").¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² Everett. *Erasure*. P.193.

¹⁰³ Ellison, Ralph. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison: Revised and Updated*. Edited by John F. Callahan. Modern Library, 2011. P. 140.

¹⁰⁴ Qtd. in Garcia, Jay. "Letters: James Baldwin, Richard Wright." *New York Times*. Published Mar. 13, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/3n7q7DG>.

¹⁰⁵ Ellison was also critical of some aspects of *Native Son*. He complained, for example, that Wright created Bigger Thomas as more of an archetype than a real person. As argued by literary critic James Robert Saunders: "[Ellison claimed that] 'Wright had to force into Bigger's consciousness concepts and ideas which his intellect could not formulate.' That complaint stems from Ellison's belief that Wright compromised too much of his own personality to achieve the fundamental theme of Bigger Thomas' frustrated existence." (Saunders. "The Social Significance of Wright's Bigger Thomas").

¹⁰⁶ De Arman, Charles. "Bigger Thomas: The Symbolic Negro and the Discrete Human Entity." *African-American Review*. Vol. 12, No. 2 (1978). Pp. 61-64. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3041598>.

¹⁰⁷ "Percival Everett on the Myth of Race." *ACC Arts and Digital Media*.

¹⁰⁸ Qtd in. Garcia. "Letters: James Baldwin, Richard Wright."

Interestingly, even though *Erasure* has been critical of *Native Son*'s overall effect on African-Americans' public image – i.e., it diagnosed that the book has been misread by the public and inadvertently perpetuated the stereotype it had been fighting against – it won the 2002 Hurston-Wright Legacy Award.¹⁰⁹ Due to ensuing publicity, Everett received a proposal to publish *Erasure* in one of the street-lit imprints of a major American publishing house. He declined the offer but continued to revel in the irony of the situation. “Did [you] not, even for a moment . . . consider taking up their offer and running with the prank as far as [you] could [?]” – asked one interviewer. “I actually thought of it,” answered Everett, “[i]t was tempting to have them invalidate themselves . . . but, you know, I really couldn't do that to my work.”¹¹⁰

My Pafology constitutes a satirical response against racialization of crime: the pervasive cultural mechanism that “colors” certain crimes – e.g., the dealing and consumption of drugs – as almost exclusively black, despite the statistical evidence to the contrary. This mechanism was perhaps best described by Michelle Alexander, a civil rights advocate and the author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012). Alexander's book's telling title reveals its grim conclusion: the judiciary branch in the US, already one of the most punitive systems in the developed world, is especially harsh with regard to non-whites.¹¹¹ As pointed out by Alexander, since the implementation of Reagan's War on Drugs policy in the 1980s and Clinton's Three-strikes law in the 1990s,

the US penal population exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase. The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world . . . No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. In Washington, DC, our nation's capital, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America. . . . Studies show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates. . . . [Yet in] some states, black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of white men.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Mitchell and Vander. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. P. ix.

¹¹⁰ Qtd. in O'Hagan. “Colour Bind.” *Guardian*.

¹¹¹ Sakala, Leah. “Breaking Down Mass Incarceration in the 2010 Census: State-by-State Incarceration Rates by Race/Ethnicity.” *Prison Policy Initiative*. Published May 28, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3hW2oFK>.

¹¹² Alexander. *The New Jim Crow*. Pp. 6-7.

There are several reasons for the state of affairs described by Alexander: the private prison-industrial complex lobbying Congress for higher mandatory sentences;¹¹³ underfunded police departments financially penalizing communities of color for minor infractions on a mass scale;¹¹⁴ the crime rates, which are higher in impoverished communities regardless of their racial composition;¹¹⁵ and the stereotype of the violent black man, still to be found in the conservative news outlets,¹¹⁶ gangsta culture,¹¹⁷ and the mainstream media in general.¹¹⁸

Van Go Jenkins, the protagonist and narrator of *My Pafology*, constitutes a parody of the “bad” black man trope, a stereotype present in (African-)American culture at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century (a time of the first large-scale slave rebellions on the US soil). As argued by literary scholar Jerry H. Bryant, there are two distinct types of the “bad” black man trope. The first one, “moral hard men,” encompasses people who revolted against white supremacy by using the rules initially designed to oppress them.¹¹⁹ It is represented, for example, by Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, men who gained notoriety not by “breaking the laws of the larger society but by smashing its expectations and stereotypes, by insisting that their lives transcend the traditional models and roles established for them and their people by the white majority.”¹²⁰ The second type of the “bad” black man trope, “simple hard man,”

¹¹³ Gotsch Kara and Vinay Basti. “Capitalizing on Mass Incarceration: U.S. Growth in Private Prisons.” *The Sentencing Project*. Published Aug. 2, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3ol8jqj>; Clarke, Matthew. “Study Shows Private Prison Companies Use Influence to Increase Incarceration.” *Prison Legal News*. Published Aug. 22, 2016. <https://bit.ly/397fITB>.

¹¹⁴ Johnson, Carrie. “DOJ: Ferguson Police Routinely Discriminate Against African-Americans.” *NPR*. Published Mar. 4, 2015. <https://n.pr/3nmBsjg>.

¹¹⁵ Mitchell, John. “Breaking Poverty: Crime, Poverty Often Linked.” *WHYY*. Published Sept. 18, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3ol8vG3>.

¹¹⁶ As argued by Eboni Williams, a former host of the show *Fox News Specialists*, Roger Ailes owes success of his Fox News network to the fear about America’s changing demographics. “I don’t know what his beliefs were, but what he knew was it would be very profitable,” she said in one interview. “There was no conservative news network speaking to the fear of intrinsic devaluation of whiteness in this country. And Roger saw a void, and like any smart business person [filled it].” (Qtd. in Durkin, Erin. “Ex-Fox News host says its reputation for racism is ‘for very good reason.’” *Guardian*. Published Apr. 19, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2JQK3gH>).

¹¹⁷ hooks, bell. “Gangsta Culture: A Piece of the Action.” *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge, 2003. Pp. 15-32.

¹¹⁸ Oliver, Mary Beth. “African-American Men as ‘Criminal and Dangerous’: Implications of Media Portrayals of Crime on the ‘Criminalization’ of African-American Men.” *Journal of African-American Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (September 2003). Pp. 3-18. <https://bit.ly/2MwmXwC>.

¹¹⁹ Bryant, Jerry. *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African-American Folklore and Fiction*. Indiana U P, 2003. Pp. 1-7.

¹²⁰ Qtd. in *ibidem*. P. 2.

personified the idea of destructive defiance. A representative of this model, a typical protagonist of urban pulp fiction, “scorned social action, was a fierce individualist, a scourge in his own community, introducing disorder and arousing fear, disapproval, and alarm.”¹²¹ *My Pafology* parodies the second type of the badman trope. This is how Van Go begins his story and introduces himself to the reader:

I’m nineteen years old and I don’t give a fuck about nobody, not you, not my Mama, not the man. The world don’t give a fuck about nobody, so why should I? . . . I tighten up my belt and then yank my pants down on my ass. The tee shirt I’m wearin be funky as shit, but I don’t give a fuck. The world be stinkin, so why not me? That’s what I says. . . . That’s my motto. . . . I step on outside and look up at the sky and I wonder which one of my fo’ babies I’m gone go see. . . . I decide I’m gone go see my boy Rexall. He got Down Sinder, but he okay. In dis fuckin world, he don’t need no brain no way. Better not to have one.¹²²

As Everett’s comic hyperbole pushes an already bombastic cultural construct to its logical extreme, it points out that its modern incarnation thrives on misrepresenting black struggle, commodifying it, and selling it as entertainment. “We’re hoping for a spring pub date. I think this is just perfect for summer reading,” says an editor from the largest paperback publisher in the world, Random House, which offered more than half a million dollars for the manuscript of *My Pafology*. “Yes,” Monk replies, “white people on the beach will get a big kick out of it.”¹²³ Just as the manuscript’s parodic intent, the irony of this quip ends up being lost on the editor.

As argued by media critic Jonathan Gray, parody is often a signal that a given genre has worn out; at the same time, it points to “the genre’s dire need for innovation and maturation and may be contributing to the push to rejuvenate it and make it evolve.”¹²⁴ “Parodic-travesty literature,” contends Bakhtin, “introduces the permanent corrective of laughter.”¹²⁵ This corrective may be twofold: it may contribute to the genre’s development or – if nothing changes for the better – its deterioration. Making street-lit the subject of his parody, Everett aims to

¹²¹ Ibidem. P. 3.

¹²² Everett. *Erasure*. P. 98-99.

¹²³ Ibidem. P. 227.

¹²⁴ Gray et al. *Satire TV*. P. 19.

¹²⁵ Bakhtin. *Dialogic Imagination*. P. 55.

liberate urban fiction from its confinement to clichéd tropes of violence and victimization. At the same time, he signals his exhaustion with the genre: its language, topics, and cultural impact.

At one point in the novel, Monk comes to see Wiley Morgenstein, a Hollywood producer offering him a significant amount of money for the rights to adapt the story of *My Pafology* to the big screen.¹²⁶ In an attempt to keep his real identity a secret, Monk attends the meeting in the guise of Stagg Leigh. To the bafflement of Morgenstein, Leigh defies all the stereotypes he had expected him to embody: e.g., he is well-mannered and speaks perfect Standard English. “You know, you’re not at all like I pictured you,” says Morgenstein. “No? How did you picture me?” – replies Leigh, provocatively. “I don’t know, tougher or something. You know, more street. More...” – Morgenstein hesitates. “Black?” – says Stagg. “Yes,” answers Morgenstein, “I’m glad you’ve said it.”¹²⁷ Critiquing racial essentialism on multiple planes at once, *Erasure* suggests that the expectations verbalized by the film producer come from ideas and images entrenched in the American mind by white racist propaganda (e.g., *Birth of the Nation*), black popular entertainment (e.g., street-lit), and high-brow literary and academic culture alike (e.g., *Native Son*, its epigones, and critical misreadings).

“I’ve seen people you write about, the real people, the earthy, gutsy people,” says Morgenstein, fetishizing the poverty portrayed in Leigh’s novel.¹²⁸ The film producer calls struggling people “gutsy,” “earthy,” and “real” – all of which function as a color-blind euphemism for “black.” In his eyes, the racial identity of the protagonists of *My Pafology* ends up being validated and made legitimate by their victimization. Noticing that, and aiming to manipulate Morgenstein into acquiring the adaptation rights, Leigh says that he had spent some time in prison for murder. “They say I killed a man with a leather awl of a Swiss army knife,” he brags. “Here I was about to think you weren’t the real thing,” Morgenstein replies, falling for his ploy. Leigh ends the conversation by addressing Morgenstein’s girlfriend: “I’m the real

¹²⁶ Everett. *Erasure*. P. 216.

¹²⁷ Ibidem. P. 217.

¹²⁸ Ibidem.

thing. Cynthia knows I'm the real thing. Don't you, Cindy?"¹²⁹ His final remark is a sexual innuendo that exploits yet another racist stereotype: that of black men's aggressive, animalistic virility.¹³⁰ Leigh's tactic pays off – his performance of essentialist tropes conveys an image of racial authenticity in the eyes of Morgenstein. In the end, it convinces the film producer that Leigh, a made-up author, is, in fact, “the real thing” – a valid representative of the black experience in the US.

The exchange between Morgenstein and Leigh reveals how the stereotype of the violent black man gets perpetuated on both sides of the color line due to its cultural entrenchment and continuous marketability. By exposing the inner workings of essentialist typecasting in the publishing industry and Hollywood, Everett tries to put a spoke in the wheel of a cultural mechanism that equates blackness with violence and/or victimization. Overall, it aims to counter what Hartigan defined as the “pathologizing perspective” on blackness: an outlook that frames African-American life exclusively in terms of dysfunction.¹³¹ One of the foundations of this viewpoint is its tendency to attribute the harmful effects of various influences – e.g., the experience of poverty, mental health issues, or a general lack of opportunities – to people's race.¹³² *Erasure* implies that it ultimately does not matter if a given racialized discourse locates the source of pathology in biology (common until the end of the Jim Crow era)¹³³ or in a notion of sociocultural environment (prevalent in the late twentieth century),¹³⁴ as the result is typically the same: it ends up creating a single story of maladjustment marked by the skin-deep factor of racial difference.

¹²⁹ Ibidem. P. 218.

¹³⁰ See hooks. *We Real Cool*.

¹³¹ Hartigan. *Race in the 21st Century*. P. 130.

¹³² For example, as argued by the US government's Office of Policy Development and Research, occurrence of violent crime – an issue that is frequently racialized in American popular culture and news media – “is related to an array of intertwined characteristics, including poverty, segregation, and inequality . . . residential instability, foreclosures, vacancy rates, and evictions . . . neighborhood change; and location of housing assistance.” (“Neighborhoods and Violent Crime.” *Evidence Matters*. Vol. Summer 2016. <https://bit.ly/3pHmLJh>).

¹³³ Andreasen, Robin O. “Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?” *Philosophy of Science*. Vol. 67. Part II: Symposia Papers (2000). Pp. 653-666.

¹³⁴ Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning*. P. 11.

My Pafology parodically scorns the way street-lit handles social problems in black communities; the journal part of *Erasure*, on the other hand, provides an example of how to approach these topics in a realistic yet respectful manner. At one point in the book, Everett illustrates an encounter between Monk and his estranged half-sister Gretchen. Abandoned by her and Monk's father, she has been raised by a single mother in an inner-city. When Monk learned of her existence, she was a single mom herself; she also battled impoverishment, depression, and drug addiction. As Monk recalled it in his journal:

She stared at me. Then I realized she was looking at my clothes. I looked around the apartment and saw that she was living badly. The place was clean enough, but it wore the scars of hard times. . . . "This is my granddaughter," she said. "I watch her while my daughter works. Then I go to work. Tomorrow will be the same and the day after even more the same. . . . A terrible sense of loneliness came over me and I was hard put to understand whether it was an empathetic response to Gretchen or simply my own feeling. . . . "Father wanted you to have this money." I took out my checkbook and pen. . . . "Money, how about that? And that makes it all okay, does it?" She glanced about her home, seeming to take it in, seeming to draw my attention to the conditions of her life. "I don't think so," I stood. "But that's all I'm here to do. Well, good luck," I said, turned and walked out of her apartment.¹³⁵

Monk's account of the meeting is representative of the whole journal part of *Erasure*, as it stands in stark contrast to the type of pulp narrative parodied in *My Pafology*. Monk's writerly scribbles tell a compelling story of heterogeneous, American life: one complex enough to be irreducible to the mere category of race. It is socially contextualized, emotionally introspective, and describes the setting – the city of Washington – in a realistic manner:

Washington hides its poverty better than any city in the world. Just blocks from the mall and Capitol Hill, where thousands of tourists mill about each day, people cover their windows with towels to keep out the rain, and nail boards across their doors when they lock up at night.¹³⁶

The description of the social setting is suggestive, but neither overly naturalistic nor sensationalist. The portrayal of the woman is sympathetic but evades cheap sentimentality. Everett describes her difficult situation with care and attention to detail but neither exploits nor idealizes her struggle. His portrayal reverberates the claim of Hartigan, who argued that when writing about the underprivileged, one should not overstress the dysfunction of their immediate

¹³⁵ Everett. *Erasure*. Pp. 343-345.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*. P. 39.

environment but rather focus on the “social practices that counteract the perils of urban violence and uncertainty while providing a basis for both hope and pleasure in a desperate setting.”¹³⁷ Everett had done just that by portraying the half-sister’s longing for familial connection and dedication to her granddaughter, and making them a symbol of her hesitant yet flickering hope for a better life.

As argued by historian Robin Kelley, the author of *Yo’ Mama’s Dysfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (1997), the majority of twentieth-century American ethnographers have turned away from studying African-American heterogeneity and focused their scholarly attention on black urban ghettos. Reducing behavior to culture, they often portrayed ruptures in black communities as their inherent, defining elements. As one might expect, this reductive framework has resulted in the proliferation of excessively pathologizing accounts. As enlisted by Hartigan, the most common adjectives used by ethnographers to describe the inhabitants of black inner cities were “nihilistic,” “underclass,” and “dysfunctional.”¹³⁸ The fact that sociology and ethnography often employed the “pathologizing perspective” and the “racial optic” endowed these viewpoints with an appearance of objectivity that obscures their foundational error: the choice of skin color as a legitimate variable in studying people grouped by historical circumstances, present economic predicaments, and sociocultural assortments.¹³⁹ While it is true that the American belief in the concept of race has had a profound impact on the situation of many groups perceived as single “ethnicities” within the US,¹⁴⁰ treating their skin pigmentation as the primary variable in studying them now legitimizes the belief in the concept of racial difference – the scientifically invalid idea that had often caused their dire situation in the first place.¹⁴¹ Throughout his novels

¹³⁷ Hartigan. *Race in the 21st Century*. P. 141.

¹³⁸ Hartigan used the work of Kelley to prepare this list. (Ibidem. P. 131).

¹³⁹ Ibidem. P. 130.

¹⁴⁰ Kochhar, Rakesh and Richard Fry. “Wealth Inequality Has Widened Along Racial, Ethnic Lines Since End of Great Recession.” *Pew Research Center*. Published December 12, 2014. <https://pewrsr.ch/3pOFHWE>.

¹⁴¹ Yglesias, Matthew. “‘The Bell Curve’ is about policy. And it’s wrong.” *VOX*. Published Apr. 10, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3bci32e>.

and interviews, Everett seems to concur with Hartigan's opinion that treating race as a scientifically valid concept makes for an erroneous approach: one that searches for a solution to racial inequality while inadvertently strengthening its foundations.

De-essentializing Black English

As aptly pointed out by Hartigan, the racial optic otherizes non-whites, refusing "blackness exactly that which is so deeply associated with whiteness – normalcy."¹⁴² One other way to portray black culture as incongruous with the American mainstream is to present the language it often employs – African-American vernacular, also known as Ebonics – as an impaired version of Standard English. US literature has a complicated history of using African-American patois. On the one hand, many black writers used their literary talent to meticulously reconstruct ethnic dialect and reflect their communities' unique local color; on the other, a distorted version of black vernacular – employed to symbolize its users' supposed intellectual inferiority – was an integral part of the minstrel aesthetic.¹⁴³ The subsequent paragraphs present a short history of Ebonics in African-American literature to build proper context for its discussion in Everett's *Erasure*.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), a poet that appears in one of Monk's dreams,¹⁴⁴ was the earliest African-American author to become famous for his employment of black vernacular. Dunbar published his first collection of poems in 1893, a time when writing in Negro dialect was a popular trend among white writers. Unlike his white counterparts, Dunbar used African-American vernacular to convey the wit of ordinary black folks. At their best, his poems reflected the ingenuity of everyday black speech better than any lyrical verse to date. At

¹⁴² Hartigan. *Race in the 21st Century*. P. 118.

¹⁴³ Bloomquist, Jennifer. "The Minstrel Legacy: African-American English and the Historical Construction of 'Black' Identities in Entertainment." *Journal of African-American Studies*. Vol. 19, 2015. Pp. 410-425.

¹⁴⁴ "My head on my pillow," recalls Monk, "I had a dream. First, of my father telling me the stories of . . . how Paul Laurence Dunbar would stroll the pier reciting poetry, and then I was alone on that very pier, younger, but not so young that I was afraid of being alone there so late." (Everett. *Erasure*. P. 68).

their worst, they descended into the minstrel mode to pander to the expectations of white readers. Although Dunbar became renowned due to his use of black speech, he gradually grew to resent it. At one point, he remarked that composing poems in dialect verse was like writing “jingles in broken English.” Dunbar’s ambivalence towards using patois in writing is characteristic of black literature at large. Throughout its history, African-American art has always been torn between its eagerness to faithfully portray its communities’ local color and the fear of white misinterpretation or judgment.¹⁴⁵

Charles Chesnutt (1858-1932) was the first writer to use black speech in a consistently positive way. He was also one of the first African-American authors who portrayed the experience of bondage in a subversively humorous way. Chesnutt’s characters poked fun at unsuspecting whites, demonstrating a masterful use of the double entendre. Exposing resilience and linguistic ingenuity hiding behind the facade of supposedly “broken English,” Chesnutt’s stories humanized common black folk while avoiding sentimentality characteristic to abolitionist literature.¹⁴⁶ Chester Himes (1909-1984), the first African-American writer of popular detective stories, used black vernacular similarly to Chesnutt. The main difference between Chesnutt and Himes was that the former turned his attention to the dialect of African-American rural folk, while the latter focused on the language of urban areas. Although they often used black vernacular for comedic effect, they never lost track of their characters’ agency and humanity: i.e., they laughed *with* them and not *at* them. Their prose became a natural habitat for jest and ingenious verbal play; black patois served to highlight the absurdity of American race relations as seen through their characters’ eyes.¹⁴⁷

Zora Neale Hurston emphasized the communal function of black dialect. She was a folklorist researcher – her ethnographic studies demonstrated that African-American vernacular is both a vehicle for dialectical dexterity and an enduring social adhesive that binds

¹⁴⁵ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 7744.

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 7795-7827.

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 8129-8138.

communities sharing linguistic idiosyncrasies. Hurston was also a writer placing her interest in the pastoral South – her employment of black vernacular was unassumingly sentimental, gently humorous, and subtly subversive. She also remained unapologetic about the accusations of tapping into the minstrel aesthetic levied against her by Richard Wright. Today, many critics and writers see her as an example of graceful and conscientious employment of African-American dialect.¹⁴⁸ Langston Hughes, one of the most prolific cultural folklorists, poets, and humorists of the Harlem Renaissance, employed African-American dialect similarly to Hurston but focused his interest on the small urban communities of the Midwest. His novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930) demonstrated how comic sensibility – and its expression through colorful linguistic plasticity – functions as an emotional safety valve as it sublimates collective experiences of struggle into shared moments of laughter. Hughes' newspaper columns served as a soapbox to his most famous literary creation, Jesse B. Semple: a philosophizing African-American everyman using his dialect as a vehicle for commonsensical wisdom.¹⁴⁹

Being wary of the judgmental white gaze, many influential race leaders of the twentieth century – among others, W. E. B. Dubois – scolded black patois use in writing. Consequently, its employment in literature came to a relative halt (Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, first published in 1952, constituted a notable exception). African-American vernacular came back to comic literature in the nineteen-sixties when satirists such as Cecil Brown and Ishmael Reed used it to convey their anti-establishment stance. Brown and Reed's linguistic boldness became a benchmark for black satirists in literature and stand-up comedy of the forthcoming decades.¹⁵⁰ Strengthened by the crossover success of Richard Pryor's linguistically no-holds-barred stand-up comedy (in the late 1970s), as well as the emergence and subsequent commercial success of hip-hop culture (1980s and onwards), black vernacular remains alive and well in the twenty-first century. Nowadays, it signifies ingenuity and imaginativeness in the works of numerous

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 8000-8008.

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 8008-8079.

¹⁵⁰ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 8411-8442.

rap artists (e.g., Kendrick Lamar), poets (e.g., Saul Williams), comedians (e.g., *Key and Peele*), and novelists (e.g., Paul Beatty).¹⁵¹

As reported by John R. Rickford from the *Linguistic Society of America*, in 1996, the Oakland (CA) School Board identified Ebonics “as the ‘primary’ language of its majority African-American students and resolved to take it into account in teaching them standard or academic English.”¹⁵² According to *New Yorker* journalist Vinson Cunningham, the proposal was widely mocked back then and remains unfathomable to this day. “Ebonics, people said, was simply a collection of ‘slang and bad grammar’ – not nearly enough to make a language,” Cunningham recalls. “The TV talking head Tucker Carlson, in a typically nasty flourish, called Black English ‘a language where nobody knows how to conjugate the verbs.’” Columbia University’s John McWhorter recalled that this “reaction baffled linguists, who had long appreciated – and begun to seriously study – the ‘languageness’ of Black English and other informal speech variants, such as Jamaican Patois, Swiss-German, and Haitian Creole.”¹⁵³ McWhorter has been one of the progenitors of this approach; in 2017, he released *Talking Back, Talking Black*, where he described African-American vernacular as a language in its own right. In the book, he enlisted many instances in which it is, in fact, more complex than Standard English (e.g., in its use of the word “up” in conjunction with a place; or the employment of the unconjugated “habitual ‘be’” to talk about repeatable actions).¹⁵⁴ He also used an apt metaphor to discuss the current status of black vernacular in the US:

To America as a whole, Black English is rather like ultraviolet light. Scientists (linguists, in this case) discuss it, but for almost everybody else it is an unperceived abstraction despite permeating our very existences. . . . Racially or not, linguists and the general public see speech very differently. Americans have trouble comprehending that any vernacular way of speaking is legitimate language.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Luu, Chi. “Black English Matters.” *Jstor Daily*. Published Feb. 12, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3rXQGpm>.

¹⁵² Rickford, John R. “What is Ebonics (African-American English)?” *Linguistic Society of America*. Accessed Apr. 1, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3vAGCNx>.

¹⁵³ Qtd. in Cunningham, Vinson. “The Case for Black English.” *New Yorker*. Published May 15, 2017. <https://bit.ly/38jcw0N>.

¹⁵⁴ McWhorter, John. *Talking Back, Talking Black*. Bellevue Literary Press, 2017. P. 9.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibidem*. P. 11.

The debate over African-American vernacular – its place in history and the modern world – continues to this date.¹⁵⁶ Everett contributes to this discussion by addressing the issue of black linguistic authenticity and its commodification. If one were to turn the query posed by *Erasure* into an actual question, it would go as follows: has the pulp publishing industry appropriated African-American vernacular to create what video-essayist Lindsay Ellis calls “manufactured authenticity”?¹⁵⁷ Everett answers this question by exposing the artificiality of Black English in the context of street-lit – a genre that, in his opinion, appropriates a genuine expression of communal belonging and cultural sensitivity and turns it into an artistically dubious performance meant to amuse or enthrall the reader.

While the journal part of *Erasure* switches between academic jargon and less formal varieties of Standard English, the entire manuscript of *My Pafology* is written in a comically distorted version of black vernacular. It includes such eccentricities as overdone phonetic transcription (e.g. “won” for “one,” “too” for “two,” “free” for “three,” “wif” for “with” or “K’rean” for “Korean”), dreadfully clichéd yo mama jokes (“Yeah, and yo mama got her own zip code and area code”), purposefully excessive use of the N-word (one which does not attempt to redefine its hurtful meaning or reclaim it on behalf of black people), and dumbed-down version of “the dozens” game (historically, a competition in creative verbal play; here, an exchange of unimaginative repartees, e.g., “‘You ain’t shit,’ I say. ‘Well, you is shit,’ Yellow say”).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ For example, feminist critic Christa Smith Anderson calls the black vernacular of Celie, the protagonist of Alice Walker’s Pulitzer-prize winning *The Color Purple* (1982), “a powerful force that challenges conventional notions of worth and intelligence,” while Everett describes it as misplaced and poorly reconstructed, arguing mockingly: “I grew up where the Civil War started, in South Carolina, and I have never in my life heard someone say, ‘Where fo’ you be going?’”(Anderson Smith, Christina. “Power of Prose: African-American Women.” *PBS*. Accessed Feb. 23, 2020. <https://to.pbs.org/3bkhQdz>; Shavers. “Percival Everett by Rone Shavers”).

¹⁵⁷ Ellis defines it as something that gives off an impression of being natural, authentic, and effortless, while in reality being a carefully constructed aesthetic meant to convey this very illusion. (Ellis, Lindsay. “Manufacturing Authenticity (For Fun and Profit!).” *Lindsay Ellis* (Official YouTube Channel). Published Sept. 11, 2018. <https://bit.ly/35gvuKO>).

¹⁵⁸ Everett. *Erasure*. Pp. 75, 76, 72, 98.

Everett does not scorn the use of Ebonics altogether – at one point in *Erasure*, Monk calls Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a story written entirely in African-American vernacular, “a really fine novel.”¹⁵⁹ Some elements of African-American vernacular employed by *My Pafology* – for example, double negatives (“He ain’t got no money”) – represent it without explicit comic distortion.¹⁶⁰ However, the text’s overall intent is unmistakably parodic. Everett mocks the way black patois is used for pseudohistoricity and sentimentalization (in plantation novels), exoticization and victimization (in urban fiction), or performative – and, at its roots, essentialist – authentication of black character’s racial identity (in both of the above-mentioned genres). As it ironically mimics the language of specific literary genres, *Erasure* is not a parody of the black patois itself, but rather of the way it is represented and exploited by pulp literature. To put it in terms created by literary critic Wayne Booth, one can say that *My Pafology* constitutes an elaborate “intentional” spoof of a set of poorly written “unintentional” parodies of African-American vernacular.¹⁶¹

The journal part of *Erasure* deals with the topic of Black English straightforwardly. “I could never talk the talk,” admits Monk, “so I didn’t try and being myself has served me well enough.”¹⁶² The trailblazing potential of this statement lies in its disarming honesty. According to Everett, one should not feel compelled to authenticate one’s racial identity by performing what is considered culturally black in American English. In contrast with artists who denounce black vernacular for reasons related to respectability politics (e.g., the now-disgraced comedian Bill Cosby),¹⁶³ Monk does not see Ebonics as a lesser version of Standard English, and his refusal to use it is not a sign of his upper-middle-class scorn. Upon meeting a poor black woman

¹⁵⁹ Ibidem. P. 41.

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem. P. 81.

¹⁶¹ “Wayne C. Booth. A Rhetoric of Irony, (1974).” *Wayne Booth’s Rhetorology Home* (uwaterloo.ca).

¹⁶² Everett. *Erasure*. P. 167.

¹⁶³ Serwer, Adam. “How Cosby’s ‘Pound Cake’ Speech Helped Lead to His Downfall.” *Atlantic*. Published Apr. 26, 2018. <https://bit.ly/35evmeT>.

using Ebonics in one scene from *Erasure*, Monk chats with her about literature without being condescending. Surprised by her perceptive elucidations, he inquires:

“Have you gone to college?” The girl laughed. “Don’t laugh,” I said. “I think you’re really smart. You should at least try.” “I didn’t even finish high school.” I didn’t know what to say to that. I scratched my head and looked at the other faces in the room. I felt an inch tall because I had expected this young woman with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid, but she was neither. I was the stupid one.¹⁶⁴

For Everett – like for McWhorter – black vernacular is just a variation of English, a testament to the language’s plasticity; it’s not a marker of class, intelligence, or respectability. If one considers it to represent one’s linguistic sensitivity, it ought to be recognized and respected. However, if one does not – as is the case with Monk – it should not matter, as “talking black” is only one of many performative acts that can assert one’s identity.¹⁶⁵

As black vernacular has not been spoken in Monk’s household, he was not accustomed to this type of expression. “I’d try,” he confesses, “but it never sounded comfortable, never sounded real.”¹⁶⁶ When Monk remarks, “I watched my friends, who didn’t sound so different from me, step into scenes and change completely,” he points the reader’s attention to the fact that the cultural construct of race is largely malleable and performative.¹⁶⁷ As such, it requires constant “acting out” of one’s identity through language – which, after some time, can become seamless and give the appearance of something inherent. Reflecting on his inability to “talk the talk,” a feature that had branded him as an outsider at school, Monk enlists some of the expressions that validated one’s blackness in the eyes of his peers (e.g., “Solid,” “What’s happenin’,” “What’s up?”, “Chillin,” “Dig,” “Yo,” “What it be like?”, “Say what?” and “Gots to be crazy”).¹⁶⁸ Listing them in a dry and clerical manner, Monk accentuates their arbitrariness and effectively questions the idea of their assumed, inherent naturalness. He also underscores the mutability of the concept of “authentic black dialect,” as some of the expressions enlisted

¹⁶⁴ Everett. *Erasure*. P. 41.

¹⁶⁵ McWhorter. “What Do You Mean ‘Sounds Black?’” *Talking Back, Talking Black*. Pp. 57-89.

¹⁶⁶ Everett. *Erasure*. P. 168.

¹⁶⁷ Ibidem. P. 166.

¹⁶⁸ Ibidem. P. 167.

by him – e.g., “What’s up?” or “Say what?” – have entered the everyday language of mainstream America and lost their function as a marker of racial authenticity.

During his teenage years, Monk “sounded white” and therefore was considered “the awkward one” among his friends.¹⁶⁹ “I was too flighty,” he recalls, “[I] lived in a swirl of abstracts, removed from the *real world*.”¹⁷⁰ Monk was an introverted bookworm: a person contemporary mainstream American culture would probably mark as a “geek” or a “nerd” (alternatively, as a “blerd,” that is, a “black nerd”).¹⁷¹ “I felt awkward, out of place,” he reminisces, “like I didn’t belong.”¹⁷² Unfortunately, Monk grew up in the nineteen-seventies, a time when nerdiness did not function as a valid form of blackness in American culture. Nowadays, the construct of African-American identity has been changed by, among others, Trey Ellis’ manifesto *New Black Aesthetic* (1989), Andre Meadows’ *Black Nerd Comedy* YouTube videos (2008–), Mat Johnson’s essay “The Geek” (2012), or Rick Fumuyiwa’s feature film *Dope* (2015). All these cultural texts define hybrid intellectual interests as the new black cool and appoint nerds as the country’s future academic, technological, and artistic elite.¹⁷³ One might reason that if Monk had relived his teenage years now, he would have felt less alienated from his black peers and African-American culture in general. Perhaps, his situation would have mirrored the one described by a “blerd” comedian W. Kamau Bell, who argued that:

there is no normal . . . not in race. I had definitely grown up feeling like I was not a “normal black boy.” And that’s where ‘blerd’ came to the rescue. I only wish that it had shown up twenty years sooner. I found out I was a Blerd when I was reading an article by Eric Deggans . . . In the article, he referred to me as this new generation of Black people who are cool with being nerdy, unlike the stereotype of Black people. Now, even though I had never heard this word before, when I read it, I thought to myself, “Oh, is that what I’ve been this whole time? Awesome! Let’s go with that!”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem. P. 14.

¹⁷¹ Deggans, Eric. “Move Over Urkel, There Are New ‘Blerds’ Around.” *NPR*. Published Nov. 20, 2012. <https://n.pr/3beUg1K>.

¹⁷² Everett. *Erasure*. P. 40.

¹⁷³ As argued by Deggans: “For years, we black nerds felt caught between white folks’ expectations that we’d be cooler and black folks’ disappointment that we’re clearly not. But then, something wonderful happened that turned the image of the black nerd sideways. . . . Look around now and blerds are everywhere, intellectual, rock and roll loving, politics talking, comic book reading black nerds.” (Deggans. “Move over Urkel. . .”).

¹⁷⁴ Bell, W. Kamau. *The Awkward Thoughts of W. Kamau Bell*. Dutton, 2017. P. 55.

In the article mentioned by Bell, Deggans argued that his intellectualism – including his somewhat nerdy and formal way of speaking – resulted in him having to face accusations of “acting white.”¹⁷⁵ *Erasure* describes a similarly essentialist cultural perception of black vernacular. Monk’s inability to “talk the talk” denied him the appearance of racial authenticity in the eyes of his peers and colleagues, making him feel alienated as a teenager and severely limiting his publishing opportunities as an adult. This unfortunate predicament pushed him to embrace the comic perspective – the final aspect of *Erasure* discussed in this chapter.

A Need for the Comic Perspective

James Weldon Johnson defines the comic perspective as “sometimes laughing at the reader, sometimes laughing at oneself” while “attacking falsehood with ridicule.”¹⁷⁶ Watkins describes it as “resiliency that eludes ‘serious’ souls trapped by the limitations of appearances.”¹⁷⁷ Combing the features of the comic perspective described by Watkins and Johnson, Everett uses it as a way to de-essentialize the concept of black identity in the eyes of readers, publishers, and the US culture at large. By doing so, he antecedes an approach that permeated African-American culture for the first two decades of the new millennium – a period dubbed by journalist Cheryl Contee as the New Black Renaissance.¹⁷⁸

Ideas championed by Everett correspond with the claims of Kimberly Bentson, a cultural critic who argued for the need to redefine African-American identity “as a term of multiple, often conflicting implications which, taken together, signal black America’s effort to articulate its own conditions of possibility.”¹⁷⁹ *Erasure* argues for widening the conditions of

¹⁷⁵ As recalled by Deggans: “Hip black intellectuals have been around from before the days of Malcolm X and James Baldwin. My own patron saint of blerds is Levar Burton’s engineer, Geordi La Forge on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. . . . Still, when I was growing up, my love of *Star Wars* and astronomy books lead to way to many accusations of acting white. Now, it’s a relief to finally reach a time when I don’t have to choose between my love for both my peoples, geeks and black folks.” (Deggans. “Move over Urkel. . .”)

¹⁷⁶ Qtd. in Scrubbs. *The Sage in Harlem*. Kindle loc. 1456-1458.

¹⁷⁷ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 8241.

¹⁷⁸ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 222.

¹⁷⁹ Qtd. in Neal, Mark Anthony. *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. Routledge, 2001. P. 4.

black possibility by illustrating the devastating consequences of Monk's creative confinement. Failing to cope with this circumstance, Monk finds himself in a pit of confusion and despair. His eventual downfall highlights the practical value of a comic recourse and highlights its function as a tool for black artists' intellectual and emotional self-preservation. As Monk reflects in his journal:

I didn't write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some way is just that) and I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of my people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint. Perhaps if I had written in the time immediately following Reconstruction, I would have written to elevate the station of my fellow oppressed. But the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So, I would not be economically oppressed because of writing [*My Pafology*] a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be. I had already talked on the phone with my editor as the infamous Stagg Leigh and now I would meet with Wiley Morgenstein. I could do it. The game was becoming fun. And it was nice to get a check.

Monk wants to afford himself some much-needed emotional (and economic) relief by publishing *My Pafology*, and thus playing an elaborate practical joke on the way American culture in general – and the publishing market in particular – distorts and commodifies black identity. Unfortunately, as mentioned before, most readers and critics interpret *My Pafology* as a straightforward account of “the black experience” in the US. The book achieves commercial success of popular urban fiction and attains critical acclaim similar to that of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940).¹⁸⁰ This is how Monk thinks of his novel and himself after the book's success:

I considered everything that was not good about the novel I was about to publish, that I submitted for the very reason it was not good, but now that fact was killing me. It was a parody, certainly, but so easy had it been to construct that I found it difficult to take it seriously even as that. The work bored and had as its only virtue brevity. There was no playing with compositional or even paginal space. In fact, the work inhabited no space artistically that I could find intelligible. For all the surface concern with the spatial and otherwise dislocation of Van Go, there was nothing in the writing that self-consciously threw it back at me. Then I caught the way I was thinking and realized the saddest thing of all, that I was thinking myself into a funk about idiotic and pretentious bullshit to avoid the real accusation staring me in the face. I was a sell-out.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ As discussed earlier, Monk thinks that *Native Son* endowed images of black violence and victimization with artistic legitimacy and prestige, and so he detests it just as much as pulp ghetto novels. (Everett. *Erasure*. P. 61).

¹⁸¹ Ibidem. Pp. 232.

After *My Pafology* gets a nomination for a The Book Award, a prestigious literary honor, Monk tries to sabotage its success.¹⁸² Ultimately, his efforts are unsuccessful: the book wins the literary prize, proving once and for all that his parodic and satirical effort has been entirely misread by the public and critics alike. Monk's story circles around as *Erasure* closes on a scene of his second nervous breakdown. The final passages of the book play with readers' expectations and purposefully evade closure, breaking off the narrative at the very moment when he was about to deliver his acceptance speech:

I stood and began to approach the front of the room. . . . My steps were difficult and my head was spinning as if I had been drugged. Cameras flashed and people murmured and I couldn't believe that I was walking through sand, through dream sand. . . . [Familiar faces] pressed around me, urging me forward and the camera flashes blinded me and made the room black during their moments of absence. "Ah, here comes one of my fellow judges . . . [maybe Monk] has heard something about the whereabouts of our winner." I was halfway there. "It's a black thang maybe," Harnet said. . . . Then there was a small boy, perhaps me as boy, and he held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh. "Now you're free of illusion," Stagg said. "How does it feel to be free of one's illusions?" . . . "The answer is Painful and empty," I said. . . . I looked at the mirror, still held by the boy. He held it by his thigh and I could only imagine the image the glass held. I chose one of the TV cameras and stared into it. I said, "Egads, I'm on television!"¹⁸³

The above-quoted words constitute the last passage of *Erasure*. The book's finale echoes the aesthetics of one of Everett's favorite writers, Thomas Pynchon: it is surreal and permeated with dream-like imagery yet remains sharp in its satirical message.¹⁸⁴ *Erasure* also explores the themes of conspiracy thinking and paranoia – after all, it ends with Monk being in a state induced by his inability to distinguish between reality and his anxiety-ridden imagination. Similarly to Pynchon's protagonists, Monk longs for a life outside "the broken machine of capitalist organizing," but finds himself entangled by "the very logic of organization [he] abhors" – in his case, the organization being the race-obsessed book market, academia, and American culture in general.¹⁸⁵ As he approaches the podium to accept the award for *My*

¹⁸² "Dilemma: I refused to admit that I, Thelonious Ellison, was also Stagg R. Leigh," Monk writes in his journal, "But yet here was the book. I could not disqualify myself [as a judge], because I would betray my secret. Solution: Who in his right mind would consider giving that novel an award? . . . I would rather have included the screenplay to *Birth of a Nation* on the list than that novel." (Ibidem. P. 332, 339).

¹⁸³ Ibidem. Pp. 373-374.

¹⁸⁴ Kincaid. "An Interview with Percival Everett."

¹⁸⁵ Beyes, Timon. "An Aesthetics of Displacement: Thomas Pynchon's Symptomatology of Organization." *Journal of Organizational Change Management*. Vol. 22, No. 4, 2009. Pp. 421-436.

Pafology, Monk has to face his friends and family (“[Familiar faces] pressed around me”), colleagues (“Ah, here comes one of my fellow judges”), racial stereotypes (“It’s a black thang maybe”), self-expectations (“I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh”), and the American public (““Egads, I’m on television!””).¹⁸⁶ This confrontation prompts him to answer the central query of the moment: “How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” The question points our attention to *Erasure*’s last crucial aspect – the novel’s outlook on the absurdity of race in the US.

Pioneered by early slave narratives and David Walker’s *Appeal* (1829), this vision found one of its most prominent expressions in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). Similarly to *Erasure*, Ellison’s novel saw America’s racial arrangement through a comic prism. It focused the reader’s attention on the performativity of racial identity – i.e., its dependence on language, appearance, and other cultural and class signifiers. As argued by Watkins:

Invisible Man is framed by . . . comic perception. Its nameless protagonist’s pursuit of his own identity leads him ever deeper into the realm of the contradictions and the absurd, into that fluid, undefined space where the comic spirit rules . . . [Ellison] suggests that the tactical folk approach of duplicity and recourse to a comic mask is the key to unraveling the mystery [of race in the US] . . . In fact, overall, the narrator’s journey can be seen as bildungsroman or journey to self-awareness and humanization through perception and acceptance [of] the comic spirit . . . Progressively, he learns to deal with absurdity surrounding him. He acquires a resiliency that . . . allows him finally to answer societal perfidy with spontaneous creativity.¹⁸⁷

Like the protagonist of Ellison’s book, Monk goes on a journey through the absurdities of the American racial landscape. It starts with him being unable to publish work that does not correspond to the essentialist conception of the “true black experience” as imagined by his profession’s gatekeepers: literary critics, agents, and publishing houses. After that, his story takes a series of unpredictable turns – from him writing *My Pafology* to the complete misreading of its parodic intent by the academic, literary, and Hollywood establishment. For a brief moment – when he assumes the guise of Stagg Leigh to sell the movie rights to his book – Monk adapts a “tactical folk approach of duplicity and recourse to a comic mask.” However, by the end of

¹⁸⁶ Everett. *Erasure*. Pp. 373-374.

¹⁸⁷ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 8240.

the novel, he reverts to being one of the “serious souls trapped by the limitations of appearances.” Monk finds himself unable to escape his designation as an ethnic writer and fails to enjoy the sought-for creative freedom outside his racial label. As such, by the end of his story, Monk stands in stark contrast to the protagonist of *Invisible Man* – as he fails to adopt the comic perspective and “answer societal perfidy with spontaneous creativity,”¹⁸⁸ he finds disillusionment with himself and his culture extraordinarily “painful and empty.”¹⁸⁹

Establishing Monk as a symbolic figure – a representative of black authors unable to realize their intellectual aspirations because of essentialist typecasting – Everett frames racial categorization of art as a systemic problem perpetuated by expectations and interests of people who create, sell, and consume literature. Literary culture is like a living organism, *Erasure* argues, and its proper functioning depends on a healthy, balanced relationship between its interdependent organs: publishers, critics, and readers. Everett portrayed the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century as a time when unconventional representations of blackness have been relegated to the margins of American culture. To avoid repeating the same mistake in the new millennium, he wanted to push the principle of multiperspectivity – a “balance of stories,” as Adichie has called it – to its forefront.¹⁹⁰ As he had become one of the first authors to adopt this approach, Everett’s critical reception was scarce, and his readership limited. Nevertheless, his niche status afforded him independence as a satirist and cultural critic. Undisturbed by the US book market’s expectations concerning African-American literature, he had managed to lay literary foundations for what later has been defined by Thurston as Open-Source Blackness – an ever-evolving polyphonic cultural framework opposing racial essentialism. Analyzing Justin Simien’s feature film *Dear White People* (2012), the subsequent chapter will discuss the development of this concept in the world of cinema.

¹⁸⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁹ Everett. *Erasure*. Pp. 373-374.

¹⁹⁰ Adichie. “The Danger of a Single Story.”

CHAPTER THREE

CINEMA: JUSTIN SIMIEN'S *DEAR WHITE PEOPLE*

This chapter aims to explore the question of racial identity in contemporary African-American film comedy on the basis of Justin Simien's *Dear White People* (2014). By translating the discourses of modern-day public debate and academic criticism into the language of comedy, Simien's movie became the first widely-discussed film in a recent wave of socially conscious satire in contemporary black cinema. Together with productions such as Rick Famuyiwa's *Dope* (2015), Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), or Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), it contributed to a cultural landscape dubbed by journalist Cheryl Contee as the New Black Renaissance, an epoch of African-American creative flourishing powered by humor, anti-essentialism, and multivocality.¹ Simien's film also constituted the broadest cinematic articulation of what has been defined by Baratunde Thurston as Open-Source Blackness – an umbrella term epitomizing the ideational and artistic variation within African-American communities.²

Simien began working on *Dear White People* in 2006, writing the first drafts of the script. In 2012, he made the concept trailer for the movie. After it went viral on YouTube, Simien launched a successful crowd-funding campaign, raising over 40,000\$ for the production of the full-length film. The movie was shot during the summer of 2013 at the University of Minnesota (the shooting took only twenty days).³ *Dear White People* rose to considerable fame on the 2014 independent film festival circuit; it won awards at Palm Springs International Film Festival, Gotham Independent Film Awards, and Sundance Film Festival. Upon its release, the movie met with favorable critical reception, receiving a high 91% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. The website aggregated opinions from 132 movie reviewers and summarized them in the

¹ Qtd. in Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 222.

² Ibidem. 208-223.

³ George, Nelson. "Justin Simien Goes Mainstream with 'Dear White People.'" *New York Times*. Published Oct. 9, 2014. <https://nyti.ms/3oqN9Hd>.

following Critics' Consensus: "*Dear White People* adds a welcome new voice to cinema's oft-neglected discussion of race, tackling its timely themes with intelligence, honesty, and gratifyingly sharp wit."⁴

Dear White People depicts the identity struggle of African-American students at Winchester, a fictional college modeled after the Ivy League universities. The plot of the film centers on a young mixed-race woman named Sam White. She is the center of Simien's cinematic universe: all of the movie's stories, even if developed in separate subplots, revolve around her. Sam is an anti-racist activist and the host of "Dear White People," a campus radio show about racial tensions at Winchester (among other issues, the program offers satirical commentary on media bias,⁵ exoticization of students of color,⁶ and fetishization of black romantic partners⁷). To push her activism beyond the show, Sam decides to run for the position of the Head of Armstrong-Parker House, a traditionally black dormitory. Even though no one expects her to win, she triumphs over Troy Fairbanks – an incumbent Head of House and the Dean's son – due to a computing error in the voting system. Sam's victory gets the attention of two editorial offices on campus: the first one is *Pastiche*, a satirical magazine modeled after the *Harvard Lampoon*, and the second is the *Independent Observer*, the campus newspaper. The former is led by Kurt Fletcher – a self-righteous, white comic writer and Winchester President's son. The latter periodical features Lionel Higgins – an aspiring journalist and a gay black man struggling to fit in with the racially essentialist campus culture.⁸ Another important character in the movie is a young black woman named Coco – an assimilationist and the primary ideological opponent of Sam's progressive activism.⁹ Apart from the students, two administrative officials

⁴ "Dear White People (2014)." *Rotten Tomatoes* (review aggregator website). Accessed March 8, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3q1Fpf2>.

⁵ Caller: "How would you feel if someone started a *Dear Black People*?"/ Sam: "No need. Mass media from Fox News to reality TV on VH1 makes it clear what white people think of us." (Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD).

⁶ "Please stop touching my hair. Does this look like a petting zoo to you?" (Ibidem).

⁷ "This just in: dating a black person to piss off your parents is a form of racism." (Ibidem).

⁸ At one point in the movie, Lionel asks rhetorically: "I listen to Mumford & Sons and watch Robert Altman movies. You really think I'm black enough for the [Black Student] Union?" (Ibidem).

⁹ "Coco: [Sam's show is a] blacker-than-thou propaganda from a bougie Lisa Bonet." (Ibidem).

play a vital role in the film: the aforementioned President Fletcher, a white man and an advocate for racial colorblindness, and Dean Fairbanks, a black man who struggles to navigate the university's overwhelmingly white structures of power. A blackface party organized by Kurt constitutes the movie's narrative culmination. Simien based it on actual events at Dartmouth College in 2013¹⁰ and Arizona State University in 2014¹¹ (despite the ensuing media uproar, similar events happen again in subsequent years).¹² The scene is a pivotal moment for the film's protagonists. Sam, previously insecure about her activism, acquires a sense of purpose and self-worth. Lionel, usually awkward and shy, confronts the party's organizers, displaying the courage of his convictions. Coco, hitherto conflicted about her allegiances, severs ties with Kurt and the *Pastiche* writers. Troy, subservient to his father, finally confronts him. President Fletcher and Dean Fairbanks acquire proof that their colorblind campus politics are ineffectual. Throughout *Dear White People*, Simien plays with multiple archetypes. For example, he portrays Sam as a Social Justice Warrior,¹³ Lionel as a black nerd,¹⁴ Coco as an assimilationist,¹⁵

¹⁰ Kinkgade, Tyler. "Dartmouth Fraternity, Sorority Host 'Bloods and Crips' Party, Apologize." *Huffington Post*. Published Aug. 14, 2013. <https://bit.ly/3q8KGBK>.

¹¹ Santos, Fernanda. "Arizona Fraternity Party Stirs Concerns of Racism." *New York Times*. Published Jan. 22, 2014. <https://nyti.ms/3nu2KEx>.

¹² As recounted by *Vox*'s P.R. Lockhart: "In the past few years, most high-profile blackface incidents have largely been confined to college campuses . . . But over the past week in Virginia . . . Gov. Ralph Northam, a Democrat, came under fire [for two incidents in 1984] . . . Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring admitted that he also wore blackface . . . [F]raming controversies over blackface simply as a reaction to a form of older, long-gone racism is a mistake . . . it has never really gone away." (Lockhart, P. R. "Blackface isn't Just About the Racism in America's Past." *Vox*. Published Feb. 11, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2LEjdbW>).

¹³ As explained by *Merriam-Webster*: "Social justice warrior and SJW are typically used with sardonic application, referring to a person who is seen as overly enthusiastic about issues of fairness in the treatment of matters of race, gender, or identity." ("Social Justice Warrior." *Merriam-Webster*. Accessed Mar. 9, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2LnB07v>).

¹⁴ According to Kathryn E. Lane, nerdiness became validated in black culture only in the late 2000s: "in a 2010 . . . performance by comedian Donald Glover, [he] states: 'I'm a black nerd and that was illegal until 2003.' . . . [It transgressed] the social expectations of his blackness . . . Glover indicates that it was the political ascent of President Barack Obama, who he identifies as a black nerd, which enabled being a black nerd to finally be 'legal' within the black community." (Lane, Kathryn E. *Age of the Geek: Depictions of Nerds and Geeks in Popular Media*. Palgrave, 2017. P. 177).

¹⁵ As argued by Ibram X. Kendi, the past and present American racial debate can be framed as a discussion between three groups: "*segregationists* [have] blamed Black people themselves for the racial disparities . . . *antiracists* [have] pointed to racial discrimination . . . [and] *assimilationists* have tried to argue for both, saying that Black people and racial discrimination were to blame for racial disparities." (Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning*. Pp. 9-10).

Troy as a jock/academic athlete,¹⁶ and Kurt as a self-righteous comedy writer.¹⁷ However, it is essential that the movie ultimately shatters all these categories: in the end, its protagonists evade stereotypical characterization due to their idiosyncratic brands of sensitivity, intelligence, and humor.

Merging his satirical endeavor with an activist cause, Simien engaged in a discussion about microaggressions, campus activism, and the intersection of race and academic success. Hence, the first part of this chapter presents a history of the term “microaggression” in American academia and popular culture. The second part looks at *Dear White People* through the history of physical and cerebral black humor in American cinema – specifically, in the context of its two most prominent twentieth-century creators, Spike Lee and Robert Townsend. As Simien’s movie reflects many recent occurrences in campus activism, the third part of the chapter focuses on the role of humor in student protests. All of the sections mentioned above include close readings of several scenes from the film and blend with a reflection on satire’s function in countering essentialist, binary definitions of race and identity.

Satirical Taxonomy of Racial Micro-Aggressions

To fully appreciate Simien’s movie, as well as understand the emotions and motivations of its characters, one needs to be familiar with the phenomenon of racial “microaggressions.” The term encapsulates the slights directed at the film’s black protagonists and helps comprehend their daily struggles. The word “microaggressions,” coined in 1970 by psychiatrist Chester Pierce, was defined by him as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges

¹⁶ According to the *TV Tropes* on-line dictionary: “jocks and athletes, in general, are typically portrayed as unintelligent . . . But [academic athlete] is different . . . it’s what you get when you combine a well-toned mind with well-toned muscles.” (“Academic Athlete.” *TV Tropes*. Accessed Mar. 9, 2020. <https://bit.ly/39iR6HE>).

¹⁷ As argued by journalist and cultural critic Caitlin Flanagan: “[In the recent years, sneering comedians] have alienated conservatives and made liberals smug. . . . we decided that we wanted the values of a Las Vegas lounge act to become part of our most important civic conversation . . . and now we have a reality-TV star for president.” (Flanagan. “How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump.” *Atlantic*).

which are ‘put-downs.’”¹⁸ Although the term was coined over fifty years ago, the discussion around racial microaggressions is a relatively new phenomenon in the world of academia. The first study devoted entirely to the subject, Derald Wing Sue’s *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, was published in 2010.

In the book, Sue defines microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative . . . slights and insults to the target person or group.”¹⁹ Sue’s work popularized the term and extrapolated it into the world of popular culture and political commentary. Nowadays, left-leaning academic circles and progressive media outlets generally embrace the concept. Still, many right-leaning comedians,²⁰ cultural critics,²¹ and social scientists²² regularly subject it to heavy criticism. Admittedly, the application of the term seems to be too broad in certain instances. For example, Sue argues that expressing the sentiment that “America is a land of opportunity” is a microaggression because it disregards the history of systemic inequalities in the US. While this might be true, Sue ignores this belief’s aspirational quality and overlooks the fact that many people of color also embrace this idea.²³ The terminology adopted by Sue also easily lends itself to ridicule. “If that’s a microaggression, then I give a microfuck” – states the most popular comment under Felix Kjellberg’s viral

¹⁸ Qtd. in Sue, Derald Wing. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Wiley and Sons Publishing, 2010. P. 5.

¹⁹ Ibidem. P.5.

²⁰ In 2017, comedian Adam Carolla and radio host Dennis Prager raised almost a million dollars for a documentary critical of campus activism, arguing that: “Trigger warnings, micro-aggressions, the suppression of free speech, and other illogical ideas born on campuses are proliferating and spreading out into the real world. Today’s campus snowflake is tomorrow’s teacher, judge, or elected official. And if that doesn’t scare you, maybe you should reconsider. No matter where you live or what you do, if you don’t think the way they do, they will attempt to silence and punish you.” (“No Safe Spaces.” *Indiegogo*. Published Jul. 18, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3hZ1jNa>).

²¹ Weiss, Bari. “We’re All Fascists Now.” *New York Times*. Published Mar. 7, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2K1eFvU>.

²² Haidt, Jonathan and Greg Lukianoff. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin Books, 2018.

²³ Sue. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. P. 115; Reynolds, Jeremy. “Perceptions of Meritocracy in the Land of Opportunity.” *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*. Vol. 36, 2014. Pp. 121-137.

YouTube video deriding the concept.²⁴ Arguably, this sardonic quip captures the problem with the name “microaggression”: i.e., the word itself opens up the possibility to disregard the problem it aims to describe, as well as allows to brandish those who care about it as oversensitive.²⁵ Nevertheless, as the term describes a phenomenon that would otherwise remain unaddressed, it constitutes a valuable addition to cultural criticism’s perceptual repertoire.²⁶

To give an example of a microaggression, one might recall an infamous verbal gaffe made by Joe Biden, the current United States president. In 2007, while running against Barack Obama in the Democratic primaries, Biden described his opponent as “the first mainstream African-American who is articulate, and bright, and clean, and a nice-looking guy.”²⁷ What has been intended as a compliment inadvertently suggested that black Americans are inarticulate, unintelligent, and unclean (as well as generally do not adhere to mainstream standards of respectability required to hold public office). The remark exemplified the insidious nature of “involuntary” microaggressions: put-downs uttered by oblivious but otherwise well-meaning people. Biden’s history of anti-discriminatory legislation, as well as the fact that Obama made him his running mate, suggests that the 46th President of the United States is decidedly *not* a racist. However, this has not precluded him from reiterating some of the anti-black bias present in American culture. As argued by Sue: “no one is immune from inheriting the biases of the

²⁴ Kjellberg, also known as PewDiePie, is the most popular YouTuber in the world; he is frequently involved in American “culture wars.” (Kjellberg, Felix. “Is That a Microaggression?” *PewDiePie* (official YouTube channel). Published Oct. 17, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3bpZveY>).

²⁵ This opportunity has been taken up frequently by what journalist Meghan Daum defined as “Free Speech YouTube” – a group of free-speech absolutists that gained popularity due to their arguments against “political correctness,” “woke activism,” and “cancel culture.” Among others, it includes intellectuals, political commentators, and comedians such as Jordan Peterson, Ben Shapiro, and Dave Rubin. (Daum, Meghan. *The Problem with Everything: My Journey Through the New Culture Wars*. Gallery Books, 2019. Pp. 124-125).

²⁶ Journalist Hannah Yoon illustrates the concept and underscores its popularity in academic circles with an apt metaphor: “For many of us, microaggressions are so commonplace that it seems impossible to tackle them one at a time. Psychologists often compare them to death by a thousand cuts. The metaphor is both the subtitle to a paper that Kevin Nadal . . . wrote about the impact of microaggressions on L.G.B.T.Q. youth, and the title of another paper on the health implications of black respectability politics by Hedwig Lee . . . The phrase is commonly found in additional studies on the topic.” (Yoon, Hannah. “How to Respond to Microaggressions.” *New York Times*. Published Mar. 3, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/35vir8e>).

²⁷ Qtd. in DelReal, Jose. “Every moment could be another Joe Biden moment.” *Washington Post*. Published on Feb. 17, 2015. <https://wapo.st/3q7bl1D>.

society, [and] all citizens are exposed to a social conditioning process that imbues within them . . . beliefs that lie outside their level of awareness.”²⁸

As opposed to acts of overt racism – e.g., racial slurs or physical violence – microaggressions are not always apparent. According to Sue, “[t]he power of microaggressions, lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator, who is unaware that he or she has engaged in behavior that . . . demeans.”²⁹ The covert nature of this phenomenon makes it a difficult one to fight with: due to their invisibility, microaggressions often become normalized in the cultural, political, or social discourse. Oft-repeated, these supposedly minor indignities add up to a psychologically burdensome stream of denigrating messages: a nagging reminder of black people’s historical place on the American social ladder and yet another impediment that undercuts their social mobility every step of the way up.

As argued by Sue, microaggressions’ invisible nature leads some black Americans to a state defined by him as “healthy paranoia” – a condition of permanent, preemptive defense against covert racism. It is a mental model operating on a default setting of skepticism: one that assumes that many Americans might harbor racial prejudice due to the mere fact of enculturation in an environment with a well-documented history of racism. Of course, “healthy paranoia” is an oxymoron: it does not contribute to one’s well-being, as it impedes interracial relations and aggravates a sense of victimization. However, according to Sue, it helps many people of color make sense of enduring racial disparities in the US – a country that often ostracizes overt manifestations of racism but sustains economic divisions along the age-old color line.³⁰

Disadvantaged groups often find themselves exhausted by identifying covert bias. As argued by Sue, it impedes their performance at school and work. “The inequities in employment and education are not so much the result of overt racism,” he claims, “but the unintentional,

²⁸ Sue. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. P. xv.

²⁹ *Ibidem*. P. 5.

³⁰ *Ibidem*. P. 73.

subtle, and invisible microaggressions that place marginalized groups at a disadvantage.”³¹ Political sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva makes a similar point in a more illustrative manner. “[T]he main problem nowadays is not the folks with the hoods,” he quips, “but the folks dressed in suits.”³² His metaphor points out that racial discrimination is, first and foremost, a collective process enacted through norms and institutions. Historian Ibram X. Kendi arrives at a similar conclusion:

Ignorance/hate → racist ideas → discrimination: this causal relationship is largely ahistorical. It has actually been the inverse relationship – racial discrimination led to racist ideas, which led to ignorance and hate. Racial discrimination → racist ideas → ignorance/hate: this is the causal relationship driving America’s history of race relations. . . . Racially discriminatory policies have usually sprung from economic, political, and cultural self-interest.³³

As argued by Kendi, racial biases remain largely invisible because they continue to be normalized through policies and standards created to rationalize the status quo. To counter this phenomenon, Sue conducts workshops on unconscious bias in various institutions of higher learning (e.g., “Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics and Impact,” Pennsylvania State University, 2014). Even though the awareness of the issue has been raised considerably in recent years, it is still often perceived as a problem of thin-skinned, self-centered, virtue-signaling student activists from Ivy League universities.³⁴

YouTube comedy vignettes constituted the first successful attempt at familiarizing American popular culture with the problem of microaggressions and unconscious bias. Two noteworthy endeavors in this category include Francesca Ramsey’s *Shit White Girls Say... To Black Girls* (2012) and Ken Tanaka’s *What Kind of Asian are You?* (2013). The former video features Ramsey, a black comedienne, in the role of a somewhat oblivious but well-intentioned white American girl. A substantial amount of the lines delivered by Ramsey are backhanded compliments predicated on the idea that blackness signifies something inherently lesser (e.g.,

³¹ Ibidem. P. 17.

³² Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009. P. xv.

³³ Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning*. P. 12.

³⁴ See, for example, Campbell, Bradley and Jason Manning. *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

to flatter her black interlocutor, the white girl praises her as “basically white”).³⁵ The sketch hit a cultural nerve and became a viral hit, inspiring numerous epigones and skyrocketing Ramsey’s career as a comedian and social activist. The latter bit, Tanaka’s *What Kind of Asian are You?*, draws its inspiration from one of the most popular questions faced by people of color in the United States: “Where are you from?” and “What are you?” The questions imply that one is not from America and suggests that racial makeup defines one’s personhood, nationality, and cultural identity.³⁶ The sketch portrays the following conversation between a Caucasian-looking man and a phenotypically Asian woman:

Man: Where are you from? Your English is perfect!

Woman: [sarcastically] San Diego. We speak English there.

Man: [patronizing, as if he was speaking to a child] Ah, no, where are you *from*?

Woman: [annoyed] Well, I was born in Orange County, but I never actually lived there.

Man: I mean before that?

Woman: [confused] Before I was born? . . . Well, my great-grandma was from Seoul.

Man: [smug, as if he has just solved a complex puzzle] Korean! I knew it. I was like, “she’s either Japanese or Korean.” But I was leaning more towards Korean.

Woman: [ironically] Amazing.

Man: [not noticing the irony in the woman’s voice] Gahm-sah-hahm-ni-da! [“thank you” in Korean]. There’s a really good Teriyaki Barbecue place near my apartment. I actually really like Kimchi.

As it is evident, the man does not treat his interlocutor as an individual; instead, he bases his assessment of the woman on a set of stereotypes about Korean culture. Even though the woman is a third-generation American, due to her Asian phenotype, he treats her as a perpetual foreigner in her own country. In an ironic turn, the woman sees through his way of thinking and adopts the man’s line of questioning:

Woman: What about you, where are you from?

Man: San Francisco.

Woman: [parodying the man’s previous response] But, where are you *from*?

Man: Uh, um, I’m just American.

Woman: [socratically] Really, you’re Native American?

Man: No, uh, I’m just regular American. Oh well, I guess my grandparents are from England.

Woman: [in an exaggerated manner of a Dickensian chimney sweep] “Ello gov’na, what’s all this, then?” . . . [sardonically] I think your people’s fish and chips are amazing.

³⁵ Ramsey, Francesca. “Shit White Girls Say... To Black Girls.” *Chescaleigh* (YouTube channel). Published on Jan. 4, 2012. <https://youtu.be/yIPUzxpIBe0>.

³⁶ Tanaka, Ken. “What Kind of Asian Are You?” *helpmefindparents* (YouTube channel). Published May 23, 2013. <https://youtu.be/DWynJkN5HbQ>.

The man's essentialist perception of ethnicity leads him to deny the woman's actual cultural and national identity. Similarly to Ramsey's sketch, Tanaka's video became an instant hit. It also made an important point in the ongoing debate about the relationship between ethnicity and Americanness. In 2015, Ramsey made a video predicated on the same idea, entitled "Where Are You REALLY From?"³⁷ Ramsey's and Tanaka's videos argue that hyphenated identities (African-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc.) are just as legitimate in their Americanness as those of their fellow white citizens (who often consider themselves "just" American – i.e., devoid of ethnicity). Both bits highlighted that people of color are all-too-often made to feel displaced: in that, despite championing American ideals, they frequently find themselves pushed to the margins of the definition of "true" Americanness.³⁸ The satirical form of Ramsey's and Tanaka's arguments helps to address this problem in a light, suggestive, and attention-grabbing manner (as of the beginning of 2020, their vignettes have been viewed more than twenty million times).³⁹

"As long as microaggressions remain hidden," argues Sue, "we will continue to insult, demean, alienate, and oppress marginalized groups."⁴⁰ As demonstrated by the comedy sketches discussed above, the language of humor proves useful in identifying unconscious bias and addressing microaggressive behavior. In *Dear White People*, Simien adopts a similar approach to that of Ramsey and Tanaka. Employing parody as a deconstructive and critical tool, he attempts to defamiliarize the familiar. Making the invisible visible – i.e., using irony to estrange what is considered natural and obvious – forces his viewers to reexamine how they ascribe racial meaning to culture, themselves, and other people.

³⁷ Ramsey, Francesca. *Where Are You REALLY From?* Chescaleigh (YouTube channel). Published on Dec. 9, 2015. <https://youtu.be/igWYMo4z2OQ>.

³⁸ For example, in 2009, sociologist and ethnographer Joel MacLeod "found instances where the black youths were unfairly treated by employers, even though they maintained a much stricter adherence to the ideals of the American dream than did their white counterparts. (Qtd. in Hartigan. *Race in the 21st Century*. P. 11).

³⁹ Tanaka. *helpmefindparents* (YouTube channel); and Ramsey. *Chescaleigh* (YouTube channel). Both accessed on Mar. 14, 2020.

⁴⁰ Sue. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. P.17.

Simien's movie portrays microaggression through its characters and their actions, but the word itself is never uttered. In the 2014 book companion to the film, Simien calls the phenomenon by its name and argues that "there is a multitude of microaggressions between mainstream and marginalized cultures brewing that go unexpressed."⁴¹ One of *Dear White People's* purposes has been to reveal and examine them through the magnifying glass of social satire. In the end, Simien's effort proved to be successful, as his movie constitutes the most comprehensive critical examination of microaggressions in American film to date.

Environmental microaggressions are the first type of racial slights represented in *Dear White People*. In one scene, Sam shows her class a short film satirizing the far-right panic over Obama's presidency. After the projection, expecting criticism from her professor, she argues preemptively: "Before you say anything might I remind you that I sat through *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind*, and Tarantino week without protest."⁴² Even though the movies mentioned by Sam include degrading or stereotypical portrayals of black people, they are considered classics of American cinema.⁴³ Sam's curriculum illustrates what Sue defines as an environmental microaggression, in which

[students of color] are placed in a situation of learning material from an ethnocentric perspective when they know a different history. They must comply and accept what they perceive as partial truths (and oftentimes mistruths) or fight to see themselves and their groups represented realistically in the curriculum. If they fight, they are likely to be labeled troublemakers and to be given lower grades. Even if they are exposed to relevant materials, they may lack the energy to be fully engaged in the learning process. If, however, they decide to accept the reality espoused by the professor, they may feel that they have "sold out." Regardless of the actions they take, the students of color will be placed at an educational disadvantage.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Simien, Justin. *Dear White People: A Guide to Inter-Racial Harmony in Post-Racial America*. Atria/37 Ink, 2014. Kindle loc. 75-98.

⁴² Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD.

⁴³ *Birth of a Nation* portrays black people as hypersexualized predators, *Gone with the Wind* surreptitiously condones slavery, and Tarantino revitalizes the blaxploitation aesthetic to what some of his critics perceive as questionably-superficial ends. (See, for example, Nama, Adilifu. *Race on the QT: Blackness and the Films of Quentin Tarantino*. U of Texas P, 2015).

⁴⁴ Sue. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. P. 16.

The prevailing perception of race in the US is that it refers exclusively to people of color.⁴⁵ What Sue means by the term “ethnocentric perspective,” however, is a curriculum focused on the white experience. Historically, the country’s white majority has had the cultural power to impose racial categorizations that defined the mainstream perception of non-whites. Describing the US education system as “ethnocentric,” Sue denies white Americans the privilege of deracination – i.e., being perceived as devoid of a race. By doing so, he points out that “American history,” usually seen as an objective and neutral account of the past, is often a narrative informed by the ethnicity of its authors – people who shared a particular interest, perspective, and cultural identity. The dialogue between Sam and her professor attempts to make the same point and illustrates the disadvantageous position of black students in a predominantly white institution. Sam, overwhelmed by the fight against negative racial attitudes on campus, is asked to “pull it together” or risk being expelled. “This is Winchester,” says the professor, invoking the pride he takes in the institution’s heritage. Ironically, he does not realize that it is precisely Winchester’s history – e.g., the white ethnocentric perspective espoused in its curriculum – that is one of the causes of Sam’s emotional struggle.

The scene discussed above tackles yet another essential problem: American educational institutions’ systemic mistreatment of black women and girls. Monique W. Morris, social activist and the author of *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (2016), argues that the education system in the US subjects African-American females to excessive penalization, policing, and standards of conduct not applied to other students.⁴⁶ As calculated by her:

Black girls are 16 percent of girls in schools, but 42 percent of girls receiving corporal punishment, 42 percent of girls expelled with or without educational services, 45 percent of girls with at least one out-of-school suspension, 31 percent of girls referred to law enforcement, and 34 percent of girls arrested on campus.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cornell, Stephen and Douglas Hartmann. *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. Pine Forge Press, 2006. P. 29.

⁴⁶ Qtd. in Anderson, Melinda D. “The Black Girl Pushout.” *Atlantic*. Published Mar. 15, 2016. <https://bit.ly/38P8818>.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

When people see the statistics cited above, they often blame the victim: i.e., they tend to think that the disciplined student must have deserved her institutional chastisement. However, as argued by Morris, “it’s not about what they did, but rather, the culture of discipline and punishment that leaves little room for error when one is black and female.”⁴⁸ “Black girls describe being labeled and suspended for being ‘disruptive,’” she recounts, “if they ask questions or otherwise engage in activities that adults consider affronts to their authority.”⁴⁹ Simien’s movie portrays this phenomenon when Sam ends up being suspended by President Fletcher for her supposedly incendiary comments made on the air of the campus radio. “We don’t have an intolerance problem here,” exclaims the President, threatening Sam with probation for accusing her fellow students of racial discrimination.⁵⁰ As illustrated by this scene, young black women often find themselves subjected to respectability standards that exceed those applied to their fellow white students. As argued by Morris, one way to address this matter is to make it apparent through storytelling. “Our stories can help us develop empathic responses to complex social issues,” she proclaims.⁵¹ Simien exemplifies her belief through socially conscious satire – one sarcastic about the assailants and sympathetic with regard to their prey. Narrativizing the phenomenon of black girls’ educational mistreatment, *Dear White People* makes the viewer simultaneously aware of the problem and empathetic towards its victims.

The second type of microaggressions in *Dear White People* concerns denying other people’s experiential reality. “Racism is over in America,” proclaims President Fletcher to the bewilderment of Dean Fairbanks, “the only people who are thinking about it are, I don’t know, Mexicans, probably.”⁵² The fact that President Fletcher is white and Dean Fairbanks is black has a formative influence on their point of view on this issue. As argued by Stephen Cornell

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD.

⁵¹ Qtd. in Anderson. “The Black Girl Pushout.”

⁵² Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD.

and Douglas Hartmann, sociologists and the authors of *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (2006), “[r]ace has been the most powerful and persistent group boundary in American history, distinguishing, to varying degrees, the experiences of those classified as non-white from those classified as white, often with devastating consequences.”⁵³ If race entails different experiences, it has to result in different perceptions of the world.

The differences between white and black outlooks on the US have been analyzed in numerous studies. For example, Greenlining Institute (2001) found out that 56.4% of black Americans think there is “a lot” of racial discrimination in America, compared with only 16% of whites. The majority of white respondents claimed there is either “some” (44.4%) or “little” (39.5%) discrimination based on race. 28% percent of whites believe that blacks are treated better than any other racial group by the US government. However, only 1% percent of black respondents share the same opinion.⁵⁴ Gallup Review (2010-2014) reported that 59% of whites declare a great deal of confidence in the police, compared with only 37% of blacks. 53% of black Americans say that there is a need for a new set of civil rights laws to decrease racial discrimination in the US, while just 17% of whites express the same view. 37% of blacks and 15% of whites believe that racial discrimination is the primary reason blacks tend to have worse housing, employment, and income. 50% of black respondents claim that racial discrimination is the main reason for the disproportionately high percentage of black males incarcerated in American prisons, compared with only 19% of whites. 69% of whites say that the justice system is not biased against black people, while only 26% of blacks agree with that view.⁵⁵

As demonstrated by the studies listed above, blacks and whites in the US hold different views on racial equality and discrimination. *Dear White People* illustrates this phenomenon in a conversation between President Fletcher and Sam. During their talk, the administrative head

⁵³ Cornell and Hartmann. *Ethnicity and Race*. P. 26.

⁵⁴ Siek, Stephanie. “Perceptions of Discrimination: A Black and White Story.” *CNN*. Published Dec. 12, 2011. <https://cnn.it/2LDSrkk>.

⁵⁵ Newport, Frank. “Gallup Review: Black and White Attitudes Toward Police.” *Gallup*. Published Aug. 20, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3bON3pw>.

of the university reprimands the student for making satirical comments on the air of Winchester's campus radio:

President Fletcher: Your advisor tells me that you're hanging on by a thread in your major. Maybe it's time for you to reprioritize.

Sam: You're trying to frighten me, but I think you're the one who's scared.

President Fletcher: And I think that you long for days when blacks were hanging from trees and denied actual rights. That way, you would have something to actually fight against.⁵⁶

As pointed out by Sue, "[t]he ability to impose a worldview upon other groups who differ in their perspectives is based upon power."⁵⁷ The cited scene provides an excellent illustration of this claim, as the student has to acquiesce to her superior's view or risk getting expelled. The movie gives another example of the same type in the following argument between Sam and Kurt, President Fletcher's son:

Kurt: Look, [black people are] the biggest athletes, right? Movie stars . . . Sometimes, I think the hardest thing to be in the American workforce right now is an educated white guy.

. . .

Sam: [sarcastically] Well, on behalf of all the colored folks in the room, let me apologize to all the better qualified white students whose place we're taking up.

Kurt: Serious question. Do you know who I am?⁵⁸

Sam's interlocutor tries to enforce his worldview by invoking his father's position of power, even though the logic of his argument is quite faulty. Kurt underscores the success of a handful of African-Americans in sports and entertainment while utterly obfuscating the overall economic standing of most black people in the US.⁵⁹ As reported by the Economic Policy Institute, the median black household earned 59 cents for every dollar of income the median white household made in 2018. According to Demos, a public policy institute, 73% percent of whites own a home, compared to 45% of blacks.⁶⁰ What is more, as proven by the US Department of Justice, the mortgages obtained by people of color tend to have higher interest

⁵⁶ Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD.

⁵⁷ Sue. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. P. 46.

⁵⁸ Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD.

⁵⁹ Wilson, Valerie and Jhacova Williams. "Racial and Ethnic Income Gaps Persist Amid Uneven Growth in Household Incomes." *EPI*. Published Sept. 11, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3oUwWKH>.

⁶⁰ "Wealth and Asset Ownership." *U.S. Census Bureau*. Accessed Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2Kn5EgS>.

rates.⁶¹ Finally, as calculated by the Institute on Assets and Social Policy, the typical black household now has just 6% of the typical white household's wealth (Median Net Worth: White, not Hispanic - \$162,770, Black - \$16,300; if the household head has college degree: White, not Hispanic - \$391,000, Black - \$68,300).⁶²

Racial disparities in the realm of economics extend into other areas of life. When it comes to healthcare, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2013) reports that the black infant mortality rate is almost two and a half times higher than the white one. Blacks are 11% more likely than whites to die of cancer within five years of the diagnosis. White Americans lose 30 per 100,000 people to HIV, while black Americans lose 330. Finally, life expectancy at birth is approximately 4.8 years higher for whites.⁶³ As for the justice system, according to the data provided by NAACP, black Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. As of 2002, black Americans constituted more than 80% of the people sentenced under the federal crack cocaine laws, even though more than 2/3 of crack cocaine users in the US were white or Hispanic.⁶⁴ According to The Sentencing Project, blacks are more likely to be arrested than whites; when arrested, they are more likely to be found guilty; and once found guilty, they face harsher punishments.⁶⁵ When it comes to schooling, the US Department of Education reports that 33% percent of black students attend high-poverty institutions, compared with only 4% of white students. Black Americans constitute 16% of school enrollment. Still,

⁶¹ In 2012, Wells Fargo, an American banking and financial services holding company, admitted that their African-American and Hispanic clients were charged higher fees and were improperly placed into subprime loans, while their white customers with similar credit profiles were offered lower payments and enjoyed the benefits of prime mortgages. ("Justice Department Reaches Settlement with Wells Fargo." *U.S. Department of Justice*. Published July 12, 2012. <https://bit.ly/3oOPZpA>).

⁶² Traub, Amy and Catherine Ruetschlin. "The Racial Wealth Gap: Why Policy Matters." *Demos*. Accessed on Dec. 31, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3im6W8i>; "Income and Wealth in the United States: An Overview of Recent Data." *Peter G. Peterson Foundation*. Published Oct. 4, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3sxXRy3>.

⁶³ "Health Disparities Experienced by Black or African-Americans." *CDC*. Published Jan. 5, 2005. <https://bit.ly/3inpx42>; "CDC Health Disparities & Inequalities Report (CHDIR) – United States, 2013." *CDC*. Accessed Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3imR8lJ>; "Racial/Ethnic Disparities in the Awareness, Treatment, and Control of Hypertension – United States, 2003–2010." *CDC*. Published May 10, 2013. <https://bit.ly/3qqMiqw>; MacDorman, Marian and T.J. Mathews. "Understanding Racial and Ethnic Disparities in U.S. Infant Mortality Rates." *NCHS Data Brief*. No. 74, Sept. 2011. <https://bit.ly/35MF7ks>.

⁶⁴ "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." *The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*. Accessed on Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/35QlojX>.

⁶⁵ "Criminal Justice Facts." *The Sentencing Project*. Accessed Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2XV2xzL>.

they account for 42% of students who receive multiple out-of-school suspensions and 34% of students who end up being expelled (which makes them three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students). Lastly, the college enrollment rate is 70% for white high school graduates and 56% for black ones. Blacks have a 42% six-year college completion rate, compared with 60% of whites.⁶⁶

Overall, as concluded by the Pew Research Center, economic inequality has systematically widened along racial lines since the end of the Great Recession. The current wealth gap between black and white Americans has reached its highest point since 1989.⁶⁷ According to *Forbes*, the racial wealth gap will widen even further in the future due to the currently implemented federal policies (e.g., tax cuts for the rich).⁶⁸ As income inequality continues to rise, it results in different life opportunities for white and black Americans. *Dear White People* helps to discuss these divergent realities through satire – the movie’s language, a mix of academic discourse and the candid dialogic ethos of stand-up comedy, facilitates an open exchange of ideas and experiences. At the same time, it allows for a de-escalation of potential racial resentment and class conflict through emotional catharsis provided by laughter.

Colorblind microaggressions are the third type of racial slights portrayed in Simien’s film. They occur when white students of Winchester insist that they “don’t see color” of their peers. In their black colleagues’ eyes, they refuse to acknowledge their fellow non-white students’ cultural identity and dismiss their life experiences (both of which have been heavily influenced by them being racialized as black in the US). According to Bonilla-Silva, the four central foundations of colorblindness are: 1) abstract liberalism (evoking the idea of individualism to deflect from the problem of systemic discrimination); 2) naturalization (explaining socially constructed reality as a natural state of affairs); 3) cultural racism (blaming

⁶⁶ “Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups.” *National Center for Education Statistics*. Accessed Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/38SiFbP>.

⁶⁷ Kochhar. “Wealth Inequality Has Widened.” *Pew Research Center*.

⁶⁸ Shin, Laura. “The Racial Wealth Gap: Why a Typical White Household Has 16 Times the Wealth of a Black One.” *Forbes*. Published Mar. 26, 2015. <https://bit.ly/38PMAkK>.

the low economic standing of a given racial group on alleged deficiencies in their culture); and 4) minimization of racism (accusing people of color of being “hypersensitive” and “overreactive”).⁶⁹ Bonilla-Silva argues that colorblindness gained significant social momentum with the presidential victory of Barack Obama – i.e., its proponents often treated his election as a cultural demarcation line that symbolically separated America from its history of racism. However, as evidenced by the previously discussed data on persisting racial inequality, the country is hardly post-racial. At its best, advocating for colorblindness is an example of idealism and aspirational thinking. As argued by journalist and political commentator Conor Friedersdorf, it is something that Americans should strive for, even if its widespread implementation is not advisable in the immediate future due to the persisting racial inequalities (color-conscious solutions help to counteract them in the most targeted manner).⁷⁰ At its worst, promoting racial colorblindness is an attempt to silence voices calling for race-specific policies – ones that could introduce legislative (as opposed to symbolic, like the election of Obama) changes and affect the material well-being of many people of color.

American racism underwent a transformation after the Civil Rights era: as it was no longer deemed acceptable to express racist sentiments in public, they have become disguised in color-blind terms (e.g., the supposedly race-neutral words such as “thugs” or “welfare queens” have been disproportionately employed to denigrate black people).⁷¹ The persistent bias, concealed behind inconspicuous language, remained discernible in microaggressions. Sue contends that contemporary black Americans encounter assumptions of criminality, intellectual inferiority, impoverishment, second-class citizenry, hypersexuality, or inferiority of their

⁶⁹ Bonilla-Silva. *Racism without Racists*. P. 255-301.

⁷⁰ As argued by Friedersdorf: “Today, colorblindness is considered a ‘micro-aggression’ . . . [yet] race-neutral policies are preferable in a pluralistic country, even if various race-specific remedies are still necessary today. . . . The alternative proposed by the academic left is an America where . . . white people are more conscious of race . . . it’s dangerous to push whites to focus on their whiteness rather than their humanity; and that nuanced, aspirational colorblindness is a respectable alternative.” (Friedersdorf. “The Left’s Attack on Color-Blindness Goes Too Far”).

⁷¹ McWhorter, John. “The Racially Charged Meaning Behind the Word ‘Thug.’” *NPR*. Published Apr. 30, 2015. <https://n.pr/2LK9gKt>; Sreenivasan, Hari et al. “The True Story Behind the ‘Welfare Queen’ Stereotype.” *PBS*. Published June 1, 2019. <https://to.pbs.org/35Rbzm1>.

communication styles primarily through coded language.⁷² According to Ian Haney-López, a law professor and the author of *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism* (2014), “coded speech operates on two levels: it triggers racial anxiety, and it allows plausible deniability by crafting language that lets the speaker deny that he’s even thinking about race.”⁷³ *Dear White People* puts this largely imperceptible phenomenon under a magnifying glass of satire. For example, an effort to make covert racism more visible is stated explicitly in the following exchange between Sam and Troy:

Troy: I really don’t see the issue. Never had [any problems with racism]. Never ran into any lynch mobs.
 Sam: Lynch mob’s still here, just re-branded itself.
 Troy: As what, pray tell?
 . . .
 Sam: You want to know how this world sees you? You go to a Young Republicans’ meeting and bring up welfare.⁷⁴

Cultural normalization masquerades the result of complex social forces – such as power structures that establish certain groups as gatekeepers of taste, respectability, and political wisdom – as a natural state of affairs. As assumptions encoded in color-blind language lead to negative judgments and skewed expectations, they end up impacting people of color in tangible ways. Nevertheless, when hierarchies created by the dominant culture become normalized, their tendency to ascribe racial value to cultural manifestations and social phenomena is rendered virtually invisible. That is why Troy cannot see the racial underpinnings of seemingly color-blind terms used by the Republican Party.⁷⁵

The last type of microaggressions exemplified in *Dear White People* centers around the “myth of meritocracy.” This belief assumes that everyone in the US – regardless of their

⁷² Sue. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. P. 148.

⁷³ Qtd. in “Sneaky Racial Code Words and Why Politicians Love Them.” *The Root*. Published Mar. 15, 2014. <https://bit.ly/38SfVLF>.

⁷⁴ Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD.

⁷⁵ For example, this is how Michelle Alexander describes the use of coded language by the Reagan administration: “Most people assume the War on Drugs was launched in response to the crisis caused by crack cocaine . . . [In fact,] Reagan officially announced the current drug war . . . before crack became an issue . . . [To] build public and legislative support for the war . . . the media [talked about] ‘crack whores,’ ‘crack dealers,’ and ‘crack babies – images that seemed to confirm the worst negative racial stereotypes about impoverished inner-city residents.” (Alexander. *The New Jim Crow*. P. 5).

background – has an equal chance of success in life, provided that they work hard enough. “The flip side of the coin,” Sue points out, “is those who do not succeed are . . . seen as possessing deficiencies.”⁷⁶ The myth of meritocracy appoints individual effort as the sole source of one’s success. Consequently, it averts public attention from various social and economic forces impeding the chances of success for underprivileged groups. Simien’s film illustrates the pitfalls of this way of thinking through the following exchange between Dean Fairbanks and his son Troy:

Troy: I’m thinking about joining [Winchester’s satirical magazine] *Pastiche*.

Dean: On Kurt Fletcher’s staff? I’ll be goddamned if after twenty years [of my work at Winchester] you’re working for that dumb-ass’s son. Fletcher and I graduated one year apart. He barely made it through. I graduated *summa cum laude*. Now, who is President and who is Dean?

Troy: What’s the difference?

Dean: Oh, a few hundred thousand dollars a year, for starters.⁷⁷

This short conversation illustrates several systemic issues hindering black Americans’ employment opportunities – problems first made evident by social science. A 2013 study by Kellogg School of Management, Princeton, and Harvard found out that black applicants are being offered lower wages than their white counterparts. As they face unemployment more often than whites, they are much more likely to accept inadequate compensation – that is, if they get invited for a job interview in the first place.⁷⁸ In 2003, two sociologists – Harvard’s Sendhil Mullainathan and the University of Chicago’s Marianne Bertrand – mailed thousands of résumés to employers with job openings. They signed some of them with stereotypically black names (such as Lakisha or Jamal) and some with stereotypically white ones (like Emily or Greg). As it turned out, a “white” résumé was approximately fifty percent more likely to result in a callback for an interview than an identical “black” one.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Sue. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. P. 39.

⁷⁷ Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD.

⁷⁸ Spenkuch, Jörgm et al. “Statistics That Hurt: Racial Discrimination Still Affects Minority Wages.” *Kellogg School of Management*. Published Jan. 8, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3oPd2R8>.

⁷⁹ Mullainathan, Sendhil. “Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions.” *New York Times*. Published on Jan. 3, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/2XQngoE>.

When Mullainathan presented the study, he recalled that human resources managers from monitored companies were surprised by its findings. Apparently, they had perceived themselves as proactive supporters of the idea of creating diversity in the workplace.⁸⁰ To explain this paradox, Mullainathan referenced a theory of a Nobel-prize-winning psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman. According to Kahneman, the human cognitive process divides into “slow” (deliberate, analytical, conscious) and “fast” (impulsive, intuitive, unconscious) thinking. As a consequence, our good intentions often fall prey to our prejudices:

Even if, in our slow thinking, we work to avoid discrimination, it can easily creep into our fast thinking. Our snap judgments rely on all the associations we have – from fictional television shows to news reports. They use stereotypes, both the accurate and the inaccurate, both those we would want to use and ones we find repulsive.⁸¹

“Fast thinking” discrimination is often invisible, both to the perpetrators (who, to the best of their knowledge, support egalitarianism) and their victims (who are unable to discern the impact of covert bias on their lives). The only way to effectively counter this type of prejudice is through introspection. According to Mullainathan: “Rather than point fingers outward, we should look inward – and examine how, despite best intentions, we discriminate in ways big and small.”⁸² Such introspection can be prompted by looking at oneself from a comic distance – a perspective championed by Simien’s movie. *Dear White People* relies heavily on irony, a critical device that engenders introspection. According to Douglas Muecke – a scholar who centered his research on applications of narrative incongruity – in irony, an “asserted fact is shown not to be true, an idea or belief to be untenable, an expectation to be unwarranted, or a confidence to be misplaced.”⁸³ In other words, irony invites viewers to examine their beliefs and preconceptions. People’s assumptions about the self and the world allow them to notice the irony in the first place – without them, they would not see the discrepancy between the text’s

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁸² Ibidem.

⁸³ Qtd. in Baym, Geoffrey. “Stephen Colbert’s Parody of the Postmodern.” *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. Edited by Jonathan Gray et al. New York U P, 2009. P. 131.

surface meaning and the actual message it aims to convey. As argued by literary critic Wayne Booth, when the viewer recognizes the text's irony, "an assumed community of values is activated between reader, author, and text."⁸⁴ The sense of discovery endows the audience with a sense of personal accomplishment. It also has a group dimension, as the ability to de- and re-construct meaning beyond what outsiders might take at face value establishes a sort of a union: a communion of values, information, and language. This bond's power is most visible in the application of irony in anti-racist campus activism – a phenomenon represented throughout *Dear White People* and analyzed in the subsequent section of this chapter.

Humor and Irony in Race-Related Campus Activism

A discussion of anti-racist activism is essential in the context of Simien's work, as his movie encapsulates numerous issues debated on American campuses in recent years. Analyzing how *Dear White People* narrativizes these disputes through satire provides a pertinent look at contemporary racial discourse in the US. Championing a polyphonic, anti-essentialist stance, Simien argues for a broad spectrum of ideological affiliations, aesthetic tastes, and ethnic identifications – all of them shared in an atmosphere of dialogue and cultural exchange facilitated by the comic perspective.

In recent years, universities in the US witnessed a resurgence of student activism. Scattered and inconsequential at their outset, the protests eventually harnessed social media's potential and managed to transform themselves into a substantial intercampus phenomenon. Emboldened by the Black Lives Matter movement's growing public presence, campus activists ran demonstrations and social media campaigns that managed to spark a nationwide debate about the meaning and significance of race in contemporary America. During the first term of Obama's presidency, students protested what they perceived as a new type of racism: one perpetuating racial inequality through supposedly color-blind policies and attitudes. What is

⁸⁴ "Wayne C. Booth. A Rhetoric of Irony." *Wayne Booth's Rhetorology Home* (uwaterloo.ca).

worth pointing out, due to the rise of new technologies, for the first time in the history of campus protests, student concerns could instantly reach national or even global audiences. YouTube videos such as “The Black Bruins” (a 2013 spoken word performance about the struggles of underprivileged students at the University of California, Los Angeles)⁸⁵ and campaigns such as “I, Too, Am Harvard” (a 2014 multimedia project arguing for a more inclusive racial climate at Ivy League universities)⁸⁶ demonstrated the potential of student activism on social media.

The most recent wave of student activism – one inspired by the vibrant and vocal, but ultimately short-lived Occupy Wall Street movement – rose around 2011. Initially focused on student debt and graduates’ diminishing economic prospects, the movement grew to embrace other causes (some of them connected with race, e.g., activists at Tufts University used the banner of Occupy to argue for establishing an Africana studies department).⁸⁷ Interestingly, the decentralized structure of the Occupy campus movement was different from that of the student-protest organizations of the past. The Occupy movement’s inclusive philosophy realized itself in an ex-centric leadership embracing a diversity of causes – a task made possible by the dispersed, pluralistic nature of social media activism.⁸⁸ This heterogeneous model was later adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement⁸⁹ and became a part of Open-Source Blackness’s ethos as delineated by Thurston.⁹⁰

As argued by the former chancellor of New York City’s public schools Harold Levy, “there’s a renaissance of political activism going on, and it exists on every major campus.”⁹¹

⁸⁵ So, Stykes. “The Black Bruins [Spoken Word].” *Sy Stokes* (YouTube channel). Published Apr. 4, 2013. <https://youtu.be/BEO3H5BOIFk>.

⁸⁶ Schonfeld, Zach. “The Viral Photo Campaign That Reveals What It’s Like to be Black at Harvard.” *Newsweek*. Published Mar. 3, 2014. <https://bit.ly/35S4aCW>.

⁸⁷ Jimerson, Brionna. “Africana Studies Launches New Major and Minor.” *Tufts Daily*. Published Nov. 6, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3iwBPas>.

⁸⁸ Heather Gautney, Heather. “What is ‘Occupy Wall Street’? The History of Leaderless Movements.” *Washington Post*. Published Oct. 10, 2011. <https://wapo.st/2KoqQTE>.

⁸⁹ Borden, Taylor. “Black Lives Matter is a Case Study in a New Kind of Leadership.” *Business Insider*. Published June 6, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2KqBmK9>.

⁹⁰ Thurston. “The Future of Blackness.” *How to Be Black*. Pp. 209-223.

⁹¹ Wong, Alia. “The Renaissance of Student Activism.” *Atlantic*. Published May 21, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2LGyBF6>.

The revival of student activism has been brought forth by those who felt alienated from their respective institutions of higher learning – places that, in their mind, should have adhered to a higher standard of inclusivity in terms of admission practices, cultural understanding, or diverse curricula. During the fall semester of 2014 alone – the year in which #blacklivesmatter started to trend on social media – there were over 160 protests on campuses throughout the US.⁹² Among other issues, students protested the mistreatment of college athletes,⁹³ mishandling sexual assault cases,⁹⁴ and Ivy League universities' investments in morally questionable industries (e.g., armament manufacturing).⁹⁵ However, the majority of these demonstrations focused on race. Energized by widely publicized instances of police brutality, student activists began to form local factions of the Black Lives Matter organization and verbalize their concerns about the state of race relations in America. In the process, they made powerful symbolic statements to deliver their message. For example, in 2014, over six hundred Tufts University students laid down in the middle of a traffic-ridden street to protest the acquittal of Darren Wilson, the police officer accused of killing Michael Brown, a black teenager.⁹⁶ The amount of time spent on the road – i.e., four and a half hours – represented the hours during which Brown was left in the street after Wilson had shot him.⁹⁷

Aside from protesting extrajudicial killings – e.g., the one of Brown, or the shooting of Tamir Rice, a black 12-year-old, protested at Oberlin College in Ohio – campus activists addressed smaller, local instances of race-based discrimination.⁹⁸ For example, in September

⁹² Johnston, Angus. "American Student Protest Timeline, 2014-15." *Student Activism* (interactive timeline). Accessed Nov. 9, 2018. <https://bit.ly/35Ty4GZ>.

⁹³ Kessler, Martin. "Following Mishandling of Head Injury, Michigan Students Call for AD's Ouster." *NPR*. Published Oct. 1, 2014. <https://wbur.fm/3suKVca>.

⁹⁴ Peters, Lucia. "Columbia Student Emma Sulkowicz's 'Mattress Performance/Carry That Weight' Performance Art Piece Tackles Campus Sexual Assault Culture Head-On." *Bustle*. Published Sep. 3, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2LZeFNN>.

⁹⁵ Urist, Jacoba. "The Push for Ethical Investment at America's Colleges." *Atlantic*. Published Apr. 28, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2XRQnbe>.

⁹⁶ "What Happened in Ferguson?" *New York Times*. Published Aug. 10, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/2M2ILRC>.

⁹⁷ Goldman, Nina. "Tufts Students Lead #IndictAmerica Protest." *Tufts Daily*. Published Dec. 8, 2014. <https://bit.ly/38UECqP>.

⁹⁸ Heller, Nathan. "The Big Uneasy: What's Roiling the Liberal-Arts Campus?" *New Yorker*. Published May 30, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3inwbqQ>.

2014, students at Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania staged a mass protest against the lack of administrative disciplinary reaction to a display of the Confederate flag in one of the college's dormitories.⁹⁹ Hundreds of students, all dressed in black, comprised a suggestive image that inspired campus activists in other states (e.g., at Colgate University, New York).¹⁰⁰ In the eyes of many, the relatively covert nature of racial incidents such as the one at Bryn Mawr rendered student demonstrations as overreactive. As a result, even well-established and respectable media outlets often accused campus activists of being coddled and hypersensitive.¹⁰¹

Despite their decentralized structures, the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter movements' campus iterations share significant similarities with the previous eras' student activism. Like their antecedents, they address global, national, and local issues all at the same time. "What you have with the Occupy movement," explains historian Angus Johnston, "is a criticism of global capitalism and the American financial system, but also a critique of policing on campus, tuition policy, and the way universities are run."¹⁰² As argued by Johnston, even though contemporary student protesters are often accused of elitism, they all share an awareness of the interdependence of life on campus with the more general issues of national culture and federal policy. Occupy movement connected the problem of ever-growing student debt with the widening income inequality in the country. Black Lives Matter supporters found a link between the history of racism in the US and their present disadvantaged position as students of color. As a keen observer of his country's social, political, and cultural reality, Simien noticed these relationships as well.

In 2014, *Dear White People* opened the "I, Too, Am Harvard" student conference (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Oct. 10-12). The gathering was part of the aforementioned broader

⁹⁹ Zipp, Bobby. "Bryn Mawr Campus Roiled by Confederate Flag, Mason-Dixon Line in Dormitory." *The Swarthmore Phoenix*. Published Sept. 25, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2LXkMC6>.

¹⁰⁰ Jones, Jaleesa. "Colgate University Students Ask #CanYouHearUsNow." *USA Today*. Published Sept. 24, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2KoxA3U>.

¹⁰¹ Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt. "The Coddling of the American Mind." *Atlantic*, Published Sept. 1, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2LZwvjx>.

¹⁰² Qtd. in Buckley, Cara. "The New Student Activism." *New York Times*. Published on Jan. 19, 2012. <https://nyti.ms/39DfGTK>.

student initiative: a multimedia project incorporating a social media campaign, a short documentary, and a stage play (all focused on campus inclusivity and black activism in the age of social media). The initiative itself was born out of the “I, Too, Am Harvard” photoblog, a website featuring a collection of images of non-white Harvard students posing with signs recounting various microaggressions they had encountered on campus. The blog aimed to educate about which remarks might be read as insensitive (even if they appear complimentary on the surface). Another purpose of “I, Too, Am Harvard” was to facilitate a discussion about the status of racial minorities at Ivy League universities. Finally, the initiative wanted to relieve students’ frustration over campus race relations. Students in the photos vented their negative emotions through ironic signs, as well as their interchangeably smirking and exasperated glances. The project’s participants looked for a sense of solidarity engendered by the relatability of their experiences, and the pictures’ sarcastic tone transformed their grievances into dark, satirical humor. Aiming at both corrective and cathartic laughter, “I, Too, Am Harvard” meant to improve communication on campus and aid those who felt excluded from the academic community on the basis of their race.¹⁰³

The photoblog included pictures of black students holding hand-written signs with messages such as: “Having an opinion does not make me an Angry Black Woman”; “My self-esteem is not contingent upon me filling your definition of beauty”; “The lack of diversity in this classroom does not make me the voice of all black people”; “You are not blacker than me because you can rap more Jay-Z lyrics”; “No, ‘ghetto’ and ‘black’ are not synonymous”; “No, I will not teach you how to twerk”; “No, I did not immigrate here to receive HIV/AIDS treatment”; “Race is more than skin deep”; or “Please, don’t pet my hair, I’m not an animal.”¹⁰⁴ As it is evident, participants of the project aimed to challenge black racial stereotypes, reject white standards of beauty, point out unequal treatment of students of color, and call for a

¹⁰³ “I, Too, Am Harvard.” *Tumblr* (a photo-blog hosting service). Published Mar. 1, 2014. <http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com>.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

recognition of the complexity of their identities. In another set of photos, one with inquiries and comments from their fellow white students, the project's participants argued against essentialist thinking and binary definitions of race. The collection incorporated questions ranging from somewhat patronizing to outright offensive: e.g., "What are you?", "Can you read?", "Don't you wish you were white like the rest of us?" and "Are you all so fast because you spend so much time running from the cops?"¹⁰⁵ It also included the following backhanded compliments: "You're lucky to be black, [it must have been] so easy to get into college," "You're basically white," "You're the whitest Black person I know," "I don't even think of you as Black," "You're really articulate for a black girl," and "You don't sound black, you sound smart."¹⁰⁶

The common denominator of all the statements cited above is their misguided foundational premise: one that defines whiteness in opposition to blackness. According to that binary equation, whiteness and blackness represent two oppositional ends on the spectrum of value.¹⁰⁷ It is a zero-sum game: e.g., if white culture is seen as cerebral, black culture is perceived as deficient in this respect. This theorem's inner workings are evident in the statements in which students equate being smart with being white. The apparatus of racially motivated cultural devaluation works by "coloring" traits that are in their essence independent of ethnicity as either "black" or "white" (in this instance, by racializing intellectualism as inherently white). Using satire as a means of protest, student activists from the "I, Too, Am Harvard" project (and the creators of *Dear White People* applauded by them during the conference) aim to put a spoke in the wheel of this discriminatory mechanism.¹⁰⁸

As recounted by *NPR*'s reporter Shereen Marisol Meraji, Simien's movie received a warm welcome at the student conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was to be expected, as the film tackles the most crucial queries of the "I, Too, Am Harvard" campaign: the complex

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁷ Morrison. *Playing in the Dark*. Pp. 1-28.

¹⁰⁸ Meraji, Shereen Marisol. "Watching 'Dear White People' At Harvard." *NPR*. Published Oct. 18, 2014. <https://n.pr/3bWqYp3>.

questions of ethnic identity, racial non-binarism, and unconscious bias. “The Harvard crowd at the screening was feeling it. People were laughing and shouting and snapping throughout” – recounts Meraji, who attended the conference to interview its participants.¹⁰⁹ The resonance of *Dear White People* among the Harvard crowd is visible in the emotional tone of the testimonials she has collected. For example, one student majoring in African-American studies told her: “It just felt like you were watching your life up on the screen, it really did. I related to a lot of the characters, especially Sam White.”¹¹⁰ Another Harvard undergraduate, presenting her opinion in a YouTube review, used the lyrics of The Fugees’ *Killing Me Softly* to sing her praise for the film:

Justin Simien hit the nail on the head with this one, like he was “Strumming my pain with his fingers. Singing my life with his words” in this movie, y’all! As a black woman at an Ivy League university who has been involved in activist filmmaking and trying to make a change on campus, this movie speaks so vividly to my experience. I have never been able to relate to a fictitious character to the degree that I can relate to the characters in this movie.¹¹¹

As for Simien himself, during the Q&A session at the “I, Too, Am Harvard” conference, he admitted that he primarily identified with two characters from his movie: Lionel and Sam. The former is a gay man, a science-fiction geek, and an aspiring journalist whose choice not to conform to essentialist definitions of race makes him feel alienated. The latter is a biracial woman and an activist torn between her political allegiances and personal convictions. Simien said he felt like Lionel during his freshman year at Chapman University. Upon graduation, however, his predicament resembled more that of Sam. While at his Alma Mater, Simien observed various dissimilar approaches to race and identity. Some of them – such as black nationalism (symbolized by Sam’s activist group), elitism (mirrored in the lofty ambitions and precarious position of Troy), or colorism (represented through Coco, a girl ashamed of her dark complexion) – found their satirical reflection in the movie. Simien drew from his internal

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹¹ “Dear White People - Movie Review (Spoiler Free).” *Ahsante the Artist* (YouTube channel). Published on July 24, 2014. <https://youtu.be/XyjsxodRPOY>.

evolution and observational skills to delineate mental models of several iterations of blackness in the US. This aspect of the film emphasized that black culture is not a monolith, and that various notions of African-American identity could interchange, overlap, and coexist within a single individual. “There are as many versions of being black as there are black people. We’re all having a different experience,” said Simien in an interview with Meraji. “Being lumped into one giant experience,” he added, “isn’t good enough anymore.”¹¹²

Fraternity parties satirized in *Dear White People* are infamous for the stereotyping referred to by Simien, as they mold the diversity of black cultural affiliations into an essentialist image pre-defined by racialized presumptions. The aforementioned scene of the Halloween blackface party at Winchester comes at the end of the movie and constitutes the highest point on the film’s dramatic arc. The invitation to the event, written by Kurt and directed to Winchester’s students, reads as follows:

For all those looking to unleash their inner Negro from years of bondage and oppression, *Pastiche* proudly presents: “Dear White People,” our 89th annual Hallows Eve costume party, tonight at 10 Pacific Time or 5 Colored People Time . . . XXXL is the smallest sized T-shirt you can wear, preferably with a collage of Barack Obama and Tupac on it. Ladies, we need to see huge hoop earrings, long nails, and cheap, tight clothes. Proper hoodrat starts fights, speaks loudly, and when she can’t think of the words she’s trying to say, just makes one up, such as “edjmuicated.” Now feel free to fry up some chicken, bring some Kool-Aid, watermelon, and of course, that purple drank. Naturally, there will be a freestyle rap competition, so bring it and join us for the party of the year.¹¹³

During the Q&A session at the “I, Too, Am Harvard” conference, Simien revealed that he initially cut the blackface party scene from the script as he had considered it too far-fetched. “I’m doing way too much,” he recalled, “I need to pull back a bit. But a few months later, that happened.”¹¹⁴ In a surprising twist, reality caught up with Simien’s comically grotesque, catastrophic imagination. The above-cited invitation to the fictional Winchester party was based on an actual one sent out by Dartmouth College’s Alpha Delta fraternity, organizers of a “Bloods and Crips party” (July 26, 2013) – an event attended by over two hundred students. As

¹¹² Meraji. “Watching ‘Dear White People’ At Harvard.” *NPR*.

¹¹³ Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD.

¹¹⁴ Meraji. “Watching ‘Dear White People’ At Harvard.” *NPR*.

reported by *Dart*, Dartmouth's campus paper, many of the party's attendees adhered to the racialized dress code (basketball jerseys, sagging pants), wore Afro wigs and blackface makeup (aesthetically reminiscent of minstrel shows), sported ostensibly racist accessories (watermelons, Kool-Aid cups), and imitated black vernacular (mocking it as an impaired version of Standard English).¹¹⁵ After images from the event have been posted on social media, many students of color felt disrespected and demanded punitive intervention from the university's officials. The situation was additionally problematic for Dartmouth's president Philip J. Hanlon – as a former Alpha Delta member, he held symbolic patronage over the fraternity. After the university's faculty officially condemned the event, the party's organizers issued a formal apology; however, it seemed too reluctant and defensive, signaling an exercise in self-protection rather than a genuine expression of regret.¹¹⁶

Joseph Asch, campus journalist who published Alpha Delta's apology, tried to confront the fraternity with a sense of irony, inquiring whether Dartmouth students should anticipate parties “with caricatures of greedy Jews, each with a hawked nose and a bag of money,” or look forward to costumes of “buck-toothed Japanese with thick glasses.”¹¹⁷ Although derisive and scornful, the author was noticeably exasperated by the state of affairs at Dartmouth. At the end of his post, he asked a question that was simultaneously rhetorical in form and resigned in tone: “After years of sensitivity training and work on cultural competence, is there no other way for students to have fun at Dartmouth College?”¹¹⁸ Citing a *New York Times* article from 1998, he also pointed out that the 2013 affair was reminiscent of a nearly identical event from fifteen years before (when Dartmouth's Chi Gamma Epsilon and Alpha Xi Delta organized a “ghetto

¹¹⁵ The name of the event referred to the infamous South Central Los Angeles' street gangs. (Asch, Joseph. “Of Crips and Bloods and Memories of Ghetto Parties.” *Dart*. Published Aug. 14, 2013. <https://bit.ly/395Ig0M>).

¹¹⁶ First of all, the letter of apology underplayed the number of people protesting the event – the statement read that the people in charge of the fraternity “sat down with *an individual* who was originally offended by the party.” Moreover, it claimed that that the party's theme was merely an “oversight” and that it “was never meant to be derogatory.” In reality, the dress code prescribed by the organizers was very deliberate in its mockery; it was also premeditated – in fact, the invitation to the party advised future attendees to “choose wisely” which group they intended to impersonate and deride. (Ibidem).

¹¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem.

party” of their own). “History repeats itself,” he observed, “first as tragedy and then as farce.”¹¹⁹ Unfortunately, Asch’s historical judgment proved to be right. Despite the public scorn endured by the organizers and the university itself, parties similar to the one at Dartmouth took place on other American campuses in the ensuing years. Overall, they have revealed that the proclaimed post-racialism of American millennials is mostly a myth¹²⁰ and provided further evidence of the global village¹²¹ falling back to the seemingly anachronistic practices of tribalism.¹²²

Blackface incidents remained a reoccurring problem on American campuses up until 2019.¹²³ As pointed out by Asch, student gatherings employing racist imagery are not a new phenomenon, but there has been a definite spike in the number of such events taking place.¹²⁴ One can look for the reason for that resurgence in the development of social media – spaces where ideological echo chambers often spark extremism. As argued by futurologist and philosopher of technology Jaron Lanier, algorithms governing websites such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube undermine informational objectivity through confirmation bias: i.e., they widen, but not necessarily diversify people’s social circle and informational intake. In order to increase user engagement, digital media platforms tend to amplify the most divisive, radical

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ Demby, Gene. “Is the Millennial Generation's Racial Tolerance Overstated?” *NPR*. Published June 22, 2015. <https://n.pr/3a96Ps7>; McElwee, Sean. “Millennials Are More Racist Than They Think: Just Look at the Numbers.” *Politico*. Published March 9, 2015. <https://politi.co/3dgMtil>.

¹²¹ In recent years, the so-called “digital tribalism” has become an important problem for the United States and the world in general. “We cannot unwind integration any more than we can stuff technology back into a box,” said President Obama in his 2016 address to the U.N, and argued that everyone in the world faces a pertinent choice. “We can choose to press forward with a better model of cooperation . . . Or we can retreat into a world sharply divided . . . along age-old lines of nation and tribe and race and religion.” (Horsley, Scott. “Obama At U.N.: Reject Tribalism Home and Abroad.” *NPR*. Published Sept. 20, 2016. <https://n.pr/396lhQg>).

¹²² As argued by journalist Roger Cohen: “The main forces in the world today are the modernizing, barrier-breaking sweep of globalization and the tribal reaction to it, which lies in the assertion of religious, national, linguistic, racial or ethnic identity against the unifying technological tide.” (Cohen, Roger. “Tribalism Here, and There.” *New York Times*. Published March 20, 2008. <https://nyti.ms/395LiT4>).

¹²³ Korn, Melissa. “Colleges Continue to Confront Blackface on Campus.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Published Feb. 14, 2019. <https://on.wsj.com/2Uu8923>.

¹²⁴ Perhaps unbeknownst to Simien, blackface parties such as the one depicted in his movie happened before. Besides the previously mentioned Dartmouth ghetto party in 1998, for example, in 2001, Auburn University students from Delta Sigma Phi and Beta Theta Pi organized a party that included pictures of lynchings and police brutality, thirteen students wearing blackface (one with a noose around his neck), and several attendees hooded and robed as Klansmen. (“Frat Bans 13 Who Wore Blackface.” *Los Angeles Times*. Published Nov. 9, 2001. <https://lat.ms/3p6p0pN>).

voices on both sides of the political aisle.¹²⁵ Growing entrapment in information bubbles balkanizes the global village, driving people towards tribalism by underscoring the importance of national, religious, and ethnic identifications.¹²⁶ The recent resurgence of blackface parties on American campuses can also constitute a response to the expanding activism of the political left.¹²⁷ Conservatives and free speech absolutists rebel against what they perceive as a forceful imposition of “wokeness” and “cancel culture” – i.e., new terms for political correctness.¹²⁸ In the process, they sought to aggravate those who participate in the “Oppression Olympics” – i.e., those who seem cynical or overindulgent in accentuating their intersectionally marginalized status.¹²⁹ Rehashing the Internet trolling culture outside online spaces, right-wing activists aim to “trigger snowflakes” or “own the libs” – that is, rebel against the new social mores by exhibiting behavior deemed outrageous by the progressive left.¹³⁰

Students at the Winchester party also intended to rebel against political correctness. The event’s organizing committee consisted of comedy writers from *Pastiche*, a fictional equivalent of the *Harvard Lampoon*. According to them, their party’s ironic tenor was equal to that of the best satirical pieces from *The Onion* or *Saturday Night Live* – i.e., two seminal American comedy institutions that the *Pastiche* writers aspired to model. However, they failed to acknowledge that genuinely poignant satire – one that can be characterized as transgressive, corrective, or cathartic – understands its social and cultural context (a perspective that must be

¹²⁵ Lanier, Jaron. “Social Media is Undermining Truth.” *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. Henry Holt and Company, 2018. Pp. 53-64.

¹²⁶ VanDerVerff, Todd. “Progressive Fundamentalism: How the Media Fortify the Bubbles We All Live In.” *VOX*. Published Nov. 14, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3959pBb>; Thornton, Patrick. “I’m a Coastal Elite from the Midwest: The Real Bubble is Rural America.” *Roll Call*. Published Nov. 10, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2wuGwh8>.

¹²⁷ Apart from the aforementioned blackface parties, campus fraternities around the US organized events mocking Native Americans (Phi Sigma Kappa’s “Colonial Bros & Nava-Hoes” at Cal Poly in 2013), Latinos (Chi Omega’s “Mexican Party” at Penn State in 2012), Asians (Kappa Sigma’s “Asia Prime Party” at Duke University in 2013), and other groups perceived as alien or inferior. (Escobar, Samantha. “13 Racist College Parties That Prove *Dear White People* Isn’t Exaggerating at All.” *The Gloss*. Posted Oct. 17, 2014. <https://bit.ly/398OSbJ>).

¹²⁸ Lewis, Helen. “Cancel Culture and the Problem of Woke Capitalism.” *Atlantic*. July 14, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3p4xhu9>.

¹²⁹ Yuval-Davis, Nira. “Dialogical Epistemology: An Intersectional Resistance to the ‘Oppression Olympics.’” *Gender and Society*. Vol. 26, No. 1, February 2012. Pp. 46-54.

¹³⁰ Winkler, Jeff. “‘Own the Libs’ Was a Snide Way to Mock Conservatives, and is Now a Fun Way to Respond to Liberalism.” *NBC News*. Published Aug. 4, 2018. <https://nbcnews.to/2U9sQBv>.

simultaneously up-to-date and historically informed). At its best, satire provides a diagnosis of the country's body politic and administers its remedial humor with surgical precision. All of that requires empathy and intellectual discipline – two qualities that constitute the direct opposite of the reckless approach adopted by the narcissistic, self-righteous jokesters from Winchester. *Pastiche* writers catered to tired cultural and racial clichés. Like the students who attended the Dartmouth party, they equated blackness with a grotesquely distorted version of inner-city and hip-hop culture. As proof positive of their ignorance, they sported racialized artifacts – e.g., watermelons, basketball jerseys, Kool-Aid, and fried chicken – while remaining blissfully unaware of the context in which they were created, propagated, and entrenched.¹³¹

As calculated by Jeff Chang, cultural critic and the author of *We Gon' Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation* (2016), during the 2015-16 academic year, almost one hundred universities encountered some form of pushback – either a protest or a list of demands – from students advocating for racial equality on campus and beyond. Chang pointed out that this rise in activism provoked a considerable outcry from both the liberal and conservative media. Usually divided along the lines of their respective ideological affiliations, they started speaking in unison, portraying student activists as coddled and overly dependent on institutional interventionism. As mentioned before, the majority of publications described them as opponents of free of speech – thin-skinned individuals willing to sacrifice open intellectual debate in the name of their emotional comfort. As enlisted by Chang:

¹³¹ In the antebellum America, racist propaganda made the watermelon a symbol of black naivete (the argument was that slaves do not mind being subjugated as long as they are afforded simple pleasures, such as eating watermelon). Basketball jerseys represent one of the few ways to escape the poverty of the inner-city – an unfortunate state of affairs perpetuated by the continuous lack of funding for quality education (also, as argued by sports journalist and cultural critic John Hoberman, US culture racializes black people as inherently athletic). Kool-Aid became a cheap alternative for water in poor neighborhoods, places which suffered from a substandard quality of drinking water due to their crumbling infrastructure and environmental racism. Finally, the image of a black hand wielding a fried chicken leg meant to symbolize primitivism and insatiability of African-Americans. It became popularized by D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) – a pean to the Ku Klux Klan and the first blockbuster in the history of Hollywood. (John, Artit. "Making Fried Chicken and Watermelon Racist." *NPR*. Published Feb. 6, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2WwqSfR>; Hoberman, John Milton. *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*. Mariner Books, 1997. P. 146).

On the right, the *National Review*'s David French called them "revolutionaries" who sought "nothing less than the overthrow of our constitutional republic, beginning with our universities." The liberal critique was even more bizarre, a barely coherent mix of free-speech absolutism (*hate speech is valuable because you had to respond to it*), pop-psych generational stereotype (*oh, you narcissistic, entitled millennials*), and "moderate" triumphalism (*look how crazy you extremists on the left and the right are!*). At the *Atlantic*, Conor Friedersdorf called student organizers "intolerant bullies." Todd Gitlin wondered in the *New York Times* why they felt so vulnerable and fearful. Thomas Friedman wrote, "There is surely a connection between the explosion of political correctness on college campuses . . . and the ovations Donald Trump is getting for being crudely politically incorrect."¹³²

Dear White People provided a preemptive response to the critiques recorded by Chang. The movie humanized black students and activists in the act of historical, present-time, and anticipatory solidarity. In the course of the film, Simien showed the vulnerability of his protagonists by stripping away their social masks and politically charged public personas. He also problematized the binary definitions of race by depicting their eclectic taste and heterogeneous interests. Finally, he portrayed them through the lens of gentle, ironic humor – one revealing his characters' shortcomings and, at the same time, making the viewer sympathetic to their plight.

Dear White People gave a human face to the largely depersonalized, almost universally criticized figures of contemporary campus activism. Illustrating their everyday struggles, the movie placed them in a broader political and social context, providing a perspective lacking from the journalistic critiques enlisted by Chang. Telling their story in the medium of film comedy, Simien extrapolated the discussion about the relationship between race and academic success beyond editorial columns and scholarly journals. Simien's narrative choices expressed confidence in satire's informative, discursive, and cathartic function. His approach echoed that of Mikhail Bakhtin, who believed that humor shortened the emotional and perceptual distance between the reader and the text of culture. "Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact," argued Bakhtin.¹³³ In a similar vein, Simien took the lofty language of academic discourse on race – e.g., the debate about

¹³² Chang, Jeff. *We Gon' Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation*. Picador, 2015. Kindle loc. 492-501.

¹³³ Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination*. P. 23.

microaggressions, unconscious bias, and racial non-binarism – and brought it down to the realm of everyday talk, democratizing the discussion by translating scholarly jargon into jokes.

***Dear White People* in the Context of Black American Film and Comic Tradition**

As discussed above, Simien appropriates various academic discourses – debates around race taking place in social studies and cultural criticism – and narrativizes them in the form of satire. In doing so, he creates a unique artistic proposition in the world of African-American cinema. At the same time, *Dear White People* constitutes one of the first movies in a new wave of black film production – one that looks at black identity through an anti-essentialist lens and treats it as an open and ever-changing entity. To fully accentuate this fact, this subchapter presents *Dear White People* in the context of black cinematic and comic tradition, placing a particular emphasis on the work of Robert Townsend and Spike Lee – two seminal figures in the twentieth-century American film satire.

As pointed out by cultural critic and filmmaker Nelson George, *Dear White People* echoes the approach and aesthetics of Robert Townsend’s *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987).¹³⁴ Townsend’s movie tells the story of Bobby Taylor, an aspiring black actor dreaming about playing the lead in a popular detective movie. In stark contrast to his ambitions, mild manners, and lanky posture, he ends up being offered stereotypical roles of gang members and street hustlers.¹³⁵ It seems that if he wants to be a movie star, he has to cater to the racialized expectations of late-twentieth-century Hollywood. The paradox enveloping Taylor’s mind has been perhaps best expressed by Nate Parker, an actor who once quipped: “As a black man, you leave auditions not hoping you get the job, but wondering how you explain it to your family if you do.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ George, Nelson. “Happy to Be Your Guide to Black Identity.” *New York Times*. Published Oct. 9, 2014. <https://nyti.ms/2y3t30n>.

¹³⁵ Townsend, Robert. *Hollywood Shuffle*. Olive Films, 2015. DVD.

¹³⁶ Qtd. in Kiang, Jessica and Oliver Lyttelton. “22 Essential Films About Hollywood.” *IndieWire*. Accessed Jan. 2, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2NhCNeW>.

The comparison drawn by George proves to be an apt one: Simien's movie mirrors Townsend's satirical magnum opus in its attempt to portray the struggle of comporting one's individuality to racially essentialist expectations of those who hold institutional and cultural power. What is more, both films share a similar comic sensibility – i.e., they eagerly employ racial stereotypes and make them overtly laughable through irony. Although nuanced and multifaceted, their humor aims to stir the viewers' imagination through satirical prodding. Simien and Townsend engage in a high-wire act of balancing on the line of propriety and provocation. Their wit cuts to the core of essentialist thinking, ousting covert discrimination through confrontation with the bias encoded in racialized expectations. Both directors argue that essentialist typecasting stamps out the inherent variability of black individuation. As it constrains self-expression and limits the possibility of cultural identification, it ultimately curbs African-Americans' self-conceptualizations, and thus their educational and career opportunities.

Interestingly, Townsend and Simien's respective movies have been financed independently: the former through private loans and life-savings of the director,¹³⁷ the latter by crowdfunding online.¹³⁸ The fact that these critically acclaimed and commercially successful productions had not been supported by any of the major film studios in the US proves that the movie industry is often ill-informed about the public's preferences. As demonstrated by *Hollywood Shuffle's* and *Dear White People's* international reception, the frequently made argument that black cinema does not translate or sell well overseas also seems to be invalid.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Nancy, Shepherdson. "Credit Card America." *American Heritage*. Vol. 42, Issue 7, 1991. Accessed Jan. 2, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2NsAwxJ>.

¹³⁸ The official website of Simien's crowd-funding campaign: <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/dear-white-people#/>

¹³⁹ As argued by film critic Nancy Wang Yuen: "There is a long-standing belief that films and television shows starring actors of color do not sell overseas. *Think Like a Man* (2012) was cancelled in France for fear that a film [with nearly all-black cast] would not sell, though other US movies with all-white casts did not prompt the same concerns." (Wang Yuen, Nancy. *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*. Rutgers U P, 2016. P. 67; see also Tre'vell, Anderson. "Disproving the 'Black Films Don't Travel' Hollywood Myth." *Los Angeles Times*. Published March 24, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/qkuf8m5>).

The changing demographics of the country,¹⁴⁰ combined with the ongoing compartmentalization of film and television culture,¹⁴¹ turned socially conscious African-American cinema – once perceived as niche – into a significant cultural market.¹⁴²

Simien’s style has also been compared to that of Spike Lee, the founding father of contemporary authorial black cinema.¹⁴³ The analogy is justified, especially with regard to *School Daze* (1988), a film based on Lee’s college experience. Like *Dear White People*, Lee’s movie talks about fraternity culture, discusses the politics of black hair, and tackles the subject of intra-racial colorism. Similarly to Simien’s film, *School Daze*’s story shuffles between multiple characters and subplots.¹⁴⁴ The protagonist of Lee’s film, Vaughn “Dap” Dunlap, is a socially and politically conscious black activist, much like *Dear White People*’s Sam. Dap’s arch-enemy, Julian “Dean Big Brother Almighty” Eaves, is a cultural elitist whose stance echoes that of Troy’s. Moreover, just like Coco in *Dear White People*, young black women from *School Daze*’s Gamma Rays sorority go to great lengths to fit into white beauty standards. Considering all that, it comes as no surprise that Simien appointed Lee’s movie as one of his core inspirations in the concept trailer for his film.¹⁴⁵

At one point in *Dear White People*, Sam is described by her fellow students as a spiritual offspring of Lee (Kurt: “God, who does Sam think she is?” / [Another *Pastiche* writer]:

¹⁴⁰ As calculated by the Pew Research Center, African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians and other minorities are going to make up a majority of the US population by 2050. (Parker, Kim et al. “Views of Demographic Changes.” *Pew Research Center*. Published Mar. 21, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/rc35eqv>).

¹⁴¹ As argued by cultural critic Julie Wilson, twenty-first century America witnessed “the historical emergence of a new television culture where the ‘Big 3’ [public broadcasters – CBS, ABC, and NBC] . . . give way to the multi-channel digital landscape, portable screens and content, interactive viewers, and niche audiences.” (Wilson, Julie. “The Post-Network Era: Understanding Contemporary U.S. Television Culture.” *Teaching Media*. Published July 28, 2010. <https://tinyurl.com/t7y5far>).

¹⁴² Whitten, Sarah. “Record Number of Black Directors Among 2018’s Top Films, Earning \$1.6 Billion at the Box Office.” *CNBC*. Published Jan. 4, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yatx9nag>.

¹⁴³ As argued by film critic Austin Collins, *Dear White People* is a project “that directly invokes Spike Lee’s seminal black college movie *School Daze*, but in some ways it’s more complicated. The 33-year-old Simien is much more attuned to college life today, with its new social technologies and increased diversity.” (Collins, Austin. “‘I Was Taken Aback by the Volume of Vitriol’: Interview with Justin Simien.” *The Ringer*. Published Apr. 21, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/w2n854k>).

¹⁴⁴ Lee, Spike. *School Daze*. Originally released in 1988. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2001. DVD.

¹⁴⁵ Simien, Justin. *Dear White People: Concept Trailer*. Published June 14, 2012. <https://vimeo.com/44018538>.

“Seriously, dude, it’s like Spike Lee and Oprah had some sort of pissed off baby”).¹⁴⁶ Even though Sam prefers Ingmar Bergman to Lee, she tells her friends that the latter is her favorite filmmaker. She fears that claiming otherwise would have diminished her credibility among black activists on campus (Sam’s boyfriend: “This isn’t you, Sam . . . Your favorite director is Bergman, but you tell people it’s Spike Lee. You love bebop, but you’ve got a thing for Taylor Swift . . . You’re more Banksy than Barack”).¹⁴⁷ Sam’s dilemma illustrates a problem caused by racially essentialist thinking: namely, the reduction of cultural identifications available to African-Americans.

In his movies, Lee aims to reappropriate the representation of what is perceived as black in American culture and do it justice on the silver screen (e.g., African-American vernacular, hip-hop ethos and street art portrayed in *Do the Right Thing*, a 1989 film that defined Lee’s style). Lee’s approach is that of authorial control, narrative unification, and aesthetic consistency that serve his representation politics. Simien’s stance is decidedly different, as he argues that African-American culture can incorporate varied, dissimilar, or even contradictory forms – all of them equally legitimate in their expression of blackness (e.g., the queerness and nerdiness of Lionel, Simien’s alter-ego in *Dear White People*, complements his black identity in an anti-essentialist, intersectional fashion). Another distinction between Lee and Simien is that the former often portrays African-American and hip-hop cultures as virtually inseparable, while the latter tends to avoid that equation. “Hip-hop is pop now,” says Simien in one interview, “it has officially been co-opted by the mainstream . . . it’s not something I define my black identity with.”¹⁴⁸

Lee’s authorial voice has been changing throughout his career. In his recent public appearances, he reportedly made sweeping generalizations, dismissed constructive criticism,

¹⁴⁶ Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD.

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁸ Qtd. in George. “Happy to Be Your Guide to Black Identity.” *New York Times*.

and shut down conversations with black activists questioning his ideological positions.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, both his 2015 movie *Chi-raq* and his 2017 Netflix series *She's Gotta Have It* have been criticized for their somewhat self-indulgent, patronizing tone.¹⁵⁰ Although poised and self-assured, Simien's work remains dialogic, as it aims to provoke discussion rather than offer ready-made conclusions. As such, *Dear White People* exemplifies one of the features of satire as delineated by media critic Jonathan Gray. "Satire is provocative, not dismissive," Gray argues, "a crucial point that critics typically ignore when assessing its role in public discourse."¹⁵¹ Interestingly, Lee's 2018 movie *BlacKKKlansman* adopted a similar approach and was generally considered a return to form for the Nestor of black independent cinema, proving that new trends in African-American culture can potentially influence some of its old masters as well.¹⁵²

Townsend and Lee rely heavily on the poetics of the "grotesque body."¹⁵³ This concept, originally put forth by Bakhtin, centers around the idea that humor translates the intellectual abstraction of ideas – e.g., aesthetic values, cultural taste, or political philosophy – to the realm of the human body. As our physicality is often inadequate, this transformation renders the ideas it aims to embody as unattainable. The attempt to enact or personify them might be noble; still, the contrast between the workings of the mind and the body – i.e., the abstract ideas and their real-world representations – makes it intrinsically tragicomic. By extrapolating intangible ideas to the concrete realm of the body, this aesthetic derives its dark, existential humor from the failures of human corporeality. We can see this aesthetic at work in Lee's Oscar-nominated *Do*

¹⁴⁹ Ramsey, Francesca. "Why Did 'Chiraq' Ignore Sexual Violence? A Review & Argument with Spike Lee." *Chescaleigh* (Ramsey's YouTube channel). Published Dec. 18, 2015. <https://youtu.be/86vww8D1u5M>; Noah, Trevor. "Spike Lee: Extended Interview." *Daily Show*. Published Nov. 30, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/wcopjth>.

¹⁵⁰ Obaro, Tomi. "'She's Gotta Have It' is Spike Lee at his Lecturing Worst." *BuzzFeed*. Published Nov. 28, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/r7amhqh>; Child, Ben. "Spike Lee rebuffs Chicago-Based Rapper's Criticism of 'Chi-Raq.'" *Guardian*. Published Dec. 11, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/uhvapkzh>.

¹⁵¹ Gray et al. *Satire TV*. P. 13.

¹⁵² "BlacKKKlansman." *Rotten Tomatoes* (review aggregator). Accessed Mar. 30, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/wgxeo26>.

¹⁵³ Bakhtin, Mikhail. "The Grotesque Image of the Body and its Sources." *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana U P, 1984. Pp. 303-367.

the Right Thing (1989). When a police officer kills Radio Raheem – one of the movie’s protagonists – the countercultural ideas of his proud, hip, revolutionary blackness suffer along with him, unable to sustain the weight of the country’s systemic racism.¹⁵⁴ We can also see this concept in action in Townsend’s *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987). Throughout the movie, Billy Tylor – its main character – contorts his physique to personify, belie, or respond to various ideas of race and respectability in American mainstream culture.¹⁵⁵

The inadequate, struggling corporeality of Raheem and Tylor symbolizes the tragicomic unattainability of the ideals they aim to embody. In *Do the Right Thing*, Raheem’s body – and, just as importantly, all that it represents – falls victim to the havoc wrought by the prejudice of the trigger-happy police force. In *Hollywood Shuffle*, Tylor’s body – as well as his ideals – eventually collapses under the strain inflicted by the racially essentialist movie industry. The characters of *Dear White People*, in contrast, manage to withstand the pressures put on them by their immediate environments and the broader US culture. They struggle at times, but their portrayal is ultimately affirmative. From time to time, they seem awkward and comically out of place, but their framing is always empathetic. As a result, they never seem grotesque – i.e., the comedy of their physical inadequacy is never tinged by tragedy. In the world of *Dear White People*, the impossibility of attaining a particular cultural ideal unmasks this ideal’s inherent faults, not the inadvertent liability of the person unable to embody it. Simien aims to redefine social standards to comport them to his characters’ imperfect bodies. That is why, for example, he portrays different versions of masculinity and femininity as equally legitimate and valuable in their embodiment of – and contribution to – black culture.

Ever since Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), American cinema has been infused with harmful stereotypes of non-white sexuality. Throughout history, it portrayed black men as dangerously salacious and fetishized black women as tantalizingly exotic (alternatively, it

¹⁵⁴ Lee. *Do the Right Thing*. DVD.

¹⁵⁵ Townsend. *Hollywood Shuffle*. DVD.

ridiculed them as asexual “mammies”).¹⁵⁶ Being aware of this troubling legacy, Simien aims to counteract it through incongruous humor – i.e., constructing characters that reliably fail to meet the potentially racialized expectations of the American viewer. Similarly to Townsend and Lee’s movies, *Dear White People* extrapolates the complex and relatively abstract inner workings of culture and race to the tangible realm of the body – a fact exemplified in its subversive representations of racialized, gendered identities. The film portrays the unlikely friendship of Lionel, an ostracized and lanky nerd, with Troy, a popular and handsome athlete. Notably, the characters defy the viewer’s expectations throughout the movie. At one point, the shy geek manifests his physical courage, and the self-confident jock exposes his emotional vulnerability. Importantly, both portrayals are ultimately positive and frame these two contrasting embodiments of masculinity and blackness as complementary. Simien’s women characters are similarly diverse. They range from Coco’s “traditional” femininity to the more androgynous, tomboyish girlhood of Sam. Once again, the movie affirms all forms along the gendered spectrum of womanhood as equally valid in their embodiment of blackness. It also utilizes a similar strategy to discuss various aspects of African-American bodily aesthetics that transgress gender, e.g., hair texture or skin complexion. The film tackles the emotional and physical strain of hair-straightening – i.e., applying a chemical relaxer to change the natural, curly texture of black hair and make it adhere to culturally prevalent white beauty standards. *Dear White People* also reflects on intra- and inter-racial colorism, discussing the historically favorable treatment of light-skinned African-Americans and its influence on the perception of black (un)desirability.¹⁵⁷ While the movie demonstrates its awareness of history, it ultimately

¹⁵⁶ Chideya, Farai. “Sex Stereotypes of African-Americans Have Long History.” *NPR*. Published May 7, 2007. <https://n.pr/3cakiUf>.

¹⁵⁷ In the antebellum America, light-skinned slaves often ended up as house servants and were treated more humanely, which incited envy and indictments of betrayal from the usually darker-skinned field slaves. Some of these antagonisms survived to this day. Nowadays, blacks with lighter complexion are often accused of having “light-skin” privilege – i.e., receiving favorable treatment – and told that they are “not black enough” to claim “true” African-American identity. (Hunter, Margaret L. “‘If You’re Light, You’re Alright’: Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color.” *Gender and Society*. Vol.16.2, 2002. Pp. 175-193).

aims to depoliticize the black body, thereby affording its characters (and black communities at large) more freedom of expression and aesthetic leeway.

Slapstick, the trope of physical humor used by Simien, conveys a message similar to that of the grotesque body, but delivers it more light-heartedly, with playful flair and cartoon-like panache. The main difference between these two concepts is a tonal one. Irrespective of circumstances, slapstick is always jovial and buoyant, not weighty and noir. Its primary purpose is comic entertainment, not reflection on human inadequacy. Of course, this type of thinking can occur, but only as a side note, a somber didascaly on the margins of silliness. *Dear White People* employs a mild form of slapstick, paying homage to the trope of physical humor present in the United States' film tradition ever since its very beginning. At times, the movements and facial expressions of its protagonists are exaggerated for comedic effect; it is especially true when it comes to cutscenes – i.e., mini-sketches interspersing and illustrating the characters' arguments.

Still, it seems reasonable to assume that Simien remains cautious about physical comedy due to its troubling relationship with race in the US. After all, the staged clumsiness of black bodies – along with their comically hyperbolized, outlandish grimaces – served as a laughing stock for white audiences in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century minstrel shows. Some black minstrel performers, such as Bert Williams, managed to infuse their performances with more depth and make their way to the more prestigious Vaudeville stages (Williams was the first black actor to play a lead role on Broadway).¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the very purpose of black minstrel humor was to secure white audiences in their imagined sense of racial and cultural superiority.

During the silent film era, many white comedians appropriated the techniques of physical humor first developed in minstrel shows. Using the expressive and interpretative

¹⁵⁸ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 4589-4596.

freedom not afforded to black performers, they redefined the genre of slapstick comedy. Performers like Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton animated their bodies with dignity and lyricism, permeating their physical humor with expressive social commentary – silent yet bountiful with meaning.¹⁵⁹ In the post-Civil Rights era, a time when black comic performers attained more artistic freedom, African-American physical comedians aimed to turn away from the minstrel aesthetics and equal the corporeal eloquence of Chaplin and other masters of the craft. Historians of American comedy generally agree that the most prominent performer of physical comedy in the post-Civil Rights era was Richard Pryor.¹⁶⁰ While the Jim Crow era physical humor portrayed African-Americans as inferior in their unrelatability, Pryor’s stand-up comedy constituted a reversal of that trope – it attempted to embody everyone, regardless of race or creed. Pryor performed his stand-up comedy through meticulous physical representations of people, animals, and inanimate objects. Once, when a journalist asked Pryor about his impersonation methods, he replied: “I am everyone I create.”¹⁶¹ Taking into account the range of the characters he was able to embody, Pryor’s comedy encompassed “a global repertoire of humanity that included different races, ages, and sexes, and all living things.”¹⁶² Taking advantage of the change instigated by Pryor – i.e., the shift in the mainstream perception of African-American humor – directors such as Townsend and Lee incorporated various elements of physical comedy to portray their characters in silly (slapstick), tragicomic (grotesque body), but ultimately humanizing way (in both of these tropes). In the process, they were able to turn the minstrel-like laughter of superiority into a comedy of recognition and identification. One can observe a similar narrative approach in *Dear White People*’s character construction, especially when it comes to Sam and Lionel. These two widely dissimilar

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, Dale, Alan. *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*. U of Minnesota P, 2000.

¹⁶⁰ Townsend, Robert. *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*. Codeblack Entertainment, 2010. DVD.

¹⁶¹ Qtd. in McCluskey, Audrey Thomas. “Richard Pryor: Comic Genius, Tortured Soul.” *Richard Pryor: The Life and Legacy of a ‘Crazy’ Black Man*. Indiana U P, 2008. P. 6.

¹⁶² Ibidem.

protagonists differ with regard to their character (outspoken vs. shy), politics (anti-racist vs. assimilationist), gender (woman vs. man), and sexuality (straight vs. gay). Even though the movie laughs at their respective inadequacies, their overall portrayal remains sympathetic, as the comic perspective helps Simien embrace and identify with his characters' fallibilities and contradictions. It allows him and the audience to join Sam and Lionel in poking fun at the circumstances that created them – not to laugh *at* but *with* them.

Historians of American comedy often describe the 1990s as the golden era of positive black portrayals on-screen – a cultural tide exemplified by productions such as *A Different World* (1987–1993), *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–1996), or *Family Matters* (1989–1998).¹⁶³ In the early two-thousands, these programs' graceful and sympathetic humor has been replaced by the crude comedy of reality shows such as *Maury* (1991–) and *Trading Spouses* (2004–2007). These shows' physical humor – dubbed by some cultural critics as the “new minstrel”¹⁶⁴ – resided primarily in condemning cultural values inscribed onto the body of its black contestants, a strategy employed to provoke the feelings of superiority among the programs' viewers. At the same time, popular African-American cinema went through its own artistic crisis as well. Even though blockbusters directed by Tyler Perry, the most popular black film comedies of the early two-thousands, did not stoop to the level of minstrel shows or reality television, one could hardly call them subtle.¹⁶⁵ Perry elicits laughter through outlandish embroidery: one represented by fat suits and perfunctory gender swaps.¹⁶⁶ It is a humor of superficial exaggeration, very different from the sly and sophisticated comedy of Townsend, Lee, and Simien.

¹⁶³ Kimble, Julian. “Best Black Sitcoms of All Time.” *Complex*. Published Feb. 11, 2013. <https://bit.ly/2NDDDBey>.

¹⁶⁴ Townsend. *Why We Laugh*. DVD.

¹⁶⁵ “Tyler Perry’s Box-Office Revenue” (database). Accessed Jul. 10, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3ccFjhd>.

¹⁶⁶ As remarked by Baratunde Thurston in his critique of stereotypical portrayals of blackness on Black Entertainment Television channel: “I know the Internet Movie Database says Perry has written over ten films, and there may be several titles and even different casts, but if you’ve seen one Tyler Perry movie, you’ve experienced the entire canon. The man has only made one film, and you can catch it on BET, repeatedly.” (Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 5).

Being undoubtedly aware of the creative failings of black physical comedy in the early years of the new millennium (reality shows, Perry, and their epigones), Simien decided to double down on accentuating the intellectual strain of African-American humor – a choice that is more subversive than it may seem at first glance. Throughout American history, black culture has been portrayed as corporeal or spiritual, but rarely cerebral. The racialized mind and spirit dichotomy was made famous by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), the most influential abolitionist novel of antebellum America. As explained by historian Ibram X. Kendi, in Stowe’s novel,

Blacks were spiritually superior because of their intellectual inferiority. . . . Stowe’s popularization of spiritually gifted Black people quickly became a central pillar of African-American identity as Black readers consumed the book and passed on its racist ideas. Racist Whites, believing themselves to be void of soul, made it their personal mission to find soul through Black people. Racist Blacks, believing themselves to be void of intellect, made it their personal mission to find intellect through White people.¹⁶⁷

The idea propagated by Stowe became ingrained in the national culture to such an extent that it managed to temporarily appeal to W. E. B. DuBois – the most prominent black sociologist of the twentieth century and one of the early champions of African-American intellectualism. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), DuBois’ seminal book, was based upon the idea of African-Americans as predominantly spiritual beings. The “soulfulness” accentuated by DuBois meant to serve as proof of African-American’s inherent humanity. While it did serve its function, it also inadvertently portrayed black people as driven by impulse and emotion, not reason (with some exceptions, such as DuBois’ Talented Tenth, a designated group of black intellectuals with a mission to become race leaders).

Even though DuBois has eventually changed his stance later in his career, his initial embrace of the mind and spirit dichotomy continues to serve as a symbol of this concept’s suggestive power. The idea popularized by Stowe survives to this day. As with most cultural concepts, one can find its reflection in the world of humor as well. For example, it is evident in the 2004 film comedy *White Chicks*. “The premise alone,” argues Black Entertainment

¹⁶⁷ Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning*. Pp. 252-253.

Television (BET) movie critic, “does obey Hollywood’s favorite racial convention – that Blacks are soulful feelers while Whites are soulless thinkers.”¹⁶⁸ The contrast pointed out by the BET staff writer is visible in many classic comedy specials, comedy sketches, and publications. For example, it reoccurs in Richard Pryor’s stand-up *Live in Concert* (1979), *Saturday Night Live*’s and Eddie Murphy’s vignette “White Like Me” (1984), or Christian Lander’s book *Stuff White People Like* (2008). While these particular texts of culture do not take the racialized “soulful feelers” vs. “soulless thinker” dichotomy in earnest, they employ it and jokingly exploit its cultural presence. What is more, their popular and critical success reveals that this trope still resonates with the American public. (Some contemporary comedians – most recently, Maggie Maye¹⁶⁹ and W. Kamau Bell¹⁷⁰ – try to oppose this trope more directly).

When it comes to Simien, he aims to belie the “soulful feelers” vs. “soulless thinkers” dichotomy by incorporating the language of academic disciplines – i.e., discourses historically attributed to white rationality – into his unapologetically black film comedy. *Dear White People* engages in a discussion about unconscious bias and microaggressions (Critical Race Theory), the difference between cultural hybridity and appropriation (New Black Aesthetic), class and ideological differences among African-Americans (Social Studies), politics of race representation (Cultural Studies), and the influence of race on academic success (Education Studies). Translating these debates into the language of popular culture through comic

¹⁶⁸ Qtd. in “Boycott White Chicks.” *Prince.org* (on-line message board). Accessed May 4, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/ycox9blj>.

¹⁶⁹ As joked by Maye during her *CONAN* stand-up set: “How is it racist when white people do ‘black people stuff’ but it’s not racist that to think that there’s ‘black people stuff’? I’ve noticed that anytime people talk about ‘black people stuff’ or ‘acting black’ it’s always the same thing: jive-talking, pimp-walking, neck-rocking, snaps. It’s some stuff you’d see on a McDonald’s commercial. No one ever says: ‘Oh, man, she came up with [an ingenious idea or invention]?! She’s acting black!’” (Maye, Maggie. “Maggie Maye Stand-Up 08/13/15.” *Team Coco* (official YouTube channel). Published Aug. 14, 2015. <https://youtu.be/-NZDNKLV37k>).

¹⁷⁰ This is how W. K. Bell reminisced about meek responses to intellectual humor in black comedy clubs: “I told my joke about Gandhi and the crowd went quiet. They knew who Gandhi was, but weren’t used to thinking about him in a black club. So I get offstage and the guy says, ‘You can tell he reads. I don’t!’ The crowd laughs and I was in seventh grade again, not fitting in with the other black people.” Bell addresses this problem further in his comedy specials *Semi-Prominent Negro* (2016) and *Private School Negro* (2019), as well as in his book *The Awkward Thoughts of W. Kamau Bell* (2017). (Green, Nato. “Interview with W. Kamau Bell.” *The Rumpus Magazine*. Published Feb. 2, 2011. <https://tinyurl.com/y7kslx9b>).

reenactment – i.e., aesthetic of criticism or embrace through parody – Simien significantly broadens the scope of cerebral humor in African-American cinema.

Intergroup Contact, Parasocial Relationships, and Race Representation

Even though it has been gravely underrepresented in film and stage comedy, cerebral black humor has a rich tradition in American literature. Authors such as George Schuyler (*Black No More*, 1931), Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*, 1952), William Melvin Kelley (*Dem*, 1967), Fran Ross (*Oreo*, 1974), Paul Beatty (*White Boy Shuffle*, 1996), Percival Everett (*Erasure*, 2001), Trey Ellis (*Platitudes*, 2003) or Mat Johnson (*Pym*, 2012) have proven time and again the intellectual potential of black satire.¹⁷¹ As movies continue to impact the worldview and identities of many young Americans, Simien’s reintroduction of black intellectualism into the world of film comedy is of no small cultural value. According to a recent study by Michelle C. Pautz, an associate professor of political science at the University of Dayton, cinema influences young people’s cultural taste, political attitudes, and sense of identity to a considerable degree. “Younger people, particularly teens, are much more likely to be impacted than older adults because they are still developing and shaping their worldviews,” says Pautz.¹⁷² He also argues that “what audiences watch and how certain institutions are portrayed over time can be very significant,” as movies constitute a vital part of the “political socialization of people (young adults in particular).”

A complex and diverse representation of minority cultures is vital for their full integration into larger societies. As argued by Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg, and Dean E. Hewes from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, people grow attached to fictional characters, forming what the researchers dubbed as “parasocial relationships.”¹⁷³ When viewers

¹⁷¹ Watkins. “Literary Reflections of African-American Humor – Depictions of Things Unseen.” *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 7619-8465.

¹⁷² Qtd. in Guida, John. “How Movies Can Change Our Minds.” *New York Times*. Published Feb. 4, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/y2gfoqff>.

¹⁷³ Schiappa, Edward, Peter B. Gregg and Dean E. Hewes. “The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis.” *Communication Monographs*. Vol. 72, No. 1, March 2005. Pp. 92-115.

develop bonds with characters representing minority cultures, they often shed their prejudices in the process. “What happens when you’re exposed to a wide variety of people in a certain minority group,” says Schiappa, “is that your ideas about that group get more complicated.”¹⁷⁴ According to Thomas F. Pettigrew – the purveyor of the so-called Intergroup Contact Theory from the University of California, Santa Cruz – when members of minority and majority cultures socialize, they tend to diminish their past animosities and dissolve harmful stereotypes.¹⁷⁵ However, as argued by psychologist Gordon Allport, the Intergroup Contact Theory works only when both sides feel safe and comfortable.¹⁷⁶ “People can feel immediately put off or threatened when they meet someone they don’t normally interact with,” Schiappa says, “and that can sometimes even increase prejudice.”¹⁷⁷ As argued by neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris, cinema provides a sense of security in interaction with the archetypal stranger:

The experience of sitting in a darkened theater and seeing people interact with one another on the screen is a social encounter of sorts – but it is one in which we, as participants, have been perfectly effaced. This very likely explains why most of us find movies and television so compelling. The moment we turn our eyes to the screen, we are in a social situation that our hominid genes could not have foreseen: we can view the actions of others, along with the minutiae of their facial expressions – even to the point of making eye contact with them – without the slightest risk of being observed ourselves. Movies and television magically transform the primordial context of face-to-face encounters, in which human beings have always been subjected to harrowing social lessons, allowing us, for the first time, to devote ourselves wholly to the act of observing other people. This is voyeurism of a transcendental kind.¹⁷⁸

As pointed out by Harris, the world of cinema allows one to gaze safely into the eyes of the Other; enter their thoughts and feelings, and observe them without fear of repercussion or reciprocation. Simien uses this feature to familiarize his viewers with elaborate and nuanced representations of young black life: personal conundrums, communal problems, intellectual dilemmas, and emotional struggles rarely seen in American film comedy. In doing so, *Dear*

¹⁷⁴ Qtd. in Singh, Maanvi. “How Shows Like ‘Will & Grace’ And ‘Black-ish’ Can Change Your Brain.” *Code Switch: Race and Identity, Remixed* (Internet blog). Published Aug. 31, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/ybg6dehj>.

¹⁷⁵ Pettigrew, Thomas F. “Intergroup Contact Theory.” *Annual Review of Psychology*. Vol. 49, Feb. 1998. Pp. 65-85.

¹⁷⁶ Allport, Gordon W. “Formation of In-Groups.” *The Nature of Prejudice: 25th Anniversary Edition*. Basic Books, 1979. p. 29-47.

¹⁷⁷ Qtd. in Singh. “How Shows Like. . .” *Code Switch* (Internet blog).

¹⁷⁸ Harris. *Waking Up*. P. 127.

White People creates a parasocial dimension of meaningful social interaction – a space for cultural and personal encounters facilitated by imagination.

Due to the aftermath of housing segregation, as well as the persistent economic divide between whites and people of color, an average white American has just one black, one Latino, and one Asian friend; if one considers the fact that the friend group of a typical African-American is equally homogenous, putting Intergroup Contact Theory into effective real-world use in the US seems virtually impossible.¹⁷⁹ “So how do you get the benefits of intergroup contact theory in a socially segregated world?” – asks Maanvi Singh, journalist and cultural critic from *NPR*.¹⁸⁰ Her answer is similar to the one offered by Harris: “The TV screen offers a sense of separation and security that can help people lower their defenses and connect with people they might try to avoid in real life,” she argues. “Schiappa’s research has shown,” adds Singh, “that this connection can lead to boosts in people’s ability to empathize with people they might not otherwise relate to.”¹⁸¹

Simien’s representation politics relate to black film and television of the nineties and early two-thousands. Comedies from this period, productions such as *Living Single* (1993-1998), *Soul Food* (1997), or *Love and Basketball* (2000), portrayed blackness as regular personhood. Admittedly, the idea seems simple enough – trivial, even. However, when one contrasts it with the legacy of racialized, essentialist portrayals of African-Americans in the US cinema, its seeming banality gains considerable artistic and political significance. Historically, American cinema has often employed black characters as archetypes. Stereotypes engrained in the culture defined their personality per their phenotype, providing a convenient narrative shorthand for scriptwriters.¹⁸² Throughout the years, numerous films and television shows used

¹⁷⁹ Parker, Kim et al. “Multiracial in America: Race and Social Connections – Friends, Family and Neighborhoods.” *Pew Research Center*. Published June 11, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/ybdnq8wf>.

¹⁸⁰ Maanvi. “How Shows Like...” *Code Switch* (Internet blog).

¹⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸² Erigha, Maryann. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*. NYU Press, 2019. P. 79.

them for various and often dissimilar intents and purposes: to scare white audiences (e.g., *Birth of a Nation*, 1915); to engender compassion (e.g., adaptations of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*); to breed sentimentality (e.g., *Gone with the Wind*, 1939); to provoke the laughter of superiority (*Amos 'n' Andy*, 1951-1953); to induce arousal and thrill (blaxploitation films, e.g., *Foxy Brown*, 1974); to argue for black social uplift (e.g., *The Butler*, 2013); or to further the moral development of white characters (e.g., *Green Book*, 2019). Instances where a black protagonist was just a person – a well-drawn, multifaceted character devoid of any explicit symbolism – have been seldom. As a result, mainstream viewers often think of films with an all-white cast as race-neutral, universal in their representation of humankind. At the same time, they perceive movies with an all-black cast as politicized, ethnic, and unrelatable.¹⁸³ Simien's portrayal of black people's 'regular' personhood, even if seemingly prosaic, universalizes their experience in the mainstream audience's eyes. It also helps his viewers to form meaningful parasocial relationships with the movie's characters (after all, it is easier to have an affinity with a seemingly real person, not an archetype).

What is important, *Dear White People* normalizes black presence in the film and television industry both on-screen and behind the scenes. In 2017, Simien adapted his movie into a television series for Netflix (its fourth and final season is scheduled to release sometime in 2021). Due to the nature of the production, not all episodes have been written and directed by him, which opened up new opportunities for underemployed filmmakers of color.¹⁸⁴ The gravity of this occasion is not to be understated. In 2015, the Writer's Guild of America reported that almost 86 percent of the people working as TV writers are white.¹⁸⁵ In 2018, a year of the unprecedented box-office success of African-American cinema, only a total of 16 black

¹⁸³ Seewood, Andre. "Why White People Don't Like Black Movies." *IndieWire*. Published Jan. 17, 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/ydytwcav>.

¹⁸⁴ "Netflix Announces *Dear White People*, a New Comedy Series Based on Justin Simien's Critically-Acclaimed Indie Film." *Netflix*. Published May 5, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/y9j522o3>.

¹⁸⁵ Demby, Gene. "'Diversity' Is Rightly Criticized as an Empty Buzzword. So How Can We Make It Work?" *NPR*. Published on Nov. 5, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/ybxmk5as>.

directors (14.3%) – fifteen males and one female – worked across the top 100 highest-grossing films.¹⁸⁶

Dear White People's characters provide a multivocal perspective on the experiences of black people in the US. The idea of polyphonic representation championed by the film started to gain traction in the mid-2010s. Since 2014, the year Simien's movie made its debut at the Sundance Film Festival, the American cultural market witnessed a resurgence of black cinema and television production. In 2014, ABC premiered *Black-ish*, a prime-time situational comedy about an upper-middle-class family of color. The show challenged the perceived whiteness of the American upper-middle class and explored the influence of wealth on black politics and cultural affiliations. In 2015, Rick Famuyiwa stirred up the enthusiasm of cinema fans with the debut of *Dope*, a movie mixing the nostalgia for the sonic and cerebral vanguard of the 1990s' hip-hop culture with an inclusive, open-source approach to racial identity. This fast-paced action-comedy associated blackness with the nerd, punk rock, and skateboarding subcultures; Famuyiwa reclaimed them on behalf of teenagers of color in a spirit of cultural hybridity and racial anti-essentialism reminiscent of *Dear White People*. In 2016, HBO released Issa Rae's *Insecure*, a comedy series about black womanhood. In an attempt to normalize its image, the show stripped it from its historical and cultural baggage – e.g., tropes of hypersexualization or undesirability – turning the seeming ordinariness of its female characters into a countercultural statement. The same year, FX debuted Danny Glover's *Atlanta*, an offbeat sitcom with a propensity to question conventions and tropes of black culture. In 2018, Boots Riley released his *Sorry to Bother You*, a satirical film about the junctures between capitalism and race echoing the surreal aesthetics of David Lynch. All of these movies and television shows elaborate on themes and strategies first explored by *Dear White People* (intersections of wealth and cultural affiliations, race and academic success, cultural hybridity and ethnic identity); they also echo

¹⁸⁶ "A 2018 Box Office Boom – for Black Directors." *USC Annenberg*. Published Jan. 3, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yb5nlo48>.

its narrative aims (satirizing stereotypes, normalizing blackness, arguing for anti-essentialism). Similarly to Simien's movie, besides telling their individual stories, they speak volumes about the significance of adequate racial representation. They all argue – even if implicitly, by providing counterexamples – that racially essentialist typecasting hurts both artists of color and the movie industry as a whole. The fact that all of the previously listed productions attained critical and commercial success proves that US audiences are eager to see comic art reflecting the country's racial composition and cultural diversity in more realistic terms.¹⁸⁷

Dear White People works against the racialized dichotomy of black “soulful feelers” and white “soulless thinkers” by portraying academic prowess and cerebral humor as a vital part of the African-American cultural repertoire. Doing so in the popular medium of film comedy changes the public perception of blackness, and therefore expands the possibilities of self-definition for young Americans of color. The movie argues for expanding the cultural definition of blackness by invoking the contentious debates around race and identity in academia and mainstream media. It also offers a valuable contribution to the conversation on microaggressions, black student protest, and African-American representation on screen. Making satire its primary mode of discourse, it manages to strike an entertaining, intellectually compelling balance between merit and mirth. It also makes a valuable contribution to the tradition of authorial comic cinema first established by Lee and Townsend. *Dear White People* set the tone for the way filmmakers tackled the issues of race and identity in the second half of the 2010s. Echoing the themes and strategies first introduced by Simien, most of the other productions referred to in this chapter – e.g., *Black-ish*, *Dope*, or *Sorry to Bother You* – are academically informed, socially conscious, anti-essentialist satires. As *Dear White People* predated all of them, it can be considered a pioneer of this new cultural trend in the US cinema:

¹⁸⁷ Lee, Cynthia. “Study Finds TV Shows with Ethnically Diverse Casts, Writers, Have Higher Ratings.” *UCLA*. Published on Oct. 8, 2013. <https://bit.ly/2Yn015U>; Andrews, Travis M. “FX’s *Atlanta* Breaks Viewing Records. Is Diverse TV Here to Stay?” *Washington Post*. Published Sept. 15, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/hnah8ma>; Ramanathan, Lavanya. “Television is Getting More Diverse. Here’s Why it’s Good for the Business.” *Washington Post*. Published Nov. 29, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/ybb4y6jc>.

a progenitor of Open-Source Blackness on the American silver screen. The next chapter will look at the work of Baratunde Thurston to investigate the development of this very idea in the third central realm of contemporary US culture: digital humanities.

CHAPTER FOUR

DIGITAL HUMANITIES: MULTIMEDIA SATIRE BY BARATUNDE THURSTON

This chapter aims to discuss the future of Open-Source Blackness – the concept developed throughout this dissertation to describe the anti-essentialist approach to African-American identity exemplified by twenty-first-century satire. The discussion draws from the work of Baratunde Thurston, the comic author who coined the term Open-Source Blackness to redefine the way people think about the issues of race and ethnicity in the US. The creative output of Thurston spans across different genres: satirical news (*The Onion*, 2008–2012; *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, 2015–2016), political blogging (*Jack & Jill Politics*, 2006–2018), public speaking (“Hacking Comedy,” 2014; “An Unconventional Look at the Future of Technology,” 2019), podcasting (*About Race*, 2015–2017; *Spit*, 2018; *How to Citizen*, 2021), new forms of parodic literature (*How to Be Black*, 2012), manifestos on data/Internet privacy (*The New Tech Manifesto*, 2018), and software development (Comedy Hack Days, 2012–2016). As Thurston’s catalog is so broad and his message so dispersed, the following chapter will focus less on a close reading of one specific text, and more on the overall vision of the future of black satire and identity as presented by him across various media outlets.¹

Throughout his work, Thurston emphasizes a mindset of interdisciplinarity: an approach born out of his pursuits in the increasingly interconnected worlds of humanities and technology.² Marrying the worlds of comic art and computing in a communion of the imaginative and the rational, Thurston looks for a methodology linking the aspirationally free and the necessarily precise. Apart from his memoir *How to Be Black* (2012), he presented this philosophy in its most extensive form during an interview on the *Code Newbie* podcast (2014),

¹ As podcast interviews with Thurston provide ideas not presented by him in other venues, this chapter aims to treat them as one of its primary sources – i.e., narrative forms on par with his other, more established forms of creative expression (e.g., books or speeches).

² See, for example, Rieger, Oya. “Framing Digital Humanities: The Role of New Media in Humanities Scholarship.” *First Monday*. Vol. 15 (10), 2010. <https://bit.ly/3pA6aay>; Olivier, Bert. “The Humanities, Technology, and Universities.” *Phronimon*. Vol. 9, 2008. Pp. 5–21.

his “Hacking Comedy” (2014) TEDx Talk, and his public address during Google Developers Conference (2019). On all of these occasions, Thurston talked about the relationship between coding and writing, reflected on the meaning and purpose of humor, and laid out his vision for developing new forms of satirical art: multidisciplinary narratives uniting traditional comic genres, digital hypertexts, and mobile software.³ Thurston’s work presents a compelling vision of a novel, inclusive, anti-essentialist culture of individuation, interconnectivity, and creative cooperation. The subsequent parts of this chapter aim to connect the arguments scattered throughout Thurston’s texts to reflect on the possible futures of Open-Source Blackness, African-American comic discourse, and racial identity.

Rewriting Race and Identity through Humor and Technology

While the history of African-American literary, stage and film comedy already fills several volumes of scholarly texts, the history of black digital humor is being written in the present moment. Even though the discussion of the former, well-established comic genres needs constant revision to keep it relevant and up-to-date, its annals have already been etched by exemplary historians and cultural critics (e.g., Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 1999; or Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, 2007). When it comes to digital comedy – and especially its black iterations – the only noteworthy attempts at its formal classification have been made by relatively niche pop-cultural magazines (e.g., *Vulture*)⁴ and satirists themselves (e.g., damali ayo).⁵

³ Yitbarek, Saron. “Comedy and Code – Part I.” *Code Newbie* (Internet podcast). Published Oct. 24, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/ycdspdjz>.

⁴ See, for example, Aswell, Sarah. “How Facebook is Killing Comedy.” *Vulture*. Published Feb 6, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/ycycu333>; David Fox, Jesse. “I Was Afraid of Virtual Comedy Shows – Until I Went to One.” *Vulture*. Published Sept. 30, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3oNwMUv>.

⁵ In her 2005 book *How to Rent a Negro*, ayo documented her satirical performative piece in which she commodified her blackness and offered it for hire on-line, providing services to institutions and individuals in need for tokenized black presence. (ayo, damali. “Baby, I was Born to Rent.” *How to Rent a Negro*. Chicago Review Press, 2005. Pp. 1-78).

Thurston defines himself as a “futurist comedian” – a practitioner of the art of digital satire as well as its advocate and theoretician.⁶ As the technologically infused forms of comedy are currently in their infancy, he focuses more on theoretical reflections about their future than on analyzing their present materializations. Translating an idea into a digital format is a considerable group effort; facilitating cooperation between investors, technologists, and artists requires substantial funding and necessitates careful planning. Consequently, Thurston’s comedic work and theoretical deliberations constitute more than idle musings of a futurologist: they potentially contribute to the birth and development of new forms of satire. They also help to establish new definitions of blackness in American culture. As elaborated by Thurston:

[I talk] about the ideas of blackness, how those ideas are changing, and how they differ from the popular ideas promoted in mainstream media and often in the black community itself. You’re probably familiar with the popular concept of blackness: hip-hop, crime and prison, fatherless homes, high blood pressure, school dropouts, drugs, athleticism, musical talent, *The Wire*, affirmative action, poverty, diabetes, the Civil Rights Movement, and, recently, the U.S. presidency. Some of these concepts are stereotypes. Some are true. Most are negative . . . all of them are limiting and simply inadequate to the task of capturing the reality of blackness. The ideas of blackness that make it into mainstream thought exclude too much of the full range of who black people are. Whether it’s musical taste, dancing proficiency, occupation, or intellectual interest, all nuance is ignored for a simpler, often more sellable blackness . . . I will attempt to re-complicate blackness, exposing the challenges, the fun, and the future of being black in the United States. It’s also a convenient way to make you care about my life story.⁷

The quotation above comes from Thurston’s parodic self-help book *How to Be Black*, but it could have just as well served as a mission statement for his work in general. Thurston uses his platform as a satirist and public speaker to connect the racial history of the US with his personal experience of growing up in Washington, D.C., blend the expansion of the Internet with the growth of digital satire, and mix the artistic potential of new technologies with theories on the formation of ethnic identity.⁸

“My sense of creativity, of what was possible,” proclaimed Thurston, “was powered by technology from an early age.”⁹ His mother was a self-thought programmer and worked as a

⁶ Thurston. “Hacking Comedy.” *TEDx Talks*.

⁷ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. Pp. 11-12.

⁸ Thurston. “An Unconventional Look at the Future of Technology.” *Google Developers* (YouTube channel).

⁹ *Ibidem*.

Systems Analyst for the American Government. Her determination to teach herself coding allowed her to find a decently-paid job and provide his son with quality education despite living in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the US. As recalled by Thurston:

I was a little black boy living in a war zone. . . . When the HBO show *The Wire* came out, I recognized so much of what was on my television screen from my memories of my own neighborhood. As I've reflected back on both, I realize that my neighborhood was just like *The Wire*. We had the drug dealing, the police brutality, the murders. Well, it was *almost* a perfect match. We had everything *The Wire* had except for universal critical acclaim and the undying love of white people who saw it. . . . Thanks to my mother, I survived that war.¹⁰

Due to his mother's occupation, young Baratunde gained access to a world largely inaccessible to other kids from the inner-city.¹¹ The opportunities offered by technology widened his range of (self-)perceptions beyond what has been provided by his immediate environment; they allowed him to escape stereotyping along the intersections of race, class, and gender.¹² As recalled by him: "early access to the Internet (1993!), impressive science labs, [and] a real focus on writing [became] the foundation for most of what I made of my life."¹³ Cheered on by his mother, Thurston became actively engaged in multiple, often dissimilar hobbies: a field of interest ranging from computer science and math, martial arts and camping, to cultural studies and philosophy. "At twelve years old," he reminisces, "I was a bass-playing, tofu-eating, weekend-camping, karate-chopping, apartheid-hating, top-grade-getting, generally trouble-avoiding agent of blackness."¹⁴ As recalled by Thurston, all of his hobbies seemed untypical, eccentric or unbecoming for a black boy from the inner-city. Thurston was aware of essentialist expectations and racialized clichés present in the larger culture at a relatively young age. As he remarked in *How to Be Black*:

¹⁰ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. Pp. 38-39.

¹¹ Royal, Dawn and Art Swift. "U.S. Minority Students Less Exposed to Computer Science." *Gallup*. Published Oct. 18, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3aLdyd5>.

¹² As reminisced by Thurston: "Whoever said black folk don't go camping forgot to tell Arnita Thurston . . . Without spending much of her very limited funds . . . my mother concocted activity after activity to engage my mind and body. She enrolled me in the DC Youth Orchestra Program, where I learned to play bass . . . She enrolled me in tae kwon do after some kids jumped me and stole my bike. She enlisted (yes, enlisted) me in an all-black Boy Scout troop . . . Under my mother's tutelage, I was becoming a miniature black activist . . . When I was eight, she gave me a book about apartheid, because, you know, how else am I supposed to learn how the world really works?" (Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 37).

¹³ *Ibidem*. P. 129.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*. P. 40.

My father was shot and killed when I was six years old. He was involved in a drug deal gone wrong. He was the buyer. These facts have always annoyed me. No boy wants his father to die. Being a black boy in Washington, DC, in the 1980s, you especially don't want him to die of drug-related gun violence. It's too stereotypical. . . . If he had to die in 1985, why couldn't he have been competing in a Hamptons polo match and gotten trampled by a horse? That would at least give his child a story for the ages. "FRIEND: Hey, Baratunde, how come your dad never comes to your soccer games? ME: Oh, he normally would be here, but two years ago, he was in the finals of the Mercedes-Benz Polo Challenge when Chad Worthington III's horse, Barbaro, got out of control. . . . Sadly, he's just another statistic in the epidemic of wealth-related horse violence striking down black men across the country."¹⁵

Thurston's mother aimed to expand her son's self-conceptions by extending the cultural repertoire of blackness beyond what had been offered by his immediate surroundings. She also wanted to protect him from racial stereotypes circulating in the mainstream culture – i.e., vilifying outlooks on young, African-American men from the inner-city. That is why the circumstances of his father's death – a scenario corresponding with the image of blackness circulated in the media during Reagan's War on Drugs – aggravated Thurston more than the loss itself ("Despite having lost my father," he admits, "I'm not bitter or overly sad about it. . . . I was too young to have developed deep bonds with him").¹⁶ The possibility to live and define himself freely, an opportunity afforded to young Baratunde by his mother, was rather precarious – it could have been upended by the stereotypes connected with his skin color, social class, or familial history at any moment.

As argued by philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, one of Thurston's teachers at Harvard, people can individuate themselves from their culture only to an extent. Seeing this mechanism at work, Thurston argues for a broad societal transformation of the way Americans conceptualize race and identity. He endeavors to redefine racial categories of the past by freeing the concept of African-Americanness to the point of its misalignment with the notion of racial essences. To paraphrase Toni Morrison, he aims to diversify the cultural meaning of blackness to such an extent that "when you know [an individual's] race, it's the least amount of

¹⁵ Ibidem. P. 58.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

information you know about a person.”¹⁷ Thurston echoes this philosophy when he introduces himself to the reader in *How to Be Black*:

I was born in 1977 in Washington, DC, in the wake of civil rights, Black Power, and *Sanford & Son*. My mother was a pro-black, Pan-African, tofu-eating hippie who had me . . . reading about apartheid before my tenth birthday. My Nigerian name was . . . bestowed upon me by parents, who demanded a connection, any connection at all, to Mother Africa. Yes, I grew up in the “inner city” . . . and I survived DC’s Drug Wars. Yes, my father was absent – he was shot to death in those same Drug Wars. But it’s also true that I graduated from Sidwell Friends School, the educational home of Chelsea Clinton and the Obama girls, and Harvard University. I love classical music, computers, and camping. I’ve gone clubbing with the president of Georgia, the country, twice. My version of being black adheres as much to the stereotypes as it dramatically breaks from them, and that’s probably true for most of you reading this – if not about blackness itself, then about something else related to your identity.

The redefinition of black identity advocated by Thurston occurs in part thanks to new technologies. “It’s already happening,” proclaims Thurston in his reflection on “The Future of Blackness.”¹⁸ “You’ve got the Afro-Punk movement and Black Geeks and the black people who love nature, and more;” all of them, he argues, “are getting new ideas, new images, and new expectations.”¹⁹ What turned their individual accomplishments and struggles into a shared artistic movement – one dubbed by Contee as The New Black Renaissance²⁰ – is “the faster-than-history communications network we have nowadays.”²¹ As argued by Thurston, the ongoing advancements in the expressive capabilities of information technology continue to lead to a “collaborative resurgence of black culture and thought”; together with the notion of Open-Source Blackness, they constitute a “bottom-up [challenge to] the prevailing and limited images of blackness peddled by major media.”²²

“Comedy is a user interface,” says Thurston, using the metaphor of technology to correspondingly define humor as a way of conceptualizing and interacting with the world.²³ Just as people use graphic interfaces to interact with software, they can use humor as a philosophical intermediary between themselves and the world. This notion, in turn, echoes the

¹⁷ Qtd. in Fishkin. “Desegregating American Studies.” P. 124.

¹⁸ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. Pp. 206-221.

¹⁹ Ibidem. P. 220.

²⁰ Ibidem. P. 222-223, 236.

²¹ Ibidem. P. 220.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Thurston. “Hacking Comedy.” *TEDx Talks*.

arguments of philosopher Simon Critchley – a thinker treating humor as a perceptual filter through which one can sift the entire human experience (for example, as discussed in the chapter on Everett, the experience of race and identity redefined by the comic perspective is an outlook of “resiliency that eludes ‘serious’ souls trapped by the limitations of appearances”).²⁴

“I’ve been on the Internet since 1993, before there was even a graphical Web browser,” recalls Thurston, “and I always prided myself on knowing the latest trends in technology as well as Web culture.”²⁵ He defines the present time as an epoch of “techno-digification” – a cultural landscape in which technology subsumes the most critical aspects of human experience: from work, through relationships, to leisure (which, of course, includes comedy).²⁶ “There have never been more opportunities to laugh,” proclaims Thurston, and moves on to enlist comic genres made abundant by the advent of the Internet: parodic news sites (e.g., *The Onion*), satirical cartoons (e.g., *The Oatmeal*), and no-holds-barred Internet talk-shows (e.g., *Between the Ferns*).²⁷ Even though black-oriented satire remains relatively niche in the virtual realm, one could easily complement Thurston’s list with African-American digital comedy: webcomics (e.g., *KChronicles*, *BOUNCE!*, *Revolutionary Times*), web-based performative art pieces (*rentanegro.com*), sociopolitical blogs (e.g., *N*****ati Manor*, *Jack and Jill Politics*), and video formats (e.g., *Chescaleigh*, *Awkward Black Girl*, *Black Nerd Comedy*, or *This Week in Blackness*).

The lists above include digitized equivalents of traditional, well-established texts of culture. However, what fascinates Thurston the most are comic narratives functioning exclusively in online spaces. Because of this interest, he attempted to categorize them during his *Hacking Comedy* TED Talk. The first category of online humor coined by Thurston, “Misuse and Non-Hostile Takeovers,” encompassed “humor in places that weren’t designed to

²⁴ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 8233-8240.

²⁵ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 240.

²⁶ Thurston. “Hacking Comedy.” *TEDx Talks*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

host it” (e.g., comment sections in traditionally straightforward discursive spaces). His second group, “Design and Interaction,” encapsulates satirical modifications to already existing software – i.e., tweaks and updates encouraging playfulness and providing meta-commentary on the user’s interaction with the program (e.g., a Google Text Message plug-in throwing sarcastic jibes at users who write exceedingly long messages). The third type, “Satirical Software,” concerns digital frameworks explicitly designed to deliver social and cultural commentary through humor (e.g., the “working prototypes of jokes” created during Comedy Hack Days). As a founder of a media company aiming to facilitate the creation of “Satirical Software,” Thurston places his highest hopes in the last category.²⁸

“I like to manipulate tech products to tell a story,” says Thurston, and the tech products he is referring to are the programs created under the banner of his company, Cultivated Wit²⁹ – an enterprise exploring the potential of satirical storytelling through technology.³⁰ His business’ motto, “We make fun,” accentuates the tangible and practical dimension of their products: smartphone and computer applications created during artistic happenings/programming marathons called Comedy Hack Days. The aim of hackathons organized by Thurston and his colleagues “is to bring together humor, satire, code, and design to make new types of comedy.”³¹ While elaborating on this principle on the *Code Newbie* podcast, Thurston explains how technology facilitates new textual, visual, and interactive experiences in the realm of satire:

There are ways to use technology to simply do what we’ve done before faster and more efficiently, and then there are ways to use technology to do things differently, to create not just new things but new types of things. During Comedy Hack Days, we’ve attempted to – and, I think, in many cases succeeded – create new types of comedy. Old-school digital comedy says, “let’s take a video file that used to be distributed through a traditional Cable Network and let’s distribute it on an IP Network, called YouTube.” That’s low-grade innovation . . . The new way is to have a participatory video creation experience so that the line between producer and consumer is all but non-existent. That’s the philosophy of Comedy Hack

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ A name adopted from Horace. As revealed by Thurston in his *Hacking Comedy* (2014) TEDx Talk, he first heard this phrase in the following paragraph by the Roman poet: “A cultivated wit, one that badgers less, can persuade all the more. Artful ridicule can address contentious issues more competently and vigorously than severity alone.” (Ibidem).

³⁰ Yitbarek, Saron. “Comedy and Code – Part I.” Circa 15:00.

³¹ Ibidem. Circa 15:30.

Days . . . get coders, designers, and comedians . . . to do these inspired, ridiculous code-sprints around projects whose ostensible goal is to solve a real problem with a hilarious and satirical solution.³²

Traditional forms of textual satire rely solely on the power of words – their intellectual and emotional impact made possible by the cognitive processes involved in reading and interpretation. “Code,” as pointed out by Thurston, “lets you manifest words into an experience.”³³ The medium’s interactive nature develops the user’s sensory and tactile involvement in the story being told through software. Thanks to this psychosomatic feature, as well as the distributional capabilities of the Internet, “hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions of people can experience the joke, not just hear it.”³⁴

To make the type of satire described by Thurston, one has to: 1) understand the social, cultural, and technological context in which it is set; 2) have expertise in comedy writing to compellingly present the textual part of its humor; 3) and possess the know-how to create software and make it operational. As pointed out by Saron Yitbarek, technology educator and the host of the *Code Newbie* podcast, combining such a varying set of skills usually requires a considerable collaborative effort.³⁵ Thurston frames such undertakings as a meeting of the minds – a venture of idealists and activists aiming to use technology and storytelling to uplift their respective communities. “When a community is not put at the forefront,” he argues, “you get a lot of products which make it easier to experience luxury for people who already have access to it.”³⁶ Events that aim to attract potential investors lean towards serving the needs of the wealthy; that is why Thurston decided to make his Comedy Hack Days a non-profit effort of like-minded individuals. Thanks to his footing in both Ivy League and Silicon Valley, as well as the comic credentials gained at *The Onion*, events organized by Cultivated Wit manage to attract colorful assemblages of eccentrics and experts: improv troupes, stand-up comedians,

³² Ibidem. Circa 16:00-18:00.

³³ Ibidem. Circa 18:30.

³⁴ Ibidem. Circa 19:00.

³⁵ Ibidem. Circa 19:30-20:05.

³⁶ Ibidem. Circa 20:30.

visual artists, developers, and hackers. Comedy Hack Days produce social critique articulated through technology – comic art that can be quite literally, as opposed to solely imaginatively, interacted with. Thurston does not use this term, but borrowing language from the world of virtual reality, one can call it “augmented satire”: a gamified, interactive narrative experience that maps onto social reality through a combination of storytelling and new technologies.

“Every era needs its art form; it demands it” – says Thurston, discussing the significance of digital, interactive comedy. He argues that the purpose of art is to “provide an escape from our essential horrors and to express some level of criticism of the world around it.”³⁷ This interplay of playfulness and poignancy is especially pronounced in the genre of satire, and Thurston aims to amplify both of these qualities through new technology. According to him, the human brain’s cognitive flexibility and the engineered efficiency of computing create a space for a promising creative experiment; the omnipresence of digital devices, as well as the collective power of humans and hardware, offer significant potential for innovation. “Comedy Hack Day,” says Thurston, “is an early indicator of the art that our era requires.” Using a metaphor of connectivity and interdependence stemming from the discourse of posthumanism, Thurston argues that “in the Matrix world you need Matrix art, and something like a Comedy Hack Day, this multidisciplinary approach to creation, fits the era way better than just an essay.”³⁸ The metaphor used by Thurston refers to the construction of the Printed Circuit Board – i.e., a computer component that connects and powers all the other hardware parts plugged into it – and the Wachowski siblings’ 1999 sci-fi movie *The Matrix*. As argued by cultural critic Stefan Herbrechter, the concept of identity proposed by this film is a radical rethinking of the Western understanding of the subject as a separate, stable entity; given Thurston’s interest in the topics of identity and technology, perhaps that is why he finds it so salient.³⁹ In terms of the

³⁷ Ibidem. Circa 28:20.

³⁸ Ibidem. Circa 29:30.

³⁹ Herbrechter, Stefan. “The Posthuman Subject in the Matrix.” *The Matrix in Theory*. Edited by Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz and Stefan Herbrechter. Editions Rodopi BV, 2006. Pp. 249-286.

future of satire, Thurston thinks that while traditional forms of comic narratives will still be in demand, the increasingly digitized culture of the forthcoming decades will go in the direction of “multimodal forms of expression” – i.e., works of art that blend (or altogether disregard) traditional definitions of media and genre.⁴⁰

As Thurston dabbles in parody, he condemns certain actions by performing them ironically – for example, he writes a book called *How to Be Black* to criticize prescriptive notions of black identity. The strategy put in practice by Thurston echoes the one theorized about by satirical cartoonist Charles Schulz. According to Schulz, “the best humor is always something of a puzzle in its camouflaged criticism . . . its appreciation requires mental participation by the audience, and its lessons are not hortatory, but self-learned.”⁴¹ As argued by Thurston, this aspect of satire becomes especially pronounced when the text is interactive. To illustrate his point on *Code Newbie*, Thurston gave a short lecture on racial and economic inequality in the US. Then, he contrasted it with the narrative workings of *Well-Deserved: The Premium Marketplace for Unused Privilege*, a satirical app developed during one of the Comedy Hack Days:

[The U.S. has] a foundation of exploitation . . . We had [mechanisms] that compounded advantage within a very narrow set of the populous through property laws, military laws, criminal laws [which produced] disparate outcomes based on these different early investments. . . . Compound interest doesn’t just work on money; it also works on values. I can say all that, and it might connect with someone who has an academic mindset and likes my professorial tone. It can also come across way smoother and be a nice introduction to the topic through a website that allows you to sell you excess privilege. You’re not always using your white male privilege; you’re not always aware of it. So why not let somebody borrow it for, let’s say, five bucks and use it to [e.g., hail a taxi in New York?] Yes, it’s ridiculous, but it also counts as one of these impressions that help an idea get acceptance.⁴²

Thurston defines standard types of satirical texts – e.g., lectures, essays, or books – as potent but ultimately passive ways to learn and reflect. On the other hand, he sees tech-infused forms of satire as a way to turn conventional forms of comic discourse into a semi-virtual, quasi-empirical reality defined by immersion and interaction. Comedy Hack Days facilitated the

⁴⁰ Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part I.” Circa 30:00.

⁴¹ Qtd. in Gray et al. *Satire TV*. P. 15.

⁴² Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part I.” Circa 37:15-40:15.

development of dozens of satirical programs, websites, and other types of interactive texts. One can see most of them on Cultivated Wit's official YouTube channel. Some of them are still available to download on the App Store and Google Play. Software created during *Comedy Hack Days* serves two principal functions: 1) the overt practical one, and 2) the covert satirical one. For example, *Truth for Humanity* generates random conspiracy theories to 1) offer enticing yet ultimately ridiculous arguments against established scientific facts, and 2) expose the non-sequiturs frequently used on conspiracy message boards through parody. *Got This Thing* fills up one's Google calendar with real events from one's area to 1) provide an excuse for avoiding an actual meeting, and 2) jokingly address the phenomenon of increased social anxiety among people immersed in exclusively online forms of communication. *Timesify* morphs the layout of celebrity-gossip sites and makes them appear as the *New York Times* webpage to 1) provide a cover for reading them at work, and 2) accentuate their shallowness by displaying them in a form associated with high-quality journalism. Last but not least, *EquiTable* lets its users divide the cost of a meal in accordance with the economic standing of those who shared it, and does so to 1) split the price more fairly, and 2) tackle the persisting wealth inequality in the US. As the experience offered by these apps is facilitated through interaction – i.e., by entering data and manipulating the program through its interface – they foster a sense of an individualized, malleable experience.⁴³ This way, augmented satire functions as a filter: its digitized lenses change our perception and mediate our contact with the world, adding a layer of critical reflection to our participation in social and cultural reality. Merging language with algorithms, it exemplifies a new genre of comic discourses – a hybrid of textuality and technology that is more interactive and experiential than traditional narrative vehicles.

As argued by media critic Jonathan Gray, comic discourses encourage people “to play with politics, to examine it, test it, and question it rather than simply consume it as information

⁴³ “Comedy Hack Day (YouTube playlist).” *Cultivated Wit*. Published Feb. 16, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/ycbxk3jv>.

or ‘truth’ from authoritative sources.”⁴⁴ He also claims that “by comically playing with the political, one can gain a greater sense of ownership over it and, in turn, feel more empowered to engage it.”⁴⁵ His statements gain another layer of meaning in the context of interactive satire – narrative forms encouraging their users to literally “play” with politics by manipulating the software’s content. They also echo Thurston’s arguments about the activist dimension of his comic art. “My stand-up comedy has always been political at its core,” he claims, “my Web-based performance art pieces have a component of advocacy and social message.”⁴⁶

Talking about the software developed during Comedy Hack Days, *Code Newbie* host argues that they are “undercover social justice apps, but because they are positioned as ‘just for fun,’ it is easy to let them in and connect with them purely on their comedic value.”⁴⁷ She also remarks that “for many people who may not have heard about [a given problem], they make you seriously think about it because you want to be in on the joke.”⁴⁸ People want to see themselves as a part of a group, and the expressive realm of social interaction allows them to signal their belonging through laughter. Their genuine amusement indicates that they are an insider – i.e., it constitutes a sign that they are familiar with the social and cultural context required to appreciate a given joke. This shared knowledge, combined with a communal experience of joy, creates communities of meaning. At the same time, however, it makes its members reflect on the rules and values that constitute their group. Yitbarek and Thurston mirror these claims when the former calls comedy a “Trojan horse for dropping some real knowledge,” and the latter defines it as a “sugar-coating on a pill of serious information.”⁴⁹

Thurston claims that he first saw the connection between coding and cultural criticism at Harvard. Whenever he wrote papers for his classes, he would start with a general problem

⁴⁴ Gray et al. *Satire TV*. P. 10.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 226.

⁴⁷ Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part I.” Circa 38:00-38:15.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

and take it apart by following the rules of hierarchical decomposition – a method of dividing large tasks into distinct functions and modules, and then dealing with them on a one-to-one basis.⁵⁰ One can observe this methodology in practice in Thurston’s writing, especially when it concerns the intersections of technology and ethics. “I have had the privilege of working with coders and managing teams of developers and designers, and so that positions me better for the future than the average comedian,” says Thurston, aptly accentuating the vantage point informing his critical reflections.⁵¹ Some of Thurston’s most original observations and analogies center around new media’s operational mechanisms. For example, early in the 2016 presidential primary process, he jokingly defined the style of Donald Trump’s politics as a “Denial of Service attack on American democracy,” correctly predicting his election campaign strategy. “DoS attack is a way of overwhelming a server with bogus requests so that legitimate requests can’t be responded to,” Thurston explained.⁵² As it turned out, the strategy called out by him has been missed by the mainstream media, where Trump was allowed to replace a much-needed debate about public policy with a constant argumentative tumult driven by scandal. Thurston’s experience in the realm of new technologies, supported by his analytical stance as a satirist and cultural critic, had allowed him to see this mechanism before it managed to take over virtually all major American news outlets.⁵³

Discussing values inscribed in our technological reality, Thurston remarks that algorithms driving the new media platforms are far less ideologically neutral and objective than they might seem at first glance. “It’s not just an algorithm,” says Thurston, “it’s a person with values that created it, and now they’re codified.”⁵⁴ His argument antecedes the one made by

⁵⁰ Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part 2.” Circa 17:20-18:10.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Ibidem. Circa 47:55-48:50.

⁵³ As calculated MediaQuant, a firm tracking media coverage of each presidential candidate and estimating its dollar value based on currently-prevailing advertising rates, throughout the 2016 campaign, “[Trump] has earned close to \$2 billion worth of media attention, about twice the all-in price of the most expensive presidential campaigns in history.” (Confessore, Nicholas and Karen Yourish. “\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump.” *New York Times*. Published Mar. 15, 2016. <https://nyti.ms/3csVp6n>).

⁵⁴ Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part 2.” Circa 17:20-18:10.

cultural critic Safiya Noble in *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (2018). The book argues that computational systems are far from impartial. For example, due to human bias and programming errors, search engine results often perpetuate skewed representations of historically oppressed groups and contribute to their discrimination. To support her claim, Noble conducts an Internet-based experiment on several key terms connected with race in the US. As documented in her book, she discovers that the results offered by search engines often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce essentialist notions of ethnic identity.⁵⁵ Virginia Eubanks makes a similar argument in *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (2018). “Forty years ago, nearly all of the major decisions that shape our lives,” she points out, “were made by human beings.” Nowadays, however, “eligibility systems, ranking algorithms, and predictive risk models control which neighborhoods get policed, which families attain needed resources, [and] who is short-listed for employment.”⁵⁶ Eubanks’ claims echo those made by Thurston and supplement them with statistical data and evidence from the realm of government regulation, corporate policy, and culture (e.g., algorithms deciding what cultural texts appear in people’s virtual newsstands, libraries, and cinemas). As the world raises its reliance on technology to optimize and ultimately automate its decision-making processes, arguments of authors such as Noble, Eubanks, and Thurston – i.e., voices blending historical awareness, social consciousness, and technological expertise – seem increasingly prescient, as there are able to define challenges of age-old thinking in the age of cutting-edge inventions.

According to Thurston, the influence of humanistic ethics on the technocratic ethos of Silicon Valley might foster a more democratic culture within its most prominent companies; consequently, it could potentially impact how their products and services shape American

⁵⁵ Noble, Safiya. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press, 2018. Kindle loc. 157.

⁵⁶ Eubanks, Virginia. *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. Picador, 2019. Kindle loc. 61.

culture, society, and politics. Importantly, Thurston does not claim that the world of technology as it functions today is inherently immoral – he simply points out that closed-circuit institutional structures tend to have their blind spots. At the same time, he argues that interdisciplinary convergence of expertise could ameliorate some of their cognitive lapses and systemic errors (given the range and amount of power currently placed in Silicon Valley’s hands – influence ensuing from their market monopoly, accrued data, and cultural influence – it seems only rational to be mindful of their possible biases). Thurston notes that one should always “put people first” – i.e., serve the needs of the underprivileged – when creating technology or writing software with potentially deep social impact. “It’s generic advice,” he admits, “but we can start to worship the things that are supposed to serve us.”⁵⁷ His claim corresponds with the arguments of scholars exploring the cognitive implications of our immersion in the virtual realm – a world that increasingly moderates people’s informational intake, emotional lives, and cultural identifications. “Computer screen bulldozes our doubts with its bounties and conveniences,” points out writer and journalist Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (2011).⁵⁸ Building on Marshall McLuhan’s classic “the medium is the message” maxim, Carr argues the operational, aesthetic, and narrative principles of new media strongly influence people’s epistemological paths, hermeneutical possibilities, and emotional reactions.⁵⁹ “[The Internet] is so much our servant,” he quips, “that it would seem churlish to notice that it is also our master.”⁶⁰ Echoing this view, Thurston argues that the current outcome of not establishing a connection between the worlds of humanities and technology is nothing short of catastrophic. “The consequence of not doing this,” he claims, “is that we have given the world over to a handful of types of minds, and with their great power, they determine things

⁵⁷ Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part 2.” Circa 23:55-24:10.

⁵⁸ Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2011. Kindle loc. 139.

⁵⁹ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. The MIT Press, 1994. Reprint edition. Originally published in 1964. P. v.

⁶⁰ Carr. *The Shallows*. Kindle loc. 139.

well beyond their experience, their education, their concern.”⁶¹ Although this statement seems alarmist at first glance, Thurston manages to complement its wary tone with crucial historical context:

If the people who are software engineers, cloud computing specialists, algorithm and big data folks, are the *only* ones defining what a ‘friend’ is, how the money moves, how we interact with our elected officials . . . that is more power than we’ve granted to any institution in our history . . . The slaveholder still could not control what the slaves did in their shacks in quarters at night and their ‘code’ of drumming and song . . . The tools with which we would create the Underground Railroad now flow through a stakeholder that we didn’t choose – through some largely capitalist-driven, venture-backed model that doesn’t have our freedom at its core . . . [So that’s why it’s important for] humanists, artists, to get in this game, because we will lose this world before we realize it . . . It’s not even about technology. It’s about everything – because everything is going to be in the Matrix.⁶²

In his metaphor referencing the famous nineteenth-century system of slave-extraction, Thurston uses the Underground Railroad as an elaborate symbol. He sees it as a means of intellectual and imaginative escape made possible by countercultural forces placed outside the dominant group’s field of control; it is a way of freeing oneself from the prevailing social order. The challenge posed by the technological and cultural monopoly of companies such as Google, Facebook, or Twitter is that people who wish to criticize them often need to do it within their confines – i.e., on their apps/websites – or risk not being heard at all. As algorithms filter through content, they select for the type of discourses that drive engagement on their host’s platforms. A new form of satirical art, one advocated for by Thurston, learns to maneuver through that information space in a way that amplifies and extends its exposure.⁶³

When Thurston references the Matrix, he talks about various areas of life being transferred into the cybernetic realm. As argued by futurologist Jaron Lanier, this shift will bring about revolutionary changes in the way people interpret and assign value to information.

⁶¹ Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part 2.” Circa 31:00.

⁶² Ibidem. Circa 31:30-33:25.

⁶³ As argued by Tarleton Gillespie from MIT: “Algorithms (particularly those embedded in search engines, social media platforms, recommendation systems, and information databases) play an increasingly important role in selecting what information is considered most relevant to us, a crucial feature of our participation in public life. As we have embraced computational tools as our primary media of expression, we are subjecting human discourse and knowledge to the procedural logics that undergird computation.” (Gillespie, Tarleton. “The Relevance of Algorithms.” *Media Technologies*. Edited by Tarleton Gillespie et al. MIT Press, 2016. DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/9780262525374.003.0009).

Lanier believes that in the digital realm, facts matter only as far as people can process them – a task that becomes increasingly difficult due to the continuous informational overflow of social media.⁶⁴ In recent years, the algorithmic modus operandi of platforms such as YouTube and Facebook led to a debate about “Fake News” and the “Post-truth Era.”⁶⁵ The crux of this discussion centered around the fact that the ongoing polarization of online spaces created “information bubbles” – i.e., discursive echo chambers providing people with content that strengthens their preconceived beliefs. This phenomenon radicalized both ends of the political spectrum by pitting them against each other to increase traffic on social media websites (it has been calculated that outrage attracts the most engagement online, so algorithms aim to amplify it to increase ad revenue).⁶⁶ It also fed into American proclivity for mythmaking – a cultural trait perhaps best described by historian and cultural critic Kurt Andersen. As argued by him in *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire* (2017), what is unique about the current moment is that the ever-present American inclination to see one’s life as a self-aggrandizing tale of inner struggle and intergroup conflict gets amplified by the atomized environment of today’s social media.⁶⁷ As Andersen criticizes it for algorithmically tailoring information to fit people’s biases, he argues for elevating science’s cultural status to provide a countermeasure to this predicament.⁶⁸

Interestingly, Andersen marks the pop-cultural elevation of satire as a way to increase the presence and status of scientific thinking in the American public sphere. The example put forth by him is a bit about “Truthiness” from Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report* (2005–2014). Truthiness, a term coined by satirist Stephen Colbert, is something that is factually not true but somehow feels “right” to say – i.e., it expresses someone’s beliefs about the world

⁶⁴ Lanier, Jaron. “Social Media is Undermining Truth.” *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. Picador, 2019. Pp. 57-66.

⁶⁵ Lee, McIntire. “What is Post-Truth?” *Post-Truth*. MIT Press, 2018. Pp.1-16.

⁶⁶ Berry, Jeffrey and Sarah Sobieraj. *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*. Oxford UP, 2013. Pp. 3-30.

⁶⁷ Andersen, Kurt. *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire*. Random House, 2017. Pp. 3-14

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*. Pp. 376-380.

rather than describes objective reality. Truthiness anteceded the current debate about Fake News and Post-Truth by parsing out the difference between preconception and proof. By making the fight against Truthiness the show's mission statement, Colbert continued the tradition commenced by his comedic alma mater, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. At the program's height, young liberal adults regarded it as the most-trusted news source in the US.⁶⁹ What made it trustworthy was its satirical approach to truth-seeking: borrowing a term from Harry G. Frankfurt's philosophical treatise *On Bullshit* (1984), Stewart called the show's epistemological approach to American public discourse "a war on BS" – i.e., a deconstructive effort to reveal true intentions hidden behind various statements made by public figures.⁷⁰ Thurston exemplifies a similar stance in his work. Following this principle, he even became a staff member on *The Daily Show*. Trevor Noah, the programs' new host, hired him in 2016 to lead its digital department and help make the show more gamified and interactive – i.e., better suited to the world of new media.⁷¹ Thurston was well-suited for the job, as he was previously the Director of Digital at *The Onion*, a parodic broadsheet and paper protoplast of *The Daily Show*.⁷²

Today's mediatized global village overflows with information, a substantial part of which does not reflect any existent, empirical reality.⁷³ Despite being unreal, the world of

⁶⁹ Izadi, Elahe. "How Comedy Made Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in News." *Washington Post*. Published Aug. 5, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/yalqlddo>.

⁷⁰ As it was explained by Frankfurt in his interview with Stewart: "Lying consist in believing that you know the truth, and saying something else . . . Bullshit doesn't really care what is true or false . . . [It] is a more insidious threat to society . . . it manifests the lack of concern for the truth and therefore undermines our commitment to [its] importance . . . The liar is concerned for the truth, he just doesn't want it. The bullshitter doesn't care about the truth, he cares about producing a certain impression in the minds of people." (Qtd. in Stewart, Jon. "Interview with Harry G. Frankfurt." *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Published Mar. 14, 2005. <https://tinyurl.com/ybg35jaf>).

⁷¹ Similarly to *The Onion*, Thurston's former place of employment, *The Daily Show* is a sought-for destination for young adepts of socially-engaged, satirical humor. "It's cool to take that beloved institution and be a part of its reimagination," said Thurston. "I'm one of a handful of people in the world to be in the lucky enough to be in *The Daily Show's* writers' room, and then on top of being in *The Onion* for five years. I try not to forget that it's not normal, and I'm forever grateful." (Yitbarek. "Comedy and Code – Part II." Circa 11:00-11:40; Guthrie, Marisa. "'The Daily Show' Hires 'How to Be Black' Author Baratunde Thurston." *Hollywood Reporter*. Published Aug. 27, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2O8CjZd>).

⁷² Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 253.

⁷³ See, for example, Hao, Karen. "Nearly Half of Twitter Accounts Pushing to Reopen America May Be Bots." *MIT Technology Review*. Published May 21, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y9dc4hjm>.

Truthiness exists and influences people's perceptions and life choices. To give an example, as reported by the BBC, "Senate inquiry has concluded that a [2016] Russian fake-news campaign targeted 'no single group . . . more than African-Americans.' It says Russian operatives used social media to deter black people from voting and planted subtly racist content to incite conflict between ethnicities."⁷⁴ What is more, as estimated by experts, 10 to 20% of American online discourse on race and identity has been conducted by A.I.-powered bots programmed to sow sociopolitical division.⁷⁵ According to Thurston, parody and satire offer some of the best ways to cope with the contemporary media landscape's Truthiness. His outlook goes in sync with the opinions of several cultural critics. For example, as argued by Geoffrey Baym, while straightforward genres often assert "an epistemological certainty, satire is a discourse of inquiry, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of a situation."⁷⁶ In parodic discourses, John Morreall claims, "deliberation is not a means to an end but an end in itself. Discussion, dialogue, provocation, and questioning are valued for their own sake . . . because they foster a community able to discern untruth."⁷⁷ All of these pronouncements align with the implied goal of Thurston's work: transgressing the epistemological and narrative limits of "serious" discourses through parody and satire.⁷⁸

When it comes to the socially transformative potential of new technology, Thurston's stance echoes that of Clive Thompson, the author of *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology is Changing Our Minds for the Better* (2014). In his book, Thompson analyzes how the Internet and social media platforms shape public discourse and inspire social activism. His thesis is that networked cultures help people to develop skills in expressing their ideas in a public forum –

⁷⁴ "Russian Trolls' Chief Target was 'Black US Voters' in 2016." *BBC News*. Published Oct. 9, 2019. <https://bbc.in/3azt77R>.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ Baym, Geoffrey. "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism." *Political Communication*. No. 22, 2005. P. 267.

⁷⁷ Qtd. in Torosyan, Robert. "The Daily Show Way: Critical Thinking, Civic Discourse, and Postmodern Consciousness." *The Ultimate Daily Show and Philosophy*. Edited by Jason Holt et al. Wiley, 2013. P. 183.

⁷⁸ Thurston. "The Future of Blackness." *How to Be Black*. Pp. 209-224.

which, according to the author, ultimately changes liberal, participatory democracies for the better.⁷⁹ What is more, Thompson argues, due to people’s cognitive immersion in the interconnected realm of the new media, they are “becoming more conversational thinkers”⁸⁰ – a claim that corresponds with the discursive ethos of satire.⁸¹ “Once you get enough people talking together online for any reason, they discover shared areas of social concern,” Thompson points out.⁸² “One of the curious features of online dissent,” he adds, “is how it can emerge from discussion boards that were not designed for political talk at all.”⁸³ One might argue that Thurston shares Thompson’s point of view. Gathering people under the banner of humor and technology, he aims to spark a conversation about culture and politics, as well as inspire intellectual and imaginative work needed to instigate social change through activism, entrepreneurship, and artistic expression.

All things considered, Thurston sees comedy as an integral part of “civil tech,” which aims to use technical and humanistic expertise not only for profit but for the public good as well. According to him, US culture should take new technologies away from the market of luxury goods (where it is prevalent now) and redirect them towards issues of broad social importance (where it is genuinely required). Thurston thinks about technology as a tool to implement new modes of creativity, congregation, and cooperation – to counter social and economic inequality, level educational opportunities, and engender more individual well-being in the public arena. One way to achieve that, he argues, is to combine the world of new technologies with the dominion of humanistic values. Notably, he sees cerebral, socially

⁷⁹ Thompson, Clive. *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better*. Penguin Books, 2014. Kindle loc. 47-285.

⁸⁰ Ibidem. Kindle loc. 205.

⁸¹ For example, as argued by humor theorists Amber Day, comic discourses are always “dialogic, playing multiple voices against each other.” (Day, Amber. “And Now . . . the News? Mimesis and the Real in ‘The Daily Show.’” *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. Ed. by Jonathan Gray et al. NYU Press, 2009. P. 95).

⁸² Thompson. *Smarter Than You Think*. Kindle loc. 5.

⁸³ Ibidem.

conscious comedy – along with the (de)constructive potentialities of satire and irony – as an integral part of this newfound imaginative and intellectual realm.⁸⁴

Thurston believes in the potential of tech-infused satire as a tool of sociopolitical activism. His stance echoes that of journalist and media critic Zeynep Tufekci, the author of *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017). “The expressive, often humorous style of networked protests attracts many participants and thrives both online and offline,” claims Tufekci, and argues that that social media platforms have become vehicles for a specific kind of activist discourse: concise, immediate, as well as blending the personal and political on a level unprecedented in the history of mass media.⁸⁵ Online activism often aims to bring about change with the aid of the deconstructive power of parody, the communally binding shared sense of irony, or the social pressures of satirical corrective laughter. “Rising in opposition . . . [activists] spread humor and dissent with an ease that would have seemed miraculous to earlier generations,” points out Tufekci.⁸⁶

By incorporating humor into software, Thurston wants to add an element of playfulness, ambiguity, and imagination into seemingly inhumane machinery – one that increasingly influences our social, cultural, and political choices through algorithmically driven calculations of preference, probability, and ad revenue. His Comedy Hack Days envisioned and gave the first examples of a new form of satirical art: one that makes ethical use of the latest Silicon Valley inventions and creatively utilizes the Internet-induced mindset of immediacy, informational abundance, and hyper-connectivity. As the practical applications of his ideas are still in their nascency, it remains to be seen whether Thurston’s vision will come to full fruition. However, one thing remains certain: a satirical medium that would effectively harness the

⁸⁴ Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part 2.” Circa 35:15-37:15.

⁸⁵ Tufekci, Zeynep. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale U P, 2017. Pp. xxiii.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*. P. xxii.

narrative capabilities of new technologies holds the potential to revolutionize both the genre of satire and its application to the question of race and identity.

Translating Scholarship into Satire

During his first year at Harvard, Thurston took an *Introduction to Philosophy* class with Kwame Anthony Appiah, a Ghanaian-American historian and cultural theorist. As recalled by Thurston, it was a transformative experience, and it shifted his academic focus from computer science to humanities.⁸⁷ Appiah's stance on the subject of race – one echoed in Thurston's work – is perhaps best exemplified in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (1998).⁸⁸ The book focuses on the history of the concept of race and its connection with the question of individual, national, and ethnic identity. The following paragraphs investigate how Appiah's academic arguments translate into Thurston's satire to argue for anti-essentialist definitions of race in the realm of popular culture. Throughout their respective texts, Appiah and Thurston use different types of argumentation: while the former utilizes a straightforward discourse in a traditional academic setting, the latter employs critical irony in the context of new media. The following subsection delineates similarities and differences between these approaches to discuss how straightforward and satirical discourses complement each other to increase their respective cultural insight, social resonance, and political impact.

In *Color Conscious*, Appiah scrutinizes how the idea of race was constructed and deployed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. He argues that the modern understanding of race in the United States is predicated upon a scientifically disproven, biological notion of race: an assumption that phenotype determines the ethical and intellectual standards of its carrier. This belief was expressed in the idea of racial essences: physical, cerebral, and moral traits exhibiting supposedly representative characteristics of a given race.

⁸⁷ Yitbarek. "Comedy and Code – Part II." Circa 17:20-18:10.

⁸⁸ Appiah co-wrote this book with another Harvard academic, Amy Gutmann. Together, they tackled race from the perspective of the history of ideas (Appiah) and public policy (Gutmann).

It was also articulated in phrenology and eugenics, (pseudo-)scientific notions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, both proven to be ideologically skewed and deeply flawed in their methodology. According to Appiah, as the American concept of race had been based on erroneous scientific notions, it does not constitute a legitimate intellectual foundation for the present or future conceptualizations of ethnicity.⁸⁹ As David B. Wilkins aptly summarized it in the introduction to *Color Conscious*:

Whether one focuses on Jefferson's assertion that skin color is linked to moral traits . . . [or] on neo-Darwinist claims about the speciation of human beings into distinct races . . . there simply is no credible scientific evidence to support the idea that the current racial designations in the United States capture any meaningful physical, intellectual, or moral differences among human beings . . . As a result, Appiah concludes, there are no "races" in the United States or elsewhere as that term has come to be understood; there are only social groups that have been constructed for purposes that cannot be defended on the scientific grounds on which the modern ideational meaning of race must inevitably rest.⁹⁰

Appiah sees current definitions of ethnicity as diluted versions of the racial ideologies of the past.⁹¹ According to him, current concepts tend to replace biological determinism with a cultural one. Appiah sees the latter as less harmful yet still criticizes it as predicated on the scientifically invalid idea of racial essences. In his view, contemporary notions of black identity are less constrictive than those in the past – e.g., the model of “respectable” blackness advocated by the Civil Rights Movement or the Afrocentric construct proposed by Marcus Garvey – but they still rely on ideas made obsolete by modern developments in genetic research and cultural theory. As approximated by socio-geneticists, “as many as two-thirds of African-Americans have some European forbearers; up to two-fifths may have American Indian ‘blood’; and at least 5 percent of white Americans are thought to have African roots.” That is why, “in humans, however, you define the major races, the biological variability within them is almost as great as the biological variation within the species as a whole.”⁹² Appiah argues that when one connects this fact with the cultural differentiation within ethnic groups, seeing race in the old, uniformizing way makes

⁸⁹ Appiah. *Color Conscious*. Pp. 30-105.

⁹⁰ Ibidem. P. 8.

⁹¹ As argued by Appiah: “current ways of talking about race are the residue, the detritus, so to speak, of earlier ways of thinking about race; so that it turns out to be easiest to understand contemporary talk about ‘race’ as the pale reflection of a more full-blooded race discourse that flourished in the last century.” (Ibidem. P. 38).

⁹² Ibidem. P. 68.

little to no sense. Thurston shares this viewpoint and demonstrates it throughout his podcast *Spit* (2018) – a format inspired by Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s popular PBS television show *Finding Your Roots* (2012–). Each episode of *Spit* includes two sets of guests: one from the realm of popular culture (e.g., musicians John Legend and Wyclef Jean) and the other from the world of academia (e.g., political scientist prof. Alvin Tillery and medical geneticist Dr. Robert Green). Discussing the genetic makeup tests of his guest – result that, without exception, point to the fact that *Homo Sapiens* are an intermixed species, and that “pure” biological races simply do not exist – Thurston accentuates two dimensions of their identity: their cultural distinctiveness and their commonality as a species. “It is an inextricable fact of blackness,” he points out, “that one will at some point be referred to as ‘too black’ or ‘not black enough’ by white people, black people, and others.”⁹³ Thurston tackles this problem by negating the very existence of “real,” “pure,” or “true” blackness, and he is doing so on two levels: 1) the genetic one, by discussing people’s DNA composition, and 2) the cultural one, by providing a platform for varied expressions of ethnic identity. Emphasizing the universalizing aspect of the human genome (when it comes to DNA, people differ from each other in the order of 0.1%) together with the ancestral history of his guests, Thurston emphasizes biological commonality without erasing cultural specificity.⁹⁴ Facilitating this discussion through humor translates the discourse of scientific analysis and cultural critique into everyday language, thereby closing the distance between the relative abstraction of the topic and its application to the realities of ordinary life.

According to Appiah, invoking skin color as a foundation for group identity and political recognition can be dangerous in the long term, even for minority groups. To give an example, one of the unintentional consequences of the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement is that it provoked a nationwide resurgence of white identity politics. Feeling threatened by BLM’s growing prominence, alt-right activists hijacked their language and tech-infused organizational

⁹³ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 42.

⁹⁴ “The Podcast ‘Spit.’” *23andMe* (blog of a genetic research company 23andMe). Published Sept. 14, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/y8gkc5pa>.

methods to promote antiquated notions of white ethnic superiority. While BLM activists talked about “black excellence” to frame their cultural and racial identity in an affirmative and non-discriminatory way, Alt-Right nationalists in the likes of Richard Spencer advocated for their own ethnic pride by harkening back to white-supremacy of Jim Crow-era segregationists (albeit repackaged in a new language).⁹⁵ Though correlation does not equal causation, it remains true that the recent rise of non-white identitarian movements coincided with the upsurge of white nationalism – a type of politics that has been in decline for the last quarter of the twentieth century.⁹⁶ Appropriating the discourse of identity politics from African-American activists and Critical Race Theory, Alt-Righters argued for a white ethnostate using dog-whistle pronouncements of cultural difference. Appiah warned about the possibility of this outcome as early as 1998, arguing that “there is a danger in making racial identities too central to our conceptions of ourselves.”⁹⁷ For his part, Thurston points out that one more thing that has been successfully hijacked from the progressive Left is the language of comedy. “What was once relegated to printed zines for haters of progress,” he explains, “has found its ways to bulletin boards, subreddits, and 4chans, and a lot of that is . . . borrowing and using the tools of comedy and digital comedy to spread themselves. It’s like a twisted Comedy Hack Day is playing out in this Alt-Right, ‘join it for the lulz’ universe.”⁹⁸ With the perspective of time, the arguments of Appiah and Thurston seem quite prescient – especially when it comes to the recent rise of identitarian populism⁹⁹ and race-based Internet troll-culture. The latter issue has been discussed at length by journalist Angela Nagle in *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (2017), and analyzed by Renée DiResta, Head of Policy at Data for Democracy, a nonprofit organization studying Russian manipulation of the 2016 US

⁹⁵ Khan, Deeyah (dir.). *White Right - Meeting the Enemy - Exposure*. ITV1, 2017.

⁹⁶ Ibidem.

⁹⁷ Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 32.

⁹⁸ Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part II.” Circa 49:35-51:00.

⁹⁹ “The foundation of Trump’s presidency is the negation of Barack Obama’s legacy,” argued writer and essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates. Referring to the rise of white populism on the American political scene, Coates claimed that “it’s impossible to imagine Trump without the force of whiteness.” (Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “The First White President.” *Atlantic*. Published Sep. 14, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/yxmykomw>).

Presidential Election. Similarly to Thurston, both Nagle and DiResta emphasized the role of viral Internet humor in spreading malign narratives and misinformation on social media.¹⁰⁰ Although Thurston believes in the critical potential of humor and satire, he is not blind to their dangers. According to him, when it comes to the role of comedic discourses in American public life, it is much more complicated than “comedy speaks truth to power.”¹⁰¹ He claims that such pronouncements oversimplify the issue, as memes spreading through digital, ideologically aligned informational bubbles are just as likely to spread untruths as to ridicule them.

Throughout his work, Appiah remains loyal to his self-stated purpose: “My job as an intellectual is to call it as I see it.”¹⁰² For better or worse, he stays in the world of model outcomes of philosophy, cultural criticism, and social theory. In contrast to this idealistic but somewhat intangible approach, Thurston tries to find a middle ground between theorizing about the future of black identity and recognizing that discarding past racial identifications might be impossible in the current historical moment. By the end of his argument in *Color Conscious*, Appiah intends to impart some wisdom onto his readers and advises them to “live with fractured identities; engage in identity play . . . and, above all, practice irony.”¹⁰³ Due to the constraints of the academic form, Appiah does not adhere to his own advice – a fact that only exposes the generic limitations of scholarly discourse (*Color Conscious* makes this evident not by example but rather a lack of one – i.e., it makes it visible through the absence of irony it advocates for). However, in *How to Be Black*, Thurston makes ample use of the critical potential of irony. To give an example, he offers tongue-in-cheek advice on 1) “How to Speak for All Black People” (e.g., “*Be male*. Overlooking the contributions and perspectives of black women is essential to the media narrative of the black experience”),¹⁰⁴ 2) “How to be an Angry Negro” (e.g.,

¹⁰⁰ Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. Zero Books, 2017. Pp. 10-27, 28-39; Harris, Sam. “The Information War: A Conversation with Renée DiResta.” *Making Sense* (Internet podcast). Ep. 145. Published 2 January 2019. <https://goo.gl/NvPLFY>.

¹⁰¹ Yitbarek. “Comedy and Code – Part II.” Circa 49:35-51:00.

¹⁰² Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 104.

¹⁰³ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁴ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 90.

Maximize the Discomfort of Black People. From your point of view, [no one is] black enough. . . . [No matter the occasion,] remind these Negroes that they are black! [For example:] ‘Skiing, my sistah? Are you so obsessed with whiteness that you must frolic in it?’),¹⁰⁵ or 3) “How to be the (Next) Black President” (e.g., “[As] black people in general are under the microscope, [you need to] know the answers to every problem in the universe, and be perfect. Simple”).¹⁰⁶ In the examples cited above, Thurston respectively 1) questions the male-oriented race discourse of the Civil-Rights Movement and Black Power, 2) ridicules the stringent colorism of Black Nationalism, and 3) laughs at the impossible standards of respectability politics. Putting the approach proposed by Appiah into practice, Thurston exemplifies the advantages of a comic discourse: the evocative aesthetics and interpretative indeterminacy characteristic to humor.

As argued by cultural critic Mary Douglas, ironic jokes entail “a play upon a form that affords an opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity.”¹⁰⁷ As humor plays with a possibility of conceptual reinvention, it is inherently anti-essentialist. This critical opportunity directly corresponds with Appiah’s central argument: the need to move beyond current racial definitions and make intellectual and imaginative investments in novel definitions of ethnicity.¹⁰⁸ As Thurston blends scholarly and pop-cultural discourses, he employs an informed perspective of cerebral comedy to advocate for a non-essentialist approach to race and identity. Given that a substantial part of both popular and academic analyses of humor focuses on its bodily, expressive, or psychological aspects, its commonly overlooked intellectual facet seems worthy of critical attention – especially since this dimension of African-American comedy is all-too-often dismissed due to its frequently employed vernacular language.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem. P. 174.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem. P.194.

¹⁰⁷ Qtd. in Gray et al. *Satire TV*. Pp. 9-10.

¹⁰⁸ Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 6.

¹⁰⁹ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 8451-8459.

While Appiah argues for a future that would allow people to freely define their ethnic identity, he recognizes that this possibility is limited by a set of tools made available by society at a given place and time. These tools include cultural archetypes, media representations, and behavioral patterns existing in the culture. Appiah calls these models “scripts,” accentuating their largely prescriptive nature.¹¹⁰ Echoing this argument, Thurston claims that it is “not enough just to be black in your own way. We also have to tell the broader story of blackness to counter the damage inflicted on us by the narrow tale told by others.”¹¹¹ As recalled by him:

The [people] my mother brought into my life rode, sold, and fixed bicycles. They played all manner of instruments. They were photographers and booksellers, and one was even a Buddhist. All of them served to subconsciously round out my definition of what black and brown men could be and do, and I owe part of my present-day love of cycling, music, photography, and books to these men. (pp. 63-64)

One of the central commonalities between Appiah and Thurston is their belief that ideas around race made available by the culture significantly impact peoples’ conceptualization of themselves – i.e., ideational environments often delineate behavioral borders for individuals perceived as members of a particular racial group. As elaborated by Appiah:

Once the racial label is applied to people, ideas about what it refers to, ideas that may be much less consensual than the application of the label, come to have their social effects. But they have not only social effects but psychological ones as well; and they shape the ways people conceive of themselves and their projects. In particular, the labels can operate to shape what I want to call ‘identification’: the process through which an individual intentionally shapes her projects – including her plans for her own life and her conception of the good – by reference to available labels, available identities.¹¹²

To further develop his argument, Appiah refers to science philosopher Ian Hacking’s theory of “dynamic nominalism” and analytic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe’s concept of “intention under description.”¹¹³ The former draws on psychological studies of multiple personality syndrome and claims that people assume various identities and act out dissimilar behavioral patterns depending on the labels that have been imposed on them. When engaging in “dynamic nominalism,” people have a certain degree of choice regarding what identity they want to adopt; however, this choice is limited by the archetypes, models, and labels made available by the

¹¹⁰ Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 73.

¹¹¹ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 221.

¹¹² Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 78.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*.

culture at large. As cultural delineations of race draw out one's (self-)perception, their intellectual and imaginative diversification could significantly transform people's interests, allegiances, and prospective life chances. In *How to Be Black*, Thurston offers a solution similar to that of Appiah's: to redefine their identity, African-Americans need to abandon narrow racial categories of the past. "Don't let someone tell you what you should do because you're black," says Thurston. "Just be," he quips, "the blackness will follow."¹¹⁴

In the end, Open-Source Blackness can be understood as an attempt to disrupt traditional concepts of ethnic identity in the US. As envisioned by Thurston, it is a multivocal, communal effort aiming to "replace the overwhelming media images of limited blackness with a more expansive concept."¹¹⁵ As scripts permeate society, they become internalized and impact people's conceptualizations of themselves. "We also have to tell the broader story of blackness," claims Thurston, "to counter the damage inflicted on us by the narrow tale told by others."¹¹⁶ Diverse, polyphonic representations of blackness expand its socially available cultural repertoire – i.e., they become building blocks of new types of identity. Illustrating this metaphor in an absurdly literal way, Thurston likens this process to assembling a LEGO set:

In my mind, I picture a nineteen-year-old [black boy] at a special Toy Shoppe for Self-Determination. He browses the aisles and happens upon the object of his search: a very-special-edition LEGO™ Negro Identity Building Set. It comes with pieces of various shapes and sizes, and on the side of the box is printed: "Build the black identity that works for you! Tired of being pressured by black people and others to fit their idea of blackness? Don't wear the 'right' clothes? Don't listen to the 'right' music? . . . This set will liberate you. Inside you'll find every country, every type of food, every genre of film, all granting you the unlimited power to be whoever you want to be while maintaining your strong sense of blackness."¹¹⁷

As evidenced by recent public discussions on cultural appropriation,¹¹⁸ many people involved in the American race debate believe in what Skip Gates – a colleague and an intellectual

¹¹⁴ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 224.

¹¹⁵ Ibidem. P. 223.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem. P. 222.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem. Pp. 103-104.

¹¹⁸ To read more about this topic, see the following essays on cultural appropriation; the first defends it as necessary for the development of a global cosmopolitan culture, while the second frames it as exploitative with regard to historically marginalized groups: Malik, Kenan. "In Defense of Cultural Appropriation." *New York Times*. Published June 14, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/y7x325jr>; and Bradford, K. Tempest. "Cultural Appropriation Is, In Fact, Indefensible." *NPR*. Published June 28, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/yacca3f5>.

kinsman of Appiah – dubbed as “cultural geneticism.”¹¹⁹ According to this belief, specific racial groups have a particular affinity for certain forms of cultural expression. Not only are they believed to have a distinctive aptitude to excel in them, but they also possess the power to authenticate them through their presence. As their connection to a given cultural expression is perceived as visceral – not merely historical, environmental, or connected with a specific talent they happen to possess – they can legitimize it as a representative of a particular racial group. As explained by Appiah, people who apply this view to African-Americans “understand black people as sharing black culture *by definition*.”¹²⁰ Appiah sees it as problematic, as it ultimately racializes traits such as artistic sensibility, intelligence, and imagination – i.e., mental capacities independent from the superficiality of skin color. He also argues that this does not do justice to most works of art, as it does not recognize artists as figures who ultimately transcend the circumstantiality of race. As discussed in the chapter about Percival Everett, authors labeled as “ethnic” often find themselves relegated to channels of distribution, consumption, and reflection with a significantly smaller audience and reach (e.g., narrowly-specialized academic departments and subsections of bookstores). Similarly to the author of *Erasure*, Appiah does not withhold his judgment when commenting upon this issue:

Because Homer and Shakespeare are products of Western culture, they are awarded to white children who have never studied a word of them, never heard their names. And in this generous spirit, the fact is forgotten that cultural geneticism deprives white people of jazz and black people of Shakespeare. This is a bad deal – as Du Bois would have insisted. “I sit with Shakespeare,” the Bard of Great Barrington wrote, “and he winces not.”¹²¹

“Cultural geneticism” limits the possibility of cerebral and emotional identification with a product of human creativity by accentuating racial factors that separate the author of a given text from its recipient. Because of racialization, literary masterpieces by eminent black writers are often deemed to be interpretable only by African-Americans (or, at the very least, those familiar with the historical and social intricacies of race in the US). At the same time, however,

¹¹⁹ Qtd. in Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P. 90.

¹²⁰ Ibidem.

¹²¹ Ibidem.

the works of Shakespeare are not perceived to be comprehensible only to Anglo-Saxons (or, at minimum, people accustomed to the linguistic, social, and political complexities of the Elizabethan era). In other words, the market defines that which is non-white as culturally specific while designating that which is white as universal. Thurston notices the faulty logic of this classificatory mechanism and satirizes it throughout *How to Be Black*. Whenever he tries to prove the universality of a given statement, he makes it appear as a Shakespeare quote, only to designate it as fake in the endnotes. For example, he opens the book with the following line: “‘Be not afraid of blackness. Some are born black. Some achieve blackness, and others have blackness thrust upon them.’ – Shakespeare.*”¹²² When one clicks on the asterisk – it works as a hyperlink in the Kindle version of the book – they see this note: “William Shakespeare never wrote this, but wouldn’t it be great if he had?”¹²³ Thurston treats this joke as a framing device. “As Shakespeare wrote, ‘There are more ways to be black than are dreamt of in your philosophy*’” – he closes the last narrative chapter of the book.¹²⁴ When one checks the endnotes, they see: “You should know by now that any time I claim to be quoting Shakespeare, I’m lying.”¹²⁵

In an effort to tackle the question of race and identity from an interdisciplinary perspective, Appiah and Thurston express support for combining academic and literary discourses with the language of popular culture and technology. As they try to convince their audiences, critical insight can be attained by academics (through scholarly detachment) and humorists alike (through comic distance). Their claim goes on a par with the theory proposed by Critchley, who argues that humor allows people to become “philosophical spectators upon their lives”¹²⁶ and dissuades them from accepting any given “cultural meme” – e.g., the notion of race – as rigid in its definition and unmovable in its practical application. As it has been

¹²² Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 1.

¹²³ Ibidem. P. 262.

¹²⁴ Ibidem. P. 224.

¹²⁵ Ibidem. P. 262.

¹²⁶ Critchley. *On Humour*. P. 18.

discussed in Chapter I of this dissertation, scientific and humorous approaches are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the best satire is often complementary to the work of the most insightful public intellectuals. This dynamic is evident in the work of Appiah and Thurston, as the former advocates for playful, ironic detachment from the issue of race and identity in his academic writing, and the latter exemplifies it in his satire. In the process, they both advocate for the emergence of self-conceptualizations informed by the latest scientific discoveries, modern tools of expression, and philosophy of humor. Their work lays a foundation for a future in which the nineteenth-century idea of racial essences and its contemporary cultural residues are replaced by diverse, polyphonic conceptions of African-American selfhood. Together, they contribute to what was dubbed by Thurston as “The Center for Experimental Blackness” – a cultural space for free intellectual exploration and imaginative play discussed in the next and final subchapter of this study.¹²⁷

Embodying Multiperspectivity

In the absence of proper funding for his satirical software ventures, Thurston tries to integrate his outlook on comedy, race, and identity into traditional literary forms, and aims to render them more suited to modern times through technology. The “enhanced” Kindle version of Thurston’s *How to Be Black* looks more like an interactive piece of software than a conventional (e-)book: it contains fourteen video interviews, an audio clip of a live reading of Thurston’s essay in a comedy club, hyperlinks to a companion website with extra content, and a set of exclusive photos.¹²⁸ Echoing Thompson’s idea of “conversational thinking,” *How to Be Black* embraces multiperspectivity – a concept of crucial importance to Thurston’s anti-essentialist ethos. As elaborated by him:

The idea of a book that claims to cover “how to be black” is, of course, preposterous, but I’m doing it anyway, and I’m not alone. Because the topic is so large and because my experiences can’t comprehensively represent those of millions of people, I recruited a few other voices to help this book live up to its title. I interviewed friends and colleagues I felt were strong new models of “how to be black.”

¹²⁷ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 210.

¹²⁸ ---. *How to Be Black (Enhanced Edition)*. <https://tinyurl.com/ybkqhs5l>.

. . . They have done more than provide color commentary for this book. They have helped me find the heart of it.¹²⁹

Even though the book is essentially a memoir – i.e., the most self-oriented literary form available – it exemplifies a polyphonic approach to the question of African-American identity. Thurston includes a diverse set of interviewees, dubs them “The Black Panel,” and declares that together, they aim to present “The Grand Unifying Theory of Blackness.”¹³⁰ Of course, he is being ironic, as the panelists – among them, a white Canadian – espouse an open-source approach to identity and would have never argued in favor of any “grand,” all-encompassing racial theories. As parsing out ideational differences between all panelists could fill an entire separate chapter, the subsequent paragraphs will focus on two members of The Black Panel who work at the intersection of satire and technology: activist and blogger Cheryl Contee and conceptual artist damali ayo.

Cheryl Contee is an expert in Civil Tech, an area of activism that aids non-profit organizations in their efforts to use technology for the betterment of underprivileged communities. In 2008, along with Thurston, she co-founded the blog *Jack & Jill Politics*: an online space for socially engaged citizen journalism and cerebral satire, as well as a platform arguing for an ideational change in black political leadership. Contee thinks that race is a social construct. “I first realized I was black in nursery school when a little girl told me that I was black. And I told her, ‘No, I’m beige!’”¹³¹ – she reminisces, implying that a child’s seemingly naïve insight might be actually wiser than the “educated ignorance” acquired through enculturation.¹³² Confounded by her friend’s characterization, young Contee consulted her parents, and they “reacted like any black intelligentsia: [they] went to the library. I would actually call it a series of seminars for my brother and me, in terms of African-American culture

¹²⁹ ---, *How to Be Black*. Pp. 13-15.

¹³⁰ Ibidem. P. 209.

¹³¹ Ibidem. P. 26.

¹³² A phenomenon defined as learning and accepting presuppositions based on an erroneous scientific understanding of a given concept, or neglecting “our ignorance and assuming we know much more than we actually do” (Mazie, Steven. “How Too Much Education Can Result in Ignorance.” *Big Think*. Published 27 March, 2015. <https://bit.ly/3aLLKWN>).

through the ages.”¹³³ Contee’s anecdote illustrates a psychological burden weighed on non-white US citizens. To understand the significance of one’s skin color – a seemingly simple act, as even a child can recognize and name her complexion accurately – one has to acquire a deep understanding of the country’s sociopolitical and cultural history (hence the trip to the library). Contee also points out that this requirement is rarely presented to white Americans, as their phenotypes and cultures are deracinated – i.e., perceived as non-ethnic.

Thurston makes a similar argument to that of Contee when he discusses the concept of “Postraciality”: a claim that race no longer matters in American society, culture, and politics (this argument, put forth in the early twentieth century, gained popularity after Obama’s presidential victory and died down after Trump’s 2016 election).¹³⁴ “At one point during my writing of [*How to Be Black*], someone suggested to me that I title it *Thoughts on Post-Racial America*,” reminisces Thurston. “I calmly informed this person,” he continues, “that the only way the term ‘post-racial’ America was getting into the title of my book is if it was called *Post-Racial America Is Some Bullshit, and Other Thoughts on How to Be Black*.”¹³⁵ As evident from this quip, even though Thurston appreciates the intellectual and experiential freedom afforded by defining one’s ethnic identity in non-essentialist terms, he does not believe that the concept of race itself will lose its significance any time soon.¹³⁶ He also does not believe in its complete detachment from one’s skin color. As he starts his memoir: “This book is not *How to Become a Black Person If You Are Not Already Black*. You cannot digest the printed copy and expect some supernatural physical transformation beyond painful indigestion.”¹³⁷

When it comes to the issue of racial colorblindness, Contee sees it as idealistically (if quixotically) aspirational rather than wishfully exculpatory, naively forgetful, or cowardly

¹³³ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 27.

¹³⁴ Hannah-Jones, Nikole. “The End of the Postracial Myth.” *New York Times*. Published Nov. 15, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/y8uobqx8>.

¹³⁵ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 201.

¹³⁶ “If the future is a United States in which race is no longer the primary issue that binds or divides us,” teases Thurston by the end of his memoir, “then why have you read this far in a book called *How to Be Black*?” (Ibidem. P. 208).

¹³⁷ Ibidem. P. 1.

evasive (as it is perceived by some of the other members of The Black Panel, e.g., ayo).¹³⁸ However – despite being discriminated against on the basis of skin color at various points in her life – she does not believe that a colorblind approach to race in the US should be a sought-for solution. “I’ve wished that other people could see me for the complex being that I am, not see past my race, but see that and all of the things that I have done, to embrace all of me” – she proclaims, pointing to the importance of recognizing the cultural and experiential dimension of race, but discarding it as a legitimate variable in characterological judgment.¹³⁹

Contee feels rooted in African-American history but finds herself misaligned with the one-dimensional, essentialist images of blackness in the American mainstream culture (e.g., the assumed propensity for physical activity, presuppositions of an impoverished upbringing, and other common racial stereotypes).¹⁴⁰ She argues that one way to fight against these stereotypes is to recognize the emergence of the New Black Renaissance – a flowering of African-American creativity in the twenty-first century’s media landscape. In *How to Be Black*, she commented upon this black cultural flourishing in the following words:

I think that we’re living through almost a second Harlem Renaissance. . . . and it’s powered by social media, so it can reach a lot more people than it could before. . . . That is really exciting for what it means for the future of African-Americans in this country and the cultural impact, the economic impact, the social impact that we can have in a positive way that also is shared with the larger culture. I think that the people who are coming up behind us are even more literate with these tools, are even faster communicators. We are going to see this amazing uprising in a positive way of African-American thought and music and art that will astonish the world.¹⁴¹

Although Contee’s vision might have seemed too idealistic at the time of *HTTB*’s first release in 2012, it has proven to be extraordinarily prescient in the following years. As it has been presented in this dissertation’s first chapter, African-American popular culture experienced an unprecedented qualitative and quantitative growth after the year 2012, expanding the market

¹³⁸ According to Contee: “I understand the idea. I understand that even for black people, sometimes you just don’t want the struggle anymore. . . . Post-racial [colorblindness] was a fantasy. I think it’s something that people really want, I think there’s an urge and a healthy aspiration to becoming a Post-racial America. I would love to see that day. I don’t think we live in that world right now.” (Ibidem. P. 204).

¹³⁹ Ibidem. P. 102.

¹⁴⁰ Ibidem. P. 43.

¹⁴¹ Ibidem. P. 223

for a previously underserved (and underrepresented) non-white clientele, and creating new possibilities for intellectual and aesthetic expression for generations to come.

Contee hoped that the African-American cultural renaissance would be accompanied by a political one, and sourced this optimism in Obama's electorate, a group comprised of many first-time voters energized by their prospective sociopolitical impact.¹⁴² Although the backlash against Obama's politics (as argued by many cultural critics, fueled by racial resentment and white identity politics) and the subsequent election of Donald Trump (seen by many as an expression of racial resentment of the part of some of his voters) might have tempered Contee's hopeful prognostications,¹⁴³ the widespread mobilization of young non-white voters in 2020 Presidential Elections may turn out to be the reason for its future restoration and development.¹⁴⁴

The second representative of the Black Panel is damali ayo [sic!], a conceptual artist and creator of *Rent-a-Negro.com* (2013), one of the first Internet-based satirical performance art pieces. Ayo's website simultaneously exemplified and strengthened the then-nascent black comedic critique on the World Wide Web. One of the first iterations of this new type of satirical discourse was Keith Obadike's 2001 eBay auction of his blackness. As Obadike's digital performance piece encapsulates the point ayo was trying to make through her own project, the description of his auction is worth quoting at length:

Benefits: 1. This Blackness may be used for creating black art. 2. For writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks. 3. For making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor comfortably. . . . 4. For accessing some affirmative action benefits. . . . 5. For dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny. 6. For gaining access to exclusive, "high risk" neighborhoods. 7. For securing the right to use the terms 'sista', 'brotha', or [the N-word] in reference to black people. . . . 8. For instilling fear. 9. To augment the blackness of those already black, especially for purposes of playing 'blacker-than-thou'. . . Warnings: the Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used: 1. During legal proceedings of any sort. 2. While seeking employment. 3. In the process of making or selling 'serious' art. 4. While

¹⁴² Ibidem. P. 236.

¹⁴³ Graham, David A. "Trump's White Identity Politics Appeals to Two Different Groups." *Atlantic*. Published Aug. 8, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3rvyprE>.

¹⁴⁴ Boak, Josh and Hannah Fingerhut. "Trump, Biden coalitions show race, class divide." *Associated Press*. Published Nov. 5, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3cZEats>.

shopping or writing a personal check. 5. While making intellectual claims. 6. While voting . . . 7. While demanding fairness. 8. While demanding. 9. In Hollywood.¹⁴⁵

Ayo lists this piece as one of her direct inspirations for *Rent-a-Negro.com*, where she tried to put her own spin on Obadike's satirical effort by offering her blackness for short-term hire instead of permanent purchase. To provide actual service to her potential customers, she offered her and her employees' assistance with tasks similar to those listed in Obadike's "benefits" section: for example, angering someone's racist parents by pretending to be their son's significant other or posing as a token black person in promotional leaflets of predominantly white universities. The point of this conceptual piece – "performative rentals," as ayo dubbed them – was to explore the tropes of blackness in American culture, demonstrate how they are being instrumentalized, and argue against essentialist ideas of race that make this whole process operational.¹⁴⁶ It was also meant to satirize the tokenization of blackness by liberal institutions and individuals who want to appear "diverse" or "progressive," even at the cost of using African-American culture as a mere prop. What ayo did not anticipate, however, is that people would treat her performance piece with a straight face and respond either with serious offers for rentals or with CVs of prospective black employees who wanted to offer their services (both of which are documented in ayo's *How to Rent A Negro* book, published in 2008 after the project came to a close). Ayo's website/performance piece inspired the chapter on "How to be a Black Friend" in *How to Be Black*, where Thurston wrote:

The Black Friend has value to all non-black Americans but especially white Americans. . . . Here's how all these benefits might play out in one setting. First, a white person brings her Black Friend to a party, adding instant cultural credibility to the event. . . . Second, that white person has more latitude to speak ignorance of a racial nature by invoking the fact that she 'has a black friend.' Innocence-by-association is a powerful defensive tactic. Depending on the type of household she is from, it may be forbidden or at least frowned upon to go hanging around with black folks. So the white person who brings her Black Friend home can enjoy the added benefit of rebelling against her parents. The Black Friend is a cultural Swiss Army knife for many white Americans, able to perform several functions of both a stylistic and practical nature.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Obadike, Keith. "Keith Obadike's Blackness." *Ebay* (Internet auction archive). Accessed Jul. 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3p3FrCe>. (The repeating phrases "This Blackness may be used" and "the Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used" were edited out for brevity's sake).

¹⁴⁶ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 241.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*. Pp. 80-81.

As one can read from the excerpt above, Thurston approached the sometimes-instrumental treatment of the archetypal Black Friend in a more playful, sympathetic, light-hearted manner, and generally accentuated the individual and communal worth of interracial friendships.¹⁴⁸ As for ayo, she summed up the effort of *Rent-a-Negro.com* with a sarcastic quip, stating that “black people can be more than professional black people.”¹⁴⁹ In a fashion typical for Thurston and his interviewees, she argued for freedom from embodying the cultural tropes that permeated blackness throughout history, and protested against performing them to validate one’s authenticity or satisfy expectations of those espousing racial essentialism.¹⁵⁰

Ayo has authored two books. As described above, *How to Rent a Negro* (2005) recounted her experiences with the web project and argued against racial tokenism and instrumentalization. The second one, *Obamistan! Land Without Racism* (2010), was a satirical response to the widely proclaimed post-racialism of Obama’s America.¹⁵¹ The book presented an idyllic vision of a colorblind country to comically hyperbolize what ayo perceived at the time as a widespread idealization of the reality of race in the US. The picture-perfect world of *Obamistan* was, of course, deeply ironic – a fact made evident through its contrast with the actual political turmoil of the Obama years.¹⁵² Ayo saw the concept of postraciality as a product of wishful thinking born out of the country’s discursive fatigue with the topic of race.¹⁵³ She

¹⁴⁸ As argued by Thurston: “By acting as a buffer and a sounding board between worlds, The Black Friend can prevent misunderstandings from escalating into an all-out conflagration, and all black people benefit from these quiet acts of diplomacy . . . The irony is that many in the black community look with derision upon those of their number who serve as Black Friends. Truly exceptional Black Friends are treated as traitors to their race, told they aren’t ‘black enough,’ and called Oreos and sellouts.” (Ibidem. P. 82).

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem. P. 229.

¹⁵⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁵¹ Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. “Barack Obama’s Original Sin: America’s Post-Racial Illusion.” *Guardian*. Published Jan. 13, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3q1ntlg>.

¹⁵² Agiesta, Jennifer. “Most say race relations worsened under Obama, poll finds.” *CNN*. Published Oct. 6, 2016. <https://cnn.it/3rBLuj0>; Bryant, Nick. “Barack Obama legacy: Did he improve US race relations?” *BBC*. Published Jan. 10, 2017. <https://bbc.in/2YW1dNM>; Bird, Robert and Frank Newport. “White racial resentment before, during Obama years.” *Gallup*. Published May 19, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3tAOEFD>.

¹⁵³ As argued by ayo: “The art world went through this phase where they were calling things post-black, which was insanity. I think it’s the same thing that is happening with this. If you’re not saying, ‘We’re post-race,’ then we don’t really want to hear you, because you’re bumming us out. . . . Human beings have this infinite potential for courage that they rarely tap. And if people would just dig down and be genuinely honest with themselves, we would all be living in a much better culture. But instead, we’re very much addicted to avoidance and cowardice, I think.” (Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 203)

argued that its implementation was all-too-convenient for white Americans, as their fellow black citizens constitute a constant reminder for the US to “get behind its own dream” – i.e., to realize the vision of equality professed in the Constitution.¹⁵⁴

During her interview with Thurston, ayo talks about the idea of passing (“I apparently am a switchy-changy black person”), not being black enough (“I am so black that the other day a black person asked me what race I am”), and relational identity (“People like to see me as white or as black as [they please]”).¹⁵⁵ She also contests the idea of racial colorblindness, telling Thurston that refusing to recognize someone’s ethnicity amounts to denying a part of their lived experience.¹⁵⁶ Overall, just like Thurston, Contee, and other panelists, ayo wants to imbue the concept of blackness with differential meanings. To put this philosophy into practice, she attempts to popularize eco-poetics in communities of color. According to her, eco-poetics recognize the transient nature of individual and communal needs. It also appoints empathetic sensibility, intellectual openness, and operational adaptability as its founding principles. Importantly, it does so on two levels: the relatively abstract world of art and the practical realm of sustainable living.¹⁵⁷ The overlapping ideational and pragmatic application of her ideas corresponds with the activism of Open-Source Blackness, a dimension exemplified by Contee and Thurston’s embrace of Civil Tech (an idea that tech products, including satirical software, ought to primarily serve the underprivileged).

Other members of Thurston’s panel include Jacquetta Szathmari, a comedian and the author of *That’s Funny. You Didn’t Sound black on the Phone*, a one-woman show about defying racial expectations¹⁵⁸; Elon James White, the host of the Web video series *This Week in Blackness*, a show satirizing reductive ideas of race in a manner similar to that of *How to Be*

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem. P. 213.

¹⁵⁵ Ibidem. P. 45.

¹⁵⁶ Ibidem. P. 201.

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem. P. 219.

¹⁵⁸ Szathmari summarizes the premise of her one-woman show in the following way: “People have always made it very clear to me that I wasn’t being black enough. Then I’ve had lots of white people [say], ‘I don’t even notice you’re black!’ Which usually means you’re not poor and smoking a five-piece on the corner and trying to rob my sister. I don’t think I’m considered to be very black in the mainstream sense.” (Ibidem. P. 45).

Black;¹⁵⁹ and W. Kamau Bell, a writer, stand-up comedian, and CNN’s “investigative satirist”¹⁶⁰ in the show *United Shades of America* (2016–).¹⁶¹ The second to last interviewee is Derrick Ashong, a multidisciplinary artist informed by his multicultural upbringing in Ghana, Qatar, and New Jersey.¹⁶² The final affiliate of the ironically-dubbed Black Panel is Christian Lander, a white satirist and the author of *Stuff White People Like* (2008), a book jokingly exploring the intersection of race and class in the Western world.¹⁶³ Taken together, Thurston and his interlocutors present a valuable critical perspective on “The Future of Blackness” – a vision encompassed most clearly in the name and content of the second to last part of *How to Be Black*.¹⁶⁴ It consists of three major proposals:

1. New Black History: teaching a more complete and honest history of black people and, thus, America, in far more interesting ways.
2. Distributed Struggle: spreading the burden of fighting oppression more broadly across society.
3. The Center for Experimental Blackness: opening up the doors of blackness by passionately embracing the eclectic, the nonracial, and whatever else suits your fancy.¹⁶⁵

New Black History discusses the unique relationship of African-Americans with the US as a nation. Because of the estrangement brought forth by slavery, the cultural recourse to their ancestors’ native lands is mainly imaginary: i.e., it is based on aspirational idealizations of lost

¹⁵⁹ Similarly to Thurston, White accentuates the relational aspect of racial identity: “How black am I? It depends on the day of the week. It depends on who you ask. It depends on what situation I’m in. . . . It depends on what topic happens to pop up.” (Ibidem. P. 43).

¹⁶⁰ Kennedy, Greg. “From Colbert to Kimmel: the rise of ‘investigative comedy.’” *The National News*. Published Jan. 1, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3p2wAkl>.

¹⁶¹ Like Thurston, Bell focuses on redefining black comedy: “I feel like the same thing that is in black comedy is in black radio. We call it black radio, but what we really mean is hip-hop and R&B radio, because black radio does not encompass all of black music. I feel the same way about black comedy. That’s like R&B and hip-hop comedy, and it’s just like a stylistic thing that I don’t do. . . . [I’m also not doing] it from a ‘Kings of Comedy’ perspective. I’ve never been a big proponent of ‘black people do stuff like this, and white people do stuff like this.’ It usually ends up that the black people do things poorer than white people.” (Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 231-233).

¹⁶² For example, as pointed out by Ashong: “I was born in Africa, so everybody was black. We don’t really think about [race] like that. [In the US], everyone’s like, ‘Is he black? Is he white? Is he black?’ In Africa, you don’t ask. The assumption is that you’re black. Therefore, what becomes more important is other things. What your name is, where you come from, what language you speak, what’s your culture.” (Ibidem. P. 28).

¹⁶³ As observed by Lander: “At my high school, anyone who liked something [that was perceived upper-middle class] and was not white was called white, was accused of acting white.” (Ibidem. Pp. 48).

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem. P. 209.

¹⁶⁵ Ibidem.

connections.¹⁶⁶ As recalled by Thurston, this fact has been often pointed out to him in reaction to his first name, Baratunde, which is Nigerian in origin:

[Once,] I called my Nigerian friend . . . Instead, his *extremely* Nigerian father answered, and our interaction proceeded as follows: “Hello, who is calling?” “Hi, sir, this is Baratunde.” “Where did you get that name!? . . . You have no history, no culture, no roots. You think you can wear a dashiki, steal an African name, and become African? You cannot!” Remember, when this self-appointed Father Nigeria decided to indict, judge, and reject all of African America for its attempts to rebuild some small part of the ancestral bridges burned by America’s peculiar institution, I was twelve years old and not in the best position to argue.¹⁶⁷

Varied reaction to Thurston’s name underscore the volatility and context-dependency of the concept of blackness vis-à-vis Americanness: “For non-blacks,” he points out, “it marks me as absolutely, positively black. However, most of the vocal Nigerians I’ve met . . . use my name to remind me that I’m not *that* black.”¹⁶⁸ Aiming to reframe the narrative about black people’s cultural displacement, New Black History claims that their predicament makes them uniquely American, as they often do not have a mode of recourse to another culture or country. “True black pride is also American pride,” exclaims Thurston, “and black people truly are the most American of people in this country. We have nowhere else to go!”¹⁶⁹ While this predicament might seem somewhat tragic, The Black Panel chooses to embrace the comic perspective and treat it as an excuse for defiant, exploratory play – an opportunity to define one’s identity anew, against the historical odds. As explained by Thurston:

Let’s face it, given most of what is commonly taught as black history and how it’s communicated, the subject can be depressing. The quick viewfinder perspective is: snatched from Africa, dragged across the sea in the least accommodating of accommodations, delivered into slavery, stripped of language and religion, freed (reluctantly), terrorized for generations and, generally speaking, treated like crap. . . . Accepting such a negative spin on your own history necessarily affects your view of your own self-worth, your potential, and your place in this world, not to mention the view others have of you. At the same time . . . the constant dehumanization and attacks on families won’t be erased just by telling positive history tales. . . . The New Black History Course aims to address these massive gaps, and it isn’t simply some repackaged Afrocentric curriculum that says, “Black people were kings and queens back in the day, and The White Man is terrible!” Instead, it’s just an honest and more complete version of events. But at the heart of this new education plan is the story of the critical place black people occupy in American history.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Appiah. *Color Conscious*. P.23, 24, 26.

¹⁶⁷ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. Pp. 20-22.

¹⁶⁸ Ibidem. P. 22.

¹⁶⁹ Ibidem. P. 211.

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem. P. 208-211.

The New Black History Course proposed by Thurston and The Black Panel frames the African-American presence as foundational for the country's very existence. This perspective opens up a possibility of reframing their national belonging on a par with that of white Americans and other ethnic groups (which, similarly to African-Americans, helped build and enrich the country they have been ideationally excluded from). It also fosters a unique approach in the conceptual realm of race, identity, and humor. Historically, one of the defining features of the African-American perspective was its "double consciousness," described by W. E. B. Du Bois as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."¹⁷¹ Thurston aims to reframe it in more affirmative terms as an integral part of American cultural heritage. "I recognize that this is an impressive and bold country whose ideas of what it means to be a country are still, over 230 years after its founding, revolutionary," he proclaims.¹⁷² "The missing link for many inside and outside of Black America," Thurston argues, "has been to fully understand the role black people have played in helping make those beautiful ideas more tangible and more real."¹⁷³

The ideas listed by the Black Panel spread out along a neatly delineated time frame: one that encompasses the past (1. New Black History), present (2. Distributed Struggle), and future (3. Experimental Blackness). If taught universally, New Black History could create an elevated sense of social responsibility – i.e., Distributed Struggle – which would ease up the psychological burden felt by many African-Americans and provide them with more space for individual self-realization. It would help black people avoid situations like the one recalled by Thurston:

At [my school], usually I was the only black student in the room, and this resulted in me being deputized as some sort of Assistant Professor X whenever anything black were to come up in the curriculum. Reading Harriet Beecher Stowe? Everyone looks at Baratunde. Watching *Eyes on the Prize*? Everyone looks at Baratunde. In science class, learning about Black Lung? Everybody looks at Baratunde. It's as if everyone expected me to carry the knowledge of some sort of Negropedia filled with answers to all things black for the edification of white classmates.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ DuBois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Public Domain e-book.

¹⁷² Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 211.

¹⁷³ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem. P. 53.

Ideally, easing up this psychological burden – not only in educational institutions but in all facets of life – would contribute to the creation of “The Center for Experimental Blackness”: an intellectual space for exploratory play with one’s identity. Thurston started thinking about this idea during his years at Harvard, a time constituting the inverse of the situation described in the above quote. As recalled by him:

[I]n general, the beauty of my Harvard experience is that I could often just be a student without having to actively and continuously think of myself as a black student. Upon graduation, I was conscious of the fact that I could be me and thus be black but not have to be black in order to be me.¹⁷⁵

This last point on the list compiled by the Black Panel – “opening up the doors of blackness by passionately embracing the eclectic, the nonracial, and whatever else suits your fancy”¹⁷⁶ – directly corresponds to Thurston’s realization. It also illustrates the core of Open-Source Blackness, a concept best exemplified through its particular, atomized embodiments (all of them individualized and often dissimilar, but still existing under the same umbrella term).

Open-Source Blackness epitomizes an ethos of intellectual freedom – a stance that finds its ideational completion in indeterminacy and open-endedness. Thurston sees ethnicity as a social and cultural construct – one malleable enough to be set free from any essentialist notions.¹⁷⁷ Talking about African-American identity in an ironic fashion, he exposes the conceptual limits of essentialist, deterministic, uniformizing definitions of blackness. Tackling discourses on race with humor and technology – “a play upon a form that affords an opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity” – Thurston contributes to their development as vehicles of narrative meaning. In that, he revitalizes traditional genres (memoirs, self-help books, humorous lectures/speeches, essays on race) while simultaneously proposing their new, tech-infused iterations (“enhanced” versions of e-books, satirical software). Although he coined the term Open-Source Blackness, it is not his by its very definition; its multivocal ethos presupposes its constant reclaiming and modification. Every

¹⁷⁵ Ibidem. P. 144.

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem. P. 53.

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem. P. 226.

time someone uses Thurston's idea to define themselves and their community anew, a different but equally legitimate iteration of Open-Source Blackness is being released into the networked space of culture. Satire, with its tenets of critical reexamination and dialogue, facilitates this process and makes it more evocative. As Thurston remains the only American comic author talking about race and identity in the context of new technologies in a thorough, systematic, investigative manner of an insider, it seems reasonable to assume that the relevance of his voice might only increase with time, giving people valuable insights into the possible futures of Open-Source Blackness.

CODA

REDEFINING BLACK IDENTITY THROUGH HUMOR

The history of America is a story of reinvention – religious, governmental, and cultural redefinition. However, the right to reinvent oneself has rarely been afforded to non-white citizens of the US. Their lack of freedom functioned as a backdrop against which white Americans could define their personal and political liberty. Open-Source Blackness argues for the right to reinvent oneself – an opportunity afforded to whites ever since the US’s inception. Working within this framework, Everett, Simien, and Thurston argue for a diversity of black voices: an anti-essentialist polyphony of authorial ideations of African-American identity. Notably, a crucial part of this multivocality is based upon a comic foundation: 1.) irony, with its capacity to deconstruct surface-level meanings and create communities of shared values and knowledge; 2.) parody, able to serve as a tool of reflection through critical reenactment; 3.) comic perspective, offering anthropological distance on the matters of one’s identity and culture; 4.) satire, with its ability to pass judgment through corrective ridicule; 5.) and humor, fostering a mental model of reevaluation and open-endedness. The following coda aims to place Everett, Simien, and Thurston’s views within the larger debate about black identity in the US and find echoes of their voices among historical and contemporary American public intellectuals.

As authentic representations of black life in the US mainstream culture were relatively rare in the twentieth century, African-Americans who achieved crossover success had to deal with the pressure of representing their race. Historical figures such as Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. DuBois, or Civil Rights leaders tried to meet this expectation with respectability politics – standards of behavior, speech, and aesthetics expected by the white majority. A significant part of respectability politics consisted of projecting the image of moral fortitude; adopting this stance, DuBois advised his fellow intellectuals never to engage in any folly in front of their

white peers. “The more highly trained we become,” he said, “the less we can laugh at Negro comedy.”¹ The approach adopted by DuBois and the Talented Tenth – a group of black intellectuals meant to embody the decorum of respectability – resulted in considerable neglect of black comic tradition in elite academic circles of the first half of the twentieth century. This approach met with historic opposition during the times of the Black Power movement, when its social leaders (e.g., Malcolm X), academics (e.g., Angela Davis), and satirists (e.g., Ishmael Reed) proclaimed that “black is beautiful” and refuted respectability politics with arguments in favor of pan-Africanism, black nationalism, and the Black Arts Movement. What is novel about Everett, Simien, and Thurston’s approach is that they proposed a solution outside of the black-and-white binary, past mere opposition to respectability politics, and beyond the often-idealizing embrace of black self-worth. Paraphrasing Mitchell and Vander, one could say that they “enacted a revision of the re-subjectification of the black self in which . . . multiplicity is the sociopolitical aim.”²

The satirists discussed in this dissertation hold varying opinions on race and its centrality to one’s sense of self. Everett opts on the side of individualism; he is not color-blind but treats race as one of the least significant aspects of one’s identity. In many ways, Everett’s view echoes that of Conor Friedersdorf – journalist, cultural critic, and one of the most vocal proponents of “aspirational colorblindness” in the American debate on race. Being strongly opposed to the notion of ethnicity proposed by Critical Race Theory, Friedersdorf posits that America should strive toward racial colorblindness, as “race is a pernicious construct that robs people of their individuality.”³ When it comes to Simien, he leans more towards the Critical Race Theory side of the argument and claims that black people in the US are not allowed to define themselves outside of their race. Interestingly, Simien’s take echoes that of sociologist

¹ Qtd. in Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 2206.

² Mitchell and Vander defined this approach to characterize the work of Everett, but this strategy extends to Simien, Thurston and other artists of the New Black Renaissance as well. (Mitchell and Vander. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. P. xi).

³ Friedersdorf. “The Left’s Attack on Color-Blindness Goes Too Far.”

Adia Harvey Wingfield, one of Friedersdorf's interlocutors in a public debate about colorblindness. "Whites, by and large, enjoy the luxury of promoting the importance of the individual, because they benefit from living in a racially stratified society where whiteness is normalized," said Wingfield, offering a retort to Friedersdorf's claim about individuality. She also added that "[r]acial minorities, by contrast, become aware from a young age that people will often judge them as members of their group."⁴ When it comes to the issue of aspirational colorblindness vs. strategic color-consciousness, Thurston finds himself somewhere in the middle: he is more on Simien's side when it comes to matters of politics but remains as individualistic as Everett when talking about culture and identity.

Everett, Simien, and Thurston argue for the mainstream inclusion of multiple conceptions of black identity: subjectivities expressed through varied political leanings, aesthetic sensibilities, and intellectual pursuits. Among the three, Everett is the strongest opponent of (self-)identification based on race.⁵ Throughout his work, he repeatedly satirizes uniformizing takes of the "black perspective"; he also argues for black artistic and intellectual freedom within the realm of subjects and genres not traditionally associated with African-American culture.⁶ Thurston is on par with Everett when it comes to laughing off racial stereotypes through anti-essentialist satire; however, as reiterated above, he supports group identification based on race in the matters of sociopolitical advocacy. The difference between the two authors might stem from the fact that Everett sees himself purely as an artist, while Thurston explicitly calls himself an activist. For the former, social change is a byproduct of his artistic endeavor; for the latter, it is one of his creative work's primary goals.⁷ Among the three comic authors discussed in this dissertation, Simien is the strongest proponent of identity

⁴ Wingfield. "Color-Blindness Is Counterproductive."

⁵ "Percival Everett on the Myth of Race." *ACCArtsandDigitalMedia*.

⁶ "Percival Everett on American Anti-Intellectualism." *ACCArtsandDigitalMedia* (official YouTube channel). Published Mar 2, 2011. <https://youtu.be/Kmk6qdE7Jo0>.

⁷ Thurston. "Hacking Comedy." *TEDx Talks*.

politics at the level of institutions, legislation, and popular culture.⁸ However, similarly to Thurston, his approach is more strategic than ideological.⁹ Although Simien constructs his protagonists as broad representations of contrastive archetypes (e.g., nerd vs. jock, assimilationist vs. rebel), when he steps down to the level of their individuality, they tend to defy and subvert the viewer's expectations. Overall, his characters – stereotypical at first sight yet increasingly more complex as we get to know them better – constitute a statement about the erroneousness of thinking in essentialist ways (especially about those who seem to embody certain cultural tropes).

As argued by cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal, the desire to create dissimilar portrayals of blackness – images informed by the context of socioeconomic background, cultural environment, and personal preferences – “is not in any way a rejection of the common heritage or experiences that clearly have been framed by race, but an attempt to seriously consider the full meaning of black identity.”¹⁰ The call to include the above-mentioned factors into the matrix of ethnic identity reverberates throughout the work of Everett, Simien, and Thurston. Life is inherently complex, they argue; reducing the black experience to a mere experience of racism is unwarrantedly one-dimensional. Taken together, all three authors discussed in this study want their characters to be defined by something other than their skin color and the baggage laden upon it by the broader society. They aim to write context-specific, individualized stories of blackness, and at the same time, make the general conception of (African-)Americanness more inclusive and polyphonic. As aptly summarized by Thurston, Open-Source Blackness provides a “perspective, not only on ‘how to be black’ but also on ‘how to be American,’ and, most important, how to be yourself.”¹¹

⁸ “‘Dear White People’ Directors on Intersectionality & Finding Yourself.” *Netflix*. YouTube video. Published Aug. 12, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2TpwCV6>.

⁹ Barone, Matt. “‘Dear White People’ Director Justin Simien Wants to Change the Way We Talk About Movies.” *complex.com*. Published Oct. 20, 2014. <https://bit.ly/33sySPZ>.

¹⁰ Neal. *Soul Babies*. Pp. 6-7.

¹¹ Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 16.

As it had been proven by numerous discoveries in the field of biology, it is impossible to delineate any “true” or “essential” qualities of any given race.¹² One can only speak of “imagined unities”: i.e., social constructions imposed on the disadvantaged by an oppressor (e.g., vilified black identity under slavery), or willfully adopted by a particular minority group (e.g., strategic essentialism of the Civil Rights Movement). Collective enactment of “imagined unities” and “strategic essentialisms” is often seen as a positive, unificatory phenomenon.¹³ Nevertheless, as pointed out by scholar of education Kevin Gosine:

[even though] intersubjective forms of racial identity can frequently work to protect and empower racialized youth living within a hostile, Eurocentric environment, the imposition of defensively situated essentialisms can be . . . just as confining or oppressive as the negatively valued representations that circulate within the dominant society. In both cases, human subjects are objectified through the imposition of confining, static labels.¹⁴

As evidenced by the aftermath of the tragic deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, or Sandra Bland, African-Americans of different social backgrounds show considerable unity in protesting against what they perceive as systemic racism of the US law enforcement.¹⁵ Demonstrations following these events proved that a degree of uniformization is strategically beneficial during periods of social unrest. Nevertheless, as argued by Everett, Simien, and Thurston, enacting racial uniformity outside of such circumstances is not only unnecessary but ultimately harmful, as it disregards the variety of black self-conceptions, cultural distinctions, and socioeconomic realities. “Could blackness stretch to encompass the enduring forms of disadvantage in America’s desperate inner cities, while also characterizing the identity of the man holding the highest elected office in the country?” – inquired ethnographer John Hartigan

¹² See a detailed discussion of genetic research on race in the Chapter I of this dissertation.

¹³ Qtd. in Gosine, Kevin. “Essentialism Versus Complexity: Conceptions of Racial Identity Construction in Educational Scholarship.” *Canadian Journal of Education*. Vol. 27, No. 1, 2002. Pp. 81-99.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*. P. 88.

¹⁵ Thanks to its unified message, the *#blacklivesmatter* movement was able to significantly shape the recent public debate around race and the criminal justice system. As aptly summarized by *New York Times*’ journalist Jay Caspian Kang: “Since Aug. 9, 2014, when Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson Police Department shot and killed Michael Brown . . . activists have built the most formidable American protest movement of the 21st century to date. Their innovation has been to marry the strengths of social media . . . with an effort to quickly mobilize protests in each new city where a police shooting occurs.” (Kang, Jay Caspian. “Our Demand Is Simple: Stop Killing Us.” *New York Times*. Published May 4, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/3qmVYmu>; Henderson, Nia-Malika. “How Black Lives Matter Activists Are Influencing 2016 Race.” *CNN*. Published Aug. 19, 2015. <https://cnn.it/378tk0v>).

during Obama's second term as president.¹⁶ One might reasonably assume that the answer offered by Everett, Simien, and Thurston would be a decisive and resounding "yes."

According to philosopher Charles Johnson, the tumultuous cultural and sociopolitical changes of the last decades of the twentieth century have significantly transformed the meaning of blackness in American culture. Most significantly, the discussion around it changed from weaving a grand narrative of relatively uniformized "black experience" to employing many non-standardized discourses that articulate differentiation within communities of color. "No matter which angle we use to view black people in America today," writes Johnson, "we find them to be complex and multifaceted people who defy easy categorization."¹⁷ Black identity continues to disperse, he argues, as those who problematize it start to "challenge, culturally and politically, an old group narrative that fails . . . to capture even a fraction of [African-American's] rich diversity."¹⁸ Everett, Simien, and Thurston challenge this group narrative as well – their emphasis on black heterogeneity problematizes the hot-button issue of the ideological and experiential unity of African-American communities. In between the lines, their work reiterates a question from the realm of contemporary social science and asks: "Are blacks still a single race?" This exact query was posed in the 2007 poll conducted by Pew Research Center. According to the result of the survey, "African-Americans see a widening gulf between [their values]."¹⁹ As a result of this growing dispersion, "nearly four-in-ten [respondents] say that . . . blacks can no longer be thought of as a single race."²⁰ The authors discussed in this dissertation seem to echo the sentiments expressed in the poll. However, rather than calling for new racial unity or framing the question of modern American identity in color-blind terms,

¹⁶ Hartigan. *Race in the 21st Century*. P. 125.

¹⁷ Qtd. in Conner, Marc and Lucas Morel. *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century*. U P of Mississippi, 2016. P. 7.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ "Blacks See Growing Values Gap Between Poor and Middle Class." *Pew Research Center*. Published Nov. 13, 2007. <https://pewrsr.ch/2Zflixu>.

²⁰ Ibidem.

Everett, Simien, and Thurston seem to embrace the fact of widening differentiations in the concepts of ethnic identity.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the outlook on the social construction of race shared by Everett, Simien, and Thurston echoes the one presented by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). In her text, Morrison attempted to accentuate the cultural meaning of ethnicity while simultaneously deemphasizing the significance of phenotypical traits (ones traditionally seen as indicative of the biological dimension of race). As argued by novelist and essayist Clifford Thompson, Morrison's body of work stressed the "separation of the fact of culture from notions of racial essentialism, and its implicit faith in the importance, and transformative power, of literature."²¹ She insisted that early American literature built the cultural image of whiteness by defining it through its juxtaposition with a construct of blackness – one that, like a photographic negative, constituted its very opposite. To counter this binary, Morrison "became interested in the portrayal of blacks by culture rather than skin color: when color alone was their *bête noire*, when it was incidental, and when it was unknowable, or deliberately withheld."²² It meant that she constructed her characters in such a way as not to make their skin color indicative of anything else but itself. "That purpose is not to say anything so simplistic as that we are all the same," argues Thompson, "it is, rather, to say that our differences are a result of culture, which, in turn, often results from enforced divisions simplistically based on color."²³ Everett, Simien, and Thurston mirror this approach and focus on the internal *who* instead of the external *what* of their characters (black people influenced by their racialized experience in the US but not defined by it). Of course, the main difference between them and Morrison is that they use humor as their primary mode of expression. The critical tools made available by satire allow them to lay bare the mechanism of binary construction of race, and thus "to de-fang cheap racism, annihilate and discredit the

²¹ Thompson. "Aliens and Fences."

²² Morrison, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Harvard UP, 2017. P. 49.

²³ Thompson. "Aliens and Fences."

routine, easy, available color fetish” – an effort defined by Morrison as her artistic mission statement.²⁴ What is more, similarly to Morrison, they are “eager to simultaneously de-fang and theatricalize race, signaling . . . how movable and hopelessly meaningless the construct [is].”²⁵ This narrative approach is best exemplified in Everett’s, Simien’s, and Thurston’s play with racial stereotypes, employed by them in a manner meant to reveal their socially constructed and culturally determined structure through ironic reversal and comic hyperbole. In the act of reclaiming ownership over hurtful stereotypes through parody – a strategy used effectively throughout the history of African-American humor²⁶ – they employ racist images with the intent to make them overtly ridiculous. Ironic, critical imitation and exaggeration render them laughable and thus undercut their cultural standing and psychological grasp.²⁷

Everett, Simien, and Thurston use satire to tackle new forms of racism – racial typecasting, unconscious bias, dog-whistle language, microaggressions, or discrimination encoded into algorithms governing the digital realm. Old racism of the antebellum, Jim Crow, and pre-Civil Rights America was overt and rationalized – in that, people were mostly aware of their biases and tried to justify them. “New” racism is often covert and unacknowledged – it is born out of the assumptions absorbed in the process of enculturation and enacted in the world through judgments made outside of people’s level of awareness. That is why the fight against “new” racism might seem like a quixotic errand – i.e., people who call it out tilt at windmills of unacknowledged discrimination. That is why humor and satire’s inherent features – its evocative form, viral potential, socially formative function, defamiliarizing premise, and deconstructive capacity – serve as one the most useful instruments in the toolkit of contemporary anti-racist activism.

²⁴ Morrison. *The Origin of Others*. P. 53.

²⁵ Ibidem. P. 66.

²⁶ Watkins. *On the Real Side*. Kindle loc. 118-637.

²⁷ Neal. *Soul Babies*. P. 123.

Far from using humor just for its own sake, Everett, Simien, and Thurston employ it to query the world – an approach that mirrors the mental model of scientific thinking and emphasizes the historically underappreciated intellectual dimension of African-American comedy. As argued by Wittgenstein, one can joke “without being facetious” – and that is precisely the approach adopted by the authors discussed in this dissertation.²⁸ They do not employ humor to provide comic relief from their otherwise “serious,” straightforward discourse. Humor is an integral part of their line of argumentation – not only illustrating their points in an evocative manner, but also adding conceptual and interpretative value to their claims about race and identity. Humor seems especially befitting to the idea of Open-Source Blackness – ambiguity inherent to humorous discourses facilitates its fluid, dynamic nature by refusing to agree on the concept’s final definition. Advancing indeterminacy instead of finality, humor ensures the continuous expansion of OSB to best approximate the ideational and experiential reality of its proponents.

The satire of Everett, Simien, and Thurston embodies the culturally and cognitively diverse ethos of black art. This aspect of their work echoes Trey Ellis’ *New Black Aesthetic* (NBA) – but without its geographic, time, and age specificity. In his NBA manifesto, Ellis constructed the apotheosis of the “cultural mulatto”; the trope portrayed a young, rebellious, middle-to-upper-class black urbanite reflecting the culturally hybrid, ethnically diverse environments of late-twentieth-century metropolises.²⁹ Due to the development of the Internet and new media, Open-Source Blackness is not constricted to such individuals, age groups, or settings. One can argue that Open-Source Blackness is a translation of Ellis’ NBA into the language of the Digital Age and the Networked Era. However, as there is no mention of Ellis anywhere in Thurston’s work, and Ellis’ manifesto (1989) and Thurston’s book (2012) are separated by over two decades, they can be reasonably treated as separate phenomena. As such,

²⁸ Qtd. in Madigan, Tom. “Philosophy and Humor.” *Philosophy Now: A Magazine of Ideas*. Issue 25: Winter 1999/2000. Accessed June 30, 2019. <https://bit.ly/33n00jH>.

²⁹ Ellis. “The New Black Aesthetic.”

Open-Source Blackness can be seen as the next step in developing the anti-essentialist ethos of African-American culture – a step that was taken from a particular historical and cultural environment but managed to establish its own unique path.

As black humor and popular art undergo a period of qualitative and quantitative flourishing – i.e., the New Black Renaissance – the ideas of Open-Source Blackness might prove to be helpful in analyzing their conceptual, narrative, and aesthetic development. As of 2021, the idea of a new Black Renaissance seems to be getting traction in the mainstream cultural circles of the US. This February, *TIME* magazine published a special issue entitled “The Black Renaissance.” As argued by the editor-in-chief of the volume, historian Ibram X. Kendi: “if the Harlem Renaissance stirred Black people to see themselves, if the Black Arts Movement stirred Black people to love themselves, then the Black Renaissance is stirring Black people to be themselves. Totally. Unapologetically. Freely.”³⁰

Kendi’s remarks echo the notions advocated for by Thurston nearly a decade earlier. While Everett, Simien, and Thurston argued for anti-essentialist notions of African-American identity by depicting their struggles with stereotypical expectations held by the larger society, the future holds a possibility for ideations of blackness free of any notions of racial determinism of the past. As art and technology evolve along with the ideas on identity and race, they provide novel possibilities for self-expression. New creative tools in literature, film, and digital humanities will inevitably result in innovative modes of defining oneself and the world. They will also lead to new iterations of blackness, and therefore – previously unforeseen modes of being. Humor turns the endeavor of redefining oneself and the culture into exploratory play; it revitalizes this entire intellectual and imaginative exercise by rewarding cognitive defamiliarization – i.e., creating new ideas and perspectives – with laughter and a sense of community among those who partake in the experience. “Add, edit, restructure. Have fun!” –

³⁰ Felsenthal, Edward. “Why TIME Partnered with Ibram X. Kendi to Recognize the Black Renaissance.” *TIME*. Published Feb. 4, 2021. <https://bit.ly/2NbipwE>.

rallies Thurston, compressing the ethos of open-source philosophy into a neat soundbite.³¹ Employing the comic perspective as their core principle, Thurston, Simien, and Everett incorporate the notion of multiplicity into the American construction of race – a concept historically wrought by biological and cultural determinism. In doing so, they aim to free blackness from essentialist notions, cultural baggage, and ultimately, from taking itself too seriously. “After all,” quips Thurston, in equal terms facetious and subversive, “being black is just being, right?”³²

³¹ Thurston, Baratunde. *The New Tech Manifesto: Live, Open-Source Edition (aka #datafesto)*. Open-sourced Google Doc. Published June 28, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/yc8catn2>.

³² Thurston. *How to Be Black*. P. 226.

Works cited

Editorial note: references to Internet websites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing (Feb. 20, 2021). The author is not responsible for URLs that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

“A 2018 Box Office Boom – for Black Directors.” *USC Annenberg*. Published Jan. 3, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yb5nlo48>.

“Academic Athlete.” *TV Tropes*. Accessed Mar. 9, 2020. <https://bit.ly/39iR6HE>.

Adams, Terri M. and Douglas B. Fuller. “The Words Have Changed but the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music.” *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 36, No. 6 (2006). Pp. 938-957. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40034353>.

Agiesta, Jennifer. “Most say race relations worsened under Obama, poll finds.” *CNN*. Published Oct. 6, 2016. <https://cnn.it/3rBLuj0>.

Alberta, Tim. “How White Identity Politics Won the Republican Civil War.” *Ezra Klein Show*. Internet podcast. Published Jul 18, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2YGX2YB>.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2012.

Allport, Gordon W. “Formation of In-Groups.” *The Nature of Prejudice: 25th Anniversary Edition*. Basic Books, 1979. p. 29-47.

Als, Hilton. “Ghosts in the House: How Toni Morrison Fostered a Generation of Black Writers.” *New Yorker*. Published Oct. 20, 2003. <https://bit.ly/2IGbTf2>.

Amburn, Brad. “The World’s Top 20 Public Intellectuals.” *Foreign Policy*. Published on Oct. 7, 2009. <https://bit.ly/37vEOvn>.

Andersen, Kurt. *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire*. Random House, 2017.

Anderson Smith, Christina. “Power of Prose: African-American Women.” *PBS*. Accessed Feb. 23, 2020. <https://to.pbs.org/3bkhQdz>.

Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Nation's Divide*. Lecture delivered at Emory University. Published Apr. 13, 2018. <https://youtu.be/YBYUET24K1c>.

Anderson, Melinda D. “The Black Girl Pushout.” *Atlantic*. Published Mar. 15, 2016. <https://bit.ly/38P8818>.

Andreasen, Robin O. “Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?” *Philosophy of Science*. Vol. 67. Part II: Symposia Papers (2000). Pp. 653-666.

Andrews, Kehinde. “From the ‘Bad N****r’ to the ‘Good N****a’: An Unintended Legacy of the Black Power Movement.” *Race & Class*. No. 55 (2013). Pp. 22-37. <https://bit.ly/3pIQGRi>.

Andrews, Travis M. “FX’s *Atlanta* Breaks Viewing Records. Is Diverse TV Here to Stay?” *Washington Post*. Published Sept. 15, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/hnah8ma>.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. “Interview with Thomas Chatterton Williams.” *After Words* (C-SPAN television show). Published Oct. 31, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y9anm25p>.

---. *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*. Princeton U P, 1998.

Arbesman, Samuel. *The Half-Life of Facts: Why Everything We Know Has an Expiration Date*. Current, 2013.

Asch, Joseph. “Of Crips and Bloods and Memories of Ghetto Parties.” *Dart*. Published Aug. 14, 2013. <https://bit.ly/395Ig0M>.

Aswell, Sarah. “How Facebook is Killing Comedy.” *Vulture*. Published Feb 6, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/yeycu333>.

“Author: Percival Everett.” *Fiction Addiction* (Internet zine). Accessed Dec. 30, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2JGCoBq>.

Ax, Joseph and Andrew Chung. “Electoral Map Bias May Worsen as U.S. Gerrymandering Battle Shifts to States.” *Reuters*. Published Jun. 29, 2019. <https://reut.rs/2Mdo1Er>.

- ayo, damali. *How to Rent a Negro*. Chicago Review Press, 2005.
- Bady, Aaron. "As an 'American Writer' (Toni Morrison on Colbert)." *The New Inquiry*. Published Nov. 22, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3n9dw3C>.
- Bakare, Lanre. "Get Out: The Film that Dares to Reveal the Horror of Liberal Racism in America." *Guardian*. Published Feb. 28, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3naYdr8>.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "The Grotesque Image of the Body and its Sources." *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana U P, 1984. Pp. 303-367.
- . *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. U of Texas P, 1981
- Banaji, Mahzarin R. and Anthony G. Greenwald. *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. Delacorte Press, 2013.
- Barnard, Anne. "From the Streets to the Libraries." *New York Times*. Published Oct. 22, 2008. <https://nyti.ms/2MdyhfL>.
- Barone, Matt. "'Dear White People' Director Justin Simien Wants to Change the Way We Talk About Movies." *complex.com*. Published Oct. 20, 2014. <https://bit.ly/33sySPZ>.
- Baym, Geoffrey. "Stephen Colbert's Parody of the Postmodern." *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. Edited by Jonathan Gray et al. New York U P, 2009.
- . "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism." *Political Communication*. No. 22, 2005.
- Beatty, Paul. *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor*. Bloomsbury USA, 2006.
- Bell, W. Kamau. *The Awkward Thoughts of W. Kamau Bell*. Dutton, 2017.
- Bengali, Shashank. "The Wicked Wit of Percival Everett." *Conversations with Percival Everett*. Edited by Joe Weixlmann. U P of Mississippi, 2013.
- Bennet, Jessica. "Netflix Further Commits to Diverse Storytelling With 'Strong Black Lead' Initiative." *Ebony*. Published June 26, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2MgrKkC>.
- Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. E-book in the US Public Domain. Gutenberg Project, 2003. <https://tinyurl.com/9t4eka3>.
- Berry, Jeffrey and Sarah Sobieraj. *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*. Oxford UP, 2013. Pp. 3-30.
- Beyes, Timon. "An Aesthetics of Displacement: Thomas Pynchon's Symptomatology of Organization." *Journal of Organizational Change Management*. Vol. 22, No. 4, 2009. Pp. 421-436.
- Bird, Robert and Frank Newport. "White racial resentment before, during Obama years." *Gallup*. Published May 19, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3tAOEFD>.
- "Black Conservatives Debate Black Liberals on American Politics (Extended Version)." *Vice*. Internet video. Published Mar. 4, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2TplXKo>.
- "BlacKKKlansman." *Rotten Tomatoes* (review aggregator). Accessed Mar. 30, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/wgxeo26>.
- "Blacks See Growing Values Gap Between Poor and Middle Class." *Pew Research Center*. Published Nov. 13, 2007. <https://pewrsr.ch/2Zffixu>.
- Bloom, Paul. *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. Ecco, 2016.
- Bloomquist, Jennifer. "The Minstrel Legacy: African-American English and the Historical Construction of 'Black' Identities in Entertainment." *Journal of African-American Studies*. Vol. 19, 2015. Pp. 410-425.
- Boak, Josh and Hannah Fingerhut. "Trump, Biden coalitions show race, class divide." *Associated Press*. Published Nov. 5, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3cZEats>.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.
- Borden, Taylor. "Black Lives Matter is a Case Study in a New Kind of Leadership." *Business Insider*. Published June 6, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2KqBmK9>.
- Bowen, Sesali. "Every Black Person Who Has Won an Oscar." *Refinery29*. Published Feb. 22, 2019. <https://r29.co/2DVld8p>.
- "Boycott White Chicks." *Prince.org* (on-line message board). Accessed May 4, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/ycox9blj>.
- Bradford, K. Tempest. "Cultural Appropriation Is, In Fact, Indefensible." *NPR*. Published June 28, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/yacca3f5>.

- Breton, André. "Introduction: Laughter in the Dark." *Anthology of Black Humor*. Ed. André Breton and Mark Polizotti. City Light Publishers, 2001.
- Brooks, Wanda and Lorraine Savage. "Critiques and Controversies of Street Literature: A Formidable Literary Genre." *The ALAN Review*. Winter 2009. Pp. 48-55. <https://bit.ly/3n6UQRw>.
- Brown, Alfie. *In the Event of Laughter: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Comedy*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.
- Bryant, Jerry. *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African-American Folklore and Fiction*. Indiana U P, 2003.
- Bryant, Nick. "Barack Obama legacy: Did he improve US race relations?" *BBC*. Published Jan. 10, 2017. <https://bbc.in/2YW1dNM>.
- Buckley, Cara. "The New Student Activism." *New York Times*. Published on Jan. 19, 2012. <https://nyti.ms/39DfGTK>.
- Campbell, Bradley and Jason Manning. *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Carlin, George. *Brain Droppings*. Hyperion, 1997.
- Carpio, Glenda. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. Oxford U P, 2008.
- Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.
- "CDC Health Disparities & Inequalities Report (CHDIR) – United States, 2013." *CDC*. Accessed Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3imR8IJ>.
- Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham. "The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film." *Journal of Black Studies*. Volume 40, No. 2, 2009. Pp. 135-152.
- Chang, Jeff. *We Gon' Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation*. Picador, 2015. Kindle loc. 492-501.
- Chatterton-Williams, Thomas. *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.
- Chideya, Farai. "Sex Stereotypes of African-Americans Have Long History." *NPR*. Published May 7, 2007. <https://n.pr/3cakiUf>.
- Child, Ben. "Spike Lee rebuffs Chicago-Based Rapper's Criticism of 'Chi-Raq.'" *Guardian*. Published Dec. 11, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/uhyvpkzh>.
- Chou, Vivien. "How Science and Genetics are Reshaping the Race Debate of the 21st Century." *harvard.edu*. Published Apr 17, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2MUM7zD>.
- Clarke, Matthew. "Study Shows Private Prison Companies Use Influence to Increase Incarceration." *Prison Legal News*. Published Aug. 22, 2016. <https://bit.ly/397fITB>.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Foreword." *The Origin of Others*. Toni Morrison. Harvard U P, 2017. Pp. x-xi.
- . "The Case for Reparations." *Atlantic*. Published Jun 1, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2j2mgr4>.
- . "The First White President." *Atlantic*. Published Sep. 14, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/yxmykomw>.
- Cohen, Roger. "Tribalism Here, and There." *New York Times*. Published March 20, 2008. <https://nyti.ms/395LiT4>.
- Colby, Tanner. *The Chris Farley Show: A Biography in Three Acts*. Viking Adult, 2008.
- Collins, Austin. "'I Was Taken Aback by the Volume of Vitriol': Interview with Justin Simien." *The Ringer*. Published Apr. 21, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/w2n854k>.
- "Comedy Hack Day (YouTube playlist)." *Cultivated Wit*. Published Feb. 16, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/ycbxk3jv>.
- Confessore, Nicholas and Karen Yourish. "\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump." *New York Times*. Published Mar. 15, 2016. <https://nyti.ms/3csVp6n>.
- Conner, Marc and Lucas Morel. *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century*. U P of Mississippi, 2016.
- Cornell, Stephen and Douglas Hartmann. *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. Pine Forge Press, 2006.
- "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." *The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*. Accessed on Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/35QlojX>.
- "Criminal Justice Facts." *The Sentencing Project*. Accessed Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2XV2xzL>.

- Critchley, Simon. "Humour." *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying: Conversations with Carl Cederstrom*. Polity Press, 2010.
- . *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. Verso, 2008.
- . *On Humour*. Routledge, 2002.
- Crouch, Ian. "Saturday Night Live and the Limits of Trump Mockery." *New Yorker*. Published Feb. 12, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3minLCq>.
- . "Is Late-Night Political Comedy Useless?" *New Yorker*. Published Nov. 10, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2VjNZZb>.
- Cunningham, Vinson. "The Case for Black English." *New Yorker*. Published May 15, 2017. <https://bit.ly/38jcw0N>.
- Dale, Alan. *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*. U of Minnesota P, 2000.
- Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Penguin Books, 2005.
- Danzy, Senna. "An Overlooked Classic About the Comedy of Race." *New Yorker*. Published May 7, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2OS1y1W>.
- Darby, Luke. "How White Supremacy Went Mainstream in the US: 8chan, Trump, Voter Suppression." *Guardian*. Published Aug. 11, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2yQJMB5>.
- Daum, Meghan. *The Problem with Everything: My Journey Through the New Culture Wars*. Gallery Books, 2019.
- David Fox, Jesse. "I Was Afraid of Virtual Comedy Shows – Until I Went to One." *Vulture*. Published Sept. 30, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3oNwMUv>.
- Day, Amber. "And Now . . . the News? Mimesis and the Real in 'The Daily Show.'" *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. Ed. by Jonathan Gray et al. NYU Press, 2009.
- . *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*. Indiana U P, 2001.
- De Arman, Charles. "Bigger Thomas: The Symbolic Negro and the Discrete Human Entity." *African-American Review*. Vol. 12, No. 2 (1978). Pp. 61-64. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3041598>.
- "Dear White People - Movie Review (Spoiler Free)." *Ahsante the Artist* (YouTube channel). Published on July 24, 2014. <https://youtu.be/XyjsxodRPOY>.
- "Dear White People (2014)." *Rotten Tomatoes* (review aggregator website). Accessed March 8, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3q1Fpf2>.
- "'Dear White People' Directors on Intersectionality & Finding Yourself." *Netflix*. YouTube video. Published Aug. 12, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2TpwCV6>.
- DeCoste, Damon Marcel. "To Blot It All Out: The Politics of Realism in Richard Wright's 'Native Son.'" *Style*. Vol. 32, No. 1 (1998). Pp. 127-147.
- Deggans, Eric. "Move Over Urkel, There Are New 'Blerds' Around." *NPR*. Published Nov. 20, 2012. <https://n.pr/3beUg1K>
- Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. NYU Press, 2001.
- DelReal, Jose. "Every moment could be another Joe Biden moment." *Washington Post*. Published on Feb. 17, 2015. <https://wapo.st/3q7b11D>.
- Demby, Gene. "'Diversity' Is Rightly Criticized as an Empty Buzzword. So How Can We Make It Work?" *NPR*. Published on Nov. 5, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/ybxmk5as>.
- . "Is the Millennial Generation's Racial Tolerance Overstated?" *NPR*. Published June 22, 2015. <https://n.pr/3a96Ps7>.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Public Domain e-book. Published Jan. 29, 2008. Originally published in print in 1903. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>.
- Durkin, Erin. "Ex-Fox News host says its reputation for racism is 'for very good reason.'" *Guardian*. Published Apr. 19, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2JQK3gH>.
- Eddo-Lodge, Reni. *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*. Metropolitan Books, 2007.
- Eligon, John. "The El Paso Screed, and the Racist Doctrine Behind It." *New York Times*. Published Aug. 7, 2019. 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2GNE9bp>.
- Ellis, Lindsay. "Manufacturing Authenticity (For Fun and Profit!)." *Lindsay Ellis* (Official YouTube Channel). Published Sept. 11, 2018. <https://bit.ly/35gvuKO>.

- Ellis, Trey. "The New Black Aesthetic." *Callaloo*. No. 38, 1989. Pp. 233-243.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2931157>.
- Ellison, Ralph. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison: Revised and Updated*. Edited by John F. Callahan. Modern Library, 2011.
- Erigha, Maryann. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*. NYU Press, 2019.
- Escobar, Samantha. "13 Racist College Parties That Prove *Dear White People* Isn't Exaggerating at All." *The Gloss*. Posted Oct. 17, 2014. <https://bit.ly/398OSbJ>.
- Eubanks, Virginia. *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. Picador, 2019.
- Everett, Percival. "The Color of His Skin." *New York Times*. Published June 6, 2004.
<https://nyti.ms/2u0xvuF>.
- . *Erasure*. U P of New England, 2001.
- . *Glyph*. Graywolf Press, 2004. P. 50.
- Felsenthal, Edward. "Why TIME Partnered with Ibram X. Kendi to Recognize the Black Renaissance." *TIME*. Published Feb. 4, 2021. <https://bit.ly/2NbipwE>.
- Fields, Karen E. and Barbara J. Fields. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. Verso, 2014.
- Fishkin, Shelley. "Desegregating American Literary Studies." *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*. Ed. by Emory Elliot. Oxford U P, 2002. Pp. 121-134.
- Flanagan, Caitlin. "How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump." *Atlantic*. Published May 1, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2VeQr3q>.
- Francis, Jacqueline. "To Be Real: Figuring Blackness in Modern and Contemporary African Diaspora Visual Cultures." *Radical History Review*. Volume 103, 2009. Pp. 188–202. <https://bit.ly/3biWay8>.
- "Frat Bans 13 Who Wore Blackface." *Los Angeles Times*. Published Nov. 9, 2001.
<https://lat.ms/3p6p0pN>.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1990 (first published in 1905).
- Friedersdorf, Conor. "The Left's Attack on Color-Blindness Goes Too Far." *Atlantic*. Published Sep. 4, 2015. <https://bit.ly/33tKt1u>.
- "Future-Proof Your Knowledge." *The Knowledge Project with Shane Parrish*. Internet podcast. Ep. 15. Published Nov. 28, 2016. <https://fs.blog/samuel-arbesman>.
- Gallagher, Brian. "Racist Ideology and Black Abnormality in the Birth of a Nation." *Phylon*. Vol. 43, No. 1 (1st Qtr., 1982), Pp. 68-76.
- Garber, Megan. "How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals." *Atlantic*. Published on May 28, 2015.
<https://bit.ly/2VcBDSP>.
- Garcia, Jay. "Letters: James Baldwin, Richard Wright." *New York Times*. Published Mar. 13, 2015.
<https://nyti.ms/3n7q7DG>.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Why the 'Mule Bone' Debate Goes On." *New York Times*. Published Feb. 10, 1991. <https://nyti.ms/2Mcfb9X>.
- George, Nelson. "Happy to Be Your Guide to Black Identity." *New York Times*. Published Oct. 9, 2014.
<https://nyti.ms/2y3t30n>.
- . "Justin Simien Goes Mainstream with 'Dear White People.'" *New York Times*. Published Oct. 9, 2014. <https://nyti.ms/3oqN9Hd>.
- Gilbert, Joanne R. *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. Wayne State U P, 2004.
- Gillespie, Tarleton. "The Relevance of Algorithms." *Media Technologies*. Edited by Tarleton Gillespie et al. MIT Press, 2016. DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/9780262525374.003.0009.
- Gimbel, Steven. *The Philosophy of Humor*. The Teaching Company, 2018.
- Goldman, Nina. "Tufts Students Lead #IndictAmerica Protest." *Tufts Daily*. Published Dec. 8, 2014.
<https://bit.ly/38UECqP>.
- Gopnik, Alison. *The Gardener and the Carpenter*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2016.
- Gosine, Kevin. "Essentialism Versus Complexity: Conceptions of Racial Identity Construction in Educational Scholarship." *Canadian Journal of Education*. Vol. 27, No. 1, 2002. Pp. 81-99.

- Gotsch Kara and Vinay Basti. "Capitalizing on Mass Incarceration: U.S. Growth in Private Prisons." *The Sentencing Project*. Published Aug. 2, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3ol8jqj>.
- Graham, David A. "Trump's White Identity Politics Appeals to Two Different Groups." *Atlantic*. Published Aug. 8, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3rvyprE>.
- Graham, David A. et al. "An Oral History of Trump's Bigotry." *Atlantic*. Published June 1, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2WRRSY1>.
- Gray, Jonathan et al. *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. NYU Press, 2009.
- Green, Laura. "Negative Racial Stereotypes and Their Effect on Attitudes Toward African-Americans." *ferris.edu*. Accessed Aug. 13, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2ZZbQ1f>.
- Green, Nato. "Interview with W. Kamau Bell." *The Rumpus Magazine*. Published Feb. 2, 2011. <https://tinyurl.com/y7kslx9b>.
- Guerra, Stephanie F. "Using Urban Fiction to Engage At-Risk and Incarcerated Youths in Literacy Instruction." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. Vol. 55, No. 5 (2012). <https://bit.ly/3b36lXE>.
- Guida, John. "How Movies Can Change Our Minds." *New York Times*. Published Feb. 4, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/y2gfoqff>.
- Guthrie, Marisa. "'The Daily Show' Hires 'How to Be Black' Author Baratunde Thurston." *Hollywood Reporter*. Published Aug. 27, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2O8CjZd>.
- Haddish, Tiffany. *The Last Black Unicorn*. Gallery Books, 2017.
- Haidt, Jonathan and Greg Lukianoff. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin Books, 2018.
- Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*. Vintage, 2012.
- Halewood, Peter. "Laying Down the Law: Post-Racialism and the Deracination Project." *Albany Law Review*. Vol. 72, No. 4, Winter 2009. <https://tinyurl.com/ycmseeas>.
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. "The End of the Postracial Myth." *New York Times*. Published Nov. 15, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/y8uobqx8>.
- Hao, Karen. "Nearly Half of Twitter Accounts Pushing to Reopen America May Be Bots." *MIT Technology Review*. Published May 21, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y9dc4hjm>.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. Harper, 2017.
- Harris, Angela. "Foreword." *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. NYU Press, 2001.
- Harris, Sam. *Free Will*. Free Press, 2012.
- . "The Information War: A Conversation with Renée DiResta." *Making Sense* (Internet podcast). Ep. 145. Published 2 January 2019. <https://goo.gl/NvPLFY>.
- . *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. Free Press, 2011.
- . *Waking Up*. Simon & Schuster, 2015.
- Hartigan, John. *Race in the 21st Century: Ethnographic Approaches*. Oxford U P, 2014.
- "Health Disparities Experienced by Black or African-Americans." *CDC*. Published Jan. 5, 2005. <https://bit.ly/3inpx42>.
- Heather Gautney, Heather. "What is 'Occupy Wall Street'? The History of Leaderless Movements." *Washington Post*. Published Oct. 10, 2011. <https://wapo.st/2KoqQTE>.
- Heller, Nathan. "The Big Uneasy: What's Roiling the Liberal-Arts Campus?" *New Yorker*. Published May 30, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3inwbqQ>.
- Henderson, Nia-Malika. "How Black Lives Matter Activists Are Influencing 2016 Race." *CNN*. Published Aug. 19, 2015. <https://cnn.it/378tk0v>.
- Herbrechter, Stefan. "The Posthuman Subject in the Matrix." *The Matrix in Theory*. Edited by Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz and Stefan Herbrechter. Editions Rodopi BV, 2006. Pp. 249-286.
- Hibberd, James. "Netflix Says Dave Chappelle Specials are its Most-Watched Ever." *Entertainment Weekly*. Published Apr. 18, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2KlIrqYK>.
- Hoberman, John Milton. *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*. Mariner Books, 1997.
- Holmes, Anna. "Has Diversity Lost its Meaning?" *New York Times*. Published Oct. 27, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/2GXjVfk>.

- hooks, bell. "Gangsta Culture: A Piece of the Action." *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge, 2003. Pp. 15-32.
- Horsley, Scott. "Obama At U.N.: Reject Tribalism Home and Abroad." *NPR*. Published Sept. 20, 2016. <https://n.pr/396lhQg>.
- Hosking, Taylor. "The Final '2 Dope Queens' Podcast Was a Perfect Interview with Michelle Obama." *Vice*. Published Nov. 18, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2KNPauI>.
- Hsu, Hua. "The Rise and Fall of Affirmative Action." *New Yorker*. Published Oct. 8, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2EdmaMP>.
- Hughes, Coleman. "Testimony on Reparations." *Quillette*. Published June 20, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2ZNUVTJ>.
- Hunter, Margaret L. "'If You're Light, You're Alright': Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color." *Gender and Society*. Vol.16.2, 2002. Pp. 175-193.
- Hurley, Matthew M. et al. "Brief History of Humor Theories." *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*. MIT Press, 2011.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "Art and Such." *Digital Public Library of America*. Public Domain e-book. Accessed Dec. 19, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2KLSn15>.
- Hutcheon, Linda "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. P. O'Donnell et al. Johns Hopkins U P, 1989.
- . *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. U of Illinois P, 2001.
- "I, Too, Am Harvard." *Tumblr* (a photo-blog hosting service). Published Mar. 1, 2014. <http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com>.
- "Income and Wealth in the United States: An Overview of Recent Data." *Peter G. Peterson Foundation*. Published Oct. 4, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3sxXRY3>.
- Itzkoff, Dave. *Robin*. Henry Holt and Co., 2018.
- Izadi, Elahe. "How Comedy Made Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in News." *Washington Post*. Published Aug. 5, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/yalqlddo>.
- Jackson, Leigh-Ann Jackson. "Who Are the Women of 'A Black Lady Sketch Show'?" *New York Times*. July 31, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2YHjFMq>.
- Jimerson, Brionna. "Africana Studies Launches New Major and Minor." *Tufts Daily*. Published Nov. 6, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3iwBPas>.
- "John McWhorter: America Has Never Been Less Racist." *Reason*. Internet podcast. Published Apr. 11, 2019. <https://spoti.fi/31u9NT6>.
- John, Artit. "Making Fried Chicken and Watermelon Racist." *NPR*. Published Feb. 6, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2WwqSfR>.
- Johnson, Carrie. "DOJ: Ferguson Police Routinely Discriminate Against African-Americans." *NPR*. Published Mar. 4, 2015. <https://n.pr/3nmBsjg>.
- Johnson, Mat. *Loving Day: A Novel*. One World, 2016.
- Johnston, Angus. "American Student Protest Timeline, 2014-15." *Student Activism* (interactive timeline). Accessed Nov. 9, 2018. <https://bit.ly/35Ty4GZ>.
- Jones, Jaleesa. "Colgate University Students Ask #CanYouHearUsNow." *USA Today*. Published Sept. 24, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2KoxA3U>.
- "Jordan Peele's Comedy and Horror Aren't That Far Apart." *Vulture*. YouTube video. Published Mar. 20, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2TqTYK0>.
- "Justice Department Reaches Settlement with Wells Fargo." *U.S. Department of Justice*. Published July 12, 2012. <https://bit.ly/3oOPZpA>.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?" *New York Times*. Published Aug. 15, 2008. <https://nyti.ms/36e8vRk>.
- Kameir, Rawiya. "How Tiffany Haddish Became Comedy's New Queen." *Vogue*. Published Aug. 14, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2QBUao5>.
- Kang, Jay Caspian. "Our Demand Is Simple: Stop Killing Us." *New York Times*. Published May 4, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/3qmVYmu>.
- Kendi, Ibram X. "The American Nightmare." *Atlantic*. Published June 1, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2IAZCIh>.
- . *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Bold Type Books, 2017.

- Kennedy, Greg. "From Colbert to Kimmel: the rise of 'investigative comedy.'" *The National News*. Published Jan. 1, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3p2wAkl>.
- Kessler, Martin. "Following Mishandling of Head Injury, Michigan Students Call for AD's Ouster." *NPR*. Published Oct. 1, 2014. <https://wbur.fm/3suKVca>.
- Khan, Deeyah (dir.). *White Right - Meeting the Enemy - Exposure*. ITV1, 2017.
- Kiang, Jessica and Oliver Lyttelton. "22 Essential Films About Hollywood." *IndieWire*. Accessed Jan. 2, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2NhCNeW>.
- Kimble, Julian. "Best Black Sitcoms of All Time." *Complex*. Published Feb. 11, 2013. <https://bit.ly/2NDDBeY>.
- Kincaid, James. "An Interview with Percival Everett." *Callaloo*. Issue 28:2, 2005.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "I Have a Dream." Speech delivered at the March on Washington, 1963. *archives.gov*. <https://bit.ly/2fmjJXA>.
- Kinkgade, Tyler. "Dartmouth Fraternity, Sorority Host 'Bloods and Crips' Party, Apologize." *Huffington Post*. Published Aug. 14, 2013. <https://bit.ly/3q8KGBK>.
- Kinnamon, Kenneth. "'Native Son': The Personal, Social, and Political Background." *Phylon*. Vol. 30, No. 1 (1969). Pp. 66-72.
- Kjellberg, Felix. "Is That a Microaggression?" *PewDiePie* (YouTube channel). Published Oct. 17, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3bpZveY>.
- Klein, Ezra. "G. Willow Wilson on Religion, Comics, and Modern Myths." *The Ezra Klein Show*. Internet podcast. Published April 11, 2017. <https://bit.ly/31s6dZE>.
- Kochhar, Rakesh and Richard Fry. "Wealth Inequality Has Widened Along Racial, Ethnic Lines Since End of Great Recession." *Pew Research Center*. Published December 12, 2014. <https://pewrsr.ch/3pOFHWE>.
- Kohn, Sally. "Thank Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton for Donald Trump's Dog-Whistle Ways." *TIME*. Published Aug. 16, 2016. <https://time.com/4452596/donald-trump-dog-whistle>.
- Korn, Melissa. "Colleges Continue to Confront Blackface on Campus." *The Wall Street Journal*. Published Feb. 14, 2019. <https://on.wsj.com/2Uu8923>.
- Kovel, Joel. "On Racism and Psychoanalysis." *Psychoanalysis in Context: Paths between Theory and Modern Culture*. Edited by Anthony Elliot and Stephen Frosh. Routledge, 1995.
- Lane, Kathryn E. *Age of the Geek: Depictions of Nerds and Geeks in Popular Media*. Palgrave, 2017.
- Lanier, Jaron. "Social Media is Undermining Truth." *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. Henry Holt and Company, 2018.
- Larson, Thomas. "The Age of Memoir." *Review Americana*. Volume 2, Issue 1, Spring 2007. <https://bit.ly/2yXsEcV>.
- Leclair, Thomas. "'The Language Must Not Sweat': A Conversation with Toni Morrison (1981)." *New Republic*. Accessed Dec. 30, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2IysBN8>.
- Lee, Cynthia. "Study Finds TV Shows with Ethnically Diverse Casts, Writers, Have Higher Ratings." *UCLA*. Published on Oct. 8, 2013. <https://bit.ly/2Yn015U>.
- Lee, McIntire. "What is Post-Truth?" *Post-Truth*. MIT Press, 2018. Pp.1-16.
- Lee, Spike. *Do the Right Thing*. Originally released in 1989. Universal Studios, 2010. DVD.
- . *School Daze*. Originally released in 1988. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2001. DVD.
- Lemons, J. Stanley. "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture." *American Quarterly*. Vol. 29, No. 1, 1977. Pp. 102-116.
- Lewis, Helen. "Cancel Culture and the Problem of Woke Capitalism." *Atlantic*. July 14, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3p4xhu9>.
- Lewis, Paul. *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*. U of Chicago P, 2006.
- Lezard, Nicholas. "Selling out to the ghetto." *Guardian*. Published Jan 17, 2004. <https://bit.ly/34UKn5j>.
- Locker, Melissa. "'The Show About Race': the podcast that gets real in not-so-post-racial America." *Guardian*. Published Aug. 27, 2015. <https://bit.ly/38QTAOL>.
- Lockhart, P. R. "Blackface isn't Just About the Racism in America's Past." *Vox*. Published Feb. 11, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2LEjdbW>.
- . "The 2020 Democratic Primary Debate Over Reparations, Explained." *Vox*. Published Jun. 19, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2VVtgt7>.
- López, Ian Haney. *Dog Whistle Politics: Coded Racism and Inequality for All*. Lecture delivered at Brown University. Published Aug. 23, 2017. <https://youtu.be/H6A3NQiJpH0>.

- Love, Matthew. "50 Best Stand-Up Comics of All Time." *Rolling Stone*. Published Feb. 14, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2Z1b9ar>.
- Łuczak, Ewa Barbara. *Breeding and Eugenics in the American Literary Imagination: Heredity Rules in the Twentieth Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt. "The Coddling of the American Mind." *Atlantic*, Published Sept. 1, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2LZwvix>.
- Luu, Chi. "Black English Matters." *Jstor Daily*. Published Feb. 12, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3rXQGpm>.
- MacDorman, Marian and T.J. Mathews. "Understanding Racial and Ethnic Disparities in U.S. Infant Mortality Rates." *NCHS Data Brief*. No. 74, Sept. 2011. <https://bit.ly/35MF7ks>.
- Madigan, Tom. "Philosophy and Humor." *Philosophy Now: A Magazine of Ideas*. Issue 25: Winter 1999/2000. Accessed June 30, 2019. <https://bit.ly/33n00jH>.
- "Making progress on diversity, equity, and inclusion." *Google Diversity*. Accessed Jun. 22, 2019. <https://diversity.google>.
- Maldonado, Camilo. "Price of College Increasing Almost 8 Times Faster Than Wages." *forbes.com*. Published Jul. 24, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2MWvPKa>.
- Malik, Kenan. "In Defense of Cultural Appropriation." *New York Times*. Published June 14, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/y7x325jr>.
- Marantz, Andrew. *Antisocial: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation*. Viking, 2019; Taibbi, Matt. *Hate Inc.: Why Today's Media Makes Us Despise One Another*. OR Books, 2019.
- Martin, Michael. "Critics Speak Out on The Movie 'Precious.'" *NPR*. Published Nov. 18, 2009. <https://n.pr/3bdDIqJ>.
- Martin, Rod. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Academic Press, 2006.
- "Mat Johnson." *enacademic.com*. Accessed Aug. 12, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2Z1Xgsu>.
- Maye, Maggie. "Maggie Maye Stand-Up 08/13/15." *Team Coco*. Published Aug. 14, 2015. <https://youtu.be/-NZDNKLV37k>.
- Mazie, Steven. "How Too Much Education Can Result in Ignorance." *Big Think*. Published 27 March, 2015. <https://bit.ly/3aILKWN>.
- McCluskey, Audrey Thomas. *Richard Pryor: The Life and Legacy of a 'Crazy' Black Man*. Indiana U P, 2008.
- McElwee, Sean. "Millennials Are More Racist Than They Think: Just Look at the Numbers." *Politico*. Published March 9, 2015. <https://politi.co/3dgmtil>.
- McEwan, Paul. "Racist Film: Teaching 'The Birth of a Nation.'" *Cinema Journal*. Vol. 47, No. 1 (Autumn, 2007). Pp. 98-101.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. The MIT Press, 1994. Reprint edition. Originally published in 1964.
- McWhorter, John. "It Wasn't 'Verbal Blackface.'" *Atlantic*. Published April 9, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2uVx5xy>.
- . "Jussie Smollett Story Shows Rise of Victimhood Culture." *Atlantic*. Published Feb 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3eREpGb>.
- . "How 'White Fragility' Talks Down to Black People." *Atlantic*. Published July 14. <https://bit.ly/36KxKtR>.
- . "The Origins of the 'Acting White' Charge." *Atlantic*. Published July 20, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y9sl9mpe>.
- . "The Racially Charged Meaning Behind the Word 'Thug.'" *NPR*. Published Apr. 30, 2015. <https://n.pr/2LK9gKt>.
- . "The Virtue Signalers Won't Change the World." *Atlantic*. Published Dec. 23, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2V7kV66>.
- . "What Joe Biden's Latest Gaffe Reveals." *Atlantic*. Published Aug 9, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2P5m6Ej>.
- . *Talking Back, Talking Black*. Bellevue Literary Press, 2017.
- Mehren, Elizabeth. "The Rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston." *Los Angeles Times*. Published April 7, 1991. <https://lat.ms/37EFHB7>.
- Meraji, Shereen Marisol. "Watching 'Dear White People' At Harvard." *NPR*. Published Oct. 18, 2014. <https://n.pr/3bWqYp3>.

- “Michelle Alexander: ‘The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.’” Lecture delivered at Oregon Humanities Center. Published Jan. 24, 2014. <https://bit.ly/33kgU2a>.
- Milner Davis, Jessica (ed.). *Satire and Politics: The Interplay of Heritage and Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Mitchell, John. “Breaking Poverty: Crime, Poverty Often Linked.” *WHYY*. Published Sept. 18, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3ol8vG3>.
- Mitchell, Keith and Robin Vander. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. U P of Mississippi, 2012.
- Morreall, John. “Philosophy of Humor: The Relief Theory.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Published Sep. 28, 2016. <https://stanford.io/3oSIQ7T>.
- . *Comic Relief: Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Wiley-Blackwell: 2009.
- Morrison, Toni. “Black Matters.” *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Harvard U P, 1992. Pp. 1-28.
- . *The Origin of Others*. Harvard UP, 2017.
- Mullainathan, Sendhil. “Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions.” *New York Times*. Published on Jan. 3, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/2XQngoE>.
- Mullin, Matthew. “The Unavoidable Percival Everett.” *LA Review of Books*. Published May 3, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2KYcV7l>.
- Muszyński, Łukasz. “Wyjazd Integracyjny: Recenzja Filmu ‘Green Book’ (2018).” *Filmweb*. Published Feb. 7, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2KEGOFx>.
- Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. Zero Books, 2017.
- Nama, Adilifu. *Race on the QT: Blackness and the Films of Quentin Tarantino*. U of Texas P, 2015.
- Nancy, Shepherdson. “Credit Card America.” *American Heritage*. Vol. 42, Issue 7, 1991. Accessed Jan. 2, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2NsAwxJ>.
- Nate, Jones. “Michelle Obama Explains Why Representation in Pop Culture Matters.” *Vulture*. Published Aug. 23, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2N4Tytz>.
- Neal, Mark Anthony. *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. Routledge, 2001.
- “Neighborhoods and Violent Crime.” *Evidence Matters*. Vol. Summer 2016. <https://bit.ly/3pHmLJh>.
- “Netflix Announces *Dear White People*, a New Comedy Series Based on Justin Simien’s Critically-Acclaimed Indie Film.” *Netflix*. Posted on May 5, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/y9j522o3>.
- Newport, Frank. “Gallup Review: Black and White Attitudes Toward Police.” *Gallup*. Published Aug. 20, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3bON3pw>.
- Ngozi Adichie, Chimamanda. “The Danger of a Single Story.” *TED Talks* (official YouTube channel). Published Oct. 7, 2009. <https://youtu.be/D9Ihs241zeg>.
- Nissel, Angela. *Mixed: My Life in Black and White*. Villard, 2006.
- “No Safe Spaces.” *Indiegogo*. Published Jul. 18, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3hZ1jNa>.
- Noah, Trevor. “Spike Lee: Extended Interview.” *Daily Show*. Published Nov. 30, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/wcopjth>.
- . *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*. Spiegel & Grau, 2016.
- Noble, Safiya. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press, 2018
- O’Brien, Daniel. *Black Masculinity on Film: Native Sons and White Lies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- O’Hagan, Sean. “Colour Bind.” *Guardian*. Published Mar. 16, 2003. <https://bit.ly/36OgEMz>.
- Obadike, Keith. “Keith Obadike’s Blackness.” *Ebay* (Internet auction archive). Accessed Jul. 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3p3FrCe>.
- Obaro, Tomi. “‘She’s Gotta Have It’ is Spike Lee at his Lecturing Worst.” *BuzzFeed*. Published Nov. 28, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/r7amhqh>.
- Obenson, Tambay. “‘Green Book’: The Feel-Good Oscar Contender Has a ‘Magical Negro’ Problem.” *IndieWire*. Published Nov. 23, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2OZQdrk>.
- Oliver, Mary Beth. “African-American Men as ‘Criminal and Dangerous’: Implications of Media Portrayals of Crime on the ‘Criminalization’ of African-American Men.” *Journal of African-American Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (September 2003). Pp. 3-18. <https://bit.ly/2MwmXwC>.
- Olivier, Bert. “The Humanities, Technology, and Universities.” *Phronimon*. Vol. 9, 2008. Pp. 5-21.

- Ondaatje, Michael L. "Counterfeit Heroes or Colour-Blind Visionaries? The Black Conservative Challenge to Affirmative Action in Modern America." *Australasian Journal of American Studies*. Volume 23, No. 2, 2004. Pp. 31-50. <https://bit.ly/31H9Nzt>.
- Parker, Kim et al. "Multiracial in America: Race and Social Connections – Friends, Family and Neighborhoods." *Pew Research Center*. Published June 11, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/ybdnq8wf>.
- . "Views of Demographic Changes." *Pew Research Center*. Published Mar. 21, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/rc35eqv>.
- "Percival Everett on American Anti-Intellectualism." *ACCArtsandDigitalMedia*. (official YouTube channel). Published Mar 2, 2011. <https://youtu.be/Kmk6qdE7Jo0>.
- "Percival Everett on the Myth of Race." *ACCArtsandDigitalMedia* (official YouTube channel). Published Mar. 2, 2011. <https://youtu.be/s5RDfcoMZE5>.
- Peters, Lucia. "Columbia Student Emma Sulkowicz's 'Mattress Performance/Carry That Weight' Performance Art Piece Tackles Campus Sexual Assault Culture Head-On." *Bustle*. Published Sep. 3, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2LZeFNN>.
- Pettigrew, Thomas F. "Intergroup Contact Theory." *Annual Review of Psychology*. Vol. 49, Feb. 1998. Pp. 65-85.
- Pinker, Steven. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. Viking, 2018.
- Plott, Elaina. "We're All Tired of Being Called Racists." *Atlantic*. Published Aug. 2, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2OPO9Hy>.
- "Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African-Americans." *NMAAHC*. Accessed Dec. 29, 2020. <https://s.si.edu/2MibyR7>.
- Haggins, Bambi. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*. Rutgers U P, 2007.
- "Racial Income Inequality: Facts." *inequality.org*. Accessed Aug. 12, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2ZfHqfd>
- "Racial/Ethnic Disparities in the Awareness, Treatment, and Control of Hypertension – United States, 2003–2010." *CDC*. Published May 10, 2013. <https://bit.ly/3qqMiqw>.
- Rae, Issa. *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. 37 Ink, 2016.
- Ramanathan, Lavanya. "Television is Getting More Diverse. Here's Why it's Good for the Business." *Washington Post*. Published Nov. 29, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/ybb4y6jc>.
- Ramsey, Francesca. "Shit White Girls Say... To Black Girls." *Chescaleigh* (YouTube channel). Published on Jan. 4, 2012. <https://youtu.be/yIPUzxpIBe0>.
- . "Why Did 'Chirag' Ignore Sexual Violence? A Review & Argument with Spike Lee." *Chescaleigh* (YouTube channel). Published Dec. 18, 2015. <https://youtu.be/86vww8D1u5M>.
- . *Well, That Escalated Quickly: Memoirs and Mistakes of an Accidental Activist*. Grand Central Publishing, 2018.
- . *Where Are You REALLY From?* *Chescaleigh* (YouTube channel). Published on Dec. 9, 2015. <https://youtu.be/igWYMo4z2OQ>.
- Reynolds, Jeremy. "Perceptions of Meritocracy in the Land of Opportunity." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*. Vol. 36, 2014. Pp. 121-137.
- Rickford, John R. "What is Ebonics (African-American English)?" *Linguistic Society of America*. Accessed Apr. 1, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3vAGCNx>.
- Rieger, Oya. "Framing Digital Humanities: The Role of New Media in Humanities Scholarship." *First Monday*. Vol. 15 (10), 2010. <https://bit.ly/3pA6aay>.
- Robinson, Phoebe. *You Can't Touch My Hair: And Other Things I Still Have to Explain*. Plume, 2016.
- Romuald, Chiara et al. "Patterns of Human Diversity, within and among Continents, Inferred from Biallelic DNA Polymorphisms." *Genome Research*. Volume 12, 2002. Pp. 602-612. <https://bit.ly/2TorRvh>.
- Rose, Jody. "Ashley and JaQuavis Coleman: Kiss Kiss Bang Bang." *New York Times*. Published May 3, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/2Qis2bC>.
- Rose, Steve. "Black Films Matter – How African-American Cinema Fought Back Against Hollywood." *Guardian*. Published Oct. 13, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2dgsUGR>.
- Rosenberg, Noah A. et al. "Genetic Structure of Human Populations." *Science Magazine*. Volume 298, 2002. <https://stanford.io/2OOAX5G>.
- Royal, Dawn and Art Swift. "U.S. Minority Students Less Exposed to Computer Science." *Gallup*. Published Oct. 18, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3aLdyd5>.

- “Russian Trolls’ Chief Target was ‘Black US Voters’ in 2016.” *BBC News*. Published Oct. 9, 2019. <https://bbc.in/3azt77R>.
- Sakala, Leah. “Breaking Down Mass Incarceration in the 2010 Census: State-by-State Incarceration Rates by Race/Ethnicity.” *Prison Policy Initiative*. Published May 28, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3hW2oFK>.
- Salamone, Frank A. “His Eyes Were Watching Her: Papa Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston, and Anthropology.” *Anthropos*. Vol. 109, No. 1, 2014, Pp. 217–224., www.jstor.org/stable/43861696.
- Santos, Fernanda. “Arizona Fraternity Party Stirs Concerns of Racism.” *New York Times*. Published Jan. 22, 2014. <https://nyti.ms/3nu2KEx>.
- Saunders, James Robert. “The Social Significance of Wright’s Bigger Thomas.” *College Literature*. Vol. 14, No. 1 (Winter, 1987). Pp. 32-37.
- Schiappa, Edward, Peter B. Gregg and Dean E. Hewes. “The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis.” *Communication Monographs*. Vol. 72, No. 1, March 2005. Pp. 92-115.
- Schonfeld, Zach. “The Viral Photo Campaign That Reveals What It’s Like to Be Black at Harvard.” *Newsweek*. Published Mar. 3, 2014. <https://bit.ly/35S4aCW>.
- Scruggs, Charles. *The Sage in Harlem: H. L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s*. The Johns Hopkins U P, 1984.
- Seck, Nicole. “The Hypersexualization and Undesirability of Black/African Women.” *Ruptures: Anti-colonial and Anti-racist Feminist Theorizing*. SensePublishers, 2013. Pp 91-103. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-446-8>.
- Nguyen, Jenny and Amanda Koontz Anthony. “Black Authenticity: Defining the Ideals and Expectations in the Construction of ‘Real’ Blackness.” *Sociology Compass*. Volume 8, Issue 6, June 2014. Pp. 770-779. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12171>.
- Seewood, Andre. “Why White People Don’t Like Black Movies.” *IndieWire*. Published Jan. 17, 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/ydytwcav>.
- Serwer, Adam. “How Cosby’s ‘Pound Cake’ Speech Helped Lead to His Downfall.” *Atlantic*. Published Apr. 26, 2018. <https://bit.ly/35evmeT>.
- Shavers, Ron. “Percival Everett by Ron Shavers.” *Bomb Magazine*. Published Jul. 1, 2004. <https://bit.ly/3a5Cyxa>.
- Shepherd, Jack. “Jordan Peele’s ‘Us’ Breaks Box-Office Record, Lands Highest Grossing Opening Weekend for Original Horror.” *Independent*. Published Mar. 25, 2019. <https://bit.ly/301trWa>.
- Shin, Laura. “The Racial Wealth Gap: Why A Typical White Household Has 16 Times the Wealth of a Black One.” *Forbes*. Published Mar. 26, 2015. <https://bit.ly/38PMAkK>.
- “Should America Pay Reparations for Slavery? Ta-Nehisi Coates v Coleman Hughes.” *Guardian*. Published June 19, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2XqaHBL>.
- Siek, Stephanie. “Perceptions of Discrimination: A Black and White Story.” *CNN*. Published Dec. 12, 2011. <https://cnn.it/2LDSrkk>.
- Simien, Justin. *Dear White People*. Lionsgate, 2015 (originally released in 2014). DVD.
- . *Dear White People: A Guide to Inter-Racial Harmony in Post-Racial America*. Atria/37 Ink, 2014.
- . *Dear White People: Concept Trailer*. Published June 14, 2012. <https://vimeo.com/44018538>.
- Singh, Maanvi. “How Shows Like ‘Will & Grace’ And ‘Black-ish’ Can Change Your Brain.” *Code Switch: Race and Identity, Remixed* (Internet blog). Published Aug. 31, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/ybg6dehj>.
- Sloman, Steven and Philip Fernbach. *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*. Riverhead Books, 2017.
- “Sneaky Racial Code Words and Why Politicians Love Them.” *The Root*. Published Mar. 15, 2014. <https://bit.ly/38SfVLF>.
- So, Stykes. “The Black Bruins [Spoken Word].” *Sy Stokes* (YouTube channel). Published Apr. 4, 2013. <https://youtu.be/BEO3H5BOIFk>.
- “Social Justice Warrior.” *Merriam-Webster*. Accessed Mar. 9, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2LnB07v>.
- Sollors, Werner. “Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition.” *Bulletin of American Academy*. Summer, 2010.
- Spenkuch, Jörgm et al. “Statistics That Hurt: Racial Discrimination Still Affects Minority Wages.” *Kellogg School of Management*. Published Jan. 8, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3oPd2R8>.
- Sreenivasan, Hari et al. “The True Story Behind the ‘Welfare Queen’ Stereotype.” *PBS*. Published June 1, 2019. <https://to.pbs.org/35Rbzm1>.

- Stancil, Will. "School Segregation Is Not a Myth." *Atlantic*. Published Mar 14, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2A4PJ00>.
- Staples, Brendt. "Decoding the Debate Over the Blackness of Barack Obama." *New York Times*. Published Feb. 11, 2007. <https://nyti.ms/31wn51r>.
- Steinberg, Stephen. *Race Relations: A Critique*. Stanford U P, 2007. P. 66.
- Stewart, Jon. "Interview with Harry G. Frankfurt." *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Published Mar. 14, 2005. <https://tinyurl.com/ybg35jaf>.
- Stott, Andrew. *Comedy: New Critical Idiom*. Routledge, 2005.
- "Strategic essentialism." *Oxford Reference Dictionary*. Accessed June 6, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/ycrzdcwe>.
- Strauss, Valerie. "The Way Out of the Black Poverty Cycle." *Washington Post*. Published May 31, 2013. <https://wapo.st/1NjA36W>.
- Sue, Derald Wing. "The Invisible Whiteness of Being: Whiteness, White Supremacy, White Privilege, and Racism." *Addressing Racism: Facilitating Cultural Competence in Mental Health and Educational Settings*. Edited by M. G. Constantine and D. W. Sue. John Wiley & Sons, 2006.
- . *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Wiley and Sons Publishing, 2010.
- Sussman, Robert Wald. "There Is No Such Thing as Race." *Newsweek*. Published Nov. 8, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2swDHGT>.
- Tafoya, Eddie. *The Legacy of the Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form*. Brown Walker Press, 2009.
- Tanaka, Ken. "What Kind of Asian Are You?" *helpmefindparents* (YouTube channel). Published May 23, 2013. <https://youtu.be/DWynJkN5HbQ>.
- Tanner, Stefanie Ricki. *The Female Trickster: The Mask That Reveals, Post-Jungian and Postmodern Psychological Perspectives on Women in Contemporary Culture*. Routledge, 2007.
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. "Barack Obama's Original Sin: America's Post-Racial Illusion." *Guardian*. Published Jan. 13, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3q1Intlg>.
- "The Podcast 'Spit.'" *23andMe* (blog of a genetic research company 23andMe). Published Sept. 14, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/y8gkc5pa>.
- Thompson, Clifford. "Aliens and Fences." *The Times' Literary Supplement*. Published Nov. 21, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2H0ovJY>.
- Thompson, Clive. *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better*. Penguin Books, 2014.
- Thorton, Patrick. "I'm a Coastal Elite from the Midwest: The Real Bubble is Rural America." *Roll Call*. Published Nov. 10, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2wuGwh8>.
- Thurston, Baratunde. "An Unconventional Look at the Future of Technology." *Google Developers* (YouTube channel). Published 10 May, 2019. <https://youtu.be/wPFnprOY7A8>.
- . "Hacking Comedy." *TEDx Talks* (YouTube channel). Published Aug 27, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2YYoewX>.
- . *How to Be Black*. Harper Collins, 2012.
- . *The New Tech Manifesto: Live, Open-Source Edition (aka #datafesto)*. Open-sourced Google Doc. Published June 28, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/yc8catn2>.
- Tishkoff, Sarah A. and Kenneth K Kidd. "Implications of Biogeography of Human Populations for 'Race' and Medicine." *Nature Genetics*. Volume 36, 2004. Pp.21–27. <https://go.nature.com/33skBmI>.
- "Toni Morrison." *The Colbert Report* (official video archive). Published Nov. 19, 2014. <https://on.cc.com/2uB0tII>.
- Torosyan, Robert. "The Daily Show Way: Critical Thinking, Civic Discourse, and Postmodern Consciousness." *The Ultimate Daily Show and Philosophy*. Edited by Jason Holt et al. Wiley, 2013.
- Townsend, Robert. *Hollywood Shuffle*. Olive Films, 2015. DVD.
- . *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*. Codeblack Entertainment, 2010. DVD.
- Traub, Amy and Catherine Ruetschlin. "The Racial Wealth Gap: Why Policy Matters." *Demos*. Accessed on Dec. 31, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3im6W8i>.
- Tre'vell, Anderson. "Disproving the 'Black Films Don't Travel' Hollywood Myth." *Los Angeles Times*. Published March 24, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/qkuf8m5>.

- “Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups.” *National Center for Education Statistics*. Accessed Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/38SiFbP>.
- Tufekci, Zeynep. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale U P, 2017.
- Turner, Patricia Ann. *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*. U of Virginia P, 1994.
- “Tyler Perry’s Box-Office Revenue” (database). Accessed Jul. 10, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3ccFjhd>.
- Urist, Jacoba. “The Push for Ethical Investment at America’s Colleges.” *Atlantic*. Published Apr. 28, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2XRQnbe>.
- VanDerVerff, Todd. “Progressive Fundamentalism: How the Media Fortify the Bubbles We All Live In.” *VOX*. Published Nov. 14, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3959pBb>.
- Walker, Rebecca. *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. Riverhead Books, 2001.
- Wang Yuen, Nancy. *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*. Rutgers U P, 2016.
- Ware, Lawrence. “How ‘Green Book’ Gives Short Shrift to a Gay Life.” *New York Times*. Published Feb. 18, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2KEb0h>.
- Watkins, Mel (ed.). *African-American Humor: The Best Comedy from Slavery to Today*. Chicago Review Press, 2002.
- . *On the Real Side: A History of African-American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*. Lawrence Hill Books, 1999.
- “Wayne C. Booth. A Rhetoric of Irony, (1974).” *Wayne Booth's Rhetorology Home (uwaterloo.ca)*. Accessed Aug. 12, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2KFWok7>.
- “Wealth and Asset Ownership.” *U.S. Census Bureau*. Accessed Dec. 31, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2Kn5EgS>.
- Weiss, Bari. “We’re All Fascists Now.” *New York Times*. Published Mar. 7, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2K1eFvU>.
- Weitzer Ronald and Charis E. Kurbin. “Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings.” *Men and Masculinities*. Vol. 12, No. 1 (2009). Pp. 3-29. <https://bit.ly/3rNsGi0>.
- “What Happened in Ferguson?” *New York Times*. Published Aug. 10, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/2M2ILRC>.
- “What is open source?” *opensource.com*. Accessed Aug. 14, 2019. <https://red.ht/1OB9j3X>.
- “What We Do.” *Harvard College Office of Diversity Education & Support*. Accessed Jun. 22, 2019. <https://diversity.college.harvard.edu/what-we-do>.
- Whitten, Sarah. “Record Number of Black Directors Among 2018’s Top Films, Earning \$1.6 Billion at the Box Office.” *CNBC*. Published Jan. 4, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yatx9nag>.
- Wilson, Julie. “The Post-Network Era: Understanding Contemporary U.S. Television Culture.” *Teaching Media*. Published July 28, 2010. <https://tinyurl.com/t7y5far>.
- Wilson, Valerie and Jhacova Williams. “Racial and Ethnic Income Gaps Persist Amid Uneven Growth in Household Incomes.” *EPI*. Published Sept. 11, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3oUwWKH>.
- Wingfield, Adia Harvey. “Color-Blindness Is Counterproductive.” *Atlantic*. Published Sep. 13, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2npVAU0>.
- Winkler, Jeff. “‘Own The Libs’ Was a Snide Way to Mock Conservatives, And is Now a Fun Way to Respond to Liberalism.” *NBC News*. Published Aug. 4, 2018. <https://nbcnews.to/2U9sQB0>.
- Winokur, Jon. *The Big Book of Irony*. St. Martin’s Press, 2007.
- Witherspoon, David et al. “Genetic Similarities Within and Between Human Populations.” *Genetics*. Vol. 176 (1), 2007. Pp. 351-359. <https://bit.ly/3aRr3cN>.
- Wong, Alia. “The Renaissance of Student Activism.” *Atlantic*. Published May 21, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2LGyBF6>.
- Wylie, Christopher. *Mindf*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America*. Random House, 2019.
- Yagoda, Ben. *About Town: ‘The New Yorker’ and The World It Made*. Scribner, 2000.
- Yglesias, Matthew. “‘The Bell Curve’ is about policy. And it’s wrong.” *VOX*. Published Apr. 10, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3bci32e>.
- Yim, Jong Eun. “Therapeutic Benefits of Laughter in Mental Health: A Theoretical Review.” *The Tohoku Journal of Experimental Medicine*. Volume 239, Issue 3. Tohoku Medical U P, 2016.
- Yitbarek, Saron. “Comedy and Code – Part I.” *Code Newbie* (Internet podcast). Published Oct. 24, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/ycdspdjz>.

---. "Comedy and Code – Part II." *Code Newbie* (Internet podcast). Published Oct. 31, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2ZwHGUp>.

Yoon, Hannah. "How to Respond to Microaggressions." *New York Times*. Published Mar. 3, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/35vir8e>.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. "Dialogical Epistemology: An Intersectional Resistance to the 'Oppression Olympics.'" *Gender and Society*. Vol. 26, No. 1, February 2012. Pp. 46-54.

Zipp, Bobby. "Bryn Mawr Campus Roiled by Confederate Flag, Mason-Dixon Line in Dormitory." *The Swarthmore Phoenix*. Published Sept. 25, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2LXkMC6>.

Zoglin, Richard. *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America*. Bloomsbury USA, 2009.

Dissertation abstract

Keywords: African-American satire, humor, anti-essentialism, Black Renaissance, Open-Source

Open-Source Blackness: Anti-Essentialist Humor in the Satire of the New Black Renaissance

The doctoral thesis presents the role of anti-essentialist humor in the satire of the New Black Renaissance (NBR) – i.e., a reflowering of African-American culture of the first two decades of the new millennium. One of the fundamental tenets of NBR is its redefinition of racial identity in African-American culture. This change has been noted in popular literature, e.g., in Baratunde Thurston’s satirical book *How to Be Black* (2012). Thurston defines this transformation as Open-Source Blackness (OSB) – an approach to racial identity founded on the ethos of anti-essentialism, individuality, and inclusivity derived from the world of satire, new media, and technology. NBR and OSB have never been described in the academic critical literature. This dissertation constitutes the first attempt to do so. It takes up this effort with the hope of making a worthwhile contribution to the discourse of racial identity and African-American satire in the field of American literary studies.

The thesis comprises an introduction, one theoretical chapter, three analytical chapters offering critical readings of cultural texts, and a coda. The primary sources, chosen because of their crucial role in the artistic and intellectual framework of NBR and OSB, are satirical cultural texts from three different genres and aesthetics: experimental literary prose (*Erasure* by Percival Everett, 2001), film comedy (*Dear White People* by Justin Simien, 2014), and transmedia texts of the Internet era (e.g., *Comedy Hack Days*, *Comedy and Code*, or *How to Be Black* by Baratunde Thurston, 2012–2016). The dissertation delineates vital elements of OSB: humor, irony, satire, anti-essentialism, inclusivity, racial nonbinarism, multivocality, as well as its distinctive amalgamation of individualism and social responsibility. While reviewing the primary sources, the thesis emphasizes the historical and present social, economic, and political circumstances of African-Americans. It also sets the texts by Everett, Simien, and Thurston against arguments relating to identity politics, post-raciality, racial colorblindness (Eduardo Bonilla-Silva), dog-whistle politics (Ian Haney López), institutional racism (Michelle Alexander), parasocial relationships (Edward Schiappa), philosophy of mind (Antonio Damasio), unconscious bias and microaggressions (Derald Wing-Sue). The dissertation analyzes its primary sources with the help of literary, social, and cultural theory, e.g., the concepts of carnivalesque laughter and grotesque body (Mikhail Bakhtin), comic perspective and defamiliarization (Simon Critchley), hive psychology (Jonathan Haidt), single story (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), or code-switching and vernacular language (John McWhorter). By combining the theories mentioned above with a critical analysis of contemporary African-American satire, the thesis accentuates the impact of contemporary comic discourses on new understandings of ethnic identity.

Chapter One builds a theoretical and historical framework necessary for the subsequent analysis of cultural texts. It investigates the role of humor in enhancing the capacity for critical and analytical thinking. It also describes the function of humor, irony, and satire in the American public discourse and emphasizes their role in defamiliarizing the concept of racial identity. The chapter problematizes the discourse around ethnic comedy – a genre often analyzed from the perspective of the group (its socially formative function) and the body (its performativity and racial representativeness). The dissertation tackles these issues while emphasizing the rich intellectual dimension of African-American humor – a side that is often pushed to the margins in the analyses of satire perceived as *ethnic*. The chapter introduces the essential tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the dominant discourse in contemporary Ethnic Studies. It also presents the history of African-American satire and the evolution of its social perception – a path leading to New Black Renaissance (the artistic flourishing of twenty-first-century

African-American culture) and Open-Source Blackness (a new approach to defining racial identity with openness and indeterminacy characteristic to the language of humor and irony).

Chapter Two analyzes Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* (2001) to investigate how African-American writers use humor, irony, and satire to expand the boundaries of artistic freedom in the realm of black literature and its social perception. The protagonist of *Erasure* is an alter-ego of Everett from the early days of his career. Through his story, Everett describes the period before the New Black Renaissance – a time in which expectations dictated by the market and culture curbed many African-American writers' intellectual and artistic freedom. *Erasure* constitutes a call to redefine black art and identity. The novel uses humor, irony, and satire to criticize essentialist tropes of mainstream American culture. Questioning the pervasive racialization of literature, social science, and language, Everett echoes George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman, the Harlem Renaissance writers. Modernizing their ideas and translating them into the twenty-first century, Everett becomes an embodiment of a new stance towards the issue of racial identity – a perspective that simultaneously celebrates individuation, accentuates social responsibility, and emphasizes the impact of historical forces on contemporary reality. The dissertation treats Everett's literary output – over twenty novels, with *Erasure* being the most famous one – as an ideational foundation of what later came to be defined as the New Black Renaissance. Simien and Thurston, comic authors discussed in subsequent chapters, extend the conceptual realm first delineated in Everett's prose. Enjoying intellectual and artistic freedom not available to the protagonist of *Erasure*, they translate ideas originated in niche, anti-essentialist literature and academic theory into popular discourses of film comedy (Simien) and new media (Thurston).

Chapter Three investigates dog-whistle politics, unconscious bias, and microaggressions on the basis of Justin Simien's *Dear White People* – a movie that has popularized the debate around the above-mentioned issues in the American public sphere. These problems have been discussed in literary satire, academic critical theory, and American student activist discourse. By translating them into popular media, Simien expands the scope and ideational influence of the New Black Renaissance. The chapter combines the concepts from Critical Race Theory and Humor Studies to investigate the ways in which film satire poses a challenge to essentialist definitions of race. Tracing the most recent developments in African-American satire, the dissertation describes the beginnings of a new comedic trend in black cinema and television. It also distinguishes and exemplifies its constituents – e.g., inclusivity, polyphony, and ambiguity – strengthened by the introduction of literary and academic discourses of humor, irony, and satire into the language of film. Contrasting *Dear White People* with classics of African-American film satire by Spike Lee and Robert Townsend, the chapter illustrates Simien's original approach to racial representation and personal identity. The last section talks about the role of cinema in spreading the ideas of Open-Source Blackness and the New Black Renaissance beyond literature and the academy. Parasocial relationships facilitated through the silver screen constitute a worthwhile substitute for social relationships between people from various cultural backgrounds. The protagonists of *Dear White People* embody the most important values of OSB and NBR, familiarizing viewers with attitudes that might seem abstract on paper.

Chapter Four explores how ideas originating in literature and academic criticism translate into the language of contemporary technology. It investigates how modern communication tools and digitalization of culture impact the perception of African-American humor and racial identity among young comic artists. Describing the transmedia satire of Baratunde Thurston – his electronic literature/hyperfiction, appearances in new media, and new forms of digital comedy – the dissertation analyzes the inherent multivocality of the New Black Renaissance. Thurston's comedic output (e.g., his book *How to Be Black* or the hackathons organized under the

emblem of *Comedy Hack Days*) comprises contributions from multiple satirists, artists, and activists. Introducing some of them – e.g., Cheryl Contee or damali ayo – the chapter analyzes their influence on the intellectual and artistic foundations of NBR. This section of the dissertation further defines and illustrates Open-Source Blackness – a term informed by the decentralized approach to creating software. Extrapolating this idea from the world of information technology into popular literature and transmedia satire, Thurston creates a concept that – even though coined by him – belongs to each black individual by its very definition. The dissertation also analyzes the function of humor, irony, and parody in comedic forms of the Internet era – i.e., the satirical apps created under the auspice of Thurston’s company, Cultivated Wit. Its *Comedy Hack Days*, artistic/programming marathons organized to develop prototypes of “new satire,” seem to be a harbinger of a novel type of comic art. The chapter defines it as Augmented Satire (AS) – a fusion of literary satirical commentary with the expressive capabilities of new media. AS adds a layer of satirical commentary onto a text or image provided by the user, changing its perception and interpretation in real-time. It foreshows the potential of new, interactive forms of literary and audio-visual comic art – satire aided by new technologies’ algorithmic capabilities and processing power. The chapter also discusses the anti-essentialist theories of race by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Thurston’s former academic teacher. Looking for similarities between the definitions of racial identity in Appiah’s scientific style and Thurston’s pop-cultural poetics, this section of the dissertation focuses on the complementary functions of academic discourse, popular literature, and transmedia forms of satire.

Coda restates the most important values represented by Everett, Simien, and Thurston. While delineating ideational similarities and differences between the three comic authors, it looks for a reflection of their arguments in the discourse of American public intellectuals (especially with regard to racial colorblindness, identity politics, and ethnic definitions of art). The chapter reiterates the most important tenets of Open-Source Blackness in the context of New Black Aesthetic (NBA), a concept defined by Trey Ellis in 1989. Unlike NBA, OSB not only assumes the inherent hybridity of culture but also aims to go beyond essentialist definitions of art and identity, questioning them through humor, irony, and satire. Thanks to the Internet, it also has a broader geographical, social, and class scope. This fact contributes to the last issue described in the dissertation – i.e., the acknowledgment of the New Black Renaissance by the mainstream media. Presenting the first extensive use of this term by an American newspaper of record (“The Black Renaissance,” a special issue of *TIME* magazine, February 2021), the final section of the coda discusses the possible futures of the OSB and NBR, as well as their influence on (para)literary African-American satire and definitions of ethnic identity in the US.

Streszczenie rozprawy doktorskiej

Słowa kluczowe: satyra afroamerykańska, humor, antyesencjalizm, Czarny Renesans, Otwarty Dostęp

Czerń Otwartego Dostępu: Antyesencjalny humor w satyrze Nowego Czarnego Renesansu

Dysertacja przedstawia rolę satyry i antyesencjalnego humoru w New Black Renaissance (NBR, pol. Nowy Czarny Renesans), czyli rozkwicie kultury afroamerykańskiej pierwszych dwóch dekad XXI wieku. NBR oparty jest w dużej mierze na przededefiniowaniu zagadnienia tożsamości rasowej w afroamerykańskiej kulturze. Zmiana ta została odnotowana w literaturze popularnej, m.in. w satyrycznej książce Baratunde Thurstona *How to Be Black* (2012). Thurston zdefiniował ją jako Open-Source Blackness (OSB, pol. Czerń Otwartego Dostępu) – podejście do zagadnienia tożsamości etnicznej oparte na etosie antyesencjalności, indywidualności i inkluzywności wywiedzionych ze świata satyry, nowych mediów i technologii. NBR i OSB nigdy nie zostały opisane w akademickiej literaturze krytycznej – dysertacja ta stanowi pierwszą taką próbę, podjętą z nadzieją wzbogacenia dyskursu na temat tożsamości i satyry afroamerykańskiej w obrębie literaturoznawczej Amerykanistyki.

Praca składa się ze wstępu, jednego rozdziału historyczno-teoretycznego, trzech rozdziałów krytyczno-analitycznych, oraz podsumowania. Źródła podstawowe, wybrane ze względu na ich kluczową rolę w badanym ruchu artystycznym, stanowią połączenie satyrycznych tekstów kultury z trzech różnych gatunków i estetyk: prozy eksperymentalnej (*Erasure* Percivala Everetta, 2001), komedii filmowej (*Dear White People* Justina Simiena, wyd. 2014) oraz transmedialnych tekstów ery Internetu (m.in. *Comedy and Code, Hacking Comedy* czy *How to Be Black* Baratunde Thurstona, wyd. 2012–2016). Dysertacja przedstawia najważniejsze elementy *Open Source Blackness*: humor, ironię, satyrę, antyesencjalizm (*anti-essentialism*), inkluzywność (*inclusivity*), niebinarność rasową (*racial nonbinarism*), wielogłosowość (*polyphony*) czy połączenie etosu indywidualizmu i odpowiedzialności społecznej. Analizując literaturę przedmiotu przez pryzmat klasycznych i najnowszych pojęć z zakresu akademickiej literatury krytycznej, praca kładzie szczególny nacisk na przedstawienie historii i obecnej sytuacji Afroamerykanów. Rozpatruje też teksty Everetta, Simiena i Thurstona w odniesieniu do argumentów popierających lub wchodzących w polemikę z polityką tożsamościową (*identity politics*), post-rasowością (*post-raciality*), daltonizmem rasowym (*racial colorblindness*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva), kodowanym rasowo językiem (*dog-whistle politics*, Ian Haney López), instytucjonalnym rasizmem (Michelle Alexander), interakcjami parasocjalnymi (Edward Schiappa), filozofią umysłu (Antonio Damasio) czy nieświadomionymi uprzedzeniami i mikroagresjami (Derald Wing-Sue). Interpretuje również źródła podstawowe za pomocą teorii literackich, kulturowych i społecznych, m.in. pojęcia śmiechu karnawałowego i groteskowego ciała (Michaił Bachtin), komicznej perspektywy i defamiliaryzacji (Simon Critchley), inteligencji zbiorowej (Jonathan Haidt), niepodzielnej narracji (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) czy zmian rejestru języka i potocznej mowy afroamerykańskiej (John McWhorter). Przeplatając ww. teorie z krytycznym odczytaniem najnowszej czarnej satyry, dysertacja podkreśla wpływ humorystycznych dyskursów XXI wieku na współczesne interpretacje pojęcia tożsamości etnicznej.

Rozdział pierwszy, historyczno-teoretyczny, używa pojęć z zakresu filozofii umysłu w celu zbadania roli humoru w budowaniu zdolności do krytycznego i analitycznego myślenia. Opisuje też funkcje ironii i satyry w dyskursie publicznym USA oraz podkreśla ich rolę w procesie defamiliaryzacji zagadnienia tożsamości rasowej. Rozdział krytykuje dyskurs dotyczący komedii etnicznej, która zazwyczaj analizowana jest z perspektywy ciała (wymiar performatywny lub reprezentatywny rasowo) i grupy (jako spoiwo społeczne lub symbol przynależności). Pierwsza sekcja dysertacji omawia ww. aspekty, nie zapominając przy tym o bogatym wymiarze intelektualnym

afroamerykańskiego humoru – często pomijanym, a zazwyczaj stanowiącym główny przedmiot analizy przy omawianiu satyry spoza kategorii postrzeganej jako *etniczna*. Rozdział przybliży również najważniejsze pojęcia z zakresu Krytycznej Teorii Rasy (Critical Race Theory), tj. dominującego dyskursu badań etnicznych ostatnich dwudziestu lat. Przedstawia też historię afroamerykańskiej satyry oraz ewolucję jej społecznego odbioru – drogi prowadzącej do New Black Renaissance, czyli artystycznego rozkwitu czarnej kultury XXI wieku, oraz Open-Source Blackness, czyli nowego podejścia do definiowania tożsamości rasowej poprzez niejednoznaczność charakterystyczną dla języka humoru i ironii.

Rozdział drugi, krytyczno-analityczny, omawia powieść *Erasure* Percivala Everetta, badając, w jaki sposób pisarze afroamerykańscy używają humoru, ironii i satyry, aby poszerzyć obszar artystycznej wolności w obrębie utworu literackiego i jego społecznego odbioru. Główny bohater *Erasure* stanowi alter-ego Everetta z początków jego kariery. Przedstawiając historię swojego protagonisty, Everett opisuje okres sprzed New Black Renaissance – czas, w którym rynkowe i społecznie oczekiwania wobec afroamerykańskich pisarzy często ograniczały ich wolność artystyczną i intelektualną. *Erasure* stanowi apel o zmianę podejścia do definicji czarnej sztuki i tożsamości; używając humoru, ironii i satyry, powieść krytykuje esencjalne tropy głównego nurtu kultury amerykańskiej. Kwestionując urasowanie (*racialization*) literatury, nauk społecznych i języka, Everett nawiązuje do twórczości takich pisarzy okresu Harlem Renaissance jak George Schuyler czy Wallace Thurman. Uaktualniając ich idee i przenosząc je do realiów XXI wieku, staje się on prekursorem nowego podejścia do tematu tożsamości rasowej – perspektywy kładącej nacisk na indywidualizację i autonomię jednostki przy jednoczesnym podkreślaniu kontekstu historycznego i odpowiedzialności społecznej. Dysertacja traktuje imponujący dorobek literacki Everetta – ponad dwadzieścia powieści, z *Erasure* na czele – jako ideowy fundament ruchu zdefiniowanego później jako New Black Renaissance. Simien i Thurston, autorzy omawiani w kolejnych rozdziałach, poszerzają świat pojęciowy zarysowany w prozie Everetta. Korzystając z wolności artystycznej niedostępnej bohaterowi *Erasure*, przenoszą oni idee niszowej, antyesencjalnej literatury do popularnych dyskursów komedii filmowej (Simien) i nowych mediów (Thurston), poszerzając wpływ idei wywodzących się z literatury eksperymentalnej poza jej względnie małe grono odbiorców.

Rozdział trzeci analizuje zjawiska kodowanych rasowo komunikatów społecznych, nieświadomych uprzedzeń i mikroagresji na podstawie *Dear White People* Justina Simiena – obrazu, który spopularyzował dyskusję o ww. tematach w debacie publicznej USA. Pojęcia ta znane były wcześniej z satyry literackiej, akademickiej teorii krytycznej oraz dyskursu działaczy społecznych z amerykańskich kampusów. Tłumacząc je na język popularnego medium, Simien zwiększył zasięg i wpływ idei New Black Renaissance w amerykańskiej kulturze. Łącząc idee z zakresu Krytycznej Teorii Rasy z analizą funkcji humoru w tekstach kultury, rozdział bada, w jaki sposób satyra filmowa przeciwstawia się esencjalnym definicjom tożsamości rasowej w dyskursie artystycznym, społecznym i politycznym USA. Śledząc rozwój tej formy sztuki, rozdział opisuje początki nowego kierunku artystycznego w kinowym i telewizyjnym dyskursie komediowym XXI wieku. Wyróżnia też i ilustruje przykładami jego najważniejsze właściwości, m.in. inkluzywność, wielogłosowość czy niejednoznaczność – wszystkie z nich umożliwione lub wzmocnione dzięki włączeniu literackich dyskursów humoru, ironii i satyry do języka filmu. Konstrastując *Dear White People* z klasykami afroamerykańskiej satyry filmowej autorstwa Spike'a Lee i Roberta Townsenda, dysertacja ilustruje nowe podejście Simiena do zagadnienia tożsamości i reprezentacji rasowej. Ostatnia sekcja rozdziału podkreśla też rolę filmu w popularyzacji najważniejszych idei Open-Source Blackness i New Black Renaissance zdefiniowanych w prozie i literaturze krytycznej. Umożliwiane przez kino interakcje parasocjalne (*parasocial relationships*) to substytut relacji z osobami pochodzącymi z innych kręgów

kulturowych. Protagonisci *Dear White People* uosabiają najistotniejsze wartości OSB i NBR oraz zapoznają widzów z postawami, które na papierze mogą wydawać się abstrakcyjne.

Czwarty rozdział dysertacji omawia przełożenie idei znanych z prozy i literatury krytycznej na język nowych mediów i technologii. Bada też jak współczesne narzędzia komunikacyjne i cyfryzacja kultury wpływają na samo postrzeganie pojęcia afroamerykańskiego humoru i rasowej tożsamości wśród młodych artystów komediowych. Opisując transmedialną satyrę Baratunde Thurstona – jego literaturę elektroniczną (tzw. hiperfikcję), wypowiedzi w nowych mediach, oraz nowe formy komedii cyfrowej – rozdział analizuje również wielogłosowość New Black Renaissance. Działalność komediowa Thurstona, np. jego happeningi artystyczno-programistyczne spod znaku *Comedy Hack Days* czy książka *How to Be Black*, inkorporuje głosy wielu innych satyryków, artystów i aktywistów. Przedstawiając sylwetki niektórych z nich – np. Cheryl Contee czy damali ayo – dysertacja nakreśla ich poglądy i sposób, w jaki współtworzą artystyczny i intelektualny wymiar NBR. Rozdział definiuje i ilustruje też Open-Source Blackness. Termin ten oparty jest na etosie zdecentralizowanego podejścia do tworzenia programów komputerowych. Przenosząc rzeczony etos do świata afroamerykańskiej literatury popularnej i kultury cyfrowej, Thurston stwarza pojęcie, które – choć ukute przez niego – należy do całej społeczności afroamerykańskiej. Rozdział bada rolę humoru, ironii i parodii w nowych formach satyrycznych ery Internetu – tj. w aplikacjach tworzonych pod skrzydłem Cultivated Wit, firmy Thurstona. Organizowane przez nią *Comedy Hack Days*, czyli maratony programistyczne mające na celu stworzenie prototypów „nowej satyry”, są załącznikiem nowatorskiej formy sztuki komediowej. Dysertacja definiuje ją jako Satyrę Rozszerzonej Rzeczywistości (SRR, ang. *Augumented Satire*) – połączenie literackiego komentarza satyrycznego z możliwościami komunikacyjnymi nowych mediów. SRR nakłada warstwę komentarza satyrycznego na wprowadzony przez użytkownika tekst czy materiały audio-wizualnie, zmieniając ich odbiór i interpretację w czasie rzeczywistym. SRR zwiastuje potencjał nowych, interaktywnych form literatury i sztuk wizualnych – cyfrowej satyry wspomaganej przez algorytmy i moc obliczeniową nowych technologii. Rozdział omawia również antyesencjalne teorie rasy Kwame Anthony’ego Appiah, byłego nauczyciela akademickiego Thurstona. Szukając podobieństw między definicjami tożsamości rasowej wyrażonych w naukowym języku Appiah i w popkulturowej poetyce Thurstona, sekcja ta skupia się na komplementarnych funkcjach dyskursu akademickiego, literatury popularnej i transmedialnych form satyry.

Koda dysertacji podsumowuje poglądy i postawy reprezentowane przez Everetta, Simiena i Thurstona. Zarysowując ideowe podobieństwa i różnice między trzema ww. autorami, przedstawia odbicie ich argumentów we współczesnym dyskursie amerykańskich intelektualistów (szczególnie w odniesieniu do tematów daltonizmu rasowego, grupowej tożsamości etnicznej i rasowych definicji sztuki). Rozdział ten przedkłada jeszcze raz najważniejsze założenia ruchu Open-Source Blackness, traktując go jako rozwinięcie idei New Black Aesthetic (NBA) zdefiniowanych przez Treya Ellisa w 1989 roku. W odróżnieniu od NBA, OSB zakłada nie tylko hybrydyczność kultury, ale też wykracza poza esencjalne definicje tożsamości i sztuki, kwestionując lub problematyzując je poprzez humor, ironię i satyrę. Dzięki Internetowi, ruch ten ma również o wiele większy zasięg geograficzny, społeczny i klasowy, co przyczynia się do ostatniego zagadnienia opisanego w tej sekcji dysertacji – tj. zauważenia zjawiska New Black Renaissance przez amerykańską kulturę głównego nurtu. Odnosząc się do jednego z pierwszych zastosowań tego pojęcia w amerykańskiej prasie wielkonakładowej (“The Black Renaissance”, specjalne wydanie magazynu *TIME*, luty 2021), koda pracy doktorskiej przedstawia możliwą przyszłość ruchów OSB i NBR oraz ich wpływ na afroamerykańską satyrę w literaturze i paraliterackich tekstach kultury, a tym samym i na tożsamość etniczną w USA.