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Report on “Open-Source Blackness: Anti-Essentialist Humor in the Satire of the New Black Renaissance” by Kamil Chrzczonowicz

“Open-Source Blackness: Anti-Essentialist Humor in the Satire of the New Black Renaissance” by Kamil Chrzczonowicz is a genuinely impressive dissertation. One of its many notable strengths is the author’s sophisticated engagement with an extraordinarily wide range of scholarship across diverse disciplines. The depth and breadth of these materials provide the study with a solid foundation and a rich array of theoretical perspectives that can be brought to bear in the analysis. In addition, the author demonstrates a thorough familiarity with a striking number of primary texts drawn from several creative modes. On the one hand, the project centers on three contemporary African American artists: Percival Everett, Justin Simien, and Baratunde Thurston. On the other hand, Mr. Chrzczonowicz references myriad other innovative figures in film, television, fiction, autobiography, stand-up comedy, and new media. One can only imagine the sheer amount of intellectual labor invested in this ambitiously conceived study. Finally, I would call special attention to the actual writing in the dissertation. The prose is lucid, jargon-free, well-paced, and energetic. The author’s scholarly voice is confident and forceful; his compelling readings are mounted with an exemplary attention to nuance and complication.

Mr. Chrzczonowicz’s goal in the dissertation is to examine “a new and developing, twenty-first-century idea of racial anti-essentialism”—what he calls, using a term advanced by Baratunde Thurston, “Open-Source Blackness” (3). In tracking the evolution of this concept, he highlights creative work from the 1990s to the present, a period marked by a vibrant outpouring of African American cultural production that has been dubbed a “New Black Renaissance.” The expressive mode with which he is most concerned in this project is satire, with its power to challenge through ironic humor entrenched attitudes about blackness in particular and about racial and ethnic identity more generally.

Given the diverse primary texts under consideration in the dissertation as well as the multiple issues which the three artists take up, it makes sense that Mr. Chrzczonowicz adopts a forthrightly interdisciplinary approach. In the Introduction, he explains that he will draw upon “scholarship on race, identity, and humor from literary and cultural studies, as well as other disciplines: sociology, neuroscience, moral philosophy, information technology, and others” (4). Accordingly, he spends Chapter 1 laying out key terms and concepts and identifying the various theoretical touchstones for the project. He leads off by discussing various categories of humor, including parody, satire, irony, and *humour noir*. He is especially interested in irony, given the way in which it “invites the reader to deconstruct the text’s surface meaning” (11). While he is not necessarily covering new ground here, he offers numerous intriguing observations that reflect the insightful nature of his approach. For example, at one point he remarks, “Another reason for the increasing popularity of comic discourses is that the contemporary cultural landscape overflows with informational chaos; in this context, the inherent brevity of jokes allows for consuming information in a refreshingly time-efficient manner” (12). And later: “The comic perspective accentuates a mismatch between the notion of a stable self and the phenomenology of human subjectivity” (37). It is evident that for Mr. Chrzczonowicz, the power of satire resides in its deconstructive potential. He writes, “[S]atire unmasks 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” (18). Over the course of Chapter 1, he considers this main idea from several disciplinary angles, including cognitive psychology, Critical Race Theory, political science, literary history, and media studies. If the goal of this opening section is to establish on sound conceptual footing exactly what is at stake in the project, Mr. Chrzczonowicz unquestionably succeeds, as he effectively sets the table for the case studies examined in the subsequent three chapters.

Chapters 2 and 3 each includes background on the given artist—Percival Everett in the former and Justin Simien in the latter; and in each Mr. Chrzczonowicz spends considerable time historically contextualizing the primary materials. His investment in conveying the importance of Everett’s *Erasure* is manifest from the outset of Chapter 2, where he describes the novel as “the first notable twenty-first-century manifestation of anti-essentialist ethos in black comic art” (68). Identifying the book’s key themes as “artistic freedom, typecasting, violence, Ebonics, and pulp literature” (69), he proceeds to walk the reader through each of those weighty topics while situating Everett’s artistic agenda against the backdrop of the unprecedented commodification of African American literature in the last decades of the twentieth century. In so doing, Mr. Chrzczonowicz juxtaposes Everett’s challenging of the restrictive categories into which black writers tended to be shunted by the publishing industry with similar assertions of creative independence by African American authors such as George Schuyler, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison. He also persuasively argues that *Erasure* is a crucial landmark in the long line of African American satirical fiction, following in the wake of writers such as Langston Hughes, Cecil Brown, and Ishmael Reed. Other topics on which he touches in the chapter include the controversy over Ebonics and black vernacular speech as well as the rise of so-called “street-lit” or “ghetto fiction,” which is a primary target for Everett’s parodic assault in *Erasure*. Mr. Chrzczonowicz summarizes the iconoclastic novelist’s importance in the history of black satiric critiques of racial essentialism this way: “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” (84).

As he does with Everett’s *Erasure* in Chapter 2, Mr. Chrzczonowicz opens his examination of Justin Simien’s film *Dear White People* by listing the main themes on which he will focus: “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” (115). In providing background on each of these topics, Mr. Chrzczonowicz alludes to post-1960s campus politics, the idea of “unconscious bias” in contemporary US race relations, the history of satire in African American film (referencing artists such as Robert Townsend and Spike Lee), the history of “cerebral black humor” (158) in US culture, and the problematic nature of physical comedy in racial representation. For Mr. Chrzczonowicz, the artistic success of *Dear White People* derives in large part from the empathy with which Simien handles his black figures: “[H]e 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” (145). Expressing a firm belief in the capacity of satire and parody to change the attitudes of readers and viewers who might prove resistant to more serious approaches, Mr. Chrzczonowicz further contends that *Dear White People* “allows for a de-escalation of potential racial resentment and class conflict through emotional catharsis provided by laughter” (128) while conveying “black people’s ‘regular’ personhood” (161).

Chapter 4 treats perhaps the single most important figure in the study, Baratunde Thurston, who coined the term “Open-Source Blackness.” Mr. Chrzczonowicz convincingly argues that Thurston is producing “new forms of satirical art: multidisciplinary narratives uniting tradition comic genres, digital hypertexts, and mobile software . . . [that embody] a compelling vision of a novel, inclusive, anti-essentialist culture of individuation, interconnectivity, and creative cooperation” (166). In providing biographical background on Thurston, Mr. Chrzczonowicz emphasizes his academic training at Harvard University, where he was a student of Kwame Anthony Appiah, whose anti-essentialist ideas seem to have a major impact. Mr. Chrzczonowicz also calls particular attention to Thurston’s commitment, first, to “Civil Tech”—“an idea that tech products, including satirical software, ought to primarily serve the underprivileged” (204)—and second, to “multiperspectivity—a concept of crucial importance to Thurston’s anti-essentialist ethos” (197). The centrality of collaboration in Thurston’s artistic vision stands out as well. An excellent example is his launching of “artistic happenings/programming marathons called Comedy Hack Days” in which participants generate and share “smartphone and computer applications” (172). The result, Mr. Chrzczonowicz suggests, is “social critique articulated through technology—comic art that can be quite literally, as opposed to solely imaginatively, interacted with” (174). Even Thurston’s foray into a more traditional media platform—book publishing—reflects his investment in collaboration as he includes in *How to Be Black* the voices of several other artists (including a white Canadian), who make up what he humorously calls “The Black Panel.” In sum, Mr. Chrzczonowicz explains, Thurston’s Open-Source Blackness “epitomizes an ethos of intellectual freedom—a stance that finds its ideational completion in indeterminacy and open-endedness” (208). The potential impact of this “ethos” in the realm of racial construction is clear: “Diverse, polyphonic representations of blackness expand its socially available cultural repertoire—i.e., they become building blocks of new types of identity” (194).

In terms of suggestions that I might offer, when revised for publication as a monograph, Mr. Chrzczonowicz’s study would benefit from a condensing of the massive amount of background material currently included. In every chapter, there are moments when his understandable desire to provide as thorough a contextualization as possible leads to giving us more information than necessary. For instance, the discussion of Simien’s *Dear White People* includes references to theories of microaggressions, the racist parties sponsored by white college fraternities, the representation of blacks on television, economic disparities in the US along racial lines, and such activist movements as Occupy and Black Lives Matter, among other topics. His presentation of this material is thoughtful and well-informed, with only occasional overgeneralizations. However, trimming it—especially in Chapters 2 and 3—will free up space for deeper engagements with the primary texts. In the case of *Dear White People*, for example, one would like to see more on the portrayal of Coco as it relates to issues of skin-color privilege and black respectability politics and more about the intersection of sexual and racial identities in the depiction of Lionel, a black gay character in the film.

On a broader level, the issue of gender will deserve further engagement when the manuscript is reworked for publication. On the one hand, Mr. Chrzczonowicz acknowledges the relatively small number of female African American artists who have, up until recently, produced the type of satire and parody that concerns him (64-65). (Moms Mabley and especially Whoopi Goldberg are oddly absent in his comments regarding groundbreaking black stand-up comedians.) On the other hand, it might be worth examining in greater depth the ways in which gender politics and power relations play out in the texts being analyzed in the dissertation. For instance, the author is quite right to identify Sapphire’s bestselling novel *Push* (later made into the film *Precious*) as a likely target of Percival Everett’s unrelenting parodic critique in *Erasure*. He notes that Everett also explicitly criticized Alice Walker’s rendering of black speech in her celebrated novel *The Color Purple* (103, n. 156). Is it coincidental that works by commercially successful black women writers in the 1980s have been targets of such black male satirists as Ishmael Reed in *Reckless Eyeballing*, Trey Ellis in *Platitudes*, and George Wolfe in *The Colored Museum*? In addition, were Mr. Chrzczonowicz open to adding a new chapter, I would suggest that it might be focused on the contemporary comic artist Issa Rae, who launched her career via a web series (*Awkward Black Girl*) before achieving celebrity with her television series, *Insecure*. In addition, she has published a book, starred in films, and is a producer (and frequent guest) on the television series *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. Juxtaposing her use of comedy as an activist black artist with that of Thurston might prove extremely productive.

Finally, Mr. Chrzczonowicz’s provocative intervention into ongoing debates about identity in the US opens up several intriguing topics that merit further inquiry. An especially fascinating one involves the remarkable persistence of conventional constructions of race and ethnicity in the US. On the one hand, as he quite astutely points out, “[R]ather than calling for new racial unity or framing the question of modern American identity in color-blind terms, Everett, Simien, and Thurston seem to embrace the fact of widening differentiations in the concepts of ethnic identity” (215-16). On the other hand, he highlights the beneficial deconstructive potential of satire: “Comic perspective fosters scientific thinking because it is inherently open-ended: it presupposes a lack of finality of its proposed ideas. . . . Scientific thinking and comic perspective work towards the same goal: continuous (self-) reflexivity” (39). Yet it strikes me that such concepts as Open-Source Blackness and the New Black Renaissance depend upon an at least somewhat stable idea of blackness even as they constitute an aggressive contestation of the stifling restrictions of racial essentialism. The complexity and slipperiness of this issue are manifest occasionally in Mr. Chrzczonowicz’s own language. For instance, on one page in Chapter 1, he refers to “*genuine* African-American satire,” “*genuine* African-American humor,” “*authentic* black comedy,” and “*genuine* African American satire” (52, emphases added). How are we to understand such terms while at the same time conceding (and, indeed, celebrating) their instability? I would hasten to note that this is hardly a conundrum that Mr. Chrzczonowicz (or any scholar) can resolve. In fact, it is a testament to the sophisticated and compellingly mounted arguments in his dissertation that they catalyze such thorny and pressing questions.

“Open-Source Blackness: Anti-Essentialist Humor in the Satire of the New Black Renaissance” is one of the most theoretically mature, imaginatively conceived, and skillfully written dissertations that I have read over the past decade or so. The author’s ability to maintain control over such a vast amount of diverse material is quite special. His achievement is all the more laudable in light of the scarcity of scholarly commentary on the three artists on whom the dissertation is centered. In sum, I find this study to constitute a truly significant contribution to work in the broad area of contemporary African American cultural production, and I am pleased to express my enthusiastic support for its formal approval.