

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JOHN L. JACKSON, JR., *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 279 p. + index.

John L. Jackson's 2005 book *Real Black* engages readers at the start with an account of Jackson's conversation with a Harlemiter whom he calls "Bill," while Bill cuts up watermelons. Bill has strongly held beliefs about the foolishness and outright self-destructiveness of many black folks and considerable skepticism that being a professor at Duke University (as Jackson is) in any way "helps the people," that is black people in Harlem. Black teachers who think they know something from "sucking wind from under white people" are ignoring their destiny (which is what used to be called "racial uplift") in Bill's weary view of social-climbing black folks.

To reverse a cliché, it's mostly uphill from there. Now and again, other black New Yorkers are heard from, but Jackson provides what seems to me a miscellany of thoughts about urban African American culture(s) – not quite free association randomness, but not shards laid into a mosaic with any pattern, either. His book leaves not the slightest doubt that he is familiar with many strands of social theory and with recent discussions about ethnography and "native anthropology," but what he picks out and/or alludes to does not cohere.

Real Black does have a thesis – or at least a dichotomy (what structuralist analysis needs, though Jackson is way post-structuralist, way postmodernist). There is a long history – both among those who identify as black and among those who do not but have taken an interest in sorting people and cultural phenomena by "race" – of judging in/authenticity (which includes passing as black as well as passing as white and performing what whites regard as authentic blackness – often primitive/country and sometimes outright criminal).

Jackson seeks to replace authenticity with sincerity and argues that there is a historical trend among African Americans to make that move, to include more people and patterns of conduct rather than to demand conformity to one narrow script of how blacks should be(have) in the world. Alas, Jackson does not define what he means by either "authenticity" or "sincerity." "Authenticity" has often been seen in North America as deriving from "blood" (with the "one-drop" definition widespread) or pigmentation (those seen as "high yellow" being less authentic than those who are coal black) and (perhaps more by white entertainment

entrepreneurs and consumers) as “down and dirty” (country- or ghetto-sounding and, often, lawbreaking). Under the sign of “sincerity,” the blackness of those opposed to affirmative action like US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, or those criticizing what used to be called “the culture of poverty,” are not treated as inauthentic. Even academic ethnographers may be “sincere” (if pitifully lost and confused, as Bill believes them to be). I live in a community in which credentials are rarely challenged (that is, “if you say you are one of us, you are”), so I think that I understand something of the relativist thrust to consider a social category as not having a single narrowly defined script that must be followed, but it still seems to me that questions of how “black,” how “genuinely” black, successful blacks are still gets asked with frequency by those most invested in their own black identities.

These days (reversing the etymology of the words), things are authenticated and humans' sincerity is granted or questioned. “Authenticity” – including “racial authenticity” – is about content, “sincerity” is about intent. Jackson writes in praise of “sincerity” that “racial subjects demand a mutual granting of autonomy and interiorized validity that outstrips authenticity’s imperfect operationalization” (18) – though it seems to me that he is very, very far from “operationalizing” measures of either. Jackson eventually writes that sincerity “privileges the real as inside [...], an immanence” (196). Jackson's examples also seem to make being “real” internal, though those he writes about function within social groups, including Pentecostal Christians, housing activists, and the Worldwide Truthful Understanding Black Hebrew Israelites.

Jackson shows that, over time, the Black Hebrews have shifted from trying to establish that they are descendants (by matrilineal descent) of Esau, lost tribes of ancient Israel who did not come from sub-Saharan Africa, to accepting those who believe their very elaborate conspiracy theories and some other very exotic beliefs (mixed with a not-unfamiliar one that the 1611 King James translation of the Old Testament and Revelations were directly authorized by God). Jackson also argues for a loosening of role requirements in regard to rap – singing no longer being taboo for “real” male rappers (Mos Def is the focus of this analysis), and explores pro-ghetto and protect-poor-tenants Harlemites (with both being “sincere”).

Jackson has a lot of ideas about a lot of phenomena, but *Real Black* does not seem to me to add up to anything in particular. As ethnography, it is very thin, with unexplained selection of phenomena and of remarkably few “informants.” Much of the text would be impenetrable to those studied – and to any other readers not familiar with social theory and discourse on crises in representation in ethnography. I think that Jackson's “bricolage” (a term from the arch-structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss that I though had passed out of fashion) leads to many interesting remarks about diverse phenomena, but only very limited understanding of 21st-century racial identities and African American cultures in Harlem and Brooklyn.

Stephen O. Murray, El Instituto, Obregón, San Francisco.

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