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The Aesthetic of America: Racism in the U.S. as portrayed by Jimmy Corrigan and his family

At the end of Chris Ware's novel entitled *Jimmy Corrigan the Smartest Kid on Earth* Ware provides us with a hermeneutical guide to understanding the various images and themes that are present throughout the text. From the explanation of the crutch to the explanation of the metaphors and symbols, the guide entitled "Corrigenda" is fully encompassing of the text's odds and ends. An example of this being an explanation of the crutch that Jimmy uses through most of the text. However, there are a few concepts in the Corrigenda that don't appear in the text; one of which is the Draft Riots. The Draft Riots were a series of Irish riots over the military draft that took place in various large metropolitan cities which lasted for four days and cost two million dollars in property damage and the lives of 1000 African-Americans. If the Corrigenda is Ware's tool for readers to understand the core concepts in his book and the Draft Riots don't come up in the text, then Ware is positioning this race riot with his text to encourage the reader to look into the issues of race within the text. There aren't many moments in the text that deal with race, but those that do involve Jimmy, his father, or his grandfather. If Ware wants us to examine racist historical events and compare them to his text, then the Corrigan family history of racism would be the aspect of the text to compare them to. By exploring this comparison through the lens of textual events, the reader can see how War uses the Corrigan family to demonstrate America's attitude towards racism. This connection is explored through the use of black people as entertainment, the portrayal of black people as savages, the use of black people as atonement, and the casual racism that is practiced by the family. To understand the casual racism and use of atonement it is important to examine the foundation of the relationship between America and race through the portrayal of black people in media.

In terms of the portrayal of black people in American culture, there was a time where racist depictions of black people were utilized as a source of comedy. An example of this in American history would be minstrel shows. Minstrel shows were comic skits that portrayed black people as simple, lazy, and superstitious. James Corrigan as a child walks by a poster for a minstrel show that is put up in a carnival and examines it as shown in figure 5. The placement of this poster in the text normalizes the idea that these racist comedic shows were a societal norm during this time period. An alternative to minstrel characterization of black people was an Uncle Tom type of character that was happily subservient to white people. This idea is explored in a story told by William Corrigan to James about a black man named Barney. William regales a tale of his father who showed sympathy towards Barney, a black man who was seen as a comic vagrant by the entire town. Being that William's father was a doctor, he was in need of a human skeleton in order to prove his high standing. Because William's father was always willing to support Barney in various small ways, Barney dedicates his dead body to William's father in the name of science, but this is complicated when Barney's body is kept by a community of black people. William's father then had to outsmart an entire community of black people. In this story we see presence of both an Uncle Tom character as well as a large community of people that exist for William's father to outsmart. William tells this story quite happily at the dinner table and laughs as he remembers the pranks that he used to play on Barney. His appreciation of black people as a source of comedic entertainment is furthered in figure 1 in which he laughs at a Jim Crow picture slide. In the first panel we see him examining a picture slide of a man in black face attempting to steal a pie. Following this image, we see his face shrouded by shadows as he recovers from a laughing fit. From the way his face is obscured his body could stand in for any character which demonstrates that William isn't unique in laughing at this racist cartoon. Not

only does William laugh at the slide, but he also scolds his child James for taking a flower from a tree explaining that stealing is bad, yet this contradicts the sympathy he expresses towards the Jim Crow character in the cartoon. In his sympathy for a thieving character the reader can see that William views the Jim Crow character as an individual who is incapable of existing on the same moral level that he or his child reside on. William's belief that black people don't exist on the same moral level as white people is also explored through the media's portrayal of black people as savages.

As a way of preventing black people from being seen as exclusively sympathetic comic characters, there was an attempt at portraying black people as savages. This idea stretches past the times of slavery and goes well on into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. We see this in the text in figure 5 when James Corrigan walks past the "cannibal" exhibit and gleefully waves towards a black woman standing inside the exhibit. By having this occurrence span three small panels, Ware formally suggests that this exhibit is not out of the societal norm. While James encounters a blatant expression of black people as savages, Jimmy the main character of the novel has internalized the idea of black people as savage. This idea plays out in figure 6 when Jimmy is sitting on the toilet and imagining what Amy will look like. While his initial mental image is what Amy really looks like, we can see that she transforms into an angry looking woman with cornrows. Not only has Jimmy has not been given any reason to believe that Amy will be an angry or mean person, but he has actually learned that Amy is a nice person who has a lot to offer, so by being able to see Jimmy's internal breakdown of what Amy will be like as a person we can see that Jimmy has internalized ideas of black people as savages. Conceptualizing black people as savages goes beyond depicting them as savages; displaying black people as savages is also used as a tool to rationalize the state of the black community post-slavery. This concept is

shown in figure 4 where William is speaking to James. In this passage we are reading a journal entry written by James about a time when William commented on a community of black people. During the encounter we see William rationalize the existence of the community as a squandering of what the black people had been given, and goes out of his way to avoid it. James rationalizes this interaction and through this act attempts to understand his father's point of view. By attempting to forge an understanding with his father, we can see that James and William's relationship is based off William's racist rhetoric. However this specific rhetoric of black people squandering what they had been given goes beyond James and William's relationship and is indicative of a problem that was more widespread in America.

William's rhetoric is a product of black people being used as a means of atonement for wrong-doings. This idea is best explained by examining the racial foundation of the Civil War. During the Civil War there was a moral argument of whether or not slavery was right and because the northern part of America that won the war believed that slavery was wrong; slavery was abolished and America got to celebrate the moral victory of freeing black people from slavery. Following this, America uses this situation to abolish itself from blame, yet this rationale ignores that America was also at fault for the beginning of slavery as well. Conceptually this is mirrored in William's belief that black people were given an opportunity to build their society post slavery, but they were given this chance after their lives were uprooted and destroyed. Jimmy's father mimics this redemption tale through his adoption of Amy. His adoption of Amy stands out, because Jimmy's father is a racist, and this is seen when he casually uses a racial slur in the doctor's office. Not only is Jimmy's father racist, but he also claimed he made a mistake in having Jimmy with Jimmy's mother. So why then would Jimmy's father adopt a black child? He did it out of guilt for abandoning Jimmy and his Mother. However, adopting Amy only provides

Jimmy's father with the illusion of atonement, and that's why he later reaches out to Jimmy in an attempt at creating a bond with him. Not only does Amy serve as a vehicle for Jimmy's father's attempted atonement, but Jimmy himself also uses Amy as a fantasy of atonement. This is seen in figure 10 where Jimmy fantasizes about leaving his life to return to Amy after the death of his mother. At this moment in the text Jimmy feels guilty about not being with his mother and instead being with his father whom his mother hates, and this manifests itself in this small fantasy in which he absolves himself of the guilt of not being with his mother by returning, but then ultimately giving himself what he wants in his return to Amy. This fantasy can be seen as Jimmy's way of finally giving himself something he wants, but only through the lens of supporting Amy. By utilizing Amy as a tool of redemption, Jimmy and his father both highlight their casually racist attitudes.

The casual racism that the Corrigan family practices mirrors the practice of the subtle racism that is found in America. This manifests itself in a few different ways in the text. The most humorous of these being Jimmy's contingency plan for when he meets Amy which is seen in figure 6. Visually it mimics his imaginations of what Amy will look like, but substitutes her appearance with how he will greet her. Although he begins with a normal greeting, he ultimately chooses to end on the phrase "Whasup I'm *Jim!* I just don't want you to think I'm afraid of *black people!*" Because each of these images appear last in his string of imaginations, the reader can see that these are the foundations of his anxieties in relation to not just Amy, but black people as well. Although this is portrayed as humorous, Jimmy's apprehensive attitude towards black people is portrayed as much more troublesome in figure 8 when he calls to see if he can get a flight going back home any sooner. Although Jimmy does not come out and say why he does this, Ware draws the connection by using Jimmy's first-person point of view to see what part of

the photo he is staring at. Because Ware draws a visual connection between Amy and Jimmy attempting to leave, the reader can see that Jimmy is too uncomfortable with the idea of a black sibling to continue staying with his father. Not only Jimmy is a casual racist, but his father is as well. Jimmy's father's use of slurs to relate to the doctor during a conversation shows that he is willing to say these sorts of things behind closed doors to professional people, which is at its core a racist way of handling a situation which is the core problem with the Corrigan family.

Because each member of the Corrigan family is a varying degree of racist, the comparison of the Corrigan family and America is supported not just by a chronological similarity, but a thematic similarity as well. The themes that emphasize this similarity are the use of black people as a source of comedic entertainment, the depiction of black people as savages, the use of black people as a means of atonement, and the casual racism of the characters. This manner of reading is encouraged by the Corrigena that appears after the end of the novel and raises the question of how America's history of racism is represented through the characters in other works.

### Bibliography

Ware, Chris. *Jimmy Corrigan the Smartest Kid on Earth*. 390. Print.

Figure 1.



William Corrigan laughs at a picture slide of a man in black face (76).

Figure 2.



William Corrigan goes to purchase a newspaper (78).

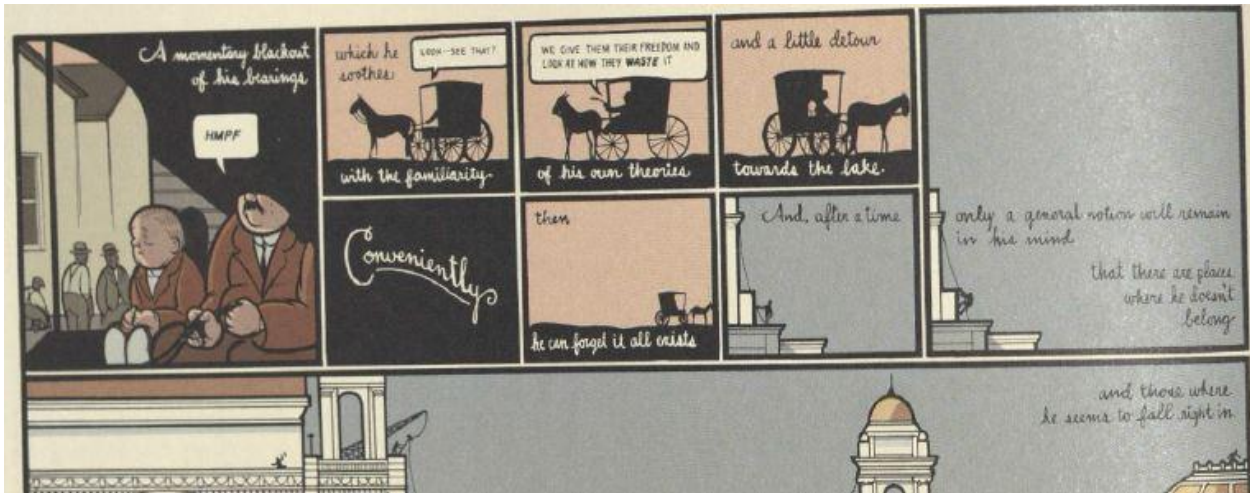
Figure 3.





William fails to purchase the newspaper (79).

Figure 4.



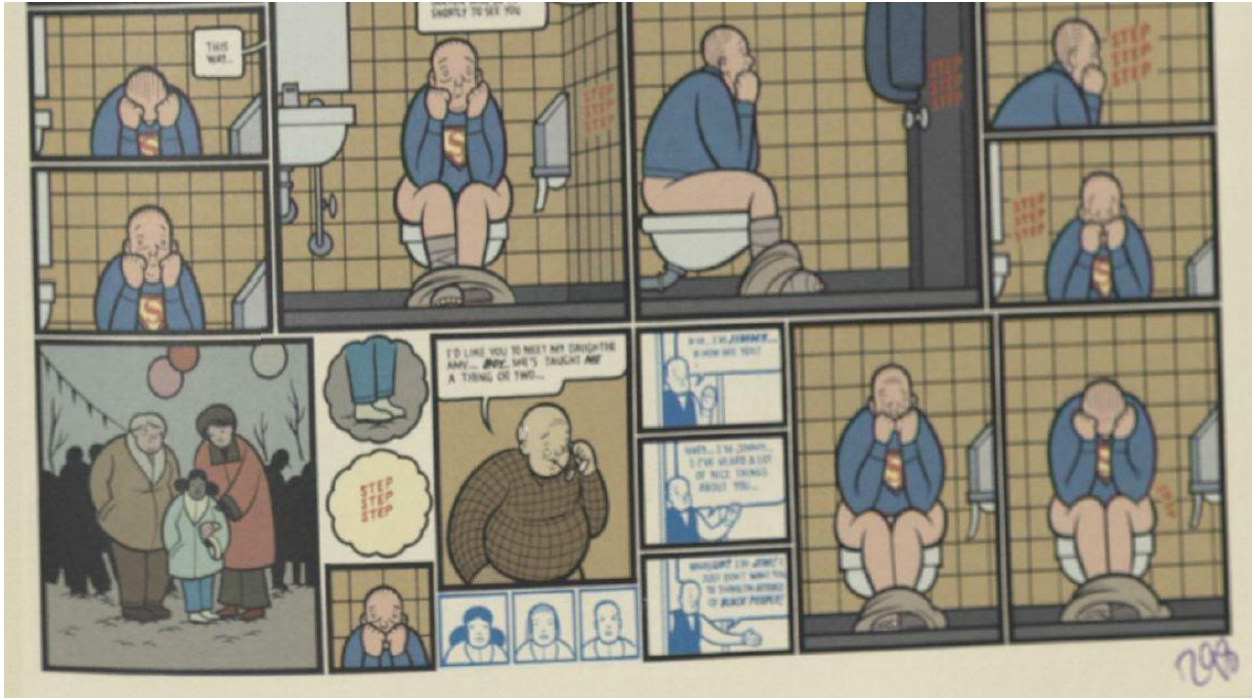
William comments on the lives of black people (149).

Figure 5.



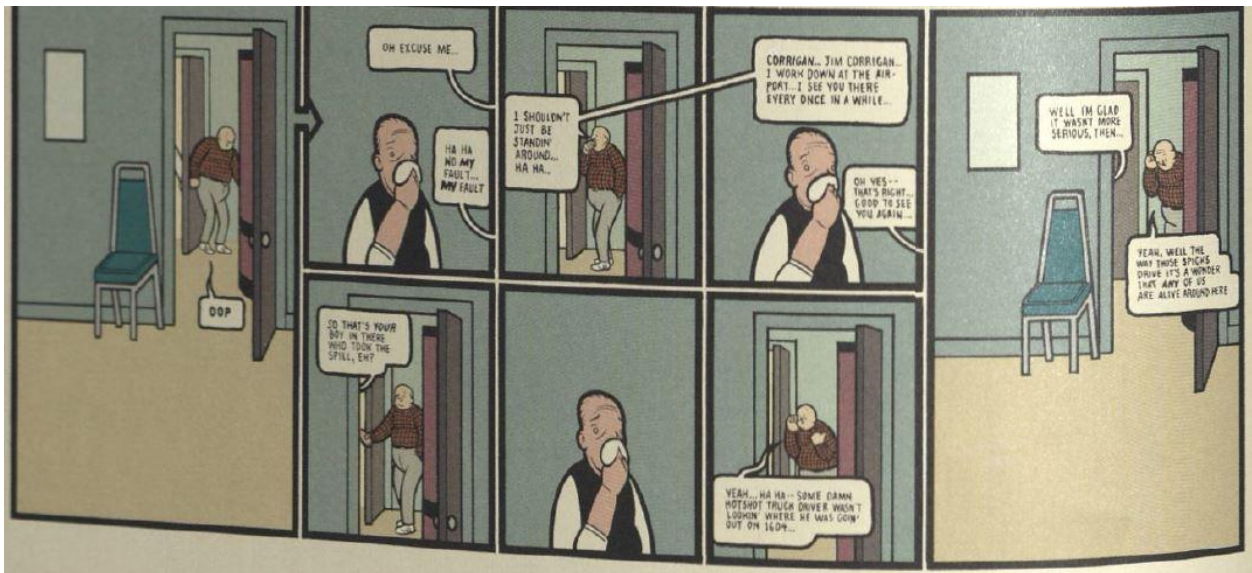
James is at a carnival and passes a poster for a minstrel show and an exhibit of cannibals (260).

Figure 6.



Jimmy imagining visiting Amy for the first time (298).

Figure 7.



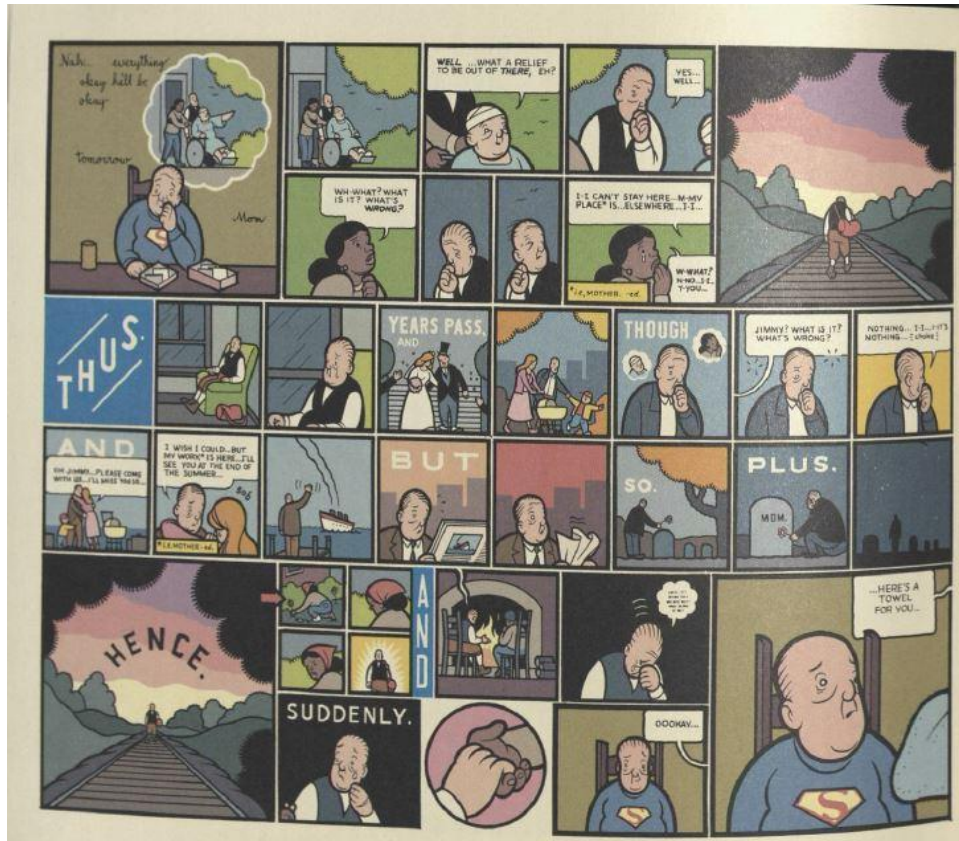
Jimmy's father casually uses a slur when speaking with a doctor (129).

Figure 8.



Jimmy tries to leave early when he sees that his father's daughter is black (200).

Figure 9.



Jimmy imagines leaving his life and returning to Amy's side (337).