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Discussion : Argument-based satire against post-raciality

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6 DISCUSSION: ARGUMENT-BASED SATIRE AGAINST POST-RACIALITY

The previous chapter detailed how Reed's satire evolved from its reliance on non-standard sexuality and contrast-based irony into a more nuanced satire driven by argumentation which has been dominant since the 1990s. This chapter proposes that such a change in satire correlates with the transition in U.S. society from a post-civil rights to a post-racial stage. As for its organisation, it first discusses the influence which social norms have on satire and examines research according to which satire needs to reflect changes in social norms if it is to be recognised as satire. The second part examines the theoretical background to a post-racial society and summarises the key arguments of its proponents, such as Shelby Steele and Dinesh D'Souza, who claim that the concept of race is no longer valid and necessary in the U. S. The third part draws on research from the field of critical race theory in order to provide counterarguments to such claims, with a special emphasis placed on the political representation of African Americans and the high rate of their incarceration.

These three strands of inquiry are united in my final argument: despite the fact that the concept of a post-racial society is now considered defunct, this was not the case during the 1990s and 2000s when Reed was writing his last two novels. While the previous chapter demonstrated that the dominant mode of satire in the respective two novels is driven by argumentation, this chapter argues that such a change is influenced by the American acceptance of post-raciality. This chapter claims that in order to attack racism which has become covert instead of overt,⁶²

62 Crenshaw distinguishes between the old type of racism—which she calls overt—and the new type—which she calls covert. She convincingly describes how the new, covert type of racism has dominated the United States of America in her paper “Color-blind Dreams and Racial Nightmares: Reconfiguring Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era.”

Reed has adapted his satire to be argument-based so that it can unravel the new form of racism which was the most common in the 1990s and 2000s.

6.1 On the Dependency of Satire on Social Norms

There is no denying that “satirists specialize in demolition projects,” as Connery and Combe claim (1), and the focus of such doing is twofold. Satirists aim to change the beliefs of their reading audience and unmask claims based on falsehood or dubious morality. By way of illustration, Bohnert claims that “satire challenges cultural perceptions” (154) while Hodgart asserts that it “contains sharp and telling comments on the problems of the world in which we live” (12). An example of such a mistaken cultural perception for Ishmael Reed is the central premise of the post-racial society, according to which racism and anti-multiculturalism no longer affect current America. Reed questions this claim in his most recent collection of essays, *Going Too Far* (2012):

And so while the media, both electronic and print, might peddle the mass delusion that racism is no longer a factor in American life, I can offer a different witness because, unlike many black men who might entertain the same idea, I have many outlets, both here and abroad, both from mainstream, alternative media and my own. (14)

Since, according to Pollard, the satirist’s ultimate goal is to “make his readers agree with him in identifying and condemning behaviour and men he regards as vicious” (1), Reed’s current argument-based satire targets this cultural perception in an effort to persuade his readers that the concept of post-raciality is nothing more than a mere illusion. By doing so, Reed confirms the observation of literature scholar George Test, according to whom satire “asserts that some person, group, or attitude is not what it should be” (5). It therefore follows that in order to judge, satire needs to rely on a recognition of what is just and what is not. In other words, satire is vitally dependent on social norms.

The connection between satire and social norms cannot be overemphasised for if satire does not rely on accepted norms, it might not be recognised as valid by its audience. As Feinberg suggests, “The moment one criticizes and says that something has been done in the wrong way, he is implying that there is a right way to do it” (11). This quote poignantly arrives at the importance of social norms for satire and the satirist: if the satirist does not choose to champion norms predominantly acknowledged by society their satire would likely not be accepted as valid and the satirist’s work could go in vain. For if satire defended norms which society did not perceive as being in need of defence, such satire would be perceived as

pointless. Hence, it would not be able to influence its audience to accept the satirist's opinion, which would be the ultimate failure of satire as many scholars agree (Bohnert 168; Hodgart 33; Kernan 25). It therefore follows that a change in social norms heralds a change in satire.

This book has already illustrated a marked change in the satire of Ishmael Reed. Given the mutual relationship between satire and social norms, it is highly probable that the change in satire was brought on by a change in social norms. For as Feinberg suggests "The more exclusive the norm, the less likely the satire is to have wide appeal" (11). Consequently, should Reed want to retain the possibility to influence his audience, both he and his readers would have to agree on the validity of the same social norms. Yet, because American society changed its opinion on the prevalence of racism, Reed needed to update his satire as well to stay relevant. Since this change of social norms is key to my argument, let us now examine in detail the changing of the American mind on the question of racism.

6.2 On the American Movement to a Post-racial Society

"Ronald Reagan's assertion in the early 1980s that we had ended racism was only the most prominent claim that the goals of the civil rights movement had been achieved and that corrective measure such as affirmative action were not only unnecessary, but actually detrimental to final achievement of color-blind society."

(Keith Byerman *Remembering the Past* 14)

Creeping into prominence in the late 1980s, fully flourishing in the 1990s, and ending with police brutality and the shootings of African Americans in the second decade of the 2000s, the post-racial idea held a brief yet powerful sway over the United States. It claimed that race no longer mattered and that minorities were no longer disadvantaged because of their belonging to a particular race. Further, while it was lamentable that some racists still remained in the U.S., or so the argument went, the proponents of the new paradigm argued that on the whole racism had been successfully abolished by the new laws accepted after the Civil Rights Movement. The theoretical basis of this argument was proposed in the late 1990s in publications such as Shelby Steele's *A Dream Deferred* (1999), Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism* (1997) and Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom's *America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible* (1997). Even though a number of social scientists and critical race theorists challenged the idea that race did not matter and that racism had been eradicated, this reading of racial reality in the U. S. was "ascend-

ant in American law, politics, and public intellectual discourse” (Singh 11–12). And as such it became “the foundation of a new national consensus on race” (Brown and Carnoy et al. Vii-viii).⁶³

Nonetheless, in spite of the claims of the proponents of a post-racial America, soon evidence to the contrary started to mount. Indeed, stark differences continue to divide races when it comes to education, access to accommodation, earning opportunities, and political and judicial representation, as Bonilla-Silva documents in her seminal monograph *Racism without Racists* (2006). Yet this present inequality is not explained by “racial realists” such as Steele and D’Souza as being the result of systematic oppression but rather, using the language of neo-liberalism, as a failure of African Americans to adopt a more entrepreneurial attitude. According to literature scholar Keith Byerman, racial realists claim that:

So much progress has been made in the past forty years that the only reason debates about racism continue is that blacks are invested in what McWhorter calls a “Cult of Victimology.” Instead of going about the business of integrating into American society, African Americans maintain cultural practices, belief systems, and social and political structures that are tied to the past and that deprive them of opportunity in the present. Fear of individuality, personal responsibility, and even success inhibit achievement. In this reading of history, the freedom movement did in fact accomplish its goal of social justice; it is simply black refusal to get over the past and accept the new reality that is the problem. Thus, from this perspective, blacks blame whites for problems of crime, poverty, poor education, and discrimination when they themselves are responsible. (21)

Even though there is much research now which questions the core tenets of post-raciality, they nonetheless seem to be supported by many white citizens of the United States. This is, for example, evidenced by the research of Brown and Carnoy et al., whose findings echo much of Byerman’s summary. Their research shows that many white Americans believe that “the civil rights revolution was successful, and they wholeheartedly accept the principles enshrined in civil rights laws” which according to them “ended racial inequality by striking down legal segregation” (1). Their research also found that white Americans reason that “if blacks are less successful than whites, it is not because America is still a racist society. In fact, a substantial majority believe that black Americans do not try hard enough to succeed” (2). And finally, they posit that “most white Americans think the United States is rapidly becoming a color-blind society, and they see little need or justification for affirmative action or other color-conscious policies” (2). It ap-

⁶³ I realise that social scientists predominantly agree that race is not a real category (Appiah 21–37, Bonilla-Silva 5, Glasgow 20–133, Zack 239, Daynes and Lee 1). Nonetheless, I use this word for the lack of a better term.

pears understandable that Americans would see no need to support a minority which is so often accused of failing to adopt the American spirit of hard work. This also explains why Reed needs argumentation (and a mode of satire driven by it) to change such a widespread perception.

The seed of a post-racial society was planted in the American mind by its proponents, who revised the logic of the post-civil rights era: actions to affirm race are no longer considered as beneficial; instead they are considered to be examples of racism as they are unfair to the dominant white population. Or as Singh writes, “The pretext for reform in one period has become the basis for abandoning it in another. Race now means racism, especially when it is used to define or defend the interest of a minority community” (10). Yet, some white Americans agree that racism has been abolished while continuing to benefit from the subtle racial oppression of minorities and claim that this position is not racist.⁶⁴ Hence, should Ishmael Reed want to influence white Americans, it seems reasonable that his satire would reflect this particular social change by relying on argumentation to debunk the myth of post-raciality.

6.3 On the Toll of Post-raciality on African Americans

However, it would be misleading to depict the complex situation of race relations in America in a black and white way. It needs to be mentioned that thanks to the laws established after the Civil Rights Movement a new class of African Americans arose: the black middle class (Barksdale and Livingston 518–9, Mukherjee 178). As Brown and Carnoy et al. write, today “at least some people of color can be found at the highest levels of every institution in American life” (223). Similar openings have been created in the entertainment industry and hence some African Americans have become a part of popular culture (Byerman 15). However, both trends are not only positive as such positions, it has already been argued, came at the price of supporting the white status quo. Mukherjee writes about “multi-cultural conservatives,” of African Americans and Latinos who rose in status thanks to civil rights laws yet “aligned themselves with the New Right and the Republican party” (179), which later on successfully and systematically narrowed down the number of opportunities for these minorities. Similarly, the entertainment industry was primarily interested in “safe, reassuring representations” of blackness, whose embodi-

64 Scholar of African American history Greta de Jong notes that simply agreeing to use politically correct language and avoiding overt oppression in public does not nullify the consequences of previous centuries. As she says: “Although the new laws [of the Civil Rights Era] were an essential step toward ensuring racial equality, they were an insufficient remedy for disparities in economic opportunity and political power that were constructed over a period of centuries and could not be eradicated merely by treating everyone equally from now on” (1).

ments were “rewarded richly for projecting integrationist possibilities” (Byerman 16). Consequently, it can be said that the rise of African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s was exchanged for the acceptance of a color-blind consensus on race. As not all African Americans rose in status, this rise led to further stratification and hence to a weakening of the African American voice. Significantly, the caste of multicultural conservatives has not escaped Reed’s attention and section 5.3 of this book examines how he lampoons its members with argument-based satire.

Hence, even though the advancement of African Americans since the 1960s has been unprecedented, it would be misleading to subscribe to the post-racial perception of race and racism since social scientists show the existence of a very different reality, one where race still plays a weighty role in influencing one’s options in life. By way of illustration, Michelle Alexander in her paper “The New Jim Crow” shows how incarceration rates of African Americans have increased fivefold since the 1970s. Her research evidences that “the overwhelming majority of the increase in imprisonment has been poor people of color, with the most astonishing rates of incarceration found among black men” (276). Yet, the emphasis of Alexander’s argument does not lie on the fact that African Americans are incarcerated. She is more worried by the legal discrimination to which they are subjected having been once designated as felons. In her research, Alexander illustrates the rise of a new means of legal discrimination that controls African Americans once they are released from prison.⁶⁵

In its entirety, Alexander’s argument describes a vicious circle whose features⁶⁶ are incongruent with the claims of racial realists. This is because the system of

65 This is significant because the numbers of incarcerated African Americans are on the rise. As she notes, “More African American adults are under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.” She further adds that “In 2007 more black men were disenfranchised than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race” (275).

66 I quote her at length at this point because of the high informational value of her research:

- Denial of the right to vote. Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia deny prisoners this right even after the term of punishment expires, states are free to deny people who have been labeled felons the right to vote for a period of years or their entire lives. In a few states, one in four black men has been permanently disenfranchised. Nationwide, nearly one in seven black men is either temporarily or permanently disenfranchised as a result of felon disenfranchisement laws.
- Exclusion from jury service. One hallmark of Jim Crow was the systematic exclusion of blacks from juries. Today, those labeled felons are automatically excluded from juries; others are routinely excluded if they have had negative experiences with law enforcement. Good luck finding a person of color in a ghetto community today who has not yet had a negative experience with law enforcement. The all-white jury is no longer a thing of the past in many regions of the country, in part because so many African Americans have been labeled felons and excluded from juries.

legal oppression which she describes simply does not allow Africans Americans in general to enjoy the listed benefits no matter how entrepreneurial they might be. In short, Alexander makes a very convincing case for the legal continuation of racism, a form which has come to rely on less visible methods yet results in very tangible discrimination nonetheless. Further, Alexander is not alone in this conviction, which is supported by other research as well. For example, Charles Mills summarises the research of the notable critical race scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw Williams, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic by saying that they “claim that American white supremacy has not vanished, but only changed from a de jure to de facto form” (269). It seems fitting to end this section by agreeing with Brown and Carnoy et al. that post-racialism is “an extremely misleading picture of what social science research really shows” (135) and with Alexander, who says that it is “nothing more than a fiction—a type of Orwellian doublespeak made no less sinister by virtue of the sincerity of those espousing it” (273). Hence, current research in the social sciences validates Reed’s accurate (and grim) description of stark inequality among different races which he satirises in *Japanese by Spring* and *Juice!*.

Glenda Carpio, a scholar of African American literature and humor, puts the tenets of post-raciality in perspective by claiming that:

A great reversal occurred almost as soon as the major Civil Rights acts passed: the focus was no longer on white racism—because segregation in public spaces, discrimi-

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- Employment discrimination. Employment discrimination against felons is deemed legal and absolutely routine. Regardless of whether your felony occurred three months ago or thirty-five years ago, for the rest of your life you’re required to check that box on employment applications asking the dreaded question: “have you ever been convicted of a felony?” In one survey, about 70 percent of employers said they would not hire a drug felon convicted for sales or possession. Most states also deny a wide range of professional licenses to people labeled felons. In some states, you can’t even get a barber’s license if you’re a felon.
 - Housing discrimination. Housing discrimination is perfectly legal. Public housing projects as well as private landlords are free to discriminate against criminals. In fact, those labeled felons may be barred from public housing for five years or more and legally discriminated against for the rest of their lives. These laws make it difficult for former prisoners to find shelter, a basic human right.
 - Public benefits. Discrimination in public benefits is legal against those who have been labeled felons. In fact, federal law renders drug offenders ineligible for food stamps for the rest of their lives. Fortunately, some states have opted out of the federal ban, but it remains that thousands of people, including pregnant women and people with HIV/AIDS, are denied even food stamps, simply because they were once caught with drugs. (279)

Her research thus describes a dire situation which is certainly not in accordance with the claims of so-called racial realists. As Alexander shows, some states are more than active in making the situation of African Americans worse than it needs be.

nation at work, and disenfranchisement had been outlawed—but on the moral deficiencies of minorities. For African Americans, this meant the return of stereotypes of blacks as lazy, irresponsible, and in ‘violation of core American values’. These stereotypes have been used to explain the undeniable inequalities in wages, access to healthcare, housing and family income that have existed between black and white Americans in the last 40 years. (326)

While describing this new covert form of racism, Bonillo-Silva writes that in contemporary America “racial inequality is reproduced through ‘New Racism’ practices that are subtle, institutional, and apparently non-racial” (2). Similarly, Parks and Rachlinski speak of racism which is “subtle” and difficult to prove (197), while Singh mentions that this new reading of current racial reality is “ascendant in American law, politics, and public intellectual discourse” (Singh 1–12). And as such it has become “the foundation of a new national consensus on race,” as Brown et al. report (vii-viii). Consequently, the existence of this new form of racism not only provided Reed with a plethora of material to deconstruct with argument-based satire, but also made manifest the value of Reed’s novels because they do not shy away from this goal of exposing an uncomfortable truth.