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## **Post-Authenticity: The Collapse of Authentic Blackness in the Post-Soul Memoir**

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## Abstract

“Oreo,” “white-black,” “Uncle Tom” or “sellout” are just a few of the derogatory terms used to refer to someone who is black but “acts white.” Today more than ever, blackness seems to be a slippery concept, and the proliferation of terms that denote someone who is “inauthentic” go hand in hand with discussions about the (in)authentic blackness of public figures. Although the general trend seems to be that of denying the validity of every notion of racial authenticity, this trend coexists with a need to define blackness, pin it down, establish boundaries, even if these boundaries are accepted as fluid and permeable. My dissertation focuses on an analysis of the notion of “authentic blackness” in African American contemporary memoirs, especially those that can be read as post-soul literature. Specifically, I base my definition of post-soul on the parameters established by Bertram Ashe in 2007, that is, I consider as “post-soul” texts that:

- have been written by authors who were born or came of age during or after the Civil Rights Movement and were raised in a multicultural, integrated environment

- stage what Ashe calls “blaxploration,” that is a desire to investigate, (re)define and de-essentialize blackness

- carry on blaxploration through the execution of “allusion-disruption gestures,” namely the author mentions tropes of traditional blackness, only to contradict them shortly after in order to show the untenable nature of their supposed authenticity.

My idea is that the memoir is a privileged genre to investigate authenticity, partly because of the long and complex history of the genre in African American literature, partly because memoirs reflect on what happens when blackness is embodied, and on the consequences of this embodiment in a racist and capitalist society. Aim of the project is to explore racial authenticity in the contemporary scene, keeping in mind how the concept has shifted over time and analyzing how it can be retraced in the production of contemporary African American memoirists. My main argument is that performances of racial identity emerge out of specific sociopolitical situations in which the performer operates, and that these performances are perceived as ineffective or at least insufficient as a tool of identity construction in the contemporary era, so that every notion of authentic blackness is seen as circumstantial, fluid, and ultimately untenable.

## Riassunto

“Oreo,” “white-black,” “Zio Tom,” e “svenduto,” sono solo alcuni dei molti termini dispregiativi che vengono comunemente utilizzati dalla comunità afroamericana per riferirsi ad un nero che si comporta “da bianco.” Oggi più che mai, la nerezza è un concetto complesso e dibattuto, e la proliferazione di questi termini si accompagna a discussioni sempre più frequenti sull’ (in)autenticità razziale di vari personaggi pubblici. Nonostante il trend generale sembri essere quello di negare la validità della nozione di autenticità razziale, questo trend coesiste con un forte bisogno di definire la nerezza, fissarne i parametri, stabilirne i confini, anche quando questi confini vengono accettati come fluidi e permeabili.

La mia tesi si focalizza su un’analisi del concetto di *authentic blackness* nel memoir contemporaneo afroamericano, in particolare in quei testi che possono essere definiti “letteratura post-soul.” Nello specifico, baso la mia definizione di post-soul sui parametri proposti da Bertram Ashe nel 2007, e cioè considero post-soul testi

-scritti da afroamericani nati o diventati adulti dopo la fine del movimento per i diritti civili e cresciuti in un ambiente razzialmente integrato e multiculturale

-che mettono in scena quella che Ashe chiama “blaxploration” (un neologismo composto dalla fusione di *black* ed *exploration*, un’ esplorazione della nerezza), e cioè il desiderio di analizzare, ridefinire, de-essenzializzare la nerezza

-performano strategie di “allusione e rottura,” ovvero menzionano caratteristiche e situazioni tradizionalmente associate alla cultura afroamericana, ma ne contraddicono l’autenticità, mettendo in discussione l’idea di una cultura *black* coesa e uniforme.

Nella tesi sostengo che il memoir sia un genere particolarmente indicato per portare avanti un’analisi del concetto di autenticità razziale, in parte grazie alla lunga e complessa storia del genere della letteratura afroamericana, in parte perché il memoir riflette su una nerezza che è sia culturale e performabile, sia vissuta nella sua corporalità, personificata. Il mio argomento principale è che nel memoir possiamo vedere come una determinata performance di identità razziale emerga da uno specifico contesto storico-sociale, e come questa performance venga ormai percepita come inadeguata o perlomeno insufficiente come strumento di costruzione dell’identità nella società americana contemporanea, con la conseguenza che la validità del concetto di autenticità razziale viene a cadere.

## Introduction

*No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.*

Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Authenticity, or the Lesson of Little Tree,” (1991)

This dissertation focuses on how the notion of authentic blackness changes after the Civil Rights movement, and in particular on how ideas about who or what is to be considered authentically black are challenged, re-defined and expanded in memoirs written by post soul writers, that is African American writers who were born or came of age after the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and who therefore have no first-hand experience of those movements. In this work, my main research hypothesis is that post-soul memoirists always describe their black identity as performable, contingent, in motion and in constant need of re-definition, criticizing fixed and prescriptive notions of authentic blackness, which are in turn perceived as ineffective or at least insufficient as tools of identity construction for the contemporary scene.

The question of authenticity in African American culture is far from new but seems to have resurfaced in a particularly intense way in the last decade, leading to passionate debates over the physical and behavioral markers of authentic blackness and over the supposed (in)authenticity of African American public figures. For example, since the beginning of Barack Obama’s presidency, there have been claims that he was either “too black” to represent most American citizens, or “not black enough” to act as a spokesperson for the African American community, and the extent of his racial salience has been constantly evaluated against that of previous black male leaders (Satta, “Is Obama Black Enough?”). Another case that recently reopened the debate on racial authenticity and the possibility to appropriate markers of blackness was the racial masquerade of Rachel Dolezal, ex-President of the NAACP division of Spokane, who in 2015—the same year in which this research project started—was outed by her parents as a white woman who had been passing for black for more than twenty years. These are just two examples of a very heated debate on the nature of authentic blackness that has found its way in literature and the arts, with an increasing number of writers, visual artists and performers who are working with notions of racial authenticity and are pushing against the borders of previous definitions of what constitutes “the authentic black experience.”



As a consequence, my dissertation tries to answer—or at least to tackle—some of the main questions that new generations of African American artists are asking when they interrogate the nature of blackness. The broader question seems to be: what defines authentic blackness in the post-Civil Rights era? What are the markers of authenticity as far as race is concerned, and how reliable and stable are they? Or on the contrary, to what extent can these markers of “authentic blackness” be performed or even commodified? Specifically, from a more strictly literary point of view, what I try to extrapolate from the texts I analyze in my case studies is how post-soul writers respond to constructions of authentic blackness that have been shaped in previous historical periods, especially by their elders during the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. How do they elaborate and eventually debunk these constructions of authenticity? And do they replace them with new ones, also in light of contemporary manifestations of anti-blackness such as police brutality and the mass incarceration of people of color, or does the concept of authentic blackness disintegrate completely? My project attempts to address these questions by bringing together two main theoretical frameworks: post-soul theory and life writing studies, with frequent recourse to the work of scholars engaged in different but complementary disciplinary fields such intersectionality theory, gender studies, and visual studies.

One of the things that took the longest in the elaboration of this research project was to establish a viable definition and chronological frame for the literature that I read as “post-soul,” a task that I had underestimated at the beginning of my research path, but that I understood in all of its complexity once I reached the United States for the first time as a visiting research student at the American Studies department of Rutgers University in 2017. In the first year of my doctoral studies, I had become strongly fascinated with the idea of studying the ways in which younger generations of black writers, who had not had any direct experience of the social and political activism that their elders took part in, were redefining the meaning of “being black,” a debate that is as complex and engaging as African American culture itself. It seemed to me that younger artists were pushing back against older dogmas about what is or is not “frowned upon” when you are black, not only in mainstream society, but also and uppermost in the black community itself.

Novels, satirical stand-up comedy routines, and music tracks by artists that critics dubbed as “post-soul” were consistently interrogating their position in a world that was very rapidly changing as far as new educational and work opportunities were concerned: was it “really black” to live in downtown Manhattan, play golf at the weekend and hold an MBA from

Harvard? Was marrying outside of the race an option? And if a black woman felt the necessity to straighten her hair and brighten her skin, was she selling out or just embracing the freedom of treating her body as she pleased? It seemed that ideas about what was traditionally associated with blackness were changing as more and more black people gained access to upward social mobility through education and embraced new and increasingly nuanced notions of class and gender identity. For me, a white Italian woman working at a predominantly—indeed, almost exclusively—white institution overseas, this was the kind of intricately, super-sensitive, intra-group racial debate that could both absorb and intimidate me.

The sensitivity of this topic, coupled with a deep and sudden awareness of my positionality as a political subject, struck me when I came to the United States and started to talk to people—both inside and outside of academia—about my idea of investigating the notion of black authenticity in a “post-” generation. Two things became immediately clear to me: the first was that, as an Italian woman in the United States, I was more personally involved in debates about racial and ethnic authenticity than I thought I was; the second was that people tended to react badly to the prefix “post,” even before they actually understood how I was framing it theoretically. As a matter of fact, once in the States two questions kept coming up whenever I mentioned my project, adding themselves to the already cluttered list of “question-worth tackling” that guided my research. The first was about my color and nationality: why was I, a white Italian, investigating authentic blackness? Wouldn’t I be more comfortable discussing the works of, say, John Fante or Louise De Salvo? The second was: how could anyone be talking about a “post” phase, when manifestations of anti-blackness were still so tragically part of the everyday lives of millions of black Americans? The tangibility of my white privilege—why else had I never before felt the need to interrogate the implications of *my* color?—and the repercussions on my research of the recent deadly incidents between unarmed black citizens and the police, or of the millions of wrongly convicted people of color that populate American prisons, became very clear to me only when people overseas started to point them out. As a consequence, I understood that framing the “post” in post-soul in the right way was not just a matter of methodological thoroughness, but had also profound ethical implications. This is when my writing process actually began, leading to an opening chapter that makes a distinction between several “post” terms that recur in my dissertation, but that have different—although at times overlapping—meanings.

As a matter of fact, the term post-soul is often confused with “post-black” and “post-racial,” terms that have sparked a very heated debate on the validity of blackness as an epistemological

category for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and on the reasons and scopes of what philosopher Paul Taylor has defined our contemporary “impulse to posterize” (626). The result is that often these “post-” labels have been used as synonyms regardless of the context in which they originated and of the intentions of those who coined them, so that anything “post” is now seen by many as suspicious, confusing or at least unclear terminology. As a consequence, defining these terms and specifying why I think that “post-soul,” despite the problematic nature of the “post” prefix, is a productive field of investigation, became an essential preliminary step in my research project. Of all of these “post” labels, “post-racial” is the most problematic, since it refers to the idea that race no longer matters in contemporary American society. The term was first coined in 1971 (Wooten, “Compact Set Up”), but became especially popular after the election of Obama, which many perceived as a moment that would mark the beginning of post-racial America, only to be bitterly disappointed shortly after (Tesler 1). Quite differently, “post-black” has emerged in the field of visual arts, and has been coined by artist Glenn Ligon and curator Thelma Golden in 2001 in the context of the *Freestyle* exhibition at the Harlem Studio Museum to refer to young black artists whose work pushed back against traditional expectations of blackness in new and unexpected ways, and who incorporated in their works elements from different cultural traditions with unprecedented ease (Golden 14). However, regardless of Ligon and Golden’s original intentions, “post-black” has soon been misinterpreted by many as a term that suggested the necessity to supersede or erase blackness as a category of ontology, and the reputation of the term has only worsened after the publication in 2011 of texts such as Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* and Touré’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now*, both of which have received mixed reviews and quite a lot of negative feedback (Simmons 2; Li 44-59; Crawford, “What Was” 21-43; Kennedy, “The Fallacy”).

“Post-soul,” on the other hand, appears to have a more general connotation and a clearer definition and scope. The term was coined by music critic Nelson George in 1992 to refer, in his words, to “the twisting, troubling, turmoil-filled, and often terrific years since the mid-seventies when black Americans moved into a new phase of history” (*Post-Soul Nation*, ix), a broad definition which simply emphasizes the idea that black people in the US were living in a different, although not necessarily better, social and political climate after the 1970s, and that this was reflected in their cultural and artistic production. The emergence of this new artistic sensibility in black culture has been noted by several critics, who between the mid-1980s and the end of the 1990s published a series of articles and essays which can be read as cultural

manifestos of this new black aesthetic or post-soul aesthetic. Amongst the most famous are Greg Tate's "Cult-Nats Meets Freaky-Deke: The Return of the Black Aesthetic" (1986), Trey Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic" (1988) and Nelson George's "Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos: The Complete History of Post-Soul Culture" (1992). As can be seen, not all of these intellectuals used the term "post-soul" back then, but all were voicing the same general feeling that something decidedly new was happening in African American culture.

By 2007, Prof. Bertram Ashe of Richmond University was making an effort to articulate exactly what was new in this new black aesthetic and to give a more precise definition of the post-soul and of the kind of literary aesthetics it originated. In the Winter Issue of *African American Review*, entirely dedicated to the post-soul aesthetics, Ashe declared:

Post-soul generally refers to art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement. I limit the post-soul aesthetic to artists or writers of the post-Civil Rights movement generation for one crucial reason: these artists were not adults during the civil rights movement ("Theorizing" 611).

Ashe's definition is particularly interesting for my argument, in that it seems to expand the meaning of the "post" prefix in post-soul beyond its traditional interpretation as "after." As Anthony Appiah has noticed, "post" can actually carry more layered and complex connotations than simply "after," as the terms "postcolonial" and "postmodern" exemplify (336). And the fact that Ashe explicitly acknowledges the relation between the Civil Rights movement and post-soul art, clarifies that the "post" in "post-soul" can be interpreted as *after* the Civil Rights movement, but also as *proceeding from* and *in reaction to* the Civil Rights movement, designating complex aesthetic practices that come after the Civil Rights Movement, but whose themes and aesthetics also proceed from those produced between the 1950s and the 1970s, and react to the fact that the promise of full equality brought by the events of those years remained in fact unfulfilled. Most importantly, Ashe has also theorized the post-soul into a literary aesthetics, whose main characteristics he summarized in his "post-soul triangular matrix," namely the fact that a post-soul author must be a person raised in a multicultural, integrated environment, who is interested in interrogating black identity from a non-essentialized perspective, and who consistently challenges traditional expectations of blackness: he terms the pillars of his post-soul triangular matrix "cultural mulattism," "blaxploration" and "allusion-disruption gestures." Ashe's essay has therefore provided me with the main concepts through which I interrogate the texts of my corpus, since it not only gives a clear, although flexible, definition of post-soul, but also identifies some of the core

elements that distinguish the post-soul aesthetics from other tendencies in contemporary African American literature. As a consequence, the post-soul triangular matrix has become the model around which this dissertation is structured.

Once identified a theoretical frame that allowed me to analyze and question the concept of authentic blackness, I needed to choose a specific field to which my analysis would be applied, and my choice fell almost immediately on autobiographical writings, and specifically on the memoir genre. The main reason for this is that autobiography, besides having a long and rich history in African American literature, is in itself a genre that entails high expectations of authenticity. Philippe Lejeune has famously pointed out that autobiography is based on what he calls “the autobiographical pact” (3), a pact between author and reader which establishes that author, protagonist and narrator must coincide and that the author will do their best to be as truthful and authentic as possible in their narration. But if autobiography in general is literally based on an expectation of authenticity (the autobiographical pact), African American autobiography in particular has an even more complex and tight relation with this concept, since black autobiographers have traditionally been expected to satisfy several conditions of authenticity. For example, the authors of slave narratives were expected to include some form of authenticating documents that would attest to the authorship of the text and to the veracity of the narration, while contemporary autobiographers are expected to be authentic in the sense that what they write should be somehow representative of “the black experience,” according to *the reader’s* expectations of what that experience should be. In other words, African American autobiographers are still burdened by what Albert Memmi has called “the mark of the plural” (129), the expectation to represent the whole black community, even within a genre that generally focuses on the individual self. If autobiography seems like a good genre to investigate how notions of what is authentic are created and manipulated, it seems even more productive to investigate a particular form of autobiography: the memoir. Generally, critics agree on the fact that the memoir differs from traditional autobiographies in that it is characterized by a discontinuous chronology and by the fact that the text chronicles only a section or a particular aspect of the writer’s life. Hence, the memoir’s structure seems to mirror contemporary identities that are perceived as more and more hybrid and fragmented, and thanks to this characteristic this genre has now become so popular that several critics have noted that we are living in the era of the so-called “memoir-boom” (Couser 140-144; Rak 306; Smith & Watson, *Reading* xii; Zinsser 3).

The result of my investigation of authentic blackness, conducted from a post-soul perspective and applied to the memoir genre, is a dissertation composed of six main chapters. In the first chapter I describe the notion of post-soul and I clarify my terminology, explaining why I think post-soul theory is a productive frame of reference. The chapter continues with a discussion on the role of authenticity in African American literary criticism, hence I examine how African American writers and literary critics from the Harlem Renaissance to the present have engaged in a debate on what constitutes black literature, and on how to best represent (or not) the black experience in their production. In the second chapter I narrow my focus down to autobiography and to the memoir in particular, retracing how expectations of authenticity have influenced the genre in various stages of African American literary history. In the third chapter, I offer my interpretation of common patterns that I have observed in post-soul memoirs and that suggest to me a new approach to notions of racial authenticity, confirming my initial hypothesis that the concept of “authentic blackness” is seriously questioned if not completely dismantled in these texts.

In the remaining sections I offer a close reading of six memoirs, centering each chapter on one of the “pillars” of the post-soul triangular matrix established by Bertram Ashe. Chapter four focuses on cultural mulattism as opposed to a “biological” understanding of race and of biraciality or multiraciality in particular. For this chapter I have selected two memoirs by authors who consider themselves black and elaborate on their blackness, but whose process of identity construction is somehow disturbed or at least influenced by the fact that they have a white parent. These memoirs are *The Color of Water* by James McBride and *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* by Danzy Senna. Chapter five focuses on blaxploration and the struggle for self-definition in post-Civil Rights America. It is also a chapter that deals with the possibility of upward class mobility for black people and on how this can influence their perception of their own blackness. The memoirs that I analyze are *City Kid: A Writer’s Memoir of Ghetto Life and Post-Soul Success* by Nelson George and Jesmyn Ward’s *Men We Reaped*. The sixth and final chapter focuses on allusion-disruption gestures and the necessity to challenge definitions of authentic blackness that have been created by the author’s parents and that are perceived by the memoirists as too limiting and often as contradictory and uncoherent. The memoirs that I analyze in this section are Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *The Beautiful Struggle* and MK Asante’s *Buck*. The close reading of these six case studies according to the principles of post-soul theory seems to confirm the initial hypothesis of my research project, that is that authentic blackness is presented in post-soul memoirs as a faulty and limiting concept. The recurrent

tropes that we can observe in these texts, as I will illustrate, all suggest that new generations of black writers are revising constructions of black authenticity that emerged in previous historical periods, and especially during the social movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Prescriptive notions of blackness are criticized, and indeed the very concept of black authenticity itself is under attack, while notions of fluid, contingent and ever-shifting racial identities are presented as a more viable tool of identity formation for the contemporary scene.

As constructions of racial authenticity shift throughout the years and adapt to the specific sociohistorical conditions that the black community experiences, the conclusions of this project are necessarily short-lived. As I write, I am conscious that the general approach to questions of racial authenticity is already changing, and that this is impacting the ways in which newly published memoirs explore black identity. This research project has in fact been written at a time of major changes in the American sociopolitical scenario, under a new administration that actively and consistently supports anti-black policies, leading to a new phase of black activism that has found its most prominent spokespeople among the supporters of #BlackLivesMatter and the dozens of other organizations that the group inspired. Literature cannot be indifferent to these changes. In life writing in particular, the consequence of this tense racial climate has been that the enthusiastic exploration of a fluid, borderless black identity that so many post-soul authors have productively engaged in for at least three decades is gradually being substituted by a renewed concern for political freedom, for the safety and integrity of the black body, and for the safeguarding of basic human rights, which has often translated into a return to essentialist stances on racial identity. My personal hope is, however, that these two approaches will fruitfully compenetrate in the future, and that a strong denunciation and condemnation of contemporary forms of anti-black racism will go hand in hand with an exploration of the rich plurality of black identities.

# 1. Post-Soul and Authentic Blackness

## 1.1 Post-Soul, Post-Black, Post-Racial: A Terminological Distinction

*The first generation of black youth to come of age in a post-integration reality, the artists of the Post-Soul are the children of Martin Luther King's "dream."*

Bertram Ashe, Preface to Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* (2003)

### The "impulse to posterize"<sup>1</sup>

In the winter of 2007, *African American Review* decided that it was time to celebrate one of the most debated and misunderstood concepts of African American literary criticism: the post-soul aesthetics. In an issue of *AAR* entirely dedicated to the emergence, theorization, and exploration of the post-soul, philosophers, literary critics and educators, among others, discussed the necessity for this label, its origins, its characteristics, and the reactions of the students who had been exposed to its agenda. Introducing the reader to this fascinating and complex topic, Bertram Ashe wrote in his "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction" that after two decades spent in analyzing the post-soul, all the while debating its very existence with colleagues and students, it was finally "time for African Americanists to weight in, *en masse*" (609). The present chapter wishes to—belatedly—acknowledge Ashe's challenge, and to provide an overview of a concept that, ten years after, has become even more debated than it used to be.

Aim of the following chapter is to discuss the terminology that is usually attached to the post-soul, relying on the work of the numerous literary critics, creative writers and cultural commentators who have expressed their views on this topic over the last three decades. I feel the need to discuss terminology because the reorganization of black identity after the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements which many critics point out was undoubtedly conducive to new approaches in African American literature, visual arts, and music. However, the terms that have come up to describe these changes have been often criticized, especially by

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<sup>1</sup> Paul C. Taylor in "Post-Black, Old Black" (2007) defines as "the impulse to posterize" as a tendency derived from postmodernist critique to refer to phenomena in the social and cultural sphere as following specific events, "the impulse to speak of the post-this or the post-that" (626).



scholars of the older generations, who perceive that the label “post” that many of these terms carry is misleading in that it suggests a superseding of race and fosters the illusion that the United States has actually ushered into an era in which blackness is not a discrete cultural category. On the other hand, although race obviously still bears significance in contemporary society, it is true that African American cultural production after the 1970s is taking place in an unprecedented historical phase, in which for the first time racial discrimination is legally persecuted but, at the same time, structural barriers that prevent the full enjoyment of citizenship for people of color are still in place. How then are we to define the artistic production that is produced in and responds to this new social climate, and that presents innovative characteristics, new tropes and a different way of looking at the past?

Actually, although I decided to stick to “post-soul” for reasons that I will illustrate in the next paragraphs, a plethora of other labels have come to appear frequently in the prose of those who seek to discuss the work of the generations of African American artists who were born after the end of the Civil Rights movement and came to prominence during the 1980s and 1990s. Together with “post-soul” and “post-Civil Rights” (the two most neutral expressions to refer to what happened in the African American cultural scene after the 1970s), “post-black,” “post-racial” and other “post-” labels have been used as synonyms, their meanings overlapping and blurring, so that anything “post” is now seen by many as unclear and confusing terminology which, at best, connotes art and popular culture that is not substantially different from that produced by previous generations of blacks, and at worst, tries to erase the role of blackness as a distinct category characterized by its own cultural practices. However, if these expressions have been coined to design a series of overlapping socio-cultural phenomena and artistic practices, it is also true that, as Paul C. Taylor comments, each term “becomes a partial window onto some relatively distinct aspect of the far-reaching and multifaceted reorganization of black life that has occurred over the last couple of decades” (625).

What is certain, is that the proliferation of the prefix “post” has become one of the marks of scholarly criticism on African American art produced by younger generations. Considering its primary meaning as “after,” the prefix “post” gives the idea of an art of the aftermath, but the aftermath of what is difficult to define and open to many interpretations. Certainly, from a political point of view we are talking about the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and their controversial legacies, while from a broadly cultural and artistic point of view we are considering the aftermath of soul culture and the Black Arts Movement and the emergence of what Taylor calls an “urban-inflected, hyper-materialistic nihilism” (625),

together with the consolidation of multiculturalist and cosmopolitan movements. However, “post” can have several other meanings. As philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah noticed at the beginning of the 1990s, “post” can carry more layered and complex connotations than simply a temporal one, and the terms “postcolonial” and “postmodern” are good examples of the different uses of this prefix. Appiah stated that postcolonial refers to something more than what remains after colonization, and that it designs in fact knowledge produced through the contact between the colonizer and the colonized, a new sort of imaginary that influenced artists and thinkers and gave life to a brand-new branch of scholarship (348). On the other hand, the “post” in postmodernism was meant to designate an oppositional artistic stance, one that emerged as a reaction against modernist rules and whose main characteristic was the will to carve space for previously unrepresented or erased voices (346).

The fluid, constantly moving definition of “post” as “after,” “proceeding from (colonialism)” and “in reaction to (modernism)” all come in handy when applying this prefix to recent terminologies in vogue, particularly post-Civil Rights, post-soul, post-black and post-racial. All these terms refer to something that comes after the Civil Rights Movement, but whose themes and aesthetics also proceed from those produced between the 1950s and the 1970s, and react to the many issues left unaddressed by the Movement and to its strategies based on respectability and the promotion of positive images. This last connotation is particularly significant in my opinion, since it seems to point out a contradictory aspect of the use of “post” in labels that wish to define contemporary African American cultural production. In fact, while “post” labels in all their forms primarily refer to something happening “after Civil Rights,” the overwhelming majority of scholars of Black Studies denounce how civil rights have been achieved only partially and how real social and economic equality is still distant, underlining the ongoing relevance of the issues brought to public attention during the 1960s and 1970s. Hence in the end the question remains: “*after*” *what, exactly?* The answer cannot be straightforward, but a viable premise seems to be that the “impulse to posterize,” as we will see, can be interpreted as a wish by commentators on African American cultural life to highlight the contradiction of a post-Civil Rights society marked by limited enjoyment of civil rights by members of minority groups, therefore pointing to the third connotation of the prefix I listed, that is “in reaction to” the unfulfilled promise of equal citizenship brought by the events of the Civil Rights Movement.

## Dealing with the legacy of soul: tentative definitions of post-soul

“Post-soul” has now been used for more than two decades as a qualifier to the artistic production of younger generations of African Americans whose work both proceeds from, and breaks with, the soul tradition. As a consequence, a brief reflection of the origins of “soul” seems to be useful. In religion and philosophy, “soul” has been used for centuries to refer to somebody’s spirit, the living sparkle that determines people’s most intimate dimension beside their bodily presence and that after their death will, according to Christian theology, be condemned to eternal damnation in hell or destined to salvation in heaven. From the Christian religious domain, the term spread among African American musicians around the 1960s to describe a musical genre that originated from the gospel hymns that were sung in church, and that provided the base for their musical education during their childhood and adolescence. As author and cultural critic Nelson George aptly points out:

It is no coincidence that those black singers of the ‘60s began describing the popular music as “soul music”, since its musical base (rhythm, melody, vocal arrangement) all harked back to the sounds heard in the Christian churches that nurtured them. Though the subject matter of soul music was secular—usually love, lust, and loss—soul was descended from gospel, and when performed by a queen like Aretha Franklin, the music possessed the devotional intensity of a Sunday sermon (*Post-Soul Nation* vii).

From the musical domain—a notable example is the Soul Records label established in 1964 by Motown Records—the term started to spread across different contexts and to refer to a whole set of African American traditions characterized by the intensity of feelings that was perceived as typical of the black experience in the United States: “soul brothers” and “soul sistas” ate “soul food,” exchanged “soul shakes” and marched for “soul power,” as George would write (*Post-Soul Nation* vii). Claude Brown, in his celebrated memoir *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), accounts for the origin of this use of the term “soul” in Harlem already in the early 1950s, stating that “‘Soul’ had started coming out of the churches and the nightclubs into the streets. Everybody started talking about “soul” as though it were something that they could see on people or a distinct characteristic of colored folks” (166).

In the same page, Brown offers several examples of the use of “soul” in different domains, from music (“everybody had this big thing about colored cats and all the soul they had. They would say, “None-a them gray boys can blow any real jazz”) to girls (“I don’t want me nothin’ but a nigger woman. [...] they’re the only ones who’ve got any soul, man”). “Soul” therefore became

synonym with the vivacity that characterized Harlem's life, which was expressed artistically through the soul music that resonated in the neighborhood's churches and clubs. Given the versatility of "soul," the term was soon commodified and applied to whatever carried within itself a promise of black authenticity, from food to magazines, from fashion and hairstyles to clubs. On the other hand, with the commodification of "soul" the term also entered the vocabulary of mainstream society and was soon appropriated and used by white Americans to describe the enthusiasm and emotional fervor conveyed by African American musicians and performers. Consequently, all things "soul" started to be considered by white consumers of black culture not only as something that could bring them closer to the lived reality of black people, but also—and more problematically—as experiences that could provide them with a heightened sense of enjoyment and pleasure, a way to spice up monotony, an exciting feeling that they could borrow from blacks in their escapades to Harlem and leave behind on their way home.

The days in which the secular use of "soul"—in all its multifaceted connotations—became popular coincided of course with the great era of the Civil Rights Movement, when institutionalized racism was strongly confronted by the African American community and those supporting its cause, highlighting the discrepancy between the promises of the American Constitution and the reality of the harsh living conditions and second-class citizenship experienced by millions of black Americans. This is the reason why the term carries, besides its original religious and artistic meaning, significant political implications as well. Again, Nelson George helps us understand the close link between the religious and political meanings of "soul." He comments: "For me this historic period was absolutely about soul in its deepest spiritual meaning. It was about faith in the human capacity for change and a palpable optimism about the future" (*Post-Soul Nation*, viii). And this brings us to post-soul, intended as the phase of African American history that immediately follows the events of the Civil Rights Movement, and in which black Americans started to come to terms with the complex legacy of the previous years.

In his *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (2002), Mark Anthony Neal offers a very broad and inclusive definition of post-soul, which he describes as "the political, social, and cultural experiences of the African-American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power movements" (3). Neal also locates the origin of the term in Nelson George's scholarship, and offers a tentative timeframe: "To my knowledge, Nelson George first used the term in a general description of black popular culture after the

blaxploitation era. More specifically, I locate the beginnings of the post-soul era in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* challenge to affirmative action in 1978” (3). As a consequence, he understands post-soul as the cultural heritage of soul babies, “folks born between the 1963 March on Washington and the *Bakke* case, children of soul, if you will” (3). Neal also links “post-soul” to the term “aesthetic” (2), thus utilizing the term to define not only the experiences and cultural references available to black Americans born after the end of the Civil Rights Movement, but also a distinct, well identifiable African American artistic tradition that developed as a consequence of, and in relation to, said experiences and cultural references.<sup>2</sup>

As stated by Neal, Nelson George was actually the first to come up with the term “post-soul”, which he used as a title for his 1992 feature article in *The Village Voice*: “Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture.” In his article George described the main events that marked the post-Civil Rights cultural scene for African Americans, starting with the release of Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassss Song* in 1971 and ending with *Boomerang*, starring Eddie Murphy, produced by Black Filmmaker Foundation co-founder Warrington Hudlin in 1992. George characterized these three decades as marked by the presence of four African American character types: buppies, b-boys, baps and bohos. These types referred, respectively, to African American yuppies, break dancers and hip-hop artists and fans, spoiled and sophisticated Black American Princes and Princesses, and bohemian blacks with a taste for yoga and alternative spirituality. George’s article is important to my analysis not only because it is the first documented source in which “post-soul” appears, but most importantly because the term is linked to the emergence of new tropes of blackness, tropes that are distinctive of the aftermath of the great social movements of the previous years. The emergence of these new character types, and the fact that George highlights that they can be observed in infinite combinations, evidences that the apparently monolithic concept of black identity that was promoted during the 1960s and 1970s was being dismantled, and that new space for more fragmented and varied black identities was being cleared out. Of course, black identity has never been fixated into a set of stable characteristics and behavioral markers, and different modes of interpreting and performing the black experience have been explored in previous eras too, but in the decades between the 1950s and 1970s the perception had been that

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<sup>2</sup> I will offer a deeper and better-documented description of post-soul aesthetics, especially in the literary field, in the following paragraphs. In this section I will only deal with definitions of post-soul in broad terms, as a label that helps us give a name to the peculiar socio-political atmosphere that followed the end of the Civil Rights Movement.

a unitarian, homogenous notion of black consciousness, although fictitious, was strategic in the struggle for civil rights. On the contrary, the post-Civil Rights era described by George, encompassing the years from 1971 until the publication of the article in 1992, offered more and more visibility for people who decided to interpret their blackness in ways that significantly departed from those promoted by the previous generation, a trend that George foresaw as something that would probably continue in the following years.

In his article George did not define “post-soul,” but just used it as a self-explanatory and very broad umbrella-term that encompassed aesthetic, class, and economic issues that rose to prominence between the 1970s and the 1990s, and that were visible in the interests and tastes of the four above-mentioned “b-types” and their combinations and overlappings. However, George himself offers a different view of post-soul twelve years after the publishing of his 1992 article. In *Post-Soul Nation* (2004) he finally comes up with a tentative definition of post-soul: “the term ‘post-soul’ defines the twisting, troubling, turmoil-filled, and often terrific years since the mid-seventies when black Americans moved into a new phase of history” (ix). Compared to his previous article, in which the post-soul years encompassed a broad two-decade period and were expected to extend to the decade to come, these “often terrific years” are framed in a more restricted timeline, specifically the eighties, a time in which the complex and ambiguous legacy of the Civil Rights Movement or, to use his words “the soul years,” reached its peak. In *Post-Soul Nation*, George gives a detailed overview of what happened between 1979 and 1989 in the African American cultural and political scenes, stating that those were in fact the years in which the black community learnt to deal with an unprecedented visibility of black people in public life and with opportunities for advancement in education and career that had been unimaginable for previous generations, all the while confronting the unrelenting realities of the persistent poverty and *de facto* discrimination that affected the majority of the black masses (ix). If in 1992 George treated the post-soul as an on-going phenomenon, twelve years later he started to consider it as something that belonged to the past. The reason for this shift is unclear: career chances and public visibility for black Americans going hand in hand with systematic injustices are at the heart of post-soul aesthetic and cultural references according to George, but even if these conditions still hold in our days, George decides to limit his description of post-soul to the eighties:

And what of post-soul? I think African Americans have passed through that phase and, in the twenty-first century, are grappling with a new set of identity issues [...] We are no longer post-soul. We are something else. For now, I leave the definition to you (229-30).

As this statement makes clear, George believes that African Americans have ushered in a new phase of their socio-political and cultural history for which he, in 2004, still had no name. This emphasizes the fact that, in his understanding of the term, post-soul has to do specifically with the thrilling but often disappointing dynamics that invested the African American community *immediately after* the Civil Rights Movement, while the contemporary scene is characterized by new phenomena. Among them, George mentions the new waves of immigration that made African Americans part of a new, huge American community of non-white people, the embracing by mixed-raced people who had previously identified as black of their multiracial and multicultural identities, and the consumption of black aesthetic and cultural practices by a growing number of whites. The fact that the creator of the label “post-soul” himself continues to adjust his understanding of it is symptomatic of how research in this field has yet to come up with a stable and universally-accepted terminology. As I am writing, the term “post-soul” actually seems in decline in publications, substituted by the much more controversial “post-black” or by a broader and more neutral “post-Civil Rights.” But is “post-black” a term that follows “post-soul”? Is it descriptive of the cultural arena inhabited by black artists who operate not *immediately after* the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, but after the 1980s and up to the present? No, at least to according to Bertram Ashe, “post-soul” and “post-black” refer to the same concept and can be used as synonyms, the latter has simply been catchier than the former. Recalling the time when he was working on the already quoted “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction,” Ashe writes that he regrets not having used “post-black” in his essay, although he admits that the term is often misunderstood:

“Post-black” is a problematic term for those who are first introduced to it, and it would be great if a term had emerged that was immediately understandable, both inside and outside the academy. Alas, such a term didn’t emerge, and what did emerge was “post-black.” I’ve been using it for several years now, and I wish I had chosen that term [“post-black”]—I had the choice, too—when I wrote my essay for *African American Review*. At that time, ten-plus years ago, there was still a chance that “post-soul” might become the expansively-recognized term. Ten years later, it’s clear that “post-black” is carrying the day.<sup>3</sup>

While it is difficult to say why this is so, I suspect that one reason why “post-black” is so (un)popular is exactly because the term is problematic and controversial, and mirrors the conflicts that arise every time notions of black authenticity are addressed both in the academy

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<sup>3</sup> Ashe, Bertram. “Re: post-soul v. post-blackness \_\_your opinion?” Received Mar. 13, 2017.

and in popular culture. On the other hand, “post-Civil Rights” is probably so widespread for the opposite reason, that is its supposed neutrality and the fact that it refers to an apparently well-established chronological frame and nothing else. “Post-soul”, in my opinion, offers a valid alternative. Post-soul art can be immediately understood, also by people who are not familiar with the genesis of the term, as art collocated after the 1960s (“after”-soul), that proceeds from soul culture, but at the same time presents a generational fracture between the soul-generation and the ones that followed. However, given that “post-black” seems to enjoy a certain popularity, in the next paragraph I am going to outline the circumstances of its emergence and why I distance myself from it and especially from the post-racial ideal that is often (although mistakenly) associated with it.

### Emergence and Critical Reception of “Post-Black”

Nowadays, the term “post-black” is probably one of the most expansively-recognized labels when dealing with African American aesthetics after the end of the Civil Rights Movement, and one that has been hotly debated. “Post-black” emerged in the world of visual arts, and was coined in 2001 by artist Glenn Ligon and curator Thelma Golden, at the time director of the Harlem Studio Museum, in a conversation regarding the work of visual artists who would participate in the upcoming *Freestyle* exhibition. In the introduction to the exhibition’s catalogue, Golden recalls the questions that she had in mind when working at *Freestyle*, and that finally convinced her that a new era had arrived for African American art:

How would black artists make work after the vital political activism of the 1960s, the focused, often essentialist. Black Arts Movement of the 1970s, the theory-driven multiculturalism of the 1980s, and the late globalist expansion of the late 1990s? *Freestyle* was the answer to those questions (14).

Ligon and Golden considered the concept of post-blackness appropriate to describe the work of artists who engaged in a reflection on blackness, but were adamant in rejecting the burden of representation, refusing to be seen as representatives for the entire black American community. These artists were perceived by Ligon and Golden as the members of a new generation of African American creatives, whose production focused around notions of identity and belonging, but who saw as limiting the moral duty of racial solidarity and racial pride. The production of the *Freestyle* artists was in fact marked by their will to distance themselves from the burden of racial trauma, and by the preference for ironic criticism over reverence when addressing issues related to the legacy of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The



term “post-black” seemed therefore fitting to describe these artists, who often saw the successes and accomplishments of the previous generations as flawed and incomplete, although they gratefully recognized the importance of the fight for civil rights and how it allowed them to have more visibility and consideration than ever before in American history.

The reflection on blackness and racial politics was actually still central to the works of artists who participated in the *Freestyle* exhibition, but was carried out with different means than in the past, in a different historical context, through different media. One of the best examples to understand this new approach to the representation of black life is the work of Ligon himself. Although “post-soul” and “post-black” are nowadays often used as synonyms to indicate the cultural production of African Americans who were born after the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, two considerations seem appropriate: “post-soul” was used by George to denote changes happening in black popular culture in general and black music in particular from the end of the 1970s onward, with a particular focus on the production of the 1980s, while “post-black” was coined by Golden and Ligon in relation to the production of visual artists and, according to Golden’s words, to denote art produced after the globalist expansion of the late 1990s. However, “post-black” expanded and was often used to describe every form of art produced by African Americans after the 1970s, especially those works who do not reference traditional tropes of blackness, do not explicitly question white privilege or spur to political and social militancy. Moreover, it is extremely important to point out that while “post-soul” has been theorized in a specific and distinctly recognizable literary aesthetic, “post-black” has broadened from its original conception in the art world to a more politicized concept that is often dangerously associated to post-raciality. In my view, applying a concept that is proper of the visual arts to the entire cultural production of blacks, or worst to the very idea of blackness, might not be a good idea, and indeed the de-contextualized use of “post-black” has caused several misunderstandings.

However, since its origins in the art world, the idea of post-Blackness has produced a branch of criticism of its own, inspiring scholars and cultural commentators outside the visual arts to reflect on the term’s implications. *Post-Black: How a New Generation Is Redefining African American Identity* (2010) by filmmaker and journalist Ytasha L. Womack and especially *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness: What it Means to Be Black Now* (2011) by author and cultural commentator Touré are both non-academic essays that contributed to popularize the term, and to open up a discussion on the importance of blackness in one’s identity formation in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, they have also contributed to the emergence of a highly divisive

debate on post-blackness, racial authenticity and racial essentialism. I will discuss the merits and shortcomings of Touré's text shortly, but to be fair, one has to notice that there are more prominent reasons why the term "post-blackness" has many opponents. The first is of course the very nature of the term, which suggests an erasure or a superseding of blackness. As previously discussed, the prefix "post" can be subject to multiple and complex interpretations, but its primary meaning is and will always be "after," so that "after-blackness" is what the majority of the people understand when they are first acquainted with the concept of post-blackness. The term therefore is muddled and problematic in its very origins, since it brings to mind the never-ending debate between African American artists who refuse to be considered only as black artists, and colleagues who insist that art should be used as political propaganda to represent and uplift the race, and that refusing this moral duty actually hides a secret desire to take a distance from one's blackness, a tacit acknowledgement of the superiority of whiteness. However, according to Derek Conrad Murray, "post-blackness" as a term is certainly problematic, but also fascinating in its psychic duality, in that it references the two-ness invoked by W.E.B. DuBois in his theorization of African American's double-consciousness (6). As a matter of fact, Golden describes her neologism in contradictory terms, and highlights how emergent black artists produce work about blackness but at the same time try to transcend the restrictions imposed by the necessity of representing the race. This "two-ness" can be received positively, as a new way of exploring one's experience of blackness in non-essentialist terms, but also negatively, since it might be considered as the symptom of the artists' insecurity about their blackness, or as a desire to escape it.

The second reason for the unpopularity of "post-blackness", as previously mentioned, is certainly the debate created by the publication of Touré's book, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*<sup>4</sup> Since its publication, the text has enjoyed a lot of critical attention: its review by Orlando Patterson appeared on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, and several critics followed with more or less positive reviews, while a stream of accomplished scholars

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<sup>4</sup> Touré's text is by no means to be interpreted as a scholarly essay, since the author draws on personal experiences and anecdotes and generalizes them to elaborate his theory of post-blackness as rejection of racial authenticity and enhancement of blacks' individuality. However, the text deserves attention because of the cultural debate and the endless stream of responses it generated, so that any discussion on post-blackness would now be incomplete if it did not mention it. Consequently, I will not base my analysis of post-blackness on what Touré wrote in his essay, but I will refer to his text as a primary source, a non-academic text that has gained popularity because of the simple way in which it describes and interprets post-blackness, and that therefore has to be mentioned in a conversation on post-blackness despite its lack of historical context and intellectual rigor.

dedicated their energies to criticizing it.<sup>5</sup> As Michael Eric Dyson writes in his preface to Touré's book, "post-blackness" defines the attitude of African American individuals who are comfortable in both black and white spaces and who are "rooted in, but not restricted by, [their] blackness" (xiii). Dyson refers to Obama and Oprah as perfect examples of post-black personae, since blackness does not capture the entire range of their identity but is still central in their public performances. Both Dyson and Touré, together with the experts interviewed by Touré for his book and many other supporters of post-blackness, reject the idea of racial authenticity altogether, and point out that postmodern identities have become so fluid, malleable and hybrid that it is impossible to stick to a single definition of blackness.

If it is true that definitions of blackness have always been challenged and redefined, giving life to a cultural debate that has been very productive from an artistic point of view, theoreticians of post-blackness emphasize the increase of diversity that seems to characterize contemporary African American communities, and that they link directly to the possibility for black Americans to have access to careers and educational paths that had been denied to them before the events of the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, they point out how younger African Americans were socialized in a desegregated society, which fostered the diversification of their life experiences. As a consequence, advocates of post-blackness reject the idea of racial authenticity and racial fundamentalism, and point out the necessity of opening up to more nuanced visions of blackness in the twenty-first century. In particular, Touré stresses the necessity to adapt one's manifestation of blackness to the situation in which one is performing, and advocates that this work of "adaptation of blackness" is not to be seen as a lack of authenticity or loyalty to the race, but as proficiency in code-switching, a useful skill not only for blacks but for everybody in contemporary American society (11). Moreover, Touré points out the paradox of accusing an African American of not being black enough, while that same person might be victim of racial discrimination at any time because of the very blackness that, according to his or her accusers, the person is lacking: this, according to him, is the proof that blackness is not a club from which somebody can be kicked out for lack of racial authenticity, because the mere fact of being the target of racism is sufficient to confirm someone's blackness.

Unfortunately, although Touré often celebrates the beauty and richness of black culture, according to this superficial argument it seems that the core of blackness is, more than anything

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<sup>5</sup> I am thinking, for example, about the collection of essays edited by Houston Baker and Merinda Simmons *The Trouble with Post-Blackness* (2015).

else, the result of centuries of racism, a curse that condemns individuals to stick together even when they have nothing in common apart from the fact of being the target of racial discrimination. Many African Americans refuse this negative vision of blackness, emphasizing on the contrary that shared history, traditions and cultural manifestations, familial ties and a sense of extended family that encompasses the whole community are the core of their black identities. A lot of counterarguments have been moved against Touré's text, the main one being that the author represents a discourse of privilege that cannot be extended to the majority of black Americans (Ali, "A Major Figure;" Patterson, "The Post-Black Condition;" Simmons 3; Lieber 269). In interviewing one hundred and five "prominent" African Americans (*Who's Afraid* 12), Touré has led many to believe that post-blackness is an ideal that only professionally accomplished and economically privileged African Americans can relate to. As a matter of fact, the lack of voices from ordinary black people in the work not only of Touré, but also of Womack and of other defendants of post-blackness is problematic. Abdul Ali in his review of *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* is particularly explicit on this point and laments the fact that Touré, insecure about his blackness, tries for more than two hundred pages to pander to the white gaze by showing an über-sophisticated list of accomplished African Americans, rather than showing the community in all its diversity. Touré acknowledges that nowadays there are "forty million ways to be black" (1) but chooses to represent only the experience of the prominent few ones.

Touré harshly criticizes the "identity cops" of the black community who like to judge who is or is not black enough on the base of people's professions, interests and interpersonal relationships, and advocates for the freedom to define blackness on one's own terms. However, in so doing he seems to forget that definitions of blackness come not only from inside, but also from outside the African American community, and that individuals who are neither "prominent" nor economically privileged may not be able to define blackness on their own terms, since their blackness encompasses categories that they cannot freely manipulate. For example, Tiger Woods can call himself a Cablinesian and insist that every part of his racial heritage be acknowledged, but less privileged Americans with a similar background may not be able to define their identity as effectively: for these "non-prominent" citizens, "black" will most probably be the racial designation used to classify them, whether they are satisfied with it or not. This example can give an idea of the fact that self-definition is not always possible for people that do not belong to an élite, for whom "black" is a conferred as well as a self-chosen identity. This leads to the previous point: for the majority of black people it is difficult to accept the idea of post-blackness, because they do not have full control on "blackness" in the first

place, and because the idea of “superseding” blackness seems outrageous when the mere fact of being black is cause enough for issues that deeply affect the African American community’s wellbeing, such as interactions with the police marked by tension and often brutality, and disproportionately high rates of incarcerated people. Simply put: Touré does not seem to notice (or at least chooses to ignore) that blackness, as a conferred rather than a chosen component of identity, is the reason why many African Americans are still subjected to a condition of second-class citizenship.

Another common critique to Touré and his supporters is the excessive inclusiveness of their conception of blackness. “Post-Blackness” Touré claims “is not a box, it’s an unbox. It opens the door to everything. It’s open-ended and open-sourced and endlessly customizable. It’s whatever you want it to be” (12). Liberating as it may be, the concept of an unbounded, all-encompassing blackness is problematic. As Randall Kennedy notices, boundaries are a fundamental part of every community, and are necessary to distinguish members and non-members (“The Fallacy”). But if blackness is so malleable that everything and everybody can fit into it, what is its core? When Touré refers to African Americans as “we,” what distinguishes “we” from “them”? Kennedy and others<sup>6</sup> have expressed their doubts about a version of blackness whose boundaries can be expanded with no limitations, a black community of which anybody can potentially become a member. Although the majority of critics agree with Touré on the fact that racial solidarity can be very demanding, many have pointed out how the fear of racial betrayal should be considered and respected as a form of self-preservation in groups that have historically been marginalized and stigmatized (Kennedy 4). It is therefore normal that every group draws boundaries and that certain behaviors can put members outside of the group, especially when there is a danger—such as racism—that threatens the group’s wellbeing. The question is not how to remove boundaries altogether, but how to make them flexible enough to fit the sociopolitical conditions of the twenty-first century and to respond to the necessity of more inclusive identity politics.

Touré focuses on the eternal battle between “self-appointed identity cops” and “sellouts,” and in so doing he points out how impositions of racial loyalty can restrict the potentials of blacks who opt for a lifestyle that is not perceived as typically black. However, if his desire not to be

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<sup>6</sup> Orlando Patterson in “The Post-Black Condition,” and Margo Nathalie Crawford, Rone Shavers and Stephanie Li in Houston Baker and Merinda Simmons’s *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, are just a few of the several critics who evidenced the problem of the indiscriminate inclusivity of post-blackness.

judged by other African Americans for enjoying skydiving or having white friends can be shared, it is also true that in his examples he does not consider the case in which a so-called “sellout” can actually act against the interests of the community and that his arguments lack an in-depth reflection on how the acts of a single member can impact a whole community in myriads of ways (Kennedy, “The Fallacy”). As he confesses, Touré is trying to defend himself from the accusation of being an “Uncle Tom:” in fact, the book reaches its climax at chapter four, when Touré confesses of having been accused by one of his college friends of not being a “real” black. In an attempt to prove him wrong, Touré clings to the concept of post-blackness, hoping that the freedom it allows will enable him to prove his loyalty to the race, while at the same time stating that loyalty to the race is a passé concept that should be debunked.

Moreover, if Touré’s intent was that of responding to accusations of Uncle Tomism, many fear that his arguments will end up justifying sellouts as well. As Randall Kennedy makes clear in his *The Sellout: The Politics of Racial Disloyalty* (2008), Uncle Tom, Oreo and similar accusations are different from Sellout. While the Uncle Toms and Oreos are seen as servile and lacking racial pride (which is the accusation received by Touré in college) but basically not dangerous to anybody except maybe themselves, the Sellout is somebody whose behavior will jeopardize the community, a person who was trusted and believed to be a member, but betrayed the group for personal interest (5). The indiscriminate inclusivity of post-blackness, while conceived to liberate people from the oppressive fear of facing charges of inauthenticity, might extend the benefit of inclusion to people who are not only trying to distance themselves from the community, but who would not mind jeopardizing it for personal interest.

To sum up, we have seen how post-blackness may be considered as a flawed and problematic concept because of the ambiguity of its very semantics, and because of the perplexity generated by publications whose arguments have received lots of negative attention and have been criticized as elitist. This brings us to the third and probably the main reason why many dislike “post-blackness:” its perceived proximity to “post-raciality.” As a matter of fact, since the term is often mentioned in relation to the experiences of African Americans who are considered privileged, and since it seems open to pretty much everything, including experiences and cultural references that are not perceived as traditionally black, there is a vast understanding of “post-blackness” as a synonym of “post-racial,” a term that was first coined in 1971<sup>7</sup> but that

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<sup>7</sup> The first reported use of “post-racial” was in “Compact Set Up for Post-Racial South” by James T. Wooten, published in *The New York Times* October 5, 1971. The article describes the establishment of the Southern Growth Policy Board in the town of Durham, North Carolina, by scholars and politicians who believed that the South had

gained momentum with the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. The post-racial ideal supports the theory according to which the United States is now a society that has moved or is on the verge of moving beyond race, so that one's racial belonging will no longer influence their life in significant ways, and will definitely not hold them back in their pursuit of a fulfilling existence and in their enjoyment of the privileges that come with fully recognized citizenship. The idea of an American society free from racial discrimination is not new, and has resurfaced often in American history. Howard McGary, in *The Post-Racial Ideal* (2012), mentions no less than Frederick Douglass as one of the first advocates of a post-racial society in which individuals would be free to reach their full potentials regardless of their race (10). However, what was new in the wake of Obama's election was the general sense of hope that, for the first time, the post-racial ideal could be actually put into practice.

In his essay, McGary accounts for two different conceptions of a post-racial society: the first is a society in which no one cares about people's race, and implies the recognition that races prevent people from treating each other as peers; the second is a society in which white privilege is eradicated, and all races enjoy equal opportunities, therefore supporting the recognition of races without racism (13). In the wake of the election of President Donald Trump it is clear that both conceptions of post-raciality are still far from reality in the United States, though the second had seemed possible for a moment. Ytasha Womack in *Post-Black: How a New Generation is Redefining African American Identity* (2010) aptly describes the feeling of hope and trust in the future that Obama's election had triggered in many African Americans:

One has to admit that it's a compelling and attractive concept—the idea that after centuries of political and spiritual conflict, a nation went to the polls and in one glorious, transformative act literally purged the land of the scourges of racism, exclusion, and discord. Yes, it is a romantic notion (x).

If ten years after Obama's election it is definitely clear that post-raciality was and remains a dream, one has to admit that even in 2008 the possibility of eradicating the color line from American society seemed distant. Michael Tesler in his *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era* (2016) points out how during the presidential campaign it was evident that Obama's racialized figure was at the heart of debates regarding his suitability or not to the presidency of the United States, a fact that characterized the debate as *most-racial*

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entered a new historical phase in which racial tensions were substituted by other concerns, such as population increase and economic instability.

instead of post-racial. Moreover, Tesler highlights how in 2014, according to several surveys,<sup>8</sup> Americans of all ethnicities believed that the first term of Obama’s presidency did not mark a post-racial moment in the history of the United States, and feared that racial polarization would continue to deteriorate the fabric of American society (5). To quote Saidiya Hartman, it seems that in the aftermath of Obama’s presidency, black Americans continue to live in “the afterlife of slavery,” so that it is difficult to postulate a “post” era when so many aspects of black citizens’ lives are still influenced by the unbalance in power relations that originated in slavery times. Hartman goes on stating that “because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by the toxic products of this social math—limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment—slavery is a clear and present danger rather than the faded burden of a too-long memory” (6).

The most dramatic evidence that the United States is *not* a post-racial society is given by the treatment of black Americans in the criminal justice system and the frequent news reports of violent interactions between the police and young African Americans, especially males, that many scholars denounce as a form of social control similar to that enacted in Southern plantations by overseers and slave patrols, and later by the Ku Klux Klan through the systematic lynching of African Americans who challenged the status quo. Acclaimed author Ta-Nehisi Coates recently denounced the climate of tension and fear for one’s life that permeates many black neighborhoods, and that can be directly linked to the nation’s past:

How can it be that, with some regularity, the news describes the shooting of an unarmed African American by the very police officers sworn to protect Americans? [...] The answer is in our past, in our résumé, in our work experience. From the days of slave patrols, through the era of lynching and work farms, into this time of mass incarceration, criminal justice has been the primary tool for managing the divide between black and white. [...] we will need a lot more than a good president—than a great president—to terminate it (“There Is No Post-Racial America”).

It is important to notice that theoreticians of post-blackness—Golden and Ligon, but also Touré and all his interviewees—have never linked their understanding of this neologism to notions of post-raciality, nor have they ever stated that the divide between black and white Americans has been healed in any way. The fact of using post-black as a synonym for post-racial is simply

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<sup>8</sup> For a thorough report of the several surveys that documented the shift of public opinion regarding racial relations after Obama’s first term, see Tesler 208, note 15.



wrong, but it is just too easy to fall into this trap<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, the mere fact that supporters of post-blackness seem to distance themselves from notions of racial solidarity is seen as suspicious by the majority of African Americans, who point out how loyalty to the community is now more necessary than ever, given the pernicious and pervasive forms of new racism that characterize contemporary American society. A good example of the misunderstandings that the indiscriminate use of “post” labels has caused, especially when notions of post-raciality are brought into the conversation, is Kimberly Fain’s book *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature* (2015) which reads Colson’s prose as purposely “forgetting” to mention the characters’ race in order to discuss problems that are shared by all Americans. The interesting fact is that, already in 2009, Colson had decidedly distanced himself from the term in his *New York Times* article “The Year of Living Postracially,” proving that his characters are not “just” Americans sharing common problems in which race plays a minor role, but impersonations of the necessity to redefine blackness in the contemporary scene.

### Conclusions: Lack of a “Post-” Label for Twenty-First Century African American Literature

It is my opinion that the problem of terminology in post-Civil Rights African American literature originates from the fact that critics borrowed “post-“ labels that originated from other cultural fields: “post-black” was specifically coined for the visual arts and in particular to denote the production of the twenty-eight artists whose work was displayed at the *Freestyle* exhibition of 2001, while “post-soul” was the term coined by music critic Nelson George, who in his articles focuses on popular culture in general, but always with a special focus on music. Literary critics have not come up with a specific term that denotes texts produced by black Americans after the 1970s that depart from traditional notions of black identity, and the fact of applying terms originated elsewhere to the critical discussion of a literary text can be sometimes tricky. For example: when professor and literary critic Margo Natalie Crawford claims that the defendants of post-blackness flatten or ignore the complexity of the Black Arts Movement by not acknowledging the elements of continuity between post-black authors and their

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<sup>9</sup> I must point out, however, that there are scholars, like Ramón Saldívar in his interesting reflection on the new transracial imaginary, who use “post-racial” to designate not the extinction of racism, but a new way of reflecting of race in the twenty-first century. Saldívar uses “post-racial” as an umbrella-term that encompasses “post-blackness” and points out that a new way of approaching racial issues is present in the contemporary literature produced of all minorities in the United States. See Saldívar, “Imagining Cultures.”

predecessors, what is she referring to, exactly? Who are the defendants of post-blackness? Which critical essay is she talking about? (“What Was” 22) The only work of literary criticism she mentions is Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African-American Literature?* (2011), whose main thesis is that the very concept of African-American literature is flawed after the end of the struggle for civil rights, **BECAUSE...** However, in this essay Warren never actually uses the term “post-black.” Crawford, who is an expert in both African American contemporary literature and visual arts, is associating post-blackness with the desire to negate the specificity of African-American literature after the legal successes of the 1960s expressed in Warren’s essay, while in fact Golden and Ligon, in theorizing the term “post-black,” never denied the distinctiveness of African American visual arts after the end of the Civil Rights movement. In fact Golden, in her essay “Post...,” very explicitly acknowledges the continuity in themes and aesthetics that exists between the Black Arts Movement and contemporary black culture,<sup>10</sup> a continuity that Crawford so painstakingly affirms and that, she claims, defendants of post-blackness are flattening or ignoring.

The chaos of a “posterized” terminology for what concerns literature is also evident in Stephanie Li’s essay “Black Literary Writers and Post-Blackness” (2015). Li focuses her essay on a critique to Touré’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness*, and points out that the cultural critic neglects the field of literature completely: “Black literature can never be post-black” she claims, “because the signifyin(g) language of black narrative affirms history, even as texts may alter or transform that history, through intertextual exchange” (45). We are tempted to agree with Li in that it is obvious that contemporary black writers are deeply engaged with black history, however I cannot help but notice that Li’s definition of post-blackness seems to rest on Touré’s text exclusively. The fact that Touré is not a professional literary critic, and that his text is not an academic essay but a work of popular culture that mixes autobiographical anecdotes, interviews, and history, should already clarify that we cannot apply his conception of post-blackness to a serious consideration of the characteristics of African American literature after the Civil Rights movement. I agree with Li that Touré’s idea of post-blackness cannot be

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Golden’s statement: “As a child born in the mid-1960s, I imagine I hold a certain degree of nostalgia for the passion and energy that created the nationalistic/aesthetic dogma of the 1970s Black Arts Movement. That point in time, notwithstanding, I was intellectually formed by the artist Raymond Saunders’ polemic ‘Black Is a Color’, which allowed me to thrive in the words and actions of the late 1980s multiculturalism. So, at the end of the 90s, Glenn [Ligon] and I began, more and more, to see evidence of art and ideas that could only be labeled (both ironically and seriously) in this way—post-black” (14). Note how Golden traces a clear connection between the Black Arts Movement (BAM), 1980s multiculturalist movement, and the post-black aesthetic: the role of the legacy of the BAM in shaping a post-black aesthetic sensibility is therefore far from denied in her words.

applied to literature, but why base our notion of post-blackness on what Touré writes, when the inventors of this term actually meant something different, something that they were noticing in the field of visual art?

As Li rightly notices, many of the works of African American authors writing in the twenty-first century “return to concerns specific to the black community” (46), and although Ligon and Golden never implied that the artists they defined as post-black are not engaged in elaborating those concerns, the idea that has circulated is that the notion of post-blackness is ahistorical and divorced from the issues of African American past. A new term—specifically designed to describe the literary aesthetics of African American authors writing in the twenty-first century—should emerge, but as Ashe wrote to me, “Alas, such a term didn’t emerge, and what did emerge was ‘post-black.’” Crawford proposed the term “Post-Black Arts” (“What Was” 30) and in her most recent work she tried to affirm the term “Black Post-Blackness” to denote literature that elaborates on the issues tackled by the Black Arts Movement in the contemporary scenario. It is probably too soon to say if these propositions will catch on, but for now “post-soul” seems to offer the most malleable—and less controversial—frame in which to place an analysis of twenty-first century African American memoirs written by black authors who were born during or after the struggle for civil rights.

Welcoming Crawford’s observation that writers of the twenty-first century do not break completely with the tradition of the Black Arts movement, but elaborate upon its legacy, it is important to consider that while the label “post-soul” pinpoints a change in artistic practices and literary aesthetics, it also recognizes the continuity of the African American cultural tradition in terms of themes and aesthetics—especially with regard to the soul tradition of the 1960s and 1970s—and acknowledges the ongoing struggle for authentic racial equality. “Post-blackness” (although this was not the intention of its creators) seems instead to advocate for a break with the past that too many African Americans do not welcome. This is why in my dissertation I will align myself with critics who theorized the emergence of a new aesthetic in African American literature written by authors born after the end of the Civil Rights Movement—Trey Ellis, Mark Anthony Neal, Bertram Ashe, among others—and will accept and employ the labels “post-soul” and “New Black Aesthetic,” but I will distance myself from the term “post-blackness.” As George writes, “documenting the post-soul era is not about chronicling the straight line of a social movement, but collecting disparate fragments that form not a linear story, but a collage” (*Post-Soul Nation* xi). I wish to acknowledge the simile suggested by George and to respond with another analogy: after all, the image of the collage

recalls the tradition of quilting so present in African American culture, the act of juxtaposing and sewing together heterogeneous and sometimes discordant fragments, symbolic of profoundly different experiences and acts of blackness, to form a rich, complex but unitary entity. While “post-soul” recognizes that the quilt of the contemporary African American community is composed by fragments that are nowadays more diverse than ever, but that still make sense as a unity in their elaborate design, “post-blackness” suggests that the seams might be too tight, and that perhaps it is time to undo the quilt altogether. In the next chapters I will discuss why this is not the case.

## 1.2 Black Identity and Artistic Production: Authentic Blackness in Literary Criticism from the New Negro to the New Black Aesthetic

*Abandoning essentialist notions would be a serious challenge to racism. Contemporary African-American resistance struggle must be rooted in a process of decolonization that continually opposes reinscribing notions of “authentic” black identity.*

bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness” (1990)

### Authenticity and Representation

The debate over the role of the black writer in society and over literature as a means to record the authentic black experience has been a basic concern of African American literary theory. As a consequence, there is a significant tradition of critical thinking that has as its main goal that of situating literature written by African Americans in the broader context of a society in which the representation of blackness in one way or another has clear political implications and can have direct consequences on the well-being of the black community. During slavery the declared purpose of African American literature had been that of attesting to the humanity of people of African descent, testifying the horrors of slavery and supporting the efforts of the abolitionist movement. In the early decades after Emancipation, its main goal was that of countering negative stereotypes of black people as immoral and undeserving of their newly acquired freedom, so that many authors engaged themselves in a so-called “war of images” to reshape and redefine the image of black people in America. The desire to change the

representation of African Americans in both high art and popular culture continued to be a leitmotif in the years of the Harlem Renaissance,<sup>11</sup> when the cultural renovation that took place inside the black community established black writers as a new social force, endowing them with unprecedented expressive agency. The Harlem Renaissance represents in fact a moment of great change in African American literary production, in which concerns over emancipation are substituted by a new focus on the distinctiveness of African Americans' culture. Consequently, it is in this period that black writers start to consistently write on the social impact of their work, and on the aesthetic premises that should inform it.

Another defining moment for African American literary criticism was during the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, when literature was permeated by the ideals of black nationalism that characterized what would become the Black Arts Movement or Black Aesthetics Movement (BAM). This new aesthetic was marked by a more self-determined mindset and by the conviction that black writers needed to be radical in their social and political activism as well as in their rejection of white supremacy. Ideas of racial authenticity were based on participation in active militancy and on the essentialized notions of blackness that informed the rhetoric of the Black Power Movement. Racial solidarity and cultural homogeneity were seen as paramount mindsets to resist white supremacy, so that the diversity of black voices was often sacrificed in the name of a monolithic notion of authentic blackness that excluded or downplayed the role of several black voices, such as those of women or queer people (Neal, *New Black Man* 22-4 and 67-9).

Contemporary New Black Aesthetic—to use Trey Ellis's terminology—or Post-Soul Aesthetic—to use Bertram Ashe's or Mark Anthony Neal's—bears elements of continuity with the preceding phases of African American literary history: the reflection on the social role of the black writer is still of the utmost importance and the general trend is that of advocating for the cultural specificity of black art, while claiming nonetheless that black artists should be free from the burden of representing the race. In fact, critics of the post-soul aesthetics point out that artists born during or after the 1960s are characterized by the desire to explore black identity in the wake of the achievements of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, to push against the boundaries of what is considered “traditionally black,” and to point out the instability and narrowness of notions of racial authenticity. At the same time, these impulses should not be

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<sup>11</sup> Although some scholars limit the Harlem Renaissance to the 1920s, I refer to “the years of the Harlem Renaissance” in the timeframe established by George Hutchinson, that is from 1918 to 1937 (1-11).

interpreted as a desire to reject blackness or as an attempt to claim that American society is now post-racial: contemporary artists cherish blackness as an essential part of their identity and want to produce art that is culturally specific, but at the same time they work against conventional tropes of blackness and express a keen desire to interrogate and possibly redefine these tropes without incurring the risk of being accused of “not being black enough.”

Understandably then, reshaping traditional notions of racial authenticity and debunking the myth of a monolithic authentic blackness is a key concern of post-soul artists. But what is new, exactly, in this New Black Aesthetic? What are the characteristics that distinguish this new moment of African American culture from previous movements? According to Trey Ellis, the novelty is to be seen in the growing number of middle-class, college educated black artists who have been socialized in a desegregated environment, while according to Bertram Ashe it is context alone, if nothing else, that impacts the production of contemporary black writers in innovative ways. In the following chapter I will therefore trace the development of a branch of literary criticism that focuses on the role of the black artist in society from the Harlem Renaissance to the New Black Aesthetic or Post-Soul Aesthetic, highlighting the similarities between post-soul and previous aesthetic movements, as well as specific features that are informed by the peculiar socio-political scene of post-Civil Rights America.

### [The Debate on the Role of Black Artists in the Harlem Renaissance](#)

African American literary theory has historically been marked by various and often contradictory approaches to the definition of the aesthetic that black artists were supposed to adhere to. If the New Black Aesthetic seems to react to the necessity of black writers to make sense of a society in which Civil Rights have been legally achieved, but racial tensions are still strong, in previous decades African American artists have also been pushed to mold their modes of self-expression in response to the peculiar socio-political conditions of their times. Similarly to the current situation, the years of the Harlem Renaissance were marked by the dichotomy between the legal achievements of the Emancipation days and lived experiences of blackness that suggested that full equality was still a distant goal. As a matter of fact, despite the protection offered by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments,<sup>12</sup> African Americans continued to be

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<sup>12</sup> The Fourteenth Amendment, adopted on July 9, 1868, extended citizenship to Americans of African descent and grants all citizens equal protection under the law. The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified on February 3, 1870, granted African American men the right to vote. Both amendments would be severely limited by the introduction of laws that legalized racial segregation (Jim Crow laws), by attempts to prevent blacks from voting (such as poll

subjected to the limitations of second-class citizenship, as well as to blatant acts of racism such as the widespread practice of lynching, and the activism of organizations such as the NAACP proved only partially effective in improving the situation. The extent of the manifestations of racism in the post-Reconstruction South had pushed many African Americans to migrate to Northern cities and this, together with a shift in leadership from the accommodationist policies of Booker T. Washington to the more radical approach of W.E.B. DuBois, had contributed in the 1920s to the blossoming of African American culture known as the Harlem Renaissance.

In his 1925 essay “The New Negro,” philosopher Alain Locke theorized the emergence of a new black man as a result of the migratory patterns of black Americans and of their process of adjustment to an urban and industrial environment. The characteristics of the New Negro are reported by Locke in terms that are strikingly similar to those utilized by Trey Ellis to describe the artists of the New Black Aesthetic. According to Locke, the emergence of a new, vibrant generation of African Americans was marked by “a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of condition” (23-4). Not only were New Negroes in search of better opportunities for self-improvement, they were also more diverse than ever: in Harlem in fact one could find not only the largest community of American blacks, but also “the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life” (24). In Locke’s words, the days of “aunties” and “mammies” are gone, Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on and time is ripe for a new generation of blacks who reject stereotypical representations of blackness and create new black “character types” (23), among which Locke mentions “the Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader” (21). In fact, one of the main novelties registered by Locke in his theorization of the New Negro is not only that black people were liberating themselves from old clichés, but also that the range of possible black identities was expanding exponentially as more and more possibilities for self-realization became available to African Americans in modern urban settings. Consequently, according to Locke the greatest chance for the New Negro was that for the first time in history African Americans had concrete possibilities for self-determination in positive terms, despite the limitations imposed by the perpetuation of white supremacy.

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taxes and literacy tests) and by the widespread practice of lynching or otherwise threatening the well-being of African Americans who tried to assert their rights See Foner 159-224 and Luconi 109-124.

In this new cultural climate, writers of the Harlem Renaissance began to reflect on the role of the black artist in society, and to question if African American intellectuals should commit themselves to the goal of black liberation or if art for art's sake was to be the ultimate goal. This debate has had a special resonance in African American literature, historically marked by the abolitionists' effort to prove the humanity of blacks, and consequently the illegitimacy of slavery, through the demonstration of black people's literary skills. In fact, from the second half of the eighteenth century onward, a wide body of literature started to be produced that dealt with the question of the "real" nature of people of African descent and attempted to demonstrate their sub-humanity by denying their capacity for abstract thought and consequently their ability to create art and science. For example, Thomas Jefferson was among those who most fervently believed that the inferiority of black people was visible in the absence of forms of art and literature among slaves. In *Notes on the States of Virginia* (1785), he famously argued that, even if African slaves had a remarkable ear for music and rhythm and Phillis Wheatley had recently published a book of poems, all art produced by black people was ultimately derivative. This lack of originality, he concluded, was directly ascribable to their subhuman nature, not to their condition of slaves<sup>13</sup> (query XVIII). The publication of texts written by African Americans was therefore used by the abolitionist movement as a proof against this argument, a proof that people of African descent were fully human and that their enslavement could not be justified on the basis of their alleged inferior nature. During slavery, therefore, the main concern of African American writers was that of "literally writing themselves into being" (Gates, *Signifying* 130).

However, with the advent of the New Negro philosophy the debate on the social role of black intellectuals was reshaped, and beside the traditional position of those who associated the merits of artistic production with the extent to which it could contribute to the improvement of the conditions of the African American community, more voices started to argue for the independence of black intellectuals and artists from any form of political propaganda. One example of the first position is certainly W.E.B. DuBois, who famously declared in his essay "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926) that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. [...] I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda" (22). Already

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<sup>13</sup> With this argument Jefferson dismisses Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* as imitative and below the standards of genuine literature (1773): "Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry [...] Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" (XVIII, spelling reported as in the original).



in 1910, DuBois had founded *Crisis*, the literary magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) through which he was able to reach a large black audience and spread his idea of literature as a means for the social, economic and political empowerment of the black masses. The social engagement of literature advocated by DuBois is reiterated in several of the essays he wrote for *Crisis*, although “Criteria of Negro Art”, delivered as a speech to the 1926 Conference of the NAACP in Chicago and later published in his magazine, is nowadays considered one of the most representative of his ideas on the role of the black militant artist.

On the opposite side to DuBois’s position was Alain Locke’s, who in his essay “Art or Propaganda?” (1928) argued that art as political propaganda, besides being monotonous, “perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it.” According to Locke, propagandistic art is never self-contained, but looks up to the reaction of a condescending mainstream public to threaten or supplicate it, while the ultimate goal of true artists, regardless of their ethnicity, should be unbounded self-expression. In Locke’s words, “the literature and art of the younger generation already reflects this shift of psychology, this regeneration of spirit,” that is the tendency to detach themselves from propaganda, although he is careful to point out that their art is “no mere idle acceptance of art for art’s sake” but rather the realization of the fundamental purpose of all artistic forms of expression (“Art or Propaganda”). Locke as a consequence envisions a black artist who is not completely apolitical, nor refuses to speak out against discrimination, but who is free to explore other themes and does not carry on his/her shoulders the burden of the advancement of the race. Anticipating the “cultural mulatto v. assimilationist nightmare” dichotomy theorized by Trey Ellis,<sup>14</sup> Locke recognizes in the production of young black writers of his time a desire to free themselves from the duty of militant writing, but at the same time warns against those writers who, in their efforts to do so, end up merely imitating mainstream literature.

Comparing young black writers to plants, he points out that not all of them are “deep enough in the sub-soil of their native materials—too many are pot-plants seeking a forced growth according to the exotic tastes of a pampered and decadent public.” In fact, “Art or Propaganda?” advocated for art that was free from the constraints of political propaganda, but still culturally-

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<sup>14</sup> I explain Trey’s dichotomy at length in the paragraph “Trey Ellis’s “New Black Aesthetic”: Ideals and Critical Responses to Cultural Mulattism.”

specific and rooted in the black experience. This view, coupled with the conviction that artists must free themselves from any obligations towards the race, appears as a constant in Locke's writing. Twenty-five years after the publication of "The New Negro," Locke writes in his "Self-Criticism: The Third Dimension of Culture" (1950) that "when racial themes are imposed upon the Negro author either from within or without, they become an intolerable and limiting artistic ghetto. But when accepted by choice, either on the ground of best known material or preferred opportunity, they stake off a cultural bonanza" (59). As a consequence, we can see how Locke anticipates a crucial debate in the New Black Aesthetic, that is the necessity to avoid impositions on black artists coming from both the African American community and mainstream culture, while at the same time positioning blackness at the center of the artists' reflection and artistic production.

The debate on the role of the artist so present in the literary criticism of the Harlem Renaissance interlocked with that on the self-identification of black artists, and on their desire—or lack thereof—to be labeled as "black writers". Already in "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), right before his famous affirmation on art as propaganda, DuBois wondered: "we want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? [...] We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not" (17). We can see very clearly in this passage how the question of the necessity of militant art was deeply connected, in DuBois's thought, to that of black artists' double-consciousness<sup>15</sup> as well as to the concept of racial authenticity. To DuBois, in fact, black intellectuals see the reality of American life from a different perspective than their white counterparts, which necessarily results in the constitution of a different literature, with different aesthetics, whose goal must necessarily be the advancement of the race. The question of whether black art should contribute to the cause of black liberation goes therefore hand in hand with the question of racial self-identification, and a particularly heated debate emerged between writers of the Harlem Renaissance who identified as "black artists" and those who saw any racial label as a limit to their creativity. The most famous example of the first position is

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<sup>15</sup> The term "double-consciousness" was first mentioned by DuBois in an *Atlantic Monthly* article published in 1897 and titled "Strivings of the Negro People," later republished with minor edits under the title "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). DuBois explains it as follows: "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. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (*Souls* 16-17). DuBois uses double-consciousness to comment on the condition of African Americans living in a white supremacist society, and also to explain his own sensation of constantly having to come to terms with a divided identity, partly American and partly black.

probably Langston Hughes's essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), in which the author complains that a promising young black poet, whose name he does not reveal but whose identity has easily been traced to Countee Cullen, stated that he wanted to be a poet, not a Negro poet, a statement that Hughes interprets as a more or less conscious desire to reject blackness in favor of whiteness.

Hughes harshly criticizes the young poet's stance, claiming that no significant artistic goal can be achieved by someone who is afraid of their identity. Moreover, he acknowledges this sort of intra-racial shame as a rather characteristic component of black middle-class upbringing, of families in which "the mother often says, 'Don't be like niggers' when the children are bad" (27). Hughes questions the ability of anybody who grew up in such an environment to come up with a healthy and stable sense of their black identity and consequently with the ability of producing art that effectively challenges the status quo. Hughes contrasts the attitude of the black bourgeoisie with that of the majority of "common" blacks and proceeds to list a series of behaviors which he identifies as representative of the best African American vernacular tradition.<sup>16</sup> Common blacks are, in his view, *the* authentic folk: "Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance!" (28). In Hughes's view, it is from this stock that the "truly great Negro artist" can emerge, since these individuals are not afraid of their cultural baggage and have no desire to disguise their blackness; on the contrary, they "still hold their own individuality in the face of America standardizations". As a consequence, artists who are "Negro enough to be different," were what the race needed, and this difference had to be manifested without fear nor shame in their artistic production (29).

The question of the difference of African American arts from mainstream American arts had become of crucial importance in the wake of assimilationist approaches such as those supported by Booker T. Washington, who assumed that African American genius, after centuries in which the mere acquisition of literacy had been prevented, was finally evolving and would eventually

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<sup>16</sup> It is impossible to give a comprehensive definition of African American vernacular tradition, given the fact that materials that could be classified as part of this tradition encompass several centuries, various geographical settings, and different media of cultural production (from slave work-song to gospel, from sermons to hip-hop lyrics). However, in this particular case I am referring to Hughes's appreciation for the cultural manifestations of rural or working-class African Americans, in particular as far as their oral cultural practices are concerned (folktales, the dozens, signifying and other improvisational practices). *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* states that what distinguished the black vernacular tradition in general "is its in-group and, at times, secretive, defensive, and aggressive character: it is not, generally speaking, produced for circulation beyond the black group itself" (1997, 1).

reach its full potential once it reached the heights of the great tradition of Western literature. The main problem of this argument is, of course, that it assumed that the creation of art would be independent from the socialization and racial identity of the artist, and that the cultural specificities proper to the black American experience were irrelevant. Hughes's essay contests this position and reaffirms the necessity to approach African American literature as a distinct tradition. In fact, his essay was meant to not only criticize Countee Cullen's unwillingness to openly identify as a black artist, but also to challenge those who wished to deny the existence of a distinct African American literary and artistic tradition.

"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" was actually written in response to George S. Schuyler's "The Negro-Art Hokum", also published in *The Nation* in 1926, in which Schuyler, mostly remembered for his satirical novel *Black No More* (1931),<sup>17</sup> had claimed that African American art was a nonexistent concept, since "the literature, painting, and sculpture of Aframericans—such as there is—[...] is identical in kind with the literature, painting, and sculpture of white Americans: that is, it shows more or less evidence of European influence" ("Hokum" 25). For Schuyler, "the Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon," and "Negroes and whites from the same localities in this country talk, think, and act about the same" (25). The essay, as the title suggests, argues that there is no difference whatsoever between the production of black and white American artists, and suggests that the necessity of defining oneself as a "black artist" is only felt when intellectuals, out of self-hatred, identify with a set of fixed representations, mostly derived by the character types of the minstrel tradition, that have been praised as authentic and spurred the belief that black Americans are different from their white counterparts. Consequently, the folk tradition in which Hughes saw the potential for the emergence of the greatest black artist is seen by Schuyler as the site where "Negro rustics and clowns" are wrongly elevated to representativeness for the entire race.

On the contrary, the belief that African American art is inherently different from mainstream American art is expressed by Zora Neale Hurston in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), which argues that African American artistic production is to be seen as a distinct tradition, given that black people in the United States have developed, over the course of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Black No More* is a satirical novel based on the premise that an African American scientist has invented a process to transform black people into whites. The novel explores themes such as internalized racism and lack of opportunities for black people (both of which contribute to the desire of many to undergo the Black-No-More procedure) and ridicules the fear of miscegenation and of the contamination of "pure" white womanhood which has been a constant of American society. *Black No More* is also famous for containing caricatures of prominent African American intellectuals of the time, including Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois.

centuries, peculiar modes of self-expression. Hurston's essay is the first programmatic attempt to analyze the characteristics of African American speech and to connect these features not to lack of education but to a different system of rules that govern the use of the English language, coupled with a specific aesthetic that tends to favor emphatic description. Hurston is, of course, also known for her focus on the lives of rural Southern blacks, and for agreeing with Hughes on the potential of the folk tradition as a site of African American cultural production, while she always remained critical towards the values and aesthetics of the black bourgeoisie.<sup>18 19</sup>

The same view on the distinctiveness of African American literature, as well as on the necessity not to alienate the black working class from cultural production, is expressed by Richard Wright in his "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1935), which also reflects on the role of nationalism in black writing, preannouncing some of the concerns of the Black Arts Movement. According to Wright, African American literature has developed specific characteristics due to the conditions of oppression from which it emerged but lacked, until recently, a serious reflection on the role of the black intellectual. Wright complains that for very long time black intellectuals were seen like "French poodles who do clever tricks" (45) and that this produced the idea of black literature as either a hallmark of achievement or the voice of educated blacks pleading for justice to a white public. Wright points out that educated blacks rarely wrote for a black public, and auspicates a change in this sense, with a more militant class of writers taking advantage of their position to fight injustices and trying their best to bridge the gap between themselves and

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<sup>18</sup> Notice, for example, Hurston's ironic stance towards "respectable" blacks in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). In explaining the phrase "My people! My people!" that they often use as an expression of racial shame, Hurston points out that "well-mannered Negroes groan out like that when they border a train or bus and find other Negroes on there with their shoes off, stuffing themselves with fried fish, bananas and peanuts, and throwing the garbage on the floor. [...] The offenders may be 'loud-talking' the place and holding back nothing of their private lives [...] The well-dressed Negro [...] shakes his head and sighs, 'My people! My people!'" (177).

<sup>19</sup> The origins of the black bourgeoisie may be traced back to the division between field slaves and house slaves. The latter usually lived in their masters' houses and, despite being frequently subjected to forms of exploitation such as rape and domestic abuse, often had better chances to acquire some form of education. Also, contrary to common belief, house slaves were generally chosen among those considered to be most good looking, usually because of lighter complexion. After Emancipation, ex house slaves and their descendants had therefore better chances to acquire a higher social status, and several scholars note that many of them internalized white standards (for example the preference for certain physical traits such as light skin, straight or wavy hair, but also values such as temperance and respectability) and used them to reinforce intra-racial class distinctions. Colorism became a widespread intra-racial practice that discriminated African Americans with a darker complexion, assigning them a lower-class status and preventing them from enjoying certain privileges such as membership to clubs and associations reserved to lighter blacks. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham convincingly argues that since all blacks had scarce access to well-paying jobs, it was usually not financial stability but aesthetics and the adherence to shared values that played the most crucial role in class distinctions among African Americans in the post-Emancipation period (185-230).

the black masses. Wright situates in fact the authentic black experience in the vernacular tradition, since it is his opinion that in folklore one can find “the collective sense of Negro life in America” and register the realities of life “as it is *lived*” (48, emphasis in the original).

The idea that it is necessary to represent black life in all of its aspects—and that artists should not restrain themselves in order to promote a spotless image of the black community—is expressed also by the intellectuals of the so-called Niggerati group, which in 1926 gave life to *Fire!!* a literary magazine which lasted only one issue but was incredibly influential in the literary scene of the Harlem Renaissance. *Fire!!*, was founded by young, brilliant intellectuals such as Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, John P. Davis, Bruce Nugent and Gwendolyn Bennett, whose goal was to create an apolitical publication concerned exclusively with the arts. The magazine was conceived as a means to articulate the aesthetic goals of a younger generation of writers, who were interested in depicting black life in a new and fresh way and were not afraid to explore in their work themes that were considered scandalous by most of the black elites, such as interracial sex, homosexuality and polygamy. The Niggerati had in fact grown dissatisfied with the black leading classes, which they saw as too elitist and assimilationist, and shared the desire to cause outrage and trespass traditional aesthetic and moral boundaries (Hutchinson 144). The title of the magazine was symbolic of the attitude of these young writers, who intended to “burn down” both stereotypical representations of black people and “censored” positive images based on the culture of respectability<sup>20</sup> adopted by the black middle class. *Fire!!* proved to be too daring for its times: few copies were sold, and the rest, ironically, was destroyed by an actual fire that burned down its headquarters.

Despite being short-lived, the Niggerati experience with *Fire!!* is indicative of the wide variety of positions on how to best represent “authentic” black life during the Harlem Renaissance. Certainly, primitivism also played a role in African Americans’ preoccupation with how to best represent themselves in literature. Primitivism, emerged as a trend in Western art which idolized prehistoric or non-Western communities as closer to nature and uncorrupted by civilization, had contributed to depict Harlem, in the eyes of a growing number of whites, as an exotic space

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<sup>20</sup> I refer to the “politics of respectability” in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s theorization of the concept. The politics of respectability has been used as a political strategy to promote positive images of the black community, fight negative stereotypes and encourage reforms since the post-Emancipation years. However, it has also been employed by the black bourgeoisie as an elitist aesthetic that would set them apart from the black poor. See: Higginbotham 185-230.

in which people could enjoy themselves free of the constraints of white middle-class morals. This “consumeristic” approach had largely been exploited by the publishing market but, understandably, was seen as a threat to black culture by several African American intellectuals, who resisted the representation of Harlem as a black paradise that whites could visit for the purposes of thrill seeking. It is not a case that Carl Van Vechten, prior to the publication of his critically acclaimed *Nigger Heaven* in 1926, felt anxious about how his depiction of Harlem life in the novel might be received by African Americans, and that a few months before the publication date he participated into a survey published on *The Crisis* titled “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?”, which solicited intellectuals to express their opinion on how black people should be represented in art and literature.<sup>21</sup>

The debates on the role of the black intellectual, on how to best represent black people and on the influence of whites in the dissemination and reception of black culture formed the theoretical basis for literary criticism during the Harlem Renaissance, and they can clearly be seen as anticipating some of the themes that will inform the aesthetic of later generation of African American writers. Commons themes, as we have seen, are the social responsibility of the artists towards the African American community but also, interestingly, the necessity to transcend this responsibility to foster freer modes of self-expression. However, writers of the Harlem Renaissance often point out that, in enjoying this free self-expression, black intellectuals should still produce art that is culturally specific, and that reflects the conditions of life of African Americans, especially the black masses in which a distinctive vernacular tradition—the *authentic* expression of the black experience in America—is to be found. The idea of authentic blackness is therefore still very strong, and is mainly conceived as the attachment to the values of the black working-class—perceived as less influenced by white standards—and to the various forms of the vernacular tradition in which they can be expressed linguistically and aesthetically.

Individualism, seen by many as the key feature of contemporary black artists, is already well contemplated in the production of writers of the Harlem Renaissance, as is the intention to

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<sup>21</sup> Most sources indicate that W.E.B. DuBois, then editor of *The Crisis*, created and launched the survey and that Carl Van Vechten simply replied to it, though Emily Bernard argues that it was Van Vechten himself who anonymously composed the survey’s questionnaire. Bernard, however, does not mention the source of her information (Bernard in Hutchinson 37). Moreover, given that DuBois was consistently critical of Van Vechten’s work, especially of his portrayal of Harlem life in *Nigger Heaven*, it seems implausible that he might have published a questionnaire on the representation of black people created by Van Vechten himself. In the absence of a reliable source to support Bernard’s argument, I rely on the most conventionally accepted information that DuBois composed the questionnaire.

refuse any limitation that might come from both the white and black communities. When Trey Ellis writes that artists of the New Black Aesthetic “no longer need to suppress any part of [their] complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black” (“NBA” 235), he seems to echo Langston Hughes when he declared that “we younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. [...] if colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either” (“Racial Mountain” 30). The enthusiasm of the youth towards new opportunities to reform African American literature and the will to be liberated not only from white condescendence but also from the expectations of the black community are key features of African American aesthetic manifestoes that have remained stable from the Harlem Renaissance to the present.

### The Protest Novel and the Question of Realism

The years of the Harlem Renaissance had proved very fruitful for black writers trying to affirm a black aesthetic and to articulate the thematic and stylistic concerns that later writers would build upon. However, the Great Depression actively ended the Harlem Renaissance and brought new difficulties for African Americans, who were often the first to be fired in times of financial crisis. The crisis was seen by many as the result of capitalism and the exploitation of the masses, and pushed African American letters towards a more humanitarian and ethical turn that would have its peak in protest novels in the 1940s and 1950s. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) was, for example, clearly propagandistic in that it brought to the spotlight the hardships endured by poor African Americans, depicting its protagonist Bigger Thomas as a victim of the circumstances and his actions as predetermined by his position in American capitalist and racist society. The novel marked therefore a turning-point in African American literature and sparked massive literary criticism.

Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin are often cited amongst the intellectuals that most vehemently criticized Wright’s novel for the way in which black life was depicted. Ellison complained that Bigger Thomas was portrayed as an example of the sociological statistics on black crime, and that he not only failed to represent the authentic experiences of poor urban blacks, but was not even depicted as a human being. In “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” (1953) Ellison in fact pointed out that the gritty experience of Bigger Thomas that white Americans saw as the “real” and “authentic” tale of urban blackness in *Native Son* was actually a story that operated against blacks, left out many experiences of blackness, and



promoted a negative image of the whole African American community. Most importantly, he claimed that what the public perceived as “real” about Bigger Thomas, was not only non-real, but also non-human, since the protagonist was crafted more as an embodiment of statistics than as an actual person. Ellison’s argument is interesting for my analysis in that he bases his observations on the fact that, in his opinion, white and black Americans have a different version of the “real” which is derived from the different experiences to which they have been exposed:

when the white American, holding up most twentieth-century fiction, says, “This is American reality,” the Negro tends to answer (not at all concerned that Americans tend generally to fight against any but the most flattering imaginative depictions of their lives), “Perhaps, but you’ve left out this, and this, and this, and most of all, what you’d have the world accept as *me* isn’t even human (135).

Ellison’s point is therefore particularly interesting in that the author points out not only the obvious fact that white and black Americans developed different notions of authentic blackness due to their different relation to power and to the category of race in American society, but also a different version of authentic humanity, which in the case of white Americans clearly bears traces of eighteenth-century theories of scientific racism that supported the idea of the sub-humanity of people of African descent. As a consequence, in Ellison’s essay the very idea of reality is shaped differently for white and black Americans, which is something that in turn influences the notions of authenticity that they infuse in their respective literatures. The main task of black authors is therefore that of producing a narrative of blackness that contrasts oversimplified images of black characters that come from a faulty and biased perception of reality.

James Baldwin, in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1955), writes from a similar standpoint. He also bases his critique of *Native Son* on Wright’s faulty perception of the “reality” of African American life, and claims that the representation of Bigger Thomas in the text is as true as that of Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), only in reverse: “Bigger Thomas is Uncle Tom’s descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle.” For in Baldwin’s view, whites and blacks are so constrained by the circumstances that shaped their version of reality that they can only “thrust and counterthrust” (155). The failure of the protest novel lies therefore in its inability to contest this narrative at the roots, and the failure of *Native Son* in particular is evident in the fact that Bigger Thomas has accepted a version of “realness” that denies his own

humanity. Similarly to Ellison, Baldwin points out how white capitalist America has been able to impose a definition of reality that denies the agency, and therefore the humanity, of black people, and that Wright has bought into this logic, accepting the categorization of people (black, poor, urban) as the only thing “which is real and which cannot be transcended” (155).

In the years after the Harlem Renaissance the debate over black authenticity and its representation in literature is therefore influenced to a great extent by the insistence on the different conception of reality that informs white and black readers, and that exacts its toll on the production and distribution of African American literature. *Phylon*, the African American literary journal founded by DuBois in 1940, often contained articles which reflected on how white standards influenced the production of black writers, while Zora Neale Hurston, in the same period, voiced in “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (1950) her concern about the fact that white publishers demanded their own version of black authenticity from black writers. In criticizing what she calls “the American Museum of Unnatural History” (118), Hurston points out that “the whole museum is dedicated to the convenient ‘typical’” (119). White publishers perpetuate their convenient version of the “real” black experience which is devoid of depth and variety and is portrayed as monolithic and flat. What Hurston is pointing out in her essay, and what is evident in the whole history of African American literature, is that an inextricable connection exists between authenticity and authority, since the ones who have the power to spread controlling images can dictate and validate their own version of the real. Consequently, Hurston laments how the general public is not interested in reading literature that depicts blacks as whole human beings who think and feel just like everybody else, but is attracted by stories that confirm their own sensationalistic version of black authenticity: “The realistic story around a Negro insurance official, dentist, general practitioner, undertaker and the like would be most revealing” she claims, but “the average, struggling, nonmorbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America” (121). Thus, the moral duty of black artists according to Hurston is that of producing literature and art that “hold up the mirror to nature” (121), reflecting the objective reality of black lives and smashing white people’s biased image of African Americans. As we have seen, black writers and critics during the 1940s and 1950s are committed to redress a perception of authentic blackness influenced by controlling stereotypes on black life, and their essays reveal that they have no doubts on the distinctive nature of African American literature, informed by a vision of reality that drastically differs from that which informs the production of white American writers.

The work of redressing distorted representations of black people has been present in all eras of African American cultural production. However, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have offered an interesting analysis of the limits of this “corrective” approach, which often rests on the power of realism to represent the truth about a community and to easily unmask lies and false representations. As they claim:

Many oppressed groups have used ‘progressive realism’ to unmask and combat hegemonic representations, countering the objectifying discourse of patriarchy and colonialism with a vision of themselves and their reality ‘from within.’ But this laudable intention is not always unproblematic (180).

Shohat and Stam invite to distinguish between realism as a goal and realism as a style, and while they are dubious about realism as a goal—since every reader or spectator can easily defend their own version of the “real”—they recognize the deconstructive power of realism as a style that aims at producing a “reality effect.” In fact, if the mechanism of stereotyping is that of fixing people into a confining set of fixed traits, alternative representations can effectively reveal not only that those formulae are false, but also that they are established and maintained as a form of social control.

However, Shohat and Stam warn against the shortcomings of a stereotype-centered approach, stressing how the call for positive images to contrast negative stereotypes can lead to “a kind of *essentialism*, as less subtle critics reduce a complex variety of portrayals to a limited set of reified formulae” (199). On the other hand, Richard Dyer has also notably argued that stereotypes should not be attacked because they are inaccurate—after all, there can be individuals who recognize themselves in the stereotype—but because they impose an external definition on a marginalized or discriminated group, depriving the groups of agency and establishing the mainstream definition as “necessary and natural” (357).

### The Black Arts Movement and the Shift to Post-Soul

In the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, several African American critics seem to be concerned that the specificity of black literature might be negatively impacted by integration. For example, Arthur P. Davis in “Integration and Race Literature” (1956) points out the paradox according to which real integration is still a distant goal, and yet, as the idea of integration looms in the air, black artists have to face their fears of losing the creative push that characterized and sustained the protest vein of African American literature. Interestingly, already in the mid-1950s Davis foresees some of the themes that will inform contemporary

New Black Aesthetics, principally the uncomfortable position of black writers working in a society in which full racial equality seems attainable but is ultimately never reached, and the shift from interracial protest to intra-racial conflicts.

This last element is particularly interesting in that it shows that already in the mid-1950s Davis was aware that the distinctive character of African American literature would not be lost as a consequence of an improvement in racial relations, that artists would shift towards “new themes within the racial framework,” and towards new interpretations of what constitutes the essence of the black experience (158). Davis therefore notices that the new climate influenced by the concrete possibility of integration demands a change in aesthetic, a change that is met by several black novelists and poets that turn their attention towards intra-racial dynamics: the Negro artists will, according to him, finally discover “that there are many facets of Negro living—humorous, pathetic, and tragic—which are not directly touched by the outside world” (161). However, despite the new climate of hope about concrete possibilities for a positive change in race relations, the demands of the literary establishment continued to burden the production of African Americans writers and to influence literary representation of authentic blackness, confirming Zora Neale Hurston’s preoccupations with the influence of white publishers, a concern that would continue well after the 1970s and that would encourage black writers to pursue a separatist literary politics.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s a certain optimism existed about the possibility for concrete racial equality in the US, since the initiatives of the Civil Rights Movement had encouraged a vision of the world in which a more equal and inclusive society could be possible. However, the hope that spread from the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 had smashed against a reality in which racial discrimination was still the rule, so that the failure of American society to live up to the promises of the early 1960s caused widespread frustration and disappointment in African Americans. As protests exploded in several urban areas (starting in the summer of 1964 in Harlem and continuing over the course of the next two years in Newark, Watts, Philadelphia, Detroit, and a number of other major cities), the killing in September 1963 of four black girls in the bombing of a Methodist church in Birmingham, and the assassination of both Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (in 1965 and 1968 respectively) resulted in widespread bitterness, disillusion, and complete distrust in the logic of integration and non-violence that had informed the Civil Rights Movement. Integration was

replaced with separatism as African Americans were encouraged to take control of their communities politically, economically and culturally.

A policy of separatism and the endorsement of black nationalism by African Americans who adhered to the ideals of Black Power were the consequences of this situation, which was reflected in literature by the emergence of the Black Aesthetic embraced by the Black Arts Movement (BAM hereafter), a literary school that sought to support a distinctly black aesthetic and to destroy Eurocentric cultural sensibilities. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka<sup>22</sup> founded in 1964 the Black Arts Repertoire Theatre School, an event considered the beginning of the BAM, and Larry Neal in “The Black Arts Movement” (1968) exposed its aesthetic. In his literary manifesto, Neal defines the BAM as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” and advocates for a reordering of European-inspired aesthetics through “a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology” (184). In Neal’s view, the moral duty of the black artist is therefore that of speaking “to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people”, and to reevaluate “western aesthetics, the traditional role of the writer, and the social function of art. Implicit in this reevaluation is the need to develop a Black Aesthetic” (185). Neal’s cultural manifesto appears strikingly different from former aesthetic manifestos such as Locke’s “The New Negro” and Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in that Neal does not simply register and monitor a change in literary aesthetics, but articulates precise goals and expectations that would have to inform the production of contemporary writers. Literature is therefore seen as having a clear racial role, and its themes and rhetorical strategies are required to be in line with the precepts of Black Power.

The concept of authentic blackness in this period was reshaped towards a much more exclusive interpretation: black art was to create its own iconology and had to be critiqued according to its own aesthetic principles. Political and social militancy were the parameters of one’s racial authenticity, and allegiance to the black community was to be expressed in art. Literature was seen as a means to finally emancipate black people from a vision of the arts rooted in the Western tradition, and to reclaim agency in self-expression. The disengagement of black people from Western aesthetic values and the endorsement of a separate aesthetic that recognized the value of distinctly black forms of expression were the main ideals of the BAM, which claimed that new rules and aesthetic parameters were necessary, according to which black artistic

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<sup>22</sup> Everett LeRoi Jones changed his name after his conversion to Islam in the late 1960s, adopting a name of African origins: Imamu (“spiritual leader”) Ameer (“prince”) Baraka (“blessed”), later shortened in Amiri Baraka.

production was to be not only judged and evaluated, but also consumed and enjoyed. This was expressed also through the need of distancing themselves from the concept of American identity and the interest for African history, languages, cultural production and artistic sensibilities: a return to the roots, so to speak, that would later be endorsed by Molefi Kete Asante's philosophy of Afrocentricity.<sup>23</sup>

The BAM poses itself as radically different from the previous tradition of African American literature in that it rejects the protest element: contrary to Davis's preoccupations in "Integration and Race Literature," intellectuals of the BAM, once discarded the protest tradition, did not lose the will to create art that is distinctly black, but focused on literature that spoke directly to black people. Don L. Lee (who would later change his name to Haki Madhubuti) in his essay "Towards a Definition: Black Poetry of the 1960s (after LeRoi Jones)" (1971), gives a good example of black critics' attempts to construct a new aesthetic that truly reflected the peculiarities of the African American experience. He lists seven rhetorical characteristics that are typical of the production of black poets from the 1960s onward, and stresses that these writers are very explicit in referring to themselves as "black men or black women first, then as poets" (217), embracing therefore their responsibility towards the African American community.

Implicit in his view is the idea that it is possible to find a new language through which the "true," "authentic" black experience can be expressed and that the position of the black writer in this climate is that of a person who has the responsibility of putting things in perspective, recognizing and highlighting the uniqueness of African American artistic efforts, decentralizing the gaze of the reading public, and emphasizing black people's contribution to American letters. The role of the writer/critic is therefore that of "artist," cultural educator, and revisionist of the establishment's prescriptions on doing and assessing art. Implicit in this vision is the fact that the writer/critic has the moral duty of enlightening other African Americans, helping them to define themselves in empowering ways and to develop a certain awareness of their history and culture and to be proud of their people's achievements. The writer that does not adhere to this vision is seen at best as a traitor of the race, someone who accepts the impositions of the

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<sup>23</sup> Several scholars note how this reactionary approach often emphasized the necessity of strong black male leadership, epitomized by the trope of the Strong Black Man, often to the detriment of black women and homosexuals. I will explore the issue of gender relations in the Black Power movement while discussing allusion-disruption gestures in the section "Blaxploration and Allusion-Disruption Gestures: A New Take on Authentic Blackness." In addition, an in-depth treatment of the origins, evolution and maintenance of tropes of strong black masculinity can be found in Mark Anthony Neal's *New Black Man*, especially in chapters 2 and 3.

establishment and does nothing to change the situation, and at worst as someone who has no racial pride and has been successfully brainwashed into believing in the universality of Western art.

For a large number of critics and writers, the nationalistic rhetoric that dominated the Black Arts Movement eventually seemed too limiting, and even Larry Neal by 1968 had to admit that the movement was “faced with a serious crisis. It has postulated a theory of Black Power, and that is good. But it has failed to evolve a workable ideology. That is, a workable concept—perhaps Black Power is it—which can encompass many of the diverse ideological tendencies existent in the black community” (“And Shine Swam On” 70). In fact, as Black Power started to decline, Neal as well as other critics felt the necessity to abandon the nationalist school and turn towards a more structured and organic approach to the analysis of the works of African American literature. Despite widespread disillusionment with the legal victories of the Civil Rights and Black Power movement and with their actual ability to change race relations for the better, by the end of the 1970s a growing number of African Americans had started to enjoy positive changes such as unprecedented possibilities for high-quality education. If the majority of the black masses were unable to benefit from these opportunities, urban, middle-class African Americans eagerly took advantage of them. This made more evident the split of the African American community along class lines, but also led to the emergence of the first Black Studies programs in academia, which encouraged a systematic study of centuries of African American history and culture. The institutionalization of Black Studies marked a turning-point from the rhetoric of authentic blackness based on separatism and black nationalism that had infused black literature up to the previous decades, to a desire to bring objectiveness and methodological accuracy into the field of African American literary criticism.

Critics such as the late Larry Neal, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker were deeply influenced by the theories of French structuralists, which they saw as an opportunity to analyze African American texts with a rigorous scientific method, to establish what was distinctly black about them and how these texts had contributed to American literature and culture. In Gates’s “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext” (1979), the critic makes clear his support of structuralism and of a more scientific and rigorous treatment of the text as opposed to the critical strategies of the Black Arts Movement. After deploring the tradition according to which black literature has historically been appreciated for its documentary and not its aesthetic value, so that ethics was often a synonym of aesthetics, Gates laments that:

race as the controlling “mechanism” in critical theory reached its zenith of influence and mystification when LeRoi Jones metamorphosed himself into Amiri Baraka, and his dashiki-clad, Swahili-named “harbari-gani” disciples “discovered” that they were black. With virtually no exceptions, black critics employed “blackness”-as-theme to forward one argument or another for the amelioration of the Afro-American’s social dilemma. Yet, the critical activity altered little, whether that ‘message’ was integration or whether it was militant separation (246).

It is evident in this passage that Gates criticized the notion of art as propaganda espoused by the Black Arts Movement as well as by many black intellectuals of previous decades, and objected to writers “who concern themselves with futile attempts to make poetry preach, which poetry is not capable of doing so well” (246) He also openly questions the notions of essentialized blackness in that he claims that “‘Blackness’ is not a material object or an event but a metaphor; it does not have an ‘essence’ as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity” (254). Blackness in literature was therefore to be found not in prescriptive notions of the rural folk tradition or the fiction of urban black life, but was to be seen as a textual event that emerged out of a system of aesthetic references.

In addition to the prescriptiveness of the nationalist agenda of the Black Arts Movement and of essentialist notions of blackness, another fundamental critique moved against the rhetoric of the previous decade was its disregard for gender dynamics and its focus on male charismatic leaders. The role of the writers tends towards *artivism* again with the womanist turn in African American studies that gains momentum after the publication of Alice Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1983), which encourages black women writers to rediscover the value of the artistic traditions of early black women writers and artists whose work has been neglected. Walker and the black feminist scholars who followed her (Deborah Mc Dowell, Valerie Smith, Hortense Spillers, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins to name a few) criticized the fact that in the feminist movement the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women were assumed to be normative, and started to give voice to the experiences of women who came from different backgrounds and were carrying the double burden of race and gender discrimination.

Critics such as bell hooks, Angela Davis and Patricia Hill-Collins effectively started to highlight the intersectionality of the categories of class, race, gender and sexuality. The emergence of intersectionality theory had an essential role in questioning analyses emerging from both black male-centered social movements and white middle-class feminism (hooks 1984; Davis 1983;



Hill Collins 2000). Theorists of intersectionality pointed out that the experiences of black women cannot be understood exclusively in terms of race, and that gender and class play an equally important role. Moreover, they stressed the fact that the intersection of these categories cannot be explained simply through the sum of different and independent forms of discrimination (such as racism and sexism) but gives life to hybrid forms of subordination that cannot be understood in isolation. The concern for gender dynamics, awakened by the production of early womanist critics and theorists of intersectionality, is still at the center of the agenda of post-soul writers and theorists such as Trey Ellis, Lisa Jones, Paul Beatty, and in essays concerning the necessity for black men to adopt a feminist perspective, such as Mark Anthony Neal's *New Black Man* (2005).

### Trey Ellis's "New Black Aesthetic": Ideals and Critical Responses to "Cultural Mulattism"

Trey Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic," published in *Callaloo* in 1989, is nowadays considered the manifesto of post-soul artists, and together with Greg Tate's "Cult-Nats Meets Freeky-Deke" (1986) and Nelson George's "Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture" (1992) constitutes one of the first attempts at defining the characteristics of art produced by young African American intellectuals coming of age after the social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Written as a term paper for a survey course in African American literature at Stanford in 1983, thirty years after its publication "The New Black Aesthetic" is now required reading in several university courses in African American culture in the US and abroad, and is widely recognized as the essay that more convincingly argued for the emergence of a new stage of African American artistic production in post-Civil Rights America. Trey's essay is characterized by overtly optimistic tones, and in this respect it reminds readers of the enthusiasm that characterized Alain Locke's prose as he announced the advent of the New Negro and the emergence of a new artistic sensibility.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Ellis announces that the time has finally come in which young blacks like him, who grew up feeling misunderstood by both

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<sup>24</sup> In retrospect, Locke critically wrote of the enthusiasm that connotated those years: "like the adolescence it was, the New Negro era was gawky and pimply, indiscreet and over-confident, vainglorious and irresponsible; but its testy and dynamic gave the Negro new spiritual stature and an added dimension of self-reliance. [...] There was in the creative expression of the Twenties and Thirties pride without poise, vision without true perspective, self-esteem without the necessary tempering of full self-understanding" (58-59). Similarly, Trey Ellis recognizes in his "Response to NBA Critiques" that "this new movement is fueled with naïve exuberance [...] A certain amount of disillusionment and cynicism will eventually set in as it always does when we discover that changing the world will take more than a couple of summers, but ingenuous arrogance has been the sparkle for all important movements, artistic and political" (250)

white and black people and who admittedly like “both Jim and Toni Morrison” (234), are present in such numbers that they can come together “like so many twins separated at birth—thrilled, soothed, and strengthened in being finally reunited” (234). In fact, in Ellis’s words the main novelty of this new generation of African American artists is constituted by the fact that among the black artists of the post-Civil Rights scene there is a vast presence of “cultural mulattoes”, a term he coined to describe a person who, “educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world” (235). Ellis describes the artistic production of these cultural mulattoes as detached from the kind of essentialized, defensive blackness embraced by their elders as well as from the stereotypes traditionally associated with the black experience in America, and points out that they see black aesthetic “as much more than just Africa and jazz” (234). In this new post-liberated context, black artists can afford to express their individual taste with no fear of both judgement from the white community and allegations of racial disloyalty from the black one, since time is ripe to be proud of one’s black cultural heritage without necessarily affecting what he calls a “superblackness” (235). As Ellis states: “Today, there are enough young blacks torn between the two worlds to finally go out and create our own. The New Black Aesthetic says you just have to *be* natural, you don’t necessarily have to *wear* one” (236, emphasis in the original).

But what are then the main traits of these cultural mulattoes, beside the fact of having grown up in a desegregated society and being “culturally multilingual”? First of all, Ellis points out, most artists of the New Black Aesthetic (NBA, hereafter) are children of Civil Rights workers and black nationalists who instilled in them positive ideas about the race and contributed to their education in African American history: “All those Ezra Jack Keats black children’s books, *Roots* parties, *For Colored Girls*...theater excursions, and the nationalist Christmas holiday of Kwanzaa worked” (236). Still, it is exactly the self-confidence they inherited from their elders’ teachings that allows them to parody black nationalism and to expose the shortcomings of its agenda. As a consequence, the production of contemporary black artists can be paradoxically described as originating from the Black Arts Movement but at the same time breaking with it, in that the consequences of racial discrimination are still forcefully denounced, but the boundaries of blackness are pushed further and further to make room for the artists’ complex, hybrid, often sophisticated identities.

Ellis adds a class dimension to this hypersophisticated group, recognizing that most of the artists who initially embraced the NBA are middle-class or even upper middle-class, and could enjoy the privilege of a good college education:

for the first time in our history we are producing a critical mass of college graduates who are children of college graduates themselves. Like most artistic booms, the NBA is a post-bourgeois movement driven by a second generation of middle class. Having scraped their way to relative wealth and, too often, crass materialism, our parents have freed (or compelled) us to bite those hands that fed us and sent us to college. [...] Another great advantage we have over the artists of the Seventies is that today's popular culture is guided by blacks almost across the board [...] the world is not only now accustomed to black faces in the arts, but also hungers for us (237).

In short, Ellis notices that if in previous decades debates on the redefinition of blackness and on the role of the black artist in society had been limited to a few individuals, with the emergence of the NBA the numbers of people who participated in these debates grew constantly, thanks to new possibilities in education for African Americans. The result of better educational opportunities is a growing black middle-class, or even upper middle-class, among which many of the artists of the NBA are to be found. These artists, contrarily to what happened in the past, have a wider range of possibilities on how to represent black people: they no longer exclusively rely on monolithic conceptions of blackness influenced by the positivist images required by the respectability politics of the 1960s, or by the radical militancy of the 1970s, and at the same time they consciously fight stereotyped representations imposed by mainstream society, in short “they have liberated themselves from both white envy and self-hate,” although propagandistic positivism is still demanded by artists of the older generation (238). Another advantage of artists of the NBA that Ellis points out is the emergence of new institutions that can guide young artists and support their critical efforts towards new representations of black life: among them, the author lists the Black Filmmaker Foundation, the Black Rock Coalition, and DefJam Records. This new array of instruments (better education, visibility, and representation through new institutions) for the enfranchisement of black artists is seen by Ellis as what sustains the revisionism of legacies of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that younger black intellectuals are enacting.

Interestingly, in the final part of his essay Ellis seems to predict one of the main criticisms that would be moved against the NBA: its alleged elitism. Since the NBA is admittedly born from a richer and more numerous than ever black middle-class, Ellis recognizes that, like all avant-garde movements, the NBA at its beginning is still an elitist thing where style is often as important as content, and where artists wearing “complete Gucci or Louis Vuitton leather outfits” coexist with young intellectuals with “little, round glasses, Ghanaian, kinte-cloth

scarves, and, increasingly, tiny, neat dreadlocks” (240). However, if the relative class homogeneity of these artists can pose a series of problems, Ellis is careful to notice that wealth does not necessarily result in political apathy: young black artists are still guided by the lessons of Black Power, they generally display radical leftist sympathies and manifest their political engagement in their work, only they claim that “you don’t have to be black and poor to be black and angry” (241). As a result of their political awareness artists of the NBA can interrogate their black identities effectively, pushing the boundaries of what it means to be black without ever denying their racial salience. In this sense, the cultural mulattoes theorized by Ellis never try to accommodate their blackness to mainstream society’s expectations, but open the meaning of blackness to include what pleases their own selves instead of what could please either the white or black worlds.

On the contrary, those who try to accommodate blackness to the requests of a large mixed public end up losing their authenticity, and becoming a faded version of their black selves. As a matter of fact, Ellis presents two possible directions towards which the cultural mulatto can gravitate: one is that in which cultural mulattoes can profit from the opportunities offered by a desegregated society and present their art, informed by their black identity and by the cultural legacies of the black experience, to a mixed public, and one is what he calls the “assimilationist nightmare,” who tries to please both blacks and whites instead of him/herself and ends up pleasing neither. As an example of assimilationist nightmares, Ellis mentions Lionel Richie and Whitney Houston, whose later performances are, in his opinion, “so lifeless precisely because they have applied Porcelana fade cream to their once extremely soulful throats” (242). The difference between “thriving hybrids” and “neutered mutations” (242) lies therefore in the former’s capacity to adapt themselves to the changed socio-political environment of post-Civil Rights America without compromising their authenticity. “Assimilationist nightmares,” more than cultural mulattoes, echo tragic mulattoes, who are caught between the black and white world and do not feel fully integrated in either. The cultural mulatto, on the contrary, has freed himself from the necessity to please anyone but himself and in so doing has transcended the stereotypes traditionally associated with blackness. Cultural mulattoes do not need to perform an essentialized blackness to gain cultural credibility in the African American community, but they also do not accept to compromise their blackness, to “fade” or “soften” it so as to avoid being perceived as threatening by white people.

The subtle but fundamental difference between cultural mulattoes and assimilationist nightmares had already been effectively exemplified by Ellis in his acclaimed novel *Platitude*,

published in 1988, one year before “The New Black Aesthetic” appeared on *Callaloo*. *Platitudes* is a metafiction that narrates the vicissitudes of writers Dewayne Wellington and Isshee Ayam, who collaborate to write the story of a young black man (Earle) who falls in love with a working-class black girl from uptown Harlem (Dorothy), and of their coming of age as cultural mulattoes in Manhattan. Although both Earle and Dorothy have been educated in a multiracial environment and are able to move rather comfortably in both white and black groups, they exemplify two different types of cultural mulattoes: Earle is a “neutered mutation” in that he moves in a mainly white world and does not really fit in Harlem, while Dorothy can move with ease both in Harlem and downtown without ever feeling out of place. *Platitudes* not only exemplifies the cultural mulatto/assimilationist nightmare dichotomy, it also skillfully illustrates the rupture between soul and post-soul aesthetic, as well as the distaste of NBA artists for monolithic tales of blackness. In fact, the first version of Earle’s story written by Dewayne is changed by Isshee, who is a feminist writer and claims that the character of Dorothy has been sexualized and stereotyped. As a consequence, she retells the story from her own feminist perspective, in turn relying on positivist stereotypes such as the “strong black woman.” Dewayne rejects the images influenced by the respectability politics suggested by Isshee, although he agrees to adapt the text to incorporate some of the feminist elements she proposed. In this way, the text shows the artistic tensions that are created as soul literature turns into post-soul: the “tale of blackness” narrated through Earle’s interactions with Dorothy is continuously altered and adapted in accordance to Isshee’s and Dewayne’s beliefs, which eventually leads the reader to understand that there is no single notion of how blackness should be represented and that representations of black characters that rest on old stereotypes cannot function in the post-Civil Rights era, although elements of continuity exist between the vernacular tradition and the contemporary scene.

Ellis’s fiction and essay attracted immediate attention from literary critics. In the same issue of *Callaloo* in which “The New Black Aesthetic” was published, Eric Lott replied with his “Response to Trey Ellis’s: ‘The New Black Aesthetic,’” a short piece in which he praises the optimism and enthusiasm that emerge from Ellis’s work both in fiction and non-fiction, and appreciates the inclusiveness of the aesthetic he outlines. However, Lott laments a lack of class consciousness in Ellis’s NBA, and comments that a deeper reflection is needed on the relationship between black middle-class and black masses in terms of cultural production. Moreover, Lott points out that although black institutions such as those mentioned by Ellis are essential to support the work of young black artists, they rarely base their agenda solely on

supporting a post-liberated aesthetic. Lott's essay provoked Ellis's reply, also published in the same issue of *Callaloo*, "Response to NBA critique," in which the author defends in six synthetic statements the validity of his thesis and faces the accusation of avoiding politics and ignoring class. Ellis bluntly declares the "leftist, neo-Nationalist" political stance of NBA artists, and at point three argues that:

just because they are no longer ashamed that their parents and perhaps their grandparents went to college doesn't mean they cavalierly ignore the economic problems of the majority of blacks. In fact these black artists, like most young artists, almost ritualistically castigate their buppie contemporaries—misguided alter egos—that have turned into investment banker/Republicans ("Response" 250).

If Ellis in his original piece admitted that the NBA was, at least for the moment being, dominated by a small group of artists of means, in his response to Lott he also realistically points out that "being a middle class artist, black or white, has always been the rule rather than the exception," a reality that, he claims, started with Phyllis Weathley (251). Ellis therefore claims that what is new and different with the NBA is not the fact that black art is produced mainly by middle-class artists, but that these artists chose blackness while witnessing other blacks, raised in similar circumstances, who "are surprised by their own skin color every time they pass a mirror" (251).

As a consequence, at point five Ellis adds a new and fundamental dimension to his definition of the NBA: that of racial authenticity. When he claims that "we don't take our 'soul' for granted because we had to fight to maintain it," Ellis clearly states what he had only implied with his cultural mulatto/assimilationist nightmare dichotomy, that is the effort made by artists that adhere to the NBA to authenticate their blackness while at the same time pushing against the limitations imposed by traditional expectations of blackness. Blacks who "are surprised by their own skin color every time they pass a mirror," despite their pigmentation and heritage, are not "real blacks:" what separates the "real" from the "fake" or even the "sell-out" is the will to choose and embrace blackness. This deliberate choice, the "fight to maintain" soul, evidences the performative nature of blackness: paradoxically, blackness can be authentic only when it is staged, that is when it is consciously chosen and interpreted through commonly recognized signs. However, what NBA artists try to renegotiate is the exact nature of these signs. As E. Patrick Johnson notices, blackness is elusive and slippery, but the impulse to fix and define it is nevertheless strong in every generation of African Americans, since "the pursuit of authenticity is inevitably an emotional and moral one" (2). In particular, this impulse is felt in

times of crisis or instability, when “the authenticity of earlier versions of blackness is called into question.” NBA artists therefore feel the need to redefine the militant, often essentialized version of blackness of their parent and grandparents, and to establish identity politics that may work for them. The urge to redefine blackness, however, is nothing new: Johnson indeed claims that “the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness in the very thing that constituted ‘black culture’” (2).

The focus on racial authenticity that clearly connotes Ellis’s work has been analyzed by literary critic J. Martin Favor, famous for his research on authentic blackness<sup>25</sup>, in his essay “Ain’t Nothin’ Like the Real Thing, Baby: Trey Ellis’s Search for New Black Voices” (1993), also published in *Callaloo*. In his article, Favor argues that Ellis’s manifesto is characterized by a more or less explicit intention to examine the way in which artistic production can or cannot reflect and elaborate something “real,” and that two different versions of “reality” are taken into account and compared: the one of a growing black middle-class producing the art that Ellis is analyzing, and the one of the constant oppression of black people by white Americans, a duality which E. Franklin Frazier refers to as “a world of make-believe into which [the artist] has sought an escape [from] the world of *reality*” (Frazier qtd in Favor 694, Favor’s emphasis). Favor notices that Ellis’s work must be concerned with questions of authenticity, since the very core of the NBA is that of representing the voices that make up the reality of black people in the contemporary scene. Which are the voices, though, that account for the authentic black experience? As it is evident in *Platitudes*, Ellis creates a heteroglossic structure that combines together influences coming from both high and mass culture, and from the black vernacular tradition as well as from the more recent post-Civil Rights scene. These influences represent a wide range of different and often contradicting black identities, which complicate the notion of black authenticity to the point that the reader wonders if such a concept makes sense at all.

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<sup>25</sup> J. Martin Favor is the author of *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (1999), in which he investigates the concept of authentic blackness in four novels of the Harlem Renaissance. Although this famous text has been published six years after the 1993 essay that I reference, the focus on racial authenticity informs Favor’s works since its beginnings.

Favor, moreover, notices that Ellis's work, both in fiction and non-fiction, is embedded in the tradition of Signifyin(g),<sup>26</sup> in that the ironic stance which characterizes *Platitudes* as well as "The New Black Aesthetic" is used to question the authenticity of traditional tropes of blackness, exactly like Signifyin(g) questions stereotypical images of African Americans ("Ain't Nothing" 695). As a matter of fact, both Signifyin(g) and post-modern parody question black authenticity and expose the absurdity of monolithic tropes of blackness to that section of the reading public who has the necessary social and political knowledge to understand the irony. What Favor does not point out, however, is that if traditional Signifyin(g) attacks stereotypes created by mainstream society, contemporary parodies expose artificial notions of black authenticity created both *inside* and outside of the African American community, so that intraracial critique becomes one of the main novelties of the New Black Aesthetic. Favor sees in this combination of Signifyin(g) and post-modernist parody the principal expression of the cultural mulatto archetype theorized by Ellis, in that Signifyin(g) implies that the performer must identify himself/herself as non-white, therefore always in relation to whiteness, while a combination of both black and white influences allows artists to engage all the cultural forces that characterize the society in which they were raised. As a consequence, according to Favor, characters who are cultural mulattoes engaging in acts of interracial as well as intra-racial parody embody the authentic experience of blacks who have grown up in a society in which black and white cultures never exist in isolation.

This interpretation is interesting in that it theorizes the convergence, in the cultural mulatto archetype, of the centuries-old tradition of Signifyin(g) and of the contemporary taste for satire and parody. However, what is problematic is that Favor seems to conceive postmodernism solely as a white movement. In fact, reading his formulation of the "mixed" cultural sources (black Signifyin(g) and white post-modern parody) that should have created the cultural mulatto Trey Ellis, one cannot help but be reminded of bell hooks's complaint that postmodernism seems to remain a "discursive practice [...] dominated primarily by the voices of white male intellectuals and/or academic elites who speak to and about one another with coded familiarity" ("Postmodern Blackness"). An interrogation of the contribution of black writers to postmodernist theory is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is important to notice that Favor, as a white male academic, seems to have fallen into the trap of characterizing postmodernism

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<sup>26</sup> I adopt the spelling of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to distinguish the traditional African American practice of Signifyin(g) from the current use of the verb. On the emergence and implications of Signifyin(g), see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.



(and postmodernist irony, more specifically) as a discourse made up of solely white voices which Ellis, being a cultural mulatto, feels free to utilize since “racial loyalty” does not prevent him from incorporating “white” influences in his writing.

The problem is that postmodern parody is not solely the domain of white authors (just think for example of Ishmael Reed’s 1972 satirical novel *Mumbo Jumbo*), as bell hooks convincingly claims (“Postmodern Blackness”). As a matter of fact, Trey Ellis himself has been considered not only an important postmodern author, but also, as Eric Lott writes, the theoretician of “one of the only postmodernisms with a conscience” (245). What cultural mulattoes do is not just “mixing up” different cultural sources—this, as Ellis himself makes clear, has been done since the time of Phillis Wheatley, who probably never read anything written by a black author—but rather questioning the very fabric of black identity by pushing against the borders which contain it (Ellis, “Response” 251). Moreover, not only the cultural mulatto is not just the result of a combination of white and black cultural influences, but also postmodernism has been instrumental in sustaining the discourse of fluid, expansive blackness that artists of the NBA are carrying on, especially in their critique to essentialized blackness, and consequently cannot be referenced as a white influence only. bell hooks in fact states that:

the critique of essentialism encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity. We have too long had imposed upon us, both from the outside and the inside, a narrow constricting notion of blackness. Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static overdetermined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of the self and the assertion of agency (“Postmodern Blackness”).

In short, Favor is right when he points out the importance of authenticity in Ellis’s fiction and non-fiction, and when he locates parody as the principal means through which authenticity is interrogated and eventually dismantled, but if the target of this parody is both interracial and intra-racial, the source of parody is intra-racial only: it is a distinctive, culturally specific black voice that wishes to remain black, while at the same time expanding the borders of blackness.

However, what is interesting is that Favor sees in the theorization of the cultural mulatto a critique to essentialist notions of racial authenticity championed by the Black Arts Movement, which considered the economics of slavery as the matrix for every authentic black American experience (697). Ellis in fact understands the peculiar socio-political situation from which the

essentialism of the Black Arts Movement emerged but claims the rights to narrate a “reality of blackness” that draws from other influences: as Favor puts it, “because the material base of a writer and his/her subjects may have changed does not necessarily mean that the resulting representation is somehow less authentic” (697). The complex relation of the NBA to racial authenticity is therefore linked to the rejection of essentialist notions of blackness and to a different approach to mainstream culture, which is referenced and appropriated, without making the production of the black artist “less black”. As Ellis makes clear in his response to Eric Lott’s critique of the NBA: “In the Twenties blacks wanted to be considered as good as the dominant culture. In the Sixties we wanted no part of the dominant culture at all. Today the NBA wants to dominate it” (250). The NBA refuses to pander to the white gaze to have its art recognized, but it also refuses separatism: its goal is to dominate the dominant, that is to tell its own narrative of its own people, drawing from as many influences as the artists please and without limits coming either from the white or the black community.

Another interesting question Favor’s essay investigates is whether all the different black voices registered in the cultural production of artists of the NBA, and in Ellis’s production in particular, are given the same amount of space and validation. That is: are there black voices which are seen as more “authentically black” than others? The question is particularly meaningful in that Ellis keeps working on the modes of representation of blackness, and specifically, as Favor aptly points out, on the “inherently oxymoronic nature of ‘authentic representation’” (699). Like all artists of the post-soul aesthetic or New Black Aesthetic, Ellis enjoys digging into the processes that lead an artist to represent blackness in a way or another, that is, he shows us the journey rather than the final product, as is evident in *Platitudes*. In the novel, the search for a narrative voice that can mediate geographical (rural Southern v. urban), class (middle v. working-class) and gendered discourses is made explicit through the collaboration of Dewayne and Isshee and their continuous process of rewriting and revision. In short, Ellis’s fiction perfectly exemplifies the principles of his aesthetic manifesto, giving more or less space and validity to different black “social types”<sup>27</sup> in the course of the narration, and presenting in this

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Dyer, in his analysis of character construction, analyzes the distinction between “social types” and “stereotypes,” basing his work on Orrin E. Klapp’s book *Heroes, Villains and Fools: The Changing American Character* (1962). Dyer defines social types as “those who live by the rules of society,” people whom one would expect to encounter on a daily basis and who have an active role in society. On the contrary, stereotypes represent “those whom the rules are designated to exclude,” therefore people outside of society, characterized as functionless or dysfunctional. Dyer argues that this distinction explains while stereotypes are rigid, while social types are open-ended, flexible, and allow freedom for choice and self-definition (Dyer 355).

way a black voice that is not fixed in monolithic notions of black authenticity, but is constantly in transition.

### Blaxploration and Allusion-Disruption Gestures: A New Take on Authentic Blackness

In the already quoted introduction to the 2007 Winter issue of *African American Review*, Bertram Ashe effectively theorizes an identifiable post-soul literary aesthetic, that is he clarifies the characteristics that a text should necessarily possess in order to be understood as post-soul. His essay is the first in its genre, in that it provides scholars of African American literature with an extremely useful set of tools to distinguish post-soul texts from texts that are best explored and understood through other theoretical approaches. Ashe is keenly aware of the fact that this “post-liberated” aesthetic refuses strict categorizations, and that the artists he identifies as post-soul “regard any sort of labeling—let alone the inherent labeling involved in defining an aesthetic—as severely limiting the freedom they demand” (612). However, he claims that any aesthetic, any school, needs recognizable features that make it distinguishable:

Ultimately however, the net effects, intentional or not, of the reluctance to offer any sort of “restrictive code” for this “post” generation’s black art is to somehow suggest that anything a black artist who was born or came of age in this post-Civil Rights movement era creates is post-soul. And that is a problem. An observer should be able to recognize participants in an aesthetic, even an aesthetic that takes its vastness and unpredictability as a point of pride (“Theorizing” 612-13).

Consequently, he seeks to establish a critical apparatus for reading post-soul literature, basing his criteria on the common traits he has observed in the several texts he has studied and taught for more than twenty years. As he explains, earlier manifestos of post-soul aesthetic were more in the tradition of Langston Hughes “The Negro Artist and the racial Mountain” (1926) than of Richard Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) or Larry Neal’s “The Black Arts Movement” (1968), that is they were concerned with registering what young black artists were already doing rather than suggesting what they should be doing.<sup>28</sup> Ashe’s “Introduction” mixes both approaches, in that the critic describes the attitude that was already informing various artists in literature as well as other forms of popular culture, but at the same time he also

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<sup>28</sup> Ashe refers to Trey Ellis’s “The New Black Aesthetic” (1989), Greg Tate’s “Cult-Nates Meets Freaky Deke” (1986), and Lisa Jones’s essays in “Bulletproof Diva” (1994) but I would add that also George Nelson’s essays, in which the critic for the first time comes up with the phrase “post-soul”, are descriptive rather than prescriptive. The intention of critics who operated in the post-soul arena before Ashe was to register the emergence of a new artistic sensibility, rather than to define its parameters.

establishes some guidelines to direct the work of scholars of African American literature and culture. His essay, therefore, is not a prescriptive manifesto in which he encourages artists to write in a certain way and treat certain topics, but an attempt to channel the work they are already producing towards the creation of a recognizable school. The pillars of post-soul (literary) aesthetic are described by Ashe in what he defines as his “post-soul triangular matrix,” which rests on the cultural mulatto archetype, the exploration of blackness according to non-traditional expectations, and what he defines as “allusion-disruption gestures” (613). Ashe offers therefore a helpful model that answers the “who”, “what” and “how” of literary post-soul theory, in that his triangular matrix offers a clear description of the authors, themes, and rhetorical strategies of post-soul texts.

I have already treated the cultural mulatto archetype extensively in the previous paragraph, however there is a point in Ashe’s essay that is worth mentioning, and that is the fact that cultural mulattism is not always seen by the involved artists as something easy to deal with. Ellis’s description of the cultural mulatto in “The New Black Aesthetic” is informed by the enthusiasm that characterizes his whole essay, in that the author claims that cultural mulattoes “navigate easily” in the white world (235). However, Ashe notices that the phrase “cultural mulatto” was first used by Reginald McKnight in his short story “The Honey Boys” (1988) with a much less optimistic connotation. The black teenager who is the protagonist of the story considers himself a cultural mulatto not because he enjoys the advantages of an integrated upbringing, but because he feels rootless, a black boy with no black cultural references. There are certainly artists who embrace the fluidity allowed by cultural mulattism, the freedom to “navigate”, easily or not, in white and black culture alike and to take advantage of the sources of inspiration offered by both worlds. However, there are artists who come to accept the rootlessness implied in the concept of cultural mulattism only after a long struggle with identity politics. The fact of not being rooted into the traditional tropes of one specific culture can represent a source of anxiety, especially during adolescence, a period in which everybody traditionally experience doubts and insecurities about who they are, and that is often described by post-soul authors as the moment in life in which they started to investigate their racial self.

Ashe notes that of course all African Americans and indeed all Americans are cultural mulattoes to some extent, but that these artists are crossing the traditional racial lines in popular culture in a way that has seldom been done before. As Trey Ellis had already noticed in “The New Black Aesthetic,” it is the growing number of cultural mulattoes that makes the difference in the post-Civil Rights era: this conscious “crossing [of] the traditionally separated racial lines in

US popular culture” has certainly been done before, but what was then an exception is now the norm. Moreover, we have to consider that nowadays it is taken for granted that African American people are raised in a multicultural environment—although full integration and racial equality are far from having been achieved—but that when legal segregation was still in place this was not the case. As a consequence, the fact of being socialized in an integrated environment as opposed to an all-black environment is a major difference between the new generations of African Americans and the previous ones, and is an element that necessarily has an impact on artistic production.

If the first pillar of the post-soul triangular matrix has to do with who these artists are, the second deals with what they do with their art. Ashe defines the complex, multifaceted work of exploring black identity in the contemporary scene as “blaxploration”, namely the exploration of blackness. As he explains:

These artists and texts trouble blackness, they worry blackness; they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity. Still, from my vantage point, this “troubling” of blackness by post-soul writers is ultimately done in service to black people (“Theorizing” 614).

“Blaxploration” is probably the most notable trait of post-soul artists in all disciplines, and particularly in literature. As this passage notices, post-soul writers deal with the eternal question of what it means to be black and explore the meaning and the instability of signifiers that mark the category “blackness.” The element of the struggle for political freedom is still present in their work (just think of the critique of gentrification and police brutality in Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout*, or the fight against mass incarceration in Bryan Stevenson’s memoir) however another element that is equally important is the writer’s preoccupation with troubling ideals of racial authenticity. In fact, as Ashe notices, post-soul writers are not preoccupied with defining a stable and coherent black identity—a fact that is strikingly evident in memoirs and other forms of life writing—but accept the continuous redefinition and re-elaboration of their racial self: notions of “authentic blackness” are therefore the constant target of post-soul writers’ caustic critique.

Blackness is conceived as performative, and the qualities that define blackness are represented as fluid and contingent. Authors refuse to perform pre-established behaviors in order to be

perceived as authentic and in this way they de-naturalize blackness, they reveal the impossibility of an “essential” black self. Moreover, Ashe’s last remark in the quoted passage of his “Introduction” is particularly interesting: post-soul artists interrogate notions of black authenticity, but they do so “in service to black people”. When creating the neologism “blaxploration”, Ashe is consciously signifyin(g) on 1970s blaxploitation movies, a genre that has been strongly criticized for making money by perpetuating stereotypes about African Americans.<sup>29</sup> With his referencing of the genre, Ashe seems to suggest that the work that post-soul artists are doing is diametrically different. Post-soul authors do not reject traditional notions of black identity because they want to distance themselves from blackness, or because they want to exploit the alleged advantages they might have if they were perceived as “less black.” These artists explore a non-essentialized blackness, but while doing that they also “maintain a dogged allegiance to their communities” (Ashe, “Theorizing” 614), even when they criticize those same communities. That is why their work of “troubling blackness” is “ultimately done in service to black people”: exposing the permeability of racial labels, the inadequacy of fixed and monolithic notions of black identity, and the fallacy of prescriptive ideals of racial loyalty is seen as something that might help black people to express their individuality in a freer and more confident way, without the threat of being accused of racial inauthenticity, of “not being black enough.”

Contrary to accusations that post-soul artists do not treat issues of racial inequality and racialized power imbalance, Ashe’s statement confirms his awareness that the exploration of blackness and the critique of racial authenticity can—and indeed does—coexist with a constant concern for the wellbeing of African American communities. Challenging the traditional boundaries of blackness is not done to the detriment of black people, nor does this work imply a disregard of the persistence of racism. The performativity of blackness, the contingency of markers of racial authenticity, and the impatience with prescriptive ideas on how to act and think black, more often than not, are explored alongside issues that fall under that broad umbrella of “new racism”. Paul Beatty is a wonderful example of this ability to “blaxplore” and evidence the necessity of fighting racial discrimination at the same time. The protagonist of his

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<sup>29</sup> The most notable blaxploitation movie is certainly Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), which initiated the whole genre. In 1972, members of the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership and the National Urban League formed the Coalition Against Blaxploitation to call to an end to this genre, which they perceived as damaging the image of the whole African American community. However, several critics point out that despite the shortcomings of the genre, blaxploitation movies allowed black people to be portrayed for the first time outside the typical roles reserved to them by the Hollywood industry (such as the “mammy” or other more or less servile characters) and to be the heroes of their own narratives. See Guerrero 69-112.

latest novel, *The Sellout* (2015), is constantly reminded of his racial inauthenticity by the pompous president of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, a local organization for the uplift of black people, and chooses to define his allegiance to the black and Latino community in which he lives in ways that are strikingly different than those suggested—or rather imposed—by the Intellectuals. Issues of authentic blackness coexist therefore with the reflection on different approaches to racial uplift, but also with more critical problems such as police brutality (the father of the protagonist has been murdered by a policeman for no reason) and the virtual erasure of black and Latinx communities by the territories they have historically occupied as a consequence of gentrification.

Another text that is often quoted as an excellent example of “troubling blackness” is Percival Everett’s *Erasure* (2001). In this touching novel the protagonist Thelonious “Monk” Ellison is presented as a non-stereotypical black character, a writer who comes from a well-to-do family and writes treatises on French poststructuralists instead of stories from the ghetto or the rural South, while listening to Mahler instead of hip-hop. The exploration of his *non*-traditional blackness is not carried on as a way to remark Monk’s “bougie” detachment from a blackness he considers limiting: quite on the contrary, Monk embraces his black heritage and never manifests a desire to “apologize” for his blackness or to mitigate it. However, he also refuses the impositions of the publishing industry and the limits of traditional expectations of blackness. Monk does not reject blackness, but people’s assumptions on blackness. At the same time, the text also critiques the shortsightedness of publishing houses when it comes to black authors—a theme already notably treated by intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston and bell hooks<sup>30</sup>—as well as the propensity to exploit stereotypes on black life to increase sales.

Clearly, blaxploration shows that blackness is not stable, but in constant transition, and that its markers shift in time and space. As a consequence, one of the favorite techniques utilized by post-soul writers to emphasize this concept is what Ashe calls “allusion-disruption” gestures (615), namely the mentioning of traditional tropes of blackness, consolidated in previous decades, only to contradict them shortly after, in order to evidence the flimsy and unstable nature of their supposed authenticity. Therefore, post-soul writers often signify on previous periods of African American history, especially periods marked by a strong, dominant narrative of how black people are supposed to think and behave, such as during the Black Power

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<sup>30</sup> Respectively in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (1950) and “Postmodern Blackness” (1990).

movement. The intense nationalistic rhetoric of Black Power is in fact the main target of these (often satirical) allusion-disruption gestures, although an ambivalent relationship with the 1960s and 1970s characterizes post-soul. Lisa Jones, daughter of Amiri Baraka, is quoted in Trey Ellis's "The new Black Aesthetic" and claims that it is the work of the previous generation that made the New Black Aesthetic possible: "though we make fun of them, if it weren't for Larry Neal and my father, we wouldn't have the freedom now to be so nonchalant" (Jones qtd in Ellis, "NBA" 236-37).

This quote well captures the ambivalent relationship between post-soul writers and their elders, which rests on the tensions between the grateful acknowledgement of the work done by civil rights and Black Power activists and the desire to contradict prescriptive narratives of blackness popularized at the time, a desire which is chiefly expressed through allusion-disruption gestures. These gestures are well exemplified in the prose of writers who address the complex relationships between themselves and their nationalistic fathers, and are marked by the writers' attempts to point out the contradictory nature of their supposed racial authenticity. Several examples of this can be found in non-fiction (such as in the memoirs of Danzy Senna, MK Asante, Jr., or Ta-Nehisi Coates and the essays that make up Lisa Jones's *Bulletproof Diva*) as well as in fiction (for example in the relationship between the protagonists and their fathers in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* or Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*).

It is important to add that although the Black Power movement is certainly the main target of allusion-disruption gestures, it is not the only one, and signifyin(g) upon previous eras of African American history is possible too: Ashe mentions, for example, Paul Beatty's *The White Boy's Shuffle* and his signifyin(g) on Swen Kaufmann, the protagonist's ancestor who runs into slavery instead of away from it ("Theorizing" 616), but we could also add James McBride's ironic treatment of the abolitionist movement in *The Good Lord Bird* (2013). Mark Anthony Neal in his seminal *Soul Babies* (2002) explains post-soul artists' tendency to signify on previous eras as a result of the critical distance between these artists and their elders:

The generation(s) of black youth born after the early successes of the traditional civil rights movement are in fact divorced from the nostalgia associated with these successes and thus positioned to critically engage the movement's legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing (103).

Post-soul authors are clearly grateful to their elders for having fought for their rights, but the historical context in which they operate, together with their condition of cultural mulattism,



allows them to be in the position of questioning their strategies and of assessing their legacy more objectively than their predecessors could do because of the emotional baggage that accompanies their personal, direct involvement with the struggles of those years. Consequently, the fact that post-soul authors, to be considered as such, must be born or have come of age *after* the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements is of critical importance in determining their literary politics.

At the same time, the chronological proximity of post-soul authors to the nationalistic rhetoric of the 1970s makes it impossible to claim for a complete break between their respective literary traditions: in fact, as Natalie Margo Crawford makes clear, there are substantial elements of continuity between black writers of the Black Arts Movement and those of the twenty-first century. In her *Black Post-Blackness* (2017), Crawford notices that these two literary moments share a similar interest in abstraction, satire, the use of mixed-media, formal experimentation and the public display of interiority. Given the many points in common between twenty-first century black literature and visual culture and the Black Arts Movement, she conceives the contemporary black cultural scene as marked by tensions that look both “backwards” (in their re-elaboration of the issues brought forth by the previous generation) and “forwards” (in their formulation of new ways of interpreting blackness). Crawford terms “Black Post-Blackness” this circular and somewhat hybrid cultural space,<sup>31</sup> and defines this concept as “a way to understand the continuity between the BAM and the twenty-first-century African American literature and culture that seems to be ‘post-black’” (4). In the light of Crawford’s scholarship, it is therefore correct to interpret allusion-disruption gestures as attempts to objectively assess, and eventually criticize, the legacy of past eras of African American history in post-soul literature, all the while recognizing that claiming a definitive and totalizing break between the post-soul aesthetics and the nationalistic aesthetics of the BAM would be simplistic and ultimately inaccurate.

Another interesting characteristic of allusion-disruption gestures is their tendency to be aimed at fathers. All the examples mentioned by Ashe in his theorization of the allusion-disruption technique, as well as the examples I retrieved in the several memoirs analyzed in this dissertation, invariably involve black males, a trait that requires some consideration. Discussing

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<sup>31</sup> “Circular” in that “the BAM and twenty-first-century spirit of black post-blackness denaturalizes this investment in blackness as a beginning or an end” (219), and “hybrid” because Crawford underlines the transnational and transcultural nature of both cultural moments.

the critical reception of the notorious Moynihan Report,<sup>32</sup> Mark Anthony Neal in *Soul Babies* stresses the patriarchal ideals that were at the base of much of the nationalistic rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s, and that are criticized by the following generations. Neal points out that the Moynihan Report was popular among the supporters of Reagan's cuts to affirmative programs and welfare funding, providing supposedly reliable scientific data on which to base these decisions, but that "the report also gained credibility among black nationalist thinkers who found Moynihan's thesis on the recovery of black patriarchy *useful to their ideological concerns*" (61, my emphasis). Mumia Abu-Jamal, current political prisoner and former member of the Black Panthers Party, substantiates Neal's claim by recognizing the misogyny that informed some sections of the movement: "much of the movement was indeed deeply macho in orientation and treated women in many of these groups in a distinctly secondary and disrespectful fashion" (160), he concedes, explaining that in some cases "for men who, often for the first time in their lives, exercised extraordinary power over others, sexism became a tool of sexual dominance over subordinates" (166).

Conscious of the problematic nature of the patriarchal ideals that often informed organized resistance in the previous decades, post-soul authors typically direct their satire to their nationalistic fathers (both biological and figurative), and welcome the pleas of black feminist critics who, from the end of the 1970s onward, insistently pointed out the necessity of a reformulation of black gender politics and criticized the representation of the experience of black men as the authentic embodiment of blackness. In fact, the emergence of post-soul roughly coincides with that of womanist prose, and it is therefore frequent that post-soul authors address and criticize the hypocrisies of what Mark Anthony Neal calls the "Strong Black Man," that is the archetype of patriarchal African American manhood that, as Neal convincingly argues, is already theorized in the writings of Martin Delany and is implicit in DuBois's conception of the "talented tenth" (*New Black Man* 8). The idea of the Strong Black Man informed the agenda of the Civil Rights and Black Power movement considerably, and was further reiterated in the occasion of the 1995 Million Man March, organized by Louis

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<sup>32</sup> *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, commonly known as the "Moynihan Report", supported the idea that the prevalence of single-mother families among African Americans was directly related to what are described as "pathological" conditions that affect many black communities (chronic poverty, joblessness, high dropout rates). Moynihan suggests that this peculiar familial structure dates back to the forced disruption of black nuclear families during slavery, which led to the emergence of matriarchal communities led by domineering, "emasculating" black women. Several scholars have criticized the Report as racially and gender-biased and as an example of "blaming the victim" for its depiction of African American women (e.g. Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", 1987).

Farrakhan, in which the leader explicitly invited black women and girls to support their men not by taking part in the march, but by staying at home with the children (*New Black Man* 17). The fact that the notion of the Strong Black Man had such a strong hold in the African American community, and resurfaces at regular intervals in time, confirms Neal's idea that "the 'Strong Black Man' was conceived as the ultimate counter to the distorted images of shiftless, shuffling, threatening, and dangerous black men that populated virtually every facet of American public and commercial culture, and thus the image of the 'Strong Black Man' is maintained at all cost" (15).

However, works like Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (first premiered in 1976), Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) and above all Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and its film adaptation by Steven Spielberg (1985) sparked an animated debate around gender relations in black communities. These authors strongly attacked the misogyny of the Strong Black Man archetype, calling for a more progressive black masculinity, informed by the lessons of great black feminist thinkers. Several post-soul works clearly hint at those lessons, and the allusion-disruption strategies they enact are clearly meant at pointing out the contradictions of Strong Black Men. For example, the film *Barbershop* (2002) references the extramarital affairs of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reverend Jesse Jackson, both products of the black church, highlighting the patriarchal roots of this institution and attacking the hypocrisy of the politics of respectability often invoked by both leaders. More explicit attacks are targeted at the Strong Black Men of the Black Power movement and Afrocentric movement, for example in the works of Danzy Senna (both her fiction and non-fiction) and in the memoirs of MK Asante and Ta-Nehisi Coates, in which allusion-disruption gestures are frequently used to highlight the hypocrisies and contradictions of fathers who not only impose their patriarchal ideas on their respective families, but allegedly promote the unity of black families even when they are involved in extramarital affairs or other actions that will obviously disrupt this unity (famous is the legal controversy between Senna and her father caused by a scene in her memoir in which he beats her mother).

In short, allusion disruption gestures, often directed at Black Power and almost always directed at black men with patriarchal views, not only criticize conservative black manhood and point at the necessity of a more progressive black feminist manhood, but also destroy symbols of racial authenticity. Nationalist fathers and black male leaders are in fact described as the representatives of an authentic blackness that should be stable, coherent and unshakable, but

when their contradictions are revealed, the smooth surface of their authentic blackness starts to crack. As a consequence, I interpret allusion-disruption gestures aimed at black nationalist fathers as the quintessential feature of post-soul texts, what undermines prescriptive notions of racial authenticity.

### Black Artists or Just Artists? Black Authenticity in Thelma Golden's Conception of Post-Blackness

It is by now recognized that the *Freestyle* exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem curated by Thelma Golden in 2001 is the context in which the term “post-black” emerged and was popularized. The Studio Museum is an acknowledged and respected institution in the field African American visual arts, and since its opening in 1968 has contributed to launch the career of countless African American artists, among which figure renowned names such as Kara Walker, Kehinde Wiley, Fred Wilson and Rashid Johnson. This is why the Museum has been identified over the course of the decades as one of the most influential sources for new trends and aesthetics in black visual culture, and as the site in which new artistic sensibilities are made well-known through a wide variety of educational programs that involve the general public. As a consequence, ideas that are generated by and in response to the exhibitions held at the Studio Museum are generally thought to have a strong impact on the African American cultural and artistic scene. When in 2001 the *Freestyle* exhibition introduced the public to the notion of “post-blackness,” the debate on the implications of this concept almost overshadowed that on the work of the twenty-eight emerging young artists who presented their latest work at the exhibition. A brief consideration of the exhibition catalogue, in which Golden and her collaborators discuss the debated concept, seems therefore necessary in this chapter, given the popularity that “post-black” has enjoyed, its frequent use beyond the field of visual arts, and its overlapping with the concept of post-soul. In particular, in this section I am interested in investigating the several ways in which Golden and her collaborators engaged—consciously or not—the concept of authentic blackness in the catalogue of the *Freestyle* exhibition, and in how they contributed in re-opening the debate on the racial self-identification of black artists and on the scope of black arts.

Golden's essay “Post...”, which serves as an introduction to the exhibition catalogue, inevitably enters the centuries-long debate on the role of black artists and their self-identification as such, when the curator claims that “contemporary artists who identify as black do not all identify as black artists” (14). This apparently contradictory statement is very intriguing, and immediately

brings to mind Countee Cullen's assertion, contested by Langston Hughes in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," that he wanted to be a poet, not a Negro poet. The two positions beg to be compared, but although they can strike the reader as very similar at first glance, a fundamental difference emerges in the attitude of the contemporary young artists represented by Golden. While Cullen's affirmation that he did not want to be read as a "Negro poet" could be interpreted—and has, indeed, been interpreted—as a more or less veiled rejection of blackness, the artists whose stance Golden is describing clearly insist on their self-identification as blacks, but refuse to see blackness as the only, or at least the main, category that should influence their themes and aesthetics. Nevertheless, Golden adds that although these artists "were adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists," "their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness," a statement that complicates the idea that these artists simply want to extend the object of their analysis beyond blackness (14). What is then the point of not being labeled as "black artists"? Although none of these young intellectuals tells us explicitly, it seems that what they are expressing, and what Golden is trying to convey in her essay, is not a rejection of blackness, but of restrictive identity labels. These artists are exploring blackness in their work, in fact blackness seems to be the main focus of their investigations, and it is not seen as a too limiting category: they do not refuse to be classified as "black artists" because they see blackness as a restrictive field of artistic research and experimentation, but simply because they claim the freedom to not be labeled by others, to limit the power of the external gaze, and to define themselves on their own terms.

From the very first page of "Post...", it is clear that Golden is not naïve about the historical debate on the role of the black artist, and that she is actually keenly aware of the historical tensions that exist between artists who chose to embrace and celebrate blackness through their art, and those who refused to be labeled as solely black artists. Golden in fact claims that "to approach a conversation about 'black art,' ultimately means embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time," thus revealing her knowledge of the difficult position of black artists in the mainstream artistic establishment, and of previous attempts to analyze this peculiar status (14). But her introduction, when carefully read, shifts the paradigms of this question from the traditional debate on the necessity to use art in service to one's community or not, to a subtler layer of signification. These artists, Golden states, are separating their black identity from "blackness" as a category that can be the focus of their artistic investigations.

When we see the self-identification of the artist as something that can be detached from the target of their artistic research, we can recognize the peculiar position of contemporary African

American artists who investigate blackness but refuse to be categorized by anybody as “black artists”, or as anything else. When they claim to identify as black, they accept black identity as a self-chosen, consciously embraced identity, not a conferred identity, a random label that the mainstream artistic establishment has attached on them. The claim that post-black artists are rejecting or superseding blackness, therefore, does not find evidence in Golden’s words, which simply point out that what these artists are demanding is the right to freely define themselves and their art, even when blackness is the central topic of their analysis.

Moreover, the concern, expressed by several critics, that post-blackness downplays the complexity of previous eras of black cultural history is clearly contradicted by Golden’s essay. Many attacks on post-blackness emerged as a reaction against Touré’s text *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness*, their main claim being that post-blackness is an ahistorical concept, whose advocates disregard the contribution of previous movements to the contemporary black cultural scene. Such a position can be motivated if we base our understanding of post-blackness on a publication that obviously lacks a serious historical perspective such as Touré’s. However, in the original conception of Golden, the intention of denying the elements of continuity between post-black artists and previous artistic currents is not present at all. On the contrary, Golden acknowledges the influence of previous aesthetic sensibilities on her own and Glenn Ligon’s theorization of post-blackness. Although her “Post...” is a mere two-page essay, and although she underlines that the approach of post-black artists to questions of identity is new and fresh, she also clearly hints at the fact that she and Ligon did not come up with the idea of “post-blackness” out of the blue, but slowly formulated this concept as a response to (and not a reaction against) the “nationalistic/aesthetic dogma of the 1970s Black Arts Movement” and “late 1980s multiculturalism” (14).

The connection with the past is acknowledged also with regard to the work of the young artists presented at *Freestyle*. Golden mentions a long list of artists who emerged in the 90s and whose work informs that of the artists of *Freestyle*, pointing out that that generation “set the platform for this new post-black existence in contemporary art” (15). The question that generated the entire *Freestyle* project is therefore one that comes directly from the radical aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement, and that does not negate its importance and complexity at all: “How would black artists make work after the vital political activism of the 1960s, the focused, often essentialist Black Arts Movement of the 1970s, the theory-driven multiculturalism of the 1980s, and the late globalist expansion of the late 1990s? “Freestyle” was the answer to those questions” (14). In this passage Golden sees post-blackness as the continuation of a long

tradition of African American artistic production, and not as a movement that denies the complex history of the African American community, nor sees the focus on blackness and on African Americans' past as "passé". The contribution of artists from previous generations is further emphasized when Golden claims that while the work of post-black artists is extremely innovative in the variety of forms they choose for self-expression, a certain element of continuity with the past exists in that the *Freestyle* artists "like the generations before them [...] resist narrow definition" (15).

The context in which post-black artists carry on their exploration of blackness in the contemporary scene is dramatically different from that of artists who elaborated on these issues only a generation before, however Golden recognizes that young artists' work "in all of its various forms speaks to an individual freedom that is *a result of this transitional moment* in the quest to define ongoing changes in the evolution of African American art and ultimately to ongoing redefinition of blackness in contemporary culture" (15, my emphasis). The transition she mentions is from previous preoccupations with racism or with the mainstream representation of black people to a more individualistic concern with notions of racial identity, but the awareness that post-black artists possess of the work done by previous generations is tangible and undeniable. What changes is not the artists' will to identify as black and to investigate blackness, nor their intention to situate themselves as the heirs of a long and celebrated tradition of African American art. What changes is the context in which post-black artists operate, "a world where their particular cultural specificity is marketed to the planet and sold back to them" (15).

It seems plausible that in this scenario, in which the cultural specificity of black artists is commodified and "sold out", the investigation of blackness demands more introspective forms of analysis, with a focus on identity politics and on a quintessentially personal interpretation of one's black experience. Interestingly, Golden lists as the main cornerstones of this analysis the three elements that Bertram Ashe, six years later, would include in the theorization of his "post-soul triangular matrix" as the model according to which post-soul literature can be interpreted.<sup>33</sup> The first one is the cultural mulatto archetype: according to Golden, post-black artists "exemplify the presence of art school training in that they create work that refers to multiple

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<sup>33</sup> An in-depth explanation of Ashe's post-soul triangular matrix is offered in the previous paragraph. Here my intention is to point out an interesting similarity between Ashe's analysis of post-soul literature and Golden's considerations on post-black artists.

histories of contemporary art and culture—both non-Western and that of the Western Modernist tradition. Their influences are rich and varied.” The second element that both Golden and Ashe point out is a desire to expand the traditional meaning of blackness and to counteract notions of authentic blackness, in that these artists “resist narrow definitions.” The third and most complex point is their enactment of allusion-disruption gestures towards the black vernacular tradition, their will to contest the past while at the same time acknowledging its important role in shaping their aesthetics: “their work [...] speaks to an individual freedom that is a result of this transitional moment in the quest to define ongoing changes in the evolution of African American art and ultimately to ongoing redefinition of blackness in contemporary culture” (15).

It is therefore interesting that artists that have been labeled as “post-black” and writers who have been referred to as “post-soul” are enacting similar strategies to investigate both their black identity, and a more abstract idea of “travelling blackness” that is detached from their bodies and their personal experiences as black people. And although both “post-blackness” and the “post-soul” have been the target of negative criticism, a close and attentive look at the sources from which these concepts originated easily reveals that, in the minds of their first theorizers, both terms are not invested with an erasure or superseding of blackness, are not ahistorical nor apolitical, and fully acknowledge the precious legacy of previous eras of African American artistic production.

### Becoming Post-Black: Self-Determination and the Racialized Self

Less often quoted than Golden’s introduction, but equally interesting is Hamza Walker’s essay “Renigged,” which is also situated at the beginning of the *Freestyle* exhibition catalogue as a sort of manifesto for the black visual aesthetics of the new millennium. Hamza Walker has worked as the Director of Education for the Renaissance Society in Chicago for more than twenty years and is nowadays considered one of the most influential curators for contemporary art exhibitions in the United States. His essay is the story of how the author during his adolescence, and in the wake of the emergence of the term “African-American” as the new designation for blacks, “discovered” his blackness and chose to embrace it, a choice that is presented as the result of the socio-historical context of the time and as a response to the essentialist notions of blackness promoted during the 1970s and of the multiculturalism of the 1990s. Walker’s essay is intriguing because it suggests the idea that the author accepts his blackness as an inheritance, but is also an active agent of blackness in that he rejects the label “African-American” and chooses to be simply “black”, expressing the wish to define his racial



identity in his own terms . After having “renigged” his blackness, as the author puts it,<sup>34</sup> Walker can begin his process of “becoming black again”, presented as an act of creation that transforms blackness from a merely inherited part of his identity into a self-chosen one, which he shapes and adjusts in his process of identity construction.

As he explains: “it was not that I became black, nor wanted to be black in an essentialist way, as much as I preferred at that time to remain in the black” (16). The desire to “remain in the black”, and not to usher in the era of “African-American,” is formulated as a refusal to accept the immigrant success story implied in the idea of “hyphenated” American identity as part of the black American experience: “I was intuitively wary of combining a hyphenated American identity with the desire for a black cultural patrimony because it blurred the incommensurability of the immigrant success story and black American history” (16). The traditional “success story” would imply a beginning, a middle, and a successful conclusion that in the case of black Americans should be the passing of the Civil Rights Act and the other legal victories of the Civil Rights movement, but Walker refuses to accept this version of history, pointing out that the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement proved that its successes had been only partial, and that he found tremendously difficult to accept what was being marketed as “the end of an era”: “This reading [of the African American experience as an immigrant success story] masked the profound ambivalence of the Movement’s legacy and implied a sense of closure” (16). Comparing the era of “African-American” to a football referee, Walker points out that the word declared his childhood and adolescence a “false start,” and compelled him to enter his adult life with a new, post-integration racial identity that he could not properly define nor embrace. To complicate Walker’s difficult relation to his new connotation as “African American”, were the expectations of racial authenticity that he felt obligated to satisfy: the fact of attending a predominantly white school in downtown Baltimore exposed him to accusations of being an Uncle Tom or an oreo, so that his cultural mulattism was something he endured rather than enjoyed.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hamza Walker seems to use the verb “to renig,” an alternative spelling of the more common “reneege” (to deny, to renounce, but also to break a deal and renegotiate its terms) combined with the past participle “niggered” (made black, made a nigger). Therefore, I choose to interpret “renigged” as a term that conveys the idea of renegotiating one’s blackness, refusing at the same time to be “niggered”, namely (offensively) defined from the outside, be it the white mainstream society or the black community.

<sup>35</sup> “I experienced multiculturalism as the sound of a door closing rather than opening” (16).

His process of identity-construction is therefore complicated by the role of the external gaze of society, which is not presented as a neutral element that simply registers a blackness that is inherently present in the author, but as an intruding force that actively constructs, shapes and defines his blackness. Burdened by the expectations of mainstream society, which projects on him stereotyped interpretations of blackness, and by the peer pressure exercised by other black boys, who push him to perform a version of racial authenticity that does not feel authentic to him, the author feels caught between the need to identify with the members of the black—or African American?—community and the need to affirm his individuality. “We” versus “I” becomes a site of negotiation in his psyche, in which his notion of a racialized self is forming, and the tensions between the anxiety of representation and the desire to affirm his uniqueness result in a fragmented identity. The two-ness of DuBois’s black souls is amplified into a myriad of fragments that the black artist can either struggle to reconcile, or accept in their fluidity and instability: “A sense of self, as it was constituted in language was irrevocably shattered. I found discussions about race incredibly difficult to maintain because I had no idea for whom I was speaking, if anyone” (17).

As a consequence, the process of definition of a racial self becomes incredibly complex not only because of the tensions between a communal black identity (we) and the lived experience of blackness that the author is undergoing on a more empirical level (I), but also given the contradictory role of blackness in mainstream society and especially in popular culture:

I couldn’t accept movies, television shows, literature (no matter how great), not to mention the ubiquitous commodifiable representations of blackness—ass whoopin’ rapper #1, the soulful, no non-sense talk show host, the athlete, the sociologist, you name it—as a substitute for an exchange with someone other than the door man [...] diversity as a lived reality was another matter altogether (17).

This passage is particularly illuminating in that it highlights not only the contrast between the unprecedented visibility of blacks in mass media—which should have been perceived as evidence that America’s racial divide had finally been solved—and the actual presence of blacks in positions of leadership, but also the emergence of new “character types” in post-Civil Rights America. The paradox of the hypervisibility of blacks in popular culture against the invisibility of blacks in real life provides the perfect site for Walker to question the extent to which American society is truly integrated, in that he argues that, during his adolescence, blacks and whites were often limiting themselves to sharing common spaces that nevertheless had

boundaries that were carefully established and seldom crossed: “black and white weren’t talking to one another. They were talking at one another through representations” (17).

This position seems to question the validity of the cultural mulatto archetype introduced by Trey Ellis, and the assumption that blacks were becoming fluent in both African American and mainstream culture as a result of the dismantling of segregation. But what if this integration is only partially achieved, and the interactions between blacks and whites are characterized by fixed patterns—“representations”—that prevent the full acknowledgement of each other’s humanity? The consequence, according to Walker, is that representations forced on blacks and whites alike undermined not only relations between the races, but also intra-racial relations, and eventually the relation of black subjects to their own racialized selves: “Just as representations of blackness mediated black-white relations, they also mediated black-black relations and ultimately the relationship I had to myself. Each and every image of someone black was speaking to me, at me and for me” (17). Moreover, Walker soon realizes that the optimism about a positive change in racial relations that had infused the decades between the 1950s and the 1970s had to be drastically downsized in the post-Civil Rights era: “As for the 1970s ideal of racial utopia, which I had been fed as a lower middle class to poor black child, the only thing missing was a unicorn” (17).

Walker places himself in the tradition of a series of intellectuals who famously “discovered” their blackness—or more precisely, the terms in which blackness is articulated—as a result of the activity of the external gaze. He references DuBois, who in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) exposes his famous theory of double-consciousness right after a scene in which his blackness is “revealed” to him by a classmate, a white girl who refused his visiting card (16). Another famous scene of “discovery of blackness” is reported by Zora Neale Hurston in her “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928), in which the author recalls that after leaving her native all-black Eatonville to go to school in Jacksonville, she realized that she was not “Zora of Orange County anymore, [she] was a little colored girl” (827). The objectifying activity of the white gaze which imposes itself on the black body is described also by Franz Fanon in an often-quoted passage of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), in which a white child is scared by his appearance. Fanon comments:

The corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. [...] I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself

to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics. I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object (112).

DuBois, Fanon and Hurston recognize the role of the external gaze in shaping, and ultimately revealing to them, their own blackness. Hurston, in particular, points out that the awareness of her own racialized identity is intimately tied to the power of the gaze: “I do not always feel colored. [...] I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (828). Fanon, on the other hand, stresses the fact that the child’s gaze has already been trained to connote his blackness in negative terms, to create meanings around his black body, equating pigmentation with danger.

The difference between DuBois’s, Fanon’s and Hurston’s discoveries of blackness, and what Hamza Walker describes in 2001, seems to be an increased awareness of the role of the black community in shaping his racial identity. In the cases of DuBois, Fanon and Hurston, it is white people who remark on their blackness and decide their position in the racialized system of American society, while in the case of Walker, the reflection on the terms of his blackness is tied to an intra-racial phenomenon, the demand that the common terminology used for black Americans shift from “black” to “African-American.”<sup>36</sup> It seems therefore that defining oneself in racial terms can be done more freely in the 1990s than in DuBois’s or Hurston’s times, since the black community plays a more active role in deciding which designation they think is the most appropriate. However, Walker experiences this shift in terminology as an imposition.

The limits he experiences in his quest for racial self-determination are further remarked when Walker discusses the shortcomings of integration. The target of daily episodes of discrimination, Walker feels discriminated by both his white classmates, who are unable to fully

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<sup>36</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, leaders of the Black Power movement had encouraged the black community to abandon old slavery-imposed racial labels such as “Negro” and to adopt “Black” as their preferred designation. “Black” was intended to signal the rejection of the idealization of white skin, and the celebration of the unique experience of people of African descent in the United States. At about the same time, “Afro-American” (later changed to “African American” to give equal importance to both terms), started to be used as an expression that emphasized the double consciousness of black people in the United States, as well as the solidarity between black Americans and Africans who were struggling against colonial oppression, such as South Africans. The new racial label hinted therefore at the global struggle against white domination, linking Africans in the United States with those of Continental Africa and other diasporic African groups. At the same time, “African American” hinted at the contribution of people of African descent in the making of the United States, legitimating their request of social and political equality. However, in this passage Walker laments the fact that “African American,” in his opinion, evokes the “immigrant success story” of groups such as Irish Americans, Italian Americans or Polish Americans, who have achieved full integration in mainstream society thanks to the privilege of whiteness. Walker notes that the experience of black Americans, who are the descendants of slaves who were forcibly taken to the New World, is not at all comparable to that of immigrants, and that blacks have always been prevented from full integration. On the reception of the term “African American” in the black community, see Smitherman 51.

accept him as a non-stereotypical black, and his black classmates, who accuse him of being a “white boy.” Although the author does not specify the reason of this accusation of racial inauthenticity, it is clear that the fact of attending school downtown, in a prevailing white and middle-class environment, is seen by his black peers as something that tarnishes his blackness. In a context in which blackness is seen by the author as both an inheritance and a self-chosen cultural affiliation, he would like to have the flexibility to actively define the terms of his racial self, but this desire constantly clashes with the expectations of society, both white and black.

Not recognizing himself in the representations—the “character types”—that he was fed by popular culture and having few other role models available for the formation of a satisfying racial identity, Walker is also disillusioned with the ideals of the 1970s that had informed his hopes of a better future, and consequently goes through a confusing and destabilizing period in which he cannot understand who he is. Paradoxically, however, it is the anger and frustration that he accumulates at that time that will provide him with the pulse to “trouble blackness” (Ashe, “Theorizing” 614) and express himself creatively. In embracing his blackness, Walker seems to accept that questions about his racialized self will never find a definite answer and will always be engaged as a central element of his creative process: The act of constantly questioning himself, without ever coming to a definitive answer, will be the main source of inspiration of his artistic practices. As Walker exemplifies, the reflection on blackness as a self-chosen rather than a conferred part of one’s identity is one of the main characteristics of post-Civil Rights black cultural production, which is evident both in the work of post-black artists and post-soul writers alike.

## 2. Literary Antecedents: Authenticity and the Reception of African American Life Narrative

*In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible,  
this in no way prevents it from existing*

Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (1998)

### Authenticities

In “Resisting Autobiography” Caren Kaplan notices how autobiography, as a master narrative of the Western world that celebrates individual achievement and the sovereign self, would seem hostile to communities whose forms of self-narration have traditionally been oral and collective (115). Yet, as it is often the case, colonized people as well as people of the African diaspora have appropriated the tools of the colonizer, and in response to systematic attempts to deny their subjectivity and cultural agency have produced rich autobiographical traditions, expanding the definition and scopes of the genre itself. The huge body of autobiographical literature created by African American authors from the second half of the eighteenth century to the present moment can certainly be read, in light of Kaplan’s considerations, as a tradition of *writing back*, of articulating the black diasporic self and writing it into being through the strategic appropriation and re-purposing of the master’s literary tools. And it is perhaps the genesis of African American autobiography, a genre that emerged out of the necessity to assert black subjectivity by every means necessary in a society that denied it, that is responsible for the role that authenticity has always played in shaping its literary conventions and for the ways in which black autobiographies have been read and evaluated both in academia and by the general public. From the publication of Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*<sup>37</sup> in 1789 to the recent “memoir boom” (Smith and Watson xii; Couser 140-144) in the contemporary scene,

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<sup>37</sup> The *Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) is the first book-length African American autobiography to reach an international audience: the text was in fact widely read in the United States as well as in England. Equiano’s narrative blends several sub-genres of autobiography, notably the slave narrative (of which it is one of the first examples), conversion narrative, captivity narrative and ethnography. I offer a broader overview of Equiano’s text and of the debate on its authenticity in the paragraph “Putting on the African Mask: Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?”.

autobiography<sup>38</sup> has been one of the most productive genres in African American literature. Autobiographies represent in the African American tradition more than the act of chronicling the remarkable life of their authors for the purpose of passing on their wisdom and perpetuating the memory of their achievements, since the very act of writing, and specifically writing the self, represented for black autobiographers a resistance practice to criticize and destabilize a status quo that denied—and to a certain extent still denies—the value of their very personhood.

As such, African American autobiographies are characterized by a protest element that has been maintained through the centuries: if the first African American autobiographies were those produced by former slaves documenting their lives under the “peculiar institution” for the purpose of supporting the abolitionist movement, some of the most recently published ones are texts by black activists who, in sharing the story of their lives, also reflect on the pervasiveness of anti-blackness in the contemporary scene and advocate for the importance of collective activism as a means to challenge the status quo.<sup>39</sup> The genre incorporates therefore the tensions between the quest for individuality of authors who “write themselves into being” (Gates, *The Slave’s* xxiii) and the denunciation of larger socio-political forces that contribute to shape the lives of African Americans as a group. Hence, historical events and the reflection on race relations in America are braided in with the chronicle of the life of the author/narrator/protagonist, whose incidents offer the base on which to elaborate on blackness—and anti-blackness—in the United States.

This confluence of personal and communal or national history is of course not exclusive to African American autobiographies—indeed, we could state that it is one of the chief characteristics of all autobiographical genres and traditions—but it bears a particular

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<sup>38</sup> By *autobiography*, in the whole chapter, I will refer to the self-referential version of what Smith and Watson more appropriately call *life writing* or *life narrative*: “We understand *life writing* as a general term for writing of diverse kinds that take a life as its subject. [...] We understand *life narrative* as a somewhat narrower term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography” (3). This definition is ampler and more inclusive than the generally accepted definition of autobiography offered by Philippe Lejeune: “we shall define autobiography as the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (viii). Although the case studies that I examine in the following chapters are exclusively memoirs—undoubtedly the most popular subgenre of autobiography these days—in the present chapter I discuss the genesis and reception of various forms of self-referential life writing, which I refer to as “autobiographical texts” for simplicity. These are, for example, poems with autobiographical content, slave narratives, ethnographies, autobiographies (in Lejeune’s definition), family histories, memoirs.

<sup>39</sup> Two recent examples of autobiographies written by African American activists are the memoir of Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (2018) and the memoir of attorney Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014).

significance in African American literature, since in the case of minorities the narrative of the individual subject has always been expected to be representative of the narrative of the whole group.<sup>40</sup> In the early stages of African American autobiography, it was especially difficult for black autobiographers to represent and celebrate the individual self while acting as the spokesperson for the whole community. Authors of slave narratives were encouraged by the abolitionist movement to simply stick to the facts of their experiences as ex-slaves: their role was to act as living proofs of the evils of the peculiar institutions, and to leave the formulation of any opinion, interpretation or philosophical reflection in the hands of their white supporters. This pressure to factuality, coupled with the poor consideration that texts written by people of African descent enjoyed and with the charges of falsity that many of them received from pro-slavery Southerners, presented the writer with the need to authenticate their narratives, to offer a tangible proof that the text was the unadulterated rendering of the author's experiences and feelings. Oversimplifying, we could make the general assumption that writers of African descent were considered knowledgeable enough to write about one thing and one thing only: their own lives written from their own point of view, a unique perspective that white authors would not be able to provide. The assumption that the value of African American autobiography lied in its capacity to document the lives of black people for the white readership has influenced how the genre has been received until recently. Rebecca Chalmers Barton, a white scholar of black literature and the author of the first academic study on African American autobiography, noticed in 1948 that "outsiders who study the Negro may indeed more successfully grasp the slippery tool of objectivity, but who else can so quickly add flesh and blood to the skeletal framework of fact as the insiders themselves?" (xi-xii).

Consequently, the peculiarity of the "black voice" of the autobiographer was that of offering a peephole through which the most hidden aspects of black life could be observed. Still, for this perspective to be valuable and credible, it had to be authentic, meaning that the black world "as it is" had to be represented. Chalmers Barton seems confident that autobiographies can be a useful tool to observe black reality, even when presented in a partial and incomplete way, yet she recognizes the limits of this approach:

Admittedly, the autobiography has limitations as a vehicle of truth [...] Undoubtedly, the Negro autobiographer especially has layer upon layer of consciousness that he may

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<sup>40</sup> I will deal with the dichotomy individual/group in more details in the section dedicated to the characteristics of post-soul memoirs.



or may not choose to expose to the casual reader, while his unconscious omissions and distortions further complicate the presentation of reality (xii).

Black autobiographers were therefore pressured to authenticity in a way that their white counterparts were not, though a certain expectation of authenticity, as already mentioned, is part of the autobiographical pact that regulates the genre itself. In particular, African American autobiographies were expected to be factually accurate, to represent the true feeling and views of the author, and to be written or dictated by a black writer with no external intervention. The readership's longing for literary renditions of the unadulterated "black voice," and the continuous necessity to authenticate and validate that voice to give it strength and credibility, has had an enormous impact on African American literature and has pushed black autobiographers in all historical periods to explore, interrogate, and re-define authenticity.

Consequently, the aim of this chapter is to examine how the request for authenticity has influenced and continues to influence the production and reception of a genre that occupies a special position in the broader panorama of African American literature. This analysis is both fascinating and very complex, considering that at least two conceptions of authenticity intertwine and influence one another in the context of the autobiographical production of every cultural and ethnic minority. The first and most obvious is authenticity as the expectation of the readership to read something factually true and intellectually honest about the life of the author, who also coincides with the narrator and the protagonist of the text, and whose name and personal data match those of the person whose name appears on the cover. This expectation of authenticity is a constitutional part of every form of autobiography and represents the core of the autobiographical pact theorized by Philippe Lejeune in *Le Pact Autobiographique* (1975). However, in autobiographies written by people who identify as members of a minority, the authenticity implied in the autobiographical pact intertwines with expectations of racial authenticity, or more specifically, in the case of African American writers, of authentic blackness. This considerably complicates the issue of authenticity in African American texts, not only because white and black readerships will have different expectations of what is authentically black, but also because the definition of authentic blackness significantly changes within the African American community itself. Cultures are, in fact, notably flexible and made up of many subcultures with different and at times oppositional needs and interests. Actually, the fiction of a uniform and unchanging black culture is only possible in racist depictions of black life based on fixed stereotypes, so that it is not at all surprising that several conceptions of authenticity can coexist at the same time in the same community.

As a consequence, it is difficult to give a universally acceptable definition of racial authenticity. Generally, if we accept that authenticity is about “successful signification of what is accepted as ‘real’ or ‘true’ for cultural products and individual’s identities” (Nguyen and Koontz 770), we can state that racial authenticity is about successful signification of what is accepted as being “real” or “true” within the specific context of a minority group. This “successful signification” is, of course, in constant motion, since the definition of what it means to be authentic within a particular context of racial minority shifts overtime, following the specific political and ethical struggles that minority is involved in, and the racial discourses that it is subjected to and that it sometimes appropriates and repurposes. However, we could state that what characterizes authentic blackness is a two-directional desire to capture the essence of the black experience: on the one side the desire of the readership—both whites and blacks—to read about black life “as it is,” on the other the will of the author to present him or herself as someone who is in a privileged position to narrate the black experience, because of familiarity and cultural allegiance. In the following chapter I will therefore examine how these tensions functioned in shaping black autobiographies, and I will question to what extent the concept of authentic blackness can be helpful to contemporary African American autobiographers as a lens through which to examine their process of identity formation.

### The Primal Test of Authenticity: Phillis Wheatley

As already mentioned, from the very beginnings of African American literature black authors have been pushed to demonstrate the authenticity of their writing, so that authenticating strategies emerged out of a pressure by the mainstream readership that white authors did not face in any comparable degree. The socio-political circumstances that African Americans had to face—slavery first, de jure segregation and de facto discrimination later—caused them to be the target of mistrust and belittlement by the white readership, so that their texts were considered acceptable only if “authentic.” Historically speaking, the question of racial authenticity has troubled African American authors at least since the trial of Phillis Wheatley, which Henry Louis Gates Jr. identifies as “the primal scene of African-American letters” (*Trial* 5). Phillis Wheatley was an African woman of Senegambian origins, brought to Boston in 1761 on board a schooner, the *Phillis*, at the age of seven and purchased by John and Susanna Wheatley as a house slave. The Wheatleys had teenaged twins who, encouraged by their parents, began to instruct Phillis in English, Latin, and the Bible. Despite the fact that Phillis spoke no English upon her arrival in 1761, by 1765 she had started writing poetry in English and Latin, and in 1772 Susanna Wheatley decided to have her poems collected and published

as a book. About three hundred subscribers were necessary to underwrite the cost of publication, but they could not be found because not enough Bostonians believed that a slave possessed the necessary degree of reason and imagination to write poetry. This is why on October 8, 1772, Phillis Wheatley was examined by an assembly of eighteen examiners, whose goal was to determine if the young slave was actually the author of the poems she claimed to have written: Wheatley passed the examination, and the judges signed an attestation in which they unanimously declared that she had written the poems herself.

To understand why Wheatley's writing skills aroused so much skepticism, we must be aware that there was, at the time of the trial, a wide body of literature that dealt with the question of the nature of people of African descent. Philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant as well as Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), were among those who questioned the humanity of black people. Their main argument was black people's alleged lack of reason, and their consequent inability to create art and sciences. In fact, according to the principles of Enlightenment, literacy, logic, abstract thought and the capacity to create original and not merely derivative art were the characteristics that distinguished people from animals, and that therefore were to be considered a badge of authentic humanity. This philosophical belief allows us to understand why Wheatley's trial marked a cornerstone in African American history: the recognition of the fact that she could write was the proof that Africans could indeed create art and, as a consequence, stood as members of the human family and could not be enslaved. Basically, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. puts it, "she [Phillis Wheatley] was auditioning for the humanity of the entire African people" (*Trial* 27), and she passed the audition with full marks.

Despite the judges' verdict, the reading public remained skeptical. As Leslie W. Lewis claims, "eighteenth-century American society as represented by the Wheatley court had rigged the game" (54), since the examiners had limited their decision to a question of agency and not of authenticity: once attested that Wheatley had actually written her poems, the question remained if what she wrote was *authentic* or merely imitative poetry. By changing the parameter of authenticity from the possibility of a black person writing poems to the quality of these poems, critics of Wheatley's poetry denied her—and all non-white people alongside her—the recognition of a higher form of authenticity, based on the quality of authorship more than on authorship itself. For the majority of white readers, Wheatley's poems did not count as literature because she did not count as a human being, since her supposedly sub-human nature made her "biologically" incapable of producing original art. This position evidences

not only the necessity to define humanity in a way that supported slavery, but also the obvious link between authenticity and authority: whites were the ones who had the power to define literature, and to impose their parameters of literariness as universal.

The reception of Wheatley's poems makes clear that the issue of racial authenticity in eighteenth-century society was essentially the question of the authentic humanity of non-white people, a question that white Americans kept raising well beyond the first decades of the nineteenth century. However, there is one more layer to add to the consideration of Wheatley's authenticity. Although Wheatley is not generally referred to as a writer of autobiographical texts, it is not a coincidence that critics have focused on the few poems that contain autobiographical elements, most notably her fleeting reference to the Middle Passage in "On Being Brought from Africa to America," wondering if the poem reflects the authentic feelings of the author, or if her "gratitude" for being forcefully removed from her motherland and brought to America as a slave is an elaborate form of Signifyin(g). Consider for example these initial lines: "'twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land / taught my benighted soul to understand." What does she mean exactly when she puts the word *pagan* in italics? Is it a way to underline the fact that maybe she did not consider her land *pagan* at all? And when she refers to her "benighted soul," does she actually believe that her soul was buried in darkness before exposure to Christianity, or is she reclaiming her black authenticity through reference to her black soul? This kind of questions have marked the way "On Being Brought" has been analyzed and interpreted in the last decades and have clearly shifted the parameters for the evaluation and appreciation of her poetry from a focus on the authentic humanity of the author to one on her authentic blackness. Phillis Wheatley's reception is therefore an interesting case study for the analysis of shifting and unstable definitions of black authenticity.

The considerations of Angelene Jamison and Eleanor Smith in the Summer 1974 edition of *The Journal of Negro Education* are an excellent example of how Wheatley's blackness was seriously questioned in light of the Black Power politics still dominant in the 1970s. While neither author doubts that Wheatley wrote her poems herself and that she must have had a special talent for literary composition, they both dismiss Wheatley's texts as useless for the black liberation cause: in their view, Wheatley's poems do not count as literature not because she was a slave, but because she was not black enough. For example, Jamison states that, in teaching Wheatley from an African American perspective, "it will be highly impossible to *make her Black*" (409, my emphasis) and she adds that Wheatley was ashamed of her Ethiopian

origins, and that the consequence is that “after reading various poems of Phillis Wheatley, the first comment of most students is that she was not Black enough, and of course they are right” (411). She concludes that “she was a poet who happened to be Black and it is a mistake to refer to her as a Black poet” (415). Smith is even more drastic in denying Wheatley’s blackness:

Did Phillis Wheatley do anything to sustain and perpetuate blackness, and give rise to Black people? From our perspective, everything that Blacks do must be done in the interest of black people; everything that Blacks observe must be analyzed from the point of view of Blacks [...] This perspective must be applied to the present and to the past if we are to redefine the experiences of black people in this country with any degree of significance (401).

Hence, according to the parameters of the 1970s, Wheatley was not black and could not be *made* Black. But paradoxically, the denial of her blackness is based on reading her text on a literal level, refusing to acknowledge her possible mastering of elements that are specific to the black literary tradition, such as Signifyin(g) and double-coding. Interestingly, in more recent years her poems have been re-evaluated and critics have started to point out that there are several layers of interpretation at play in her texts. John Shields and Eric Lamore’s 2011 collection *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, for example, groups together several scholars who re-read Wheatley’s poems from feminist, transnational, and even pan-African perspectives. For example, in the second essay of the collection Devona Mallory argues that

Phillis Wheatley consistently honors her African homeland while critiquing the very institution of slavery that inspired her poetic gifts [...] she fights against the system that has taken her away from her family and now enslaves her, but at the same time she reaps what little benefits that system provides for her (19).

Mallory and the other contributors to the collection are more than willing to confirm Wheatley’s authentic blackness: indeed, in highlighting her use of quintessentially African American practices such as Signifyin(g) and post-colonial practices such as the appropriation of Western literary forms for the denunciation of Western institutions, the essayists of this collection position Wheatley as a matriarch of such cultural practices. Karen Lerner Dovell, for example, suggests that Wheatley’s consistent use of the classical tradition serves a double purpose: on the one hand it proves her familiarity with such a renowned tradition, on the other hand it reminds white people that the classical world was as pagan as her motherland (41). Another

interesting reading comes from Tom O. McCulley II, who reads “On Being Brought” from a queer theory perspective, suggesting that the poem

exemplifies both the use of biblical language as protest language and what I have called Wheatley’s position of ‘othered other.’ For a Queer theorist, ‘On Being Brought is a goldmine for the kind of fluid identities, self-aware commentary, guerrilla linguistics and cultural critiques that make up the crux of what Queer Theory is all about (201).

The different consideration that Wheatley’s work received at the time of its publication, in the 1970s, and in the contemporary scene is a clear example of how the parameters of black authenticity shift and are re-contextualized and re-defined overtime, and of how authors can be deemed more or less authentic according to how their work fits into existing notions of racial authenticity and identity politics.

### Putting on the African Mask: Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?<sup>41</sup>

In a famous essay which questions the African origins of Olaudah Equiano, literary historian Vincent Carretta bestows the eighteenth-century author the role of father of the slave narrative genre.<sup>42</sup> Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa according to his Western name, is in fact considered the most remarkable African American writer of the late eighteenth century and his *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789) is acknowledged to be the text that established the main conventions and tropes reproduced in most subsequent slave narratives. These conventions include the depiction of the African’s difficult pattern towards the acquisition of literacy, represented through the trope of the Talking Book, and the attempt to produce an illusion of oral narration, a technique known as “speakerly text” (Gates, *Signifying* 139). At the same time, this slave narrative is unique in its detailed descriptions of life in an African village and of the horrible conditions of the Middle Passage, as well as in the depiction of the African’s encounter with literacy and the conventions of Western literature.

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<sup>41</sup> According to the author, Olaudah Equiano was the name that his African family gave him at birth. He was subsequently renamed as Michael by the crew of the slave ship, and as Jacob by his first owner, until his second owner, lieutenant Michael Pascal, named him Gustavus Vassa after king Gustav I of Sweden. In fact, it was common for slave owners to name their African slaves after kings, ancient emperors and renowned historical figures, to ironically emphasize their status of servitude.

<sup>42</sup> “The most important and most widely published author of African descent in the English-speaking world of the eighteenth century, Olaudah Equiano founded the genre of the African American slave narrative” (Carretta 44).

In his *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano maintains that he was born in Guinea, in the Kingdom of Benin (today's southeastern Nigeria) in 1745 and that his family lived in a village called Eboe. He claims that his father was one of the chiefs of the village and that this honorable position was destined to be inherited by his sons. In describing his native land, Equiano focuses on the simplicity of the costumes, the moral integrity of its inhabitants and the importance of communal life. Moreover, he points out that although slavery exists, people can be enslaved only as a punishment for unpaid debts or particularly heinous crimes, and that slaves are generally well-treated and work as hard as any other member of the family they are assigned to. His idyllic existence in Eboe, where he is loved and protected by his family and enjoys the respect that his social standing accords to him, lasts until he is eleven years old, when he and his sister fall prey to local bandits, who kidnap the siblings and sell them to English slave traders.

The following section of the book documents his alleged first-hand experience of the Middle Passage. Still on the African shore, Equiano meets white people for the first time and is terrified by their unfamiliar looks and language. After having boarded the slave ship that will take him to the New World, his worst suppositions are confirmed: the author narrates in detail the tortures and abuses that slaves are subjected to, and that lead many Africans to die from consumption or suffocation or to attempt suicide to put an end to their sufferings. Being young and delicate, Equiano is permitted to stay on deck to make sure that he will survive the long and excruciating journey. The rest of the book narrates the vicissitudes of Equiano after his landing in America. The young slave is purchased by a Barbadian planter, who later sells him again to an officer of the British Royal Navy, Michael Henry Pascal, who renames him Gustavus Vassa and puts him to work on various ships, including war ships engaged in the Seven Years' War. During one of these travels, Equiano meets Dick, a Native American boy who will initiate him to literacy and to the study of the Bible: eventually, Equiano will convert to Christianity and will be baptized in Westminster in 1759. After several years working as a sailor and putting money aside to buy his freedom, Equiano tries to convince Pascal to liberate him, but instead his master sells him to the West Indies where he is exploited as a field hand in sugar cane plantations. Equiano eventually manages to escape the horrors of plantation slavery when he is bought by Mr. King, a Quaker who employs him in his ships and eventually allows him to buy his own freedom. As a free man, Equiano puts to good use his entrepreneurial spirit: he sets off on commercial voyages and scientific explorations to North America, Europe, the West Indies and even the North Pole, configuring himself as the first truly cosmopolitan African American man.

Eventually, after having become involved in the abolitionist cause, Equiano decides to write the story of his life in an autobiography. In 1792, he marries an English white woman with whom he will have two daughters, and he will be able support his family modestly but comfortably thanks to the profits of the text.

The authenticity of the father of the slave narrative, however, has been seriously questioned when Vincent Carretta has suggested that the first part of Equiano's text might have been completely invented by the author. As the scholar has pointed out, a baptismal certificate at Margaret's Church, Westminster, dated 1759 shows that he was born in "Carolina", while a Royal Navy muster roll from Constantine Phipp's expedition to the Arctic records that he was born in "South Carolina" (46). The most interesting thing is that in both cases the information must have come from Equiano himself. Consequently, the sections on his African upbringing and on the horrors of the Middle Passage have most likely been drawn from the accounts of European explorers and from the oral accounts of former slaves, respectively, rather than from first-hand experience. Carretta's discovery does not settle the matter of Equiano's origins completely, since there is still the possibility that Equiano interpreted the question "Where are you from?" not as "Where were you born exactly?" but as "Where did you first land when you came to America? Where did you first live as a slave?" and this would suffice to explain the discrepancy between his narrative and the official documents Carretta refers to. However, despite the complex debate that Carretta's study has sparked among literary historians, the most evident clue suggesting that Equiano might have invented the first section of his text is the almost mythological style he adopts while talking about his motherland: African society is described as something idyllic, where everyone lives in harmony with nature and with the rest of the community and this romanticized style does not really fit with the rest of the narration, which is much more pragmatical and detail-oriented.

Whether or not Equiano invented part of his autobiography—and it seems pretty certain that he did—what is most interesting is the consideration that his fictional chapters have found among literary critics and historians. For example, rather than accusing Equiano of being inauthentic, Carretta sees his inventions as a proof of his remarkable literary abilities:

every autobiography is a act of re-creation, and autobiographers are not under oath when they are reconstructing their lives. Furthermore, an autobiography is an act of rhetoric. That is, any autobiography is designated to influence the reader's impression of its author, and often, as in the case of the *Interesting Narrative*, to affect the reader's beliefs or actions as



well. No autobiographer has faced a greater opportunity for redefinition than has a manumitted (freed) slave (46).

Carretta reasonably argues that redefining the self was a necessary act for the freed slave: from the choice of a name, to that of a profession and a place to live, the ex-slave had to forge a completely new identity for himself. As Carretta states: “With freedom came the obligation to forge a new identity, whether by creating one out of the personal qualities and opportunities at hand, or by counterfeiting one” (47). As an example of Equiano’s will to establish his identity and claim full ownership of it, Carretta points out his decision not to sell the copyright of his narrative, and to retain it instead, despite the high profits he could have made by selling it (55). By acting as his own publisher, Equiano was able to keep almost all of the profits from his book for himself, but most importantly he could also maintain full control of how his public persona was presented to the reader. Keeping the copyright, in fact, assured that not only he would be in control of the actual text of the publication, but also of the visual material that might have accompanied it. This allowed Equiano to control how he would be portrayed not only textually but also pictorially, and significantly he chose to add to the text’s frontispiece an elegant portrait that seems to perfectly combine his identities as an African native and as a cosmopolitan self-made man.

A quick glance at the historical period in which the *Interesting Narrative* appeared is sufficient to clarify the reasons why Equiano might have decided to invent his African past. Before 1789, when Equiano’s narrative was published, the abolitionist movement had in fact focused not so much on the abolition of slavery in toto—which seemed like a distant and hard-to-reach goal—but on the abolition of the slave trade, which was seen as a more realistic goal. The public opinion both in Britain and in the United States was in fact more drawn to see the trade, and not slavery itself, as an extremely cruel practice. In fact, if slavery could be justified as a paternalistic and benign institution that allowed otherwise helpless Africans to be cared for by Christian families, removing Africans from their homelands and exposing them to the horrors of the Middle Passage was more difficult to justify. Equiano might have recognized that the anti-slave trade movement was gaining momentum, and that what it needed to achieve its ultimate goal was the testimony of an African, not an African American voice, the voice of a man who had endured the atrocious conditions of the Middle Passage and could give a first-hand account of them, providing the kind of authentic narration that no white abolitionist could supply.

The oral testimony of slaves who had endured the Middle Passage at abolitionist meetings, however, was not considered enough: to provide the movement with a strong weapon against pro-slavery Southerners, this testimony had to be written. In fact, to fully understand the role of written accounts of slavery we have to consider the argument, widely supported at the time, that blacks were suitable for enslavement because of their sub-human nature, which was supposedly confirmed by the lack of literature and art produced by people of African descent. This theory, largely accepted by the great majority of white society, had its foundations on a rich corpus of publications of natural history and physiognomy, which authenticated race according to specific physical and behavioral parameters, and defined authentic humanity accordingly.<sup>43</sup> The acceptance of the sub-humanity of black people was meant to erase any sense of guilt, reinforcing a perverse notion of what the “natural” order of things was, and fostering the oppressive market economy of slavery that characterized the Southern states. In the light of these considerations, it is evident that for eighteenth-century African Americans writing became not only an occasion to leave written evidence of their personal stories, but also something that gained them full access to authentic humanity in the opinion of the dominant white society.

The fight for the recognition of authentic humanity intertwines with the one to find and record an authentic black voice in the “Trope of the Talking Book,” which Henry Louis Gates theorized as the foundational trope of African American literature (*Signifying* 139), and of which the presumably fictional section of Equiano’s text offers an early example. In this trope, books refuse to speak to a person of African descent who, coming from an oral culture, cannot communicate with them. At the same time, we can paradoxically read about this incommunicability in a text created by a black person, a demonstration in itself that blacks could, indeed, interact with books. The image of a book talking—or refusing to talk—to a person of African descent was firstly introduced by James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw in his 1770 slave narrative *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1770) but the trope became quickly pervasive and was so representative of the relationship between the production of

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<sup>43</sup> One of the first and most successful publications in this regard was Johann Blumenbach’s *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1775), which distinguished five races based on skin color: white, black, red, yellow and brown. Blumenbach’s classification is then reflected in Thomas Jefferson’s comparative analysis of whites, blacks, and Native Americans in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. For a more extended description on race authentication in nineteenth-century natural history, see Tucker.

literature and the recognition of authentic humanity that, between 1770 and 1815, five different authors used the same image to explain the significance of their progress from literacy to authorship,<sup>44</sup> and examples of this trope can also be found in more recent African American literature. Gates points out that the ability to produce literature, formulated in this trope as the ability to make the text “speak,” was a way for African American authors to prove their equality to white people as members of the human family. However, he also concedes that the trope testifies to the importance of “recording an authentic black voice in the text of Western letters” (*Signifying* 130), one that interacts with the written page in a way that is specifically and peculiarly African American.

By turning the book into a “speakerly text,” the writer claims his status as author and not just as witness: the narration is told by an unmistakably black voice, and in this way the author authenticates the text in a way that is different from the authentication provided by the letters of white abolitionists that usually accompanied slave narratives. If traditional authenticating documents attest to the factual veracity of the narration, the scene of the talking book in Equiano’s *Narrative* must be read not as a claim of factual truth but of authentic blackness, and the fact that the section in which the scene is inserted might be fictional does not make the African voice of its author any less authentic. The fact that one of the most canonical black autobiographies of all times is very probably partly fictional is significant: as James Olney claims, the question of factual truth in autobiography is the wrong question, since autobiography allows readers to access not only the realm of individual experience, in which the factual veracity of a certain episode can be more or less easily verified, but also and most importantly the cultural and communal experience that the autobiographer represents (*Autobiography* 11). Equiano may have never lived in Africa or crossed the Atlantic on a slave ship, but his narrative carries the authentic voice of millions of enslaved Africans who did, and whose enslavement and exploitation will define the so-called “black experience in America” for the generations to follow.

### The Exceptional as Representative: Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs

In “Beyond Douglass and Jacobs” (2007), literary critic John Ernest argues that students taking a standard “Survey of American Literature” course, if exposed to the genre of the slave narrative

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<sup>44</sup> John Marrant, *The Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785); Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787); Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789); John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea* (1815).

at all, will probably encounter two texts: Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (first published in 1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (first published in 1861 under the pseudonym of Linda Brent).<sup>45</sup> Ernest adds that Douglass's and Jacobs's texts are the only examples of slave narratives that figure in renowned anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 1820-1865* and *The Heath Anthology of American Literature-Early Nineteenth Century: 1800-1865*, both of which include a few chapters from the *Narrative* and *Incidents* as examples of a body of literature that contains more than six-thousand works. These narratives have therefore achieved canonical status in their own genre as well as in the broader panorama of American literature, with the consequence that, Ernest remarks, Douglass and Jacobs "have some serious representative work to do" (218).

Douglass and Jacobs have therefore unintentionally established the standards of authenticity for all subsequently published slave narratives, whose accounts have been deemed as credible and representative or not according to their proximity in style and content to those reported in the *Narrative* and *Incidents*. The consideration of Douglass and Jacobs in literary criticism appears, however, almost paradoxical if we consider that the experiences of both authors were all but emblematic of the typical condition of most nineteenth-century American slaves. "What is being represented?" wonders therefore Ernest when pondering on the representative status of the *Narrative* and *Incidents*, "and how should we understand that representation?" (218). As a matter of fact, the status of Douglass and Jacobs as both representative *and* exceptional figures in the field of African American literature offers an interesting perspective on the politics of racial representation, and specifically on the criteria according to which depictions of the black experience are deemed authentic or not. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has argued that Douglass, even during his lifetime, was widely recognized as the representative man of his race for the very reason that he was an exceptional figure, since despite his lack of formal education he was able to portray the sufferings and plights of his people in a style that rivaled that of white, college-educated writers (*Figures* 108). On the contrary, Ernest suggests, Jacobs and her text were "long ignored or devalued *because* [she] was an exception, both because [she] represents a woman's perspective and because scholars suspected that white writers were involved in the production of [her] narrative" (*Figures* 219, emphasis in the original). Douglass and Jacobs's narratives have therefore been evaluated differently according to the gender of their respective authors, and a different degree of authenticity—where authenticity stands for the ability to

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<sup>45</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Narrative* and *Incidents* for conciseness.

represent what was considered the authentic black experience—has been accorded to these two texts: as Rafia Zafar has pointed out, “for breaking from [the] recognized pattern of male slave narrators [...] Jacobs was either decried as inauthentic or dismissed as atypical” (qtd. in Ernest 219).

The fame that Douglass enjoyed during his lifetime has been reflected in the attention his three autobiographies<sup>46</sup> have received over the centuries by critics of all periods and academic backgrounds, and in the vastly different approaches that have been utilized to interpret the remarkable story of his life and his attempts to shape it in literary terms. Maurice S. Lee, in the “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass*, has noticed that “the history of Douglass’s critical reception is itself a narrative of transformation” (5), while Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has pointed out the continuous appeal of Douglass’s texts to critics regardless of their goals and political orientation. As he writes in *Figures in Black*:

From Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1868, through Charles Chesnut and Booker T. Washington at the turn of the century, to William Pickens, Arna Bontemps, and Benjamin Quarles in the forties, to Philip Foner, John Blassingame, and Nathan Huggins in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, the life of Douglass continues to compel from the scholar and creative writer (102).

Gates notes however that, if Douglass is to these scholars the Representative Black Man, it is mainly thanks to his ability to fashion his public persona through a meticulous work of re-adjustment that allowed him to be remembered “exactly as he wanted to be” (106). The composition of his three autobiographies, written over a period of forty-seven years, witnesses in fact his will to construct his literary persona according to his own taste and wishes, and to detach himself from the Garrisonian<sup>47</sup> ideal of the slave-narrator as a witness who should just provide facts, leaving the work of interpretation to his white supporters. As a consequence, “if

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<sup>46</sup> *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Time of Frederick Douglass* (1881, revised in 1892).

<sup>47</sup> William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879) was a white abolitionist, social reformer, and founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society. He is mostly known as the editor of abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, founded in 1831. Garrison is the author of the “Preface” to Douglass’s *Narrative* which, as was customary for slave narratives, validated the text by confirming its authorship, as well as the moral soundness of its author and the veracity of the narrated facts. Although Douglass was Garrison’s *protégé* for many years, tensions between the two culminated when Douglass founded his own abolitionist magazine, *The North Star*, in 1847, leading to the end of their alliance. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass repeatedly complains that white abolitionists, though led by good intentions, encouraged ex-slaves who participated in their meetings to merely relate the facts and incidents of their lives as slaves, and not to act as interpreters and critical thinkers.

Frederick Douglass was the nineteenth century's Representative Man, it was primarily because of his mastery of the literary uses of spoken and written language, a usage he diligently reworked and refined [...] he was Representative Man because he was Rhetorical Man" (*Figures* 108). By considering his commitment to self-fashioning, Gates can make sense of Douglass's status as representative black man not despite his exceptionality, but because of it: in this sense, Douglass is representative of his race even if the story of his life is not emblematic of the "authentic" experience of slavery, since the *Narrative*, thanks to its stylistic perfection, has become the reference text of a tradition made of thousands of individual stories that make up a communal tale of the experiences of enslaved blacks. By becoming the reference text of the slave narrative genre, Douglass's *Narrative* does not represent synecdochally the position of all American slaves, but inaugurates nevertheless a tradition that allowed enslaved blacks to fashion their communal identity in literary terms.

The literary persona of Frederick Douglass has therefore reached canonical status as the representative of a black collective self that has been perceived by critics as coherent, undivided and monolithic, but that has been read differently according to their agendas and political orientations. The fact that the *Narrative* has been read from an incredibly wide range of different critical perspectives is therefore not surprising since, as Gates aptly suggests,

the single most pervasive assumption of all black writing since the eighteenth century has been that there exists an unassailable, integral, black self, as compelling and as whole in Africa as in the New World, within slavery as without slavery [...] this self was knowable, retrievable, recuperable, if only attention to detail was displayed. [...] The fundamental integrity of the speaking black subject [...] has also remained the great unspoken and unchallenged fiction even in contemporary black literary and historiographical scholarship (*Figures* 115-16).

In fact, as I repeatedly argue in this dissertation, essentialized notions of the authentic black self are actually tied to the socio-historical period in which said fictions are created, and thus deemed to be manipulated and reconsidered overtime. The different reception of Douglass's *Narrative* overtime is in itself a challenge to the notion of a knowable and monolithic black self, as evidenced for example in the contrasting portraits offered by Benjamin Quarles and Robert Stepto in their introductions to the *Narrative*'s editions published by Harvard University Press in 1960 and 2009 respectively.

Quarles, Douglass's first biographer, reads the *Narrative* as a sensationalist tale written to satisfy the taste for adventure and titillation of readers used to the conventions of the "heroic fugitive" school of American literature. In his words, the text is "overdrawn in incidents and bitterly indignant in tone, but these very excesses made for greater sales" (xvi). The text is therefore seen as biased in its representation of slavery, in that the events of the author's life are supposedly exaggerated to suit the tastes and elicit the sympathy of a reading public craving for drama. It seems that for Quarles, Douglass's voice stands out not so much for its poignant denunciation of the peculiar institution, but for the only reason that he wrote his autobiography himself, therefore adding to the narration "a freshness and a forcefulness that come only when a document written in the first person has in fact been written by that person" (xvi). We can therefore see how Quarles's claims coincide with those of the already quoted Rebecca Chalmers Barton—"who else can so quickly add flesh and blood to the skeletal framework of fact as the insiders themselves?"—in that both critics point out how the main value of an autobiographical text written by a black author is its ability to provide a point of view that no white author could possibly offer. It is in this ability, the critics claim, that the authenticity—the "freshness", the "flesh and blood"—of the text is to be observed (xi-xii).

The fact that Quarles does not seem to consider the *Narrative* as an objective text and that, according to him, its only added value is that of providing the reader with an insider's perspective, is evident in the critic's treatment of Douglass's characters as merely fictional. The most striking example of this is given when Quarles points out that "in slave-breaker Edward Covey we have one of the more believable prototypes of Simon Legree" (xvii). Given that for decades slave narratives have been read as testimonials whose main purpose was that of witnessing the evils of slavery, Quarles's statement is puzzling, in that he considers slave-breaker Covey believable not because the character was, in fact, based on a real person, but because it fitted the archetype of the evil overseer established by Harriet Beecher Stowe in what is undoubtedly a work of fiction. The measure of authenticity is, in Quarles's words, not the extent to which fiction can imitate reality (therefore factual accuracy), but the extent to which characters can coincide with an established trope, whose moral and physical traits have become recognizable by the reading public as those of the "representative" slave breaker.

The *Narrative* is actually considered by Quarles as a factually accurate text, but this is not enough to make the book authentic:

A final reason for the influence of the *Narrative* is its credibility. The book is soundly buttressed with specific data on persons and places, not a single of them fictitious [however,] while Douglass' facts, by and large, can be trusted, can the same be said for his point of view? Did he tend to overstate his case? It must be admitted that Douglass was not charitable to the slave-owning class, and that he did not do justice to master Thomas Auld's good intentions. Let it be said, too, that if slavery had a sunny side, it will not be found in the pages of the *Narrative*. [...] It is always easy to stir up sympathy for people in bondage" (*Veil* xxi-xxiv).

As Gates has noted, it is the ability to present himself as the Rhetorical Man that makes Douglass authentic in the eyes of his reader, but if his narrative voice is questioned, his authenticity is compromised, and no guarantee of factual accuracy can reinstate his authority as narrator. Sadly, questioning the validity of Douglass's voice is exactly what Quarles proceeds to do: "The *Narrative* marks its author as the personification not only of struggle but also of performance. 'I can't write to much advantage, having never had a day's schooling in my life,' stated Douglass in 1842. Yet three years later his unschooled person had penned his autobiography" (xviii). Quarles statement seems to follow the lead of the Garrisonian abolitionists who suggested to Douglass to "downgrade" his oratorical skills in order to make his testimony more believable: despite the accuracy of the narrated facts—which Quarles has researched and ascertained—Douglass's voice is simply too sophisticated to match the stereotype of the plantation slave that Quarles, and well as the Garrisonians, had in mind, and the failure to fit this archetype inevitably leads to hinted charges of inauthenticity.

It is not surprising therefore that Robert Stepto, in his own "Introduction" to the *Narrative*, focuses exactly on the reception of Douglass's narrative voice. Written almost fifty years after Quarles's, Stepto's "Introduction" begins by pointing out the elements that contributed in making Douglass's statements unconvincing to many of his readers. Stepto points out the necessity for Douglass to omit many of the details of his escape, such as the names of people who helped him, in order to not jeopardize other slaves' attempts to run away. These omissions, coupled with his perfect command of the spoken and written English language, contributed in making the public skeptical: "people doubted if I had ever been a slave," remarked Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, "they said I did not talk as a slave, look like a slave, nor act as a slave, and that they believed I had never been South of the Mason's and Dixon's line" (*Autobiographies* 367). The reaction of his abolitionist supporters was, as Douglass tells us shortly after, that of policing his language in order to make him more credible, by trying to



convince him that it was “better to have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not” (367).

Stepito reads the *Narrative* as Douglass’s response to the abolitionists’ attempts to restrain his voice, an explicit challenge to the archetype of “The Slave Who Tells His Story” to which his supporters were trying to confine him. Stepito argues therefore that “[Douglass] was striking back at the abolitionists, who did not contest his history as a slave but did have fixed ideas about Douglass’s role in the antislavery movement and about his place among them as a black man” (viii). The act of writing his *Narrative* is therefore seen by the critic as an occasion for Douglass to shape his literary persona, to “compose and author himself” (viii). It is not a coincidence that Stepito, in his famous *From Behind the Veil*, considers Douglass’s *Narrative* unique as far as authentication is concerned (4). Stepito identifies two early phases of the slave narrative genre: the “eclectic” narrative, in which several authenticating documents accompany the main text and are usually collected in one or more appendixes, and the “integrated” narrative, in which authenticating documents are harmoniously integrated in the narration. This second phase, Stepito argues, signals the emergence of a more complex kind of text, which is on its way to become what he terms a “generic” narrative, that is a text of a well-recognizable genre such as autobiography, essay or novel. Douglass’s *Narrative*—whose main text is accompanied by a preface by abolitionist activist William Lloyd Garrison and a letter to the author by attorney and judge Wendell Phillips—seems to belong to the first phase, although Stepito notices that:

each ancillary text is drawn to the tale by some sort of extraordinary gravitational pull or magnetic attraction [...] Its new and major thrust is the creation of that aforementioned energy which binds the supporting texts to the tale, while at the same time removing them from participation in the narrative’s rhetorical and authenticating strategies. Douglass’s tale dominates the narrative because it alone authenticates the narrative (*Veil* 17).

In conclusion, if for Quarles Douglass’s narrative voice seems ultimately inauthentic in that it does not stick to the convention of the “Slave Who Tells His Story” in the plainest possible way, for Stepito it is exactly Douglass’s effort to carve a space in which his critical voice could be heard—and in which the voices of white “authenticators” became of secondary importance—that makes the narration authentic and unique.

If Douglass’s refusal to comply with the established stylistic and thematic patterns of previous slave narratives is what makes his text unique, a different story is true for Jacobs. Hazel Carby has noticed how Jacobs has been disadvantaged for falling out of the typical guidelines for slave

narrators, failing to stand as a representative for the race and therefore compromising her authenticity:

the issue of conformity to conventions has been linked to questions concerning the authenticity of slave narratives by historians, particularly in the case of Harriet Jacobs's narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Arguing, convincingly, that historians need to recognize both the 'uniqueness' and the 'representativeness' of the slave narrative, John Blassingame, in *The Slave Community*, concludes that Jacobs's narrative is inauthentic because it does not conform to the guidelines of representativeness ("Careless Daughters" 63).

If Douglass could be seen as the representative black man because of the exceptionality of his narrative voice—the Representative Man as Rhetorical Man—Jacobs did not enjoy the same privilege. The literary precedent established by Douglass's *Narrative* has pushed critics to interpret the narrative of the pursuit of literacy and freedom as a quest for the establishment of subjecthood: in this sense, since Douglass's text is the representative tale of the slave experience, it is taken for granted that this tale must be that of a man. Blassingame complains that *Incidents* dwells in the description of miscegenation, sexual exploitation and moral corruption, but instead of interpreting the episodes in which these issues are presented in light of the specificity of the experiences of black enslaved women, he dismisses them as not plausible in that they differ from the conventions established by male narrators. On the other hand, historian Jean Fagan Yellin has proven through external sources the factual accuracy of Jacobs's text<sup>48</sup>, confirming Carby's view that *Incidents*, far from being a work of fiction, presents a perspective that is uniquely black and feminine. And still, though *Incidents* is nowadays almost always presented to readers and students as the counternarrative to Douglass's story of masculine resistance to slavery, the uniqueness of Jacobs's point of view has historically hindered rather than facilitated the positive reception of her text.

As a matter of fact, Jacobs exhibits the same control of the authenticating machinery of her text that Stepto has praised in Douglass's *Narrative*. Though *Incident* has been edited by abolitionist activist Lydia Maria Child, the burden of authentication is entirely carried by the author, which brilliantly shifts the terms according to which her experience should be validated. By utilizing the conventions of the sentimental novel to appeal to the sympathy of white Northern women, Jacobs demonstrates how different her experience is from that of her readers: as a consequence,

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<sup>48</sup> See Yellin's edition of *Incidents*, Harvard UP, 2009.

she makes clear that her actions cannot be judged by the same parameters reserved to white womanhood. Jacobs then assigns the work of validating her tale to the internal structure of the text, rather than to the reading public: she reveals her sexual history to her daughter Ellen, asking her for forgiveness and understanding. And, as Carby points out, Ellen's final reassurance that she will always love and support her mother unconditionally makes every other form of external validation "unnecessary and unwarranted" ("Careless Daughters" 76). Jacobs displaces therefore the traditional expectations of readers of slave narratives by changing the parameters of validation and authentication, and in this sense contributes a unique voice to the genre of the slave narrative. Despite the brilliancy of this stratagem, it is only after Yellin's meticulous work demonstrated the factual accuracy of Jacobs's tale, confuting previous charges of untruth, that critics have stopped focusing on the veracity or lack thereof of *Incident*, directing their attention to the uniqueness of the author's experience and to her role of forerunner of subsequent phases of black feminism.

### Authenticity and Self-Representation after Slavery

If during slavery the principal concern of African American writers was to support the efforts of the abolitionist movement by bearing witness to the horrors of the peculiar institution, the post-Emancipation era brings the possibility for black authors to expand their literary production beyond established forms of personal testimony. For decades, African American authors had been bound to the literary conventions of the slave narrative genre, which had been developed in response to the necessity to elicit the sympathy and understanding of white Northerners and to secure their support. However, the abolition of slavery did not mark the end of the slave narrative genre: on the contrary, as Deborah McDowell points out, "the slave narrative continued to play a dominant role in African American letters from the end of the Civil War until well into the 1920s" (150). Not only actual slave narratives were published well after abolition—such as Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, first published in 1901—but the stylistic and thematic patterns of the genre heavily influenced subsequent phases of African American autobiography, as well as other genres such as the novel. But despite undeniable elements of continuity between African American life narrative of the pre- and post-Emancipation period, it is interesting to observe that the conventions of the slave narrative are critically assessed and transformed to suit the different social and political goals of a new phase of black history.

The first element that critics notice in post-Emancipation African American life narratives is the necessity to respond to revisionist interpretations of slavery that depict it as a benign institution in which white people provided for their slaves. The dominant public memory of slavery as a paternalistic practice in which the races harmoniously occupied their “natural” place in society was reinforced by the publication of several works in which the site of the plantation is described in nostalgic terms. Deborah McDowell lists, among other works, George Washington Cable’s *Ole Creole Days* (1879), Thomas Nelson Page’s *In Ole Virginia* (1887), and Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1881) as texts whose main goal was to reminisce the supposedly good old times before Reconstruction, when faithful slaves worked for families who actually cared for them. African American authors writing in this period therefore reacted to either sentimental evocations of plantation life, or to more blatant racist works such as Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905).

Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (1901) is probably the most famous slave narrative written and published after Emancipation, and both Deborah McDowell and William L. Andrews have read it as one of many post-Emancipation responses to the romanticizing of slavery. According to both critics, the text employs a quasi-realist tone that differs dramatically from the style of previous slave narratives (Andrews, “Literary Realism” 79; McDowell 155). While the image of the heroic rebellious slave, present in many slave narratives and made iconic by Douglass’s *Narrative*, appealed to the tastes of a public used to the conventions of Romanticism, after Civil War life narrators started to chronicle the stories of their life from a much more pragmatical perspective. In particular, Andrews notes that “the stunningly different treatments of bondage and selfhood in *Up from Slavery*, for instance, signal a new wave of revisionism in postbellum Afro-American literature, instanced in the reaction to what [black narrators] perceived as romanticized interpretations of the pre-Emancipation past, whether by black or white writers” (79). In this context, Washington’s main goal seems to be that of celebrating the virtues of those who courageously endured and survived slavery, and not only the ones who managed to escape. Andrews suggests that in Washington’s text “slavery needed to be reviewed and reempowered as a concept capable of effective change, of making a difference in what white people thought of black people as freedmen, not slaves” (83). Consequently, the famous metaphor used by Washington, who compared slavery to a school, can be understood in light of the fact that he was not denouncing the institution with the purpose of ending it—like his predecessors—but was considering the effects of slavery in the present

and was trying to prove what slaves learned while in bondage could be put to use to improve the future of the race. Washington refuses to depict slavery as a site of abjection and degradation, and represents it instead as a period of training in which black people acquired advanced survival skills, essential in an industrial-capitalist society. The idea of Washington in *Up From Slavery* seems therefore that of using past experiences of slavery as a starting point on which to build a new race consciousness, indispensable for the wellbeing of the community in the years to come.

If critics have typically read *Up from Slavery* as the proof of Washington's submissiveness towards white people and of his willingness to downplay the horrors of slavery to secure the financial support of the white financiers of the Tuskegee Institute, Andrews's interpretation of this slave narrative reevaluates its agenda in light of the complex racial dynamics that shaped the literary trends of postbellum America. In Washington's pragmatism, Andrews sees not disloyalty to the race, but the will to rehabilitate the race's past and provide secure foundations upon which the black community could build and prosper. Washington's accommodationist policy is reevaluated, as the critic reminds us that, in the context of postbellum South, "what we could call accommodationism is what the Tuskegean would have termed realism" (84). This realism is clearly manifested in Washington's will to portray himself as a man of deeds rather than a man of words, a statement that seems contradictory in an autobiography. The contradiction is, however, soon solved once Washington, in professing his appreciation for "real things," condemns literary genres such as the novel and poetry as useless imitations of life, and elevates (auto)biography as the solely authentic genre: "I like to be sure that I am reading about a real man or a real thing" (186). By arguing for a substantial division between action and speech, Washington denies the dynamics of self-representation at play in *Up from Slavery*, creating the illusion that in chronicling his life he is merely reporting facts and not engaging in the complex construction of his public persona.

A very different approach to how the conventions of the slave narratives are re-elaborated is offered by anti-lynching activist and investigative journalist Ida B. Wells in her autobiography *Crusade for Justice*, edited by her daughter Alfreda Duster and posthumously published in 1970. Written between 1928 and 1931, and narrating events happening approximately between 1862 and 1927, *Crusade for Justice* presents itself as a work of transition between slave narratives and later political memoirs. Her narrative strategies are in fact interestingly hybrid, in that Wells employs the authenticating mechanisms of the slave narrative, but repurposes them for a new political agenda. Stephen Butterfield, in commenting *Crusade*, has stated that

“Ida B. Wells is a giant of the [autobiographical] form” adding that, unlike Washington, she “apologizes to nobody. She takes the position that slavery still exists; therefore it is appropriate to combat it with the old abolitionist fervor” (201). Accordingly, the elements of continuity between the slave narrative tradition and Wells’s text can be interpreted as textual evidence of her belief that slavery had been abolished only on paper, and that the struggle for black liberation needed to continue. But this struggle has to take a different form, since Wells, unlike her literary predecessors, is not involved in a mass movement that supports her efforts, but in many little documented grassroots movements such as women’s clubs, discussion groups, and church-based programs for mutual assistance. As a consequence, she needs a wide variety of authenticating documents to prove the extent and intensity of these “fragmented” and multifaceted forms of activism.

Wells’s text utilizes the techniques of what Stepto would call an “integrated slave narrative,” incorporating in the text a myriad authenticating sub-texts such as excerpts of article journals, letters and flyers advertising her lectures, for the purpose of documenting her anti-lynching initiatives and the way in which they were received. However, she does not need these testimonies to prove her literacy, her capacity of formulating abstract thoughts and consequently her humanity and equality to white people, but to document her commitment to the struggle for human rights and to defend herself from charges of inauthenticity, of being a “Negro Adventuress,”<sup>49</sup> an opportunist whose only goal was that of securing the financial support of a sympathetic white public. In fact, Wells’s explicit goal in writing the text is “to set the record straight,” to offer a counter narrative of the Reconstruction years that explicitly challenges the writings of white historians, which Wells saw as flawed, biased, and lacking authenticity:

It is therefore for the young who have so little of our history recorded that I am for the first time in my life writing about myself. I am all the more constrained to do this because there is such a lack of *authentic* race history of Reconstruction times written by a Negro himself [...] our race has little of its own that is definite and authentic (4, my emphasis).

The reader is therefore immediately informed that Wells will act as a crusader not only in a political sense—through her anti-lynching campaigns—but also in a literary one, since she will be the one who redresses the wrongs done to her people by Southern historians. This commitment to “correcting” biased or incomplete historical accounts will be one of the central

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<sup>49</sup> The expression was used by the *Memphis Daily Commercial* to discredit Wells (Wells 187).

leitmotifs in the texts of Civil Rights autobiographers, as noticed by historian Kathryn Nasstrom, who in discussing the relationship between historiography and life narrative of the Movement points out that “history is under assault from autobiography, and, at least as some former activists have it, memoir trumps history at nearly every turn” (326). In this sense, Wells seems to anticipate one of the main characteristics of later phases of black autobiography.

In line with William Andrews’s theory that post-Emancipation narratives need to respond to biased descriptions of slavery and Reconstruction through a “realist” approach, Wells’s autobiography seems to be invested in the same kind of pragmatism displayed by Washington’s *Up from Slavery*. However this pragmatism has seldom been appreciated in her text, whose value as “transition” work between two major phases of African American autobiography—the slave narrative and the post-Emancipation political or activist memoir—has rarely been recognized.<sup>50</sup> This text can be certainly read as, in James Cox’s terms, “literature of content,” in that it is strongly involved in factuality and in the meticulous documentation of anti-lynching activism. However, Cox has noticed that, especially in the wave of New Criticism, this kind of literature has suffered from a certain tendency among literary critics to privilege autobiographies that focus on the emotional life of writers rather than their public persona (125). Cox does not consider the role of gender dynamics in this critical tendency, but it seems very likely that this expectation for introspection rather than pragmatism might have been greater for women autobiographers, and that this might have impacted the way in which Wells’s autobiography has been (dis)regarded. If Harriet Jacobs’s text has been long ignored for not conforming to the conventions of a traditionally masculine genre, Wells’s seems to have undergone the same fate despite her adherence to the pragmatism and revisionist efforts that characterize post-Emancipation black literature.

If pragmatism and factuality inform the autobiographies of Washington and Wells, a different major trend dominates autobiographies published in the following decades, and that is the tendency to reflect on the untenability of racial classifications. The definition of race differences was in fact solidified in the previous two centuries to clearly distinguish slaves from free citizens, but the ratification of the thirteenth Amendment, which defined the new status of African Americans as citizens, pushed black writers to expose the artificial and arbitrary nature

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<sup>50</sup> The only essay that offers an extensive reading of *Crusade for Justice*, mentioning its value as “transition autobiography,” is, to my knowledge, Joanne M. Braxton’s “Crusader for Justice: Ida B. Wells” (1993). It seems interesting that despite the increased attention of critics to Wells’s journalism and activism, witnessed by numerous publications in the last decade, few of them have paid any attention to her autobiography.

of race distinctions. If the genre of the novel witnesses a boom of stories of passing—James Weldon Johnson’s fictional *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* being the most famous—in life narrative the necessity to question the borders between whiteness and blackness is mainly expressed through the protagonists’ realization of how their blackness is socially constructed, and of how blackness and whiteness depend on one another for mutual existence.

Nowhere is this clearer than in W.E.B. DuBois’s vast autobiographical production, which comprises three autobiographies, published at regular intervals of about twenty years: *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920), *Dusk of Dawn: An Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940), and *The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1968)<sup>51</sup>, to which should be added the several autobiographical references that punctuate his seminal *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). DuBois’s autobiographies are surprisingly diverse in the variety of approaches used by the author to fashion his literary persona. More than conventional autobiographies, *Darkwater* and *Dusk of Dawn* are in fact collections of essays that illuminate the formation and consequences of the color line through episodes taken from his own life, resembling in many ways the structure and intent of *The Souls of Black Folk*. *Darkwater* in particular blends autobiographical chapters, essays, and poems to create a hybrid text that does not simply chronicle the most remarkable events of DuBois’s life, but retraces the roots of the color-line in work policies based on inequality and power imbalance, accounting for the emotional toll that this situation is exacting from millions of black Americans.

DuBois troubles the color line by referring to the myriad ways in which the artificiality of race barriers manifested itself in his everyday life: for example, he remarks that race distinctions were insignificant for him as a child and that he found himself “very much one of them” among the families of his middle-class white classmates, establishing an early example of what Ellis Trey would later term a “cultural mulatto” (*Darkwater* 11). However, once the implications of his color are made clear to him in more or less subtle ways by his classmates and teachers, he can no longer escape the color line, whose dictates will influence all of the following phases of his development as a man and intellectual. At the same time, it is evident how in *Darkwater* DuBois reclaims his blackness as a reason for pride and self-respect: for example, he states that

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<sup>51</sup> DuBois’s *Soliloquy* was firstly published in Vospominaniia, URSS, in 1962. 1968 refers to the first English edition, published in New York by International Publishers.



he was “born with a flood of Negro blood, a strain of French, a bit of Dutch, but, thank God! no Anglo-Saxon” (9). This essentialist perspective is, however, marginal in both *Darkwater* and *Dusk of Dawn*, since both texts are mostly concerned with explaining the problem of the color line in economical and class terms, that is as a consequence of chattel slavery and plantation economy. Through this explanation, DuBois can demonstrate the artificiality of racial categories and argue that “the discovery of personal whiteness among the world’s people is a very modern thing—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed” (*Darkwater* 29-30).

If *Darkwater* and *Dusk of Dawn* build on his personal experiences to offer a broader reflection on race relations, DuBois’s *Soliloquy* provides a relatively different perspective. The text is in fact written from a more introspective point of view and is closer in structure to the classic autobiographical tale of an elderly man who looks back at the events of his life to offer his wisdom to the generations to come. Only in his nineties DuBois seems to actually lift “the veil” on his inner life, and to provide readers with a more intimate view of his personal experiences. Even in this case, however, it is noteworthy that DuBois does not respect the conventions of traditional autobiography, since he begins the text not by chronicling the different stages of his life in chronological order, but with a chapter in which he describes his travels to Europe and the Soviet Union. It is therefore evident that he selects specific episodes of his life to reflect not so much on the entirety of the experiences that led him to become the man and intellectual he is, but on why and how he reached what he regarded as the most important ideological decision of his life: his embrace of communist ideals.

The examples of post-Emancipation life narrative offered in this section show that a redefinition of race authentication issues occurs in the decades between the end of the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance. If during slavery race authentication had been imposed from the outside as a means to sort individuals in order to facilitate the distinction between slaves and free citizens, legal scholar Christopher A. Bracey notices how during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth century

blacks would begin to assert control over their own racial identity—to racially authenticate on their own terms. [...] Race authentication, when harnessed by racial minorities themselves, would be converted from a tool of oppression into a means of human liberation, community building and political activism (25).

The Reconstruction years marked the shift from the effort to validate and authenticate the authentic humanity of black people, to that of authenticating blackness for progressive reform:

in other words, the question gradually shifted from “who is authentically human?” to “who is authentically black?” in a context in which authentic blackness could be embraced for social empowerment. The Harlem Renaissance marked an important moment in the redefinition of racial authentication, since one of the central aspirations of this literary movement was to acknowledge and cherish the distinctiveness of African American culture. Racial authentication was still used to justify discrimination—Jim Crow laws and the widespread practice of lynching being its most obvious manifestations—but it could also serve to evaluate one’s loyalty and racial salience, which Bracey defines as “the extent to which one’s personal identity was shaped by the habits, culture, and expression of a particular racial group” (34).

It is therefore not a coincidence that, during the Harlem Renaissance and well into the 1940s, African American autobiographers shift their focus from the commitment to racial uplift to a more self-reflective style. Even if attention to broader sociopolitical issues remains an essential part of black autobiographies produced in those years, the main focus is on the formation of the protagonist’s racial consciousness. This is evident, for example, in texts such as Claude McKay’s *A Long Way from Home* (1937), Langston Hughes’s *The Big Sea* (1940), Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945). Although these texts are profoundly different as far as setting, structure and themes are concerned, they all share the intention of elaborating on the peculiar circumstances that shaped their authors’ perception of themselves as racialized subjects. Unlike previous phases of African American life narrative, these autobiographers are not at all concerned with proving their equality to white people through the chronicle of their remarkable achievements, but are interested in presenting their process of identity formation and the specificity of their experiences as black subjects. This is a trend that will inform subsequent phases of African American autobiography, and that will find its best expression in the political autobiographies of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

### Manchildren and Revolutionaries: Black Autobiography in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements

In the years between the beginning of the 1960s and the late 1970s African American autobiographers have produced some of the best-known examples of the genre, whose paperback editions have appeared on the shelves of libraries and bookstores all over the world, outselling white autobiographies published in the same period. Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *The*

*Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974) are probably the most studied black autobiographies produced in the context of the great social movements of the 1960s-70s, but dozens of other texts by both activists and professional writers have contributed to enrich and expand the genre: Black Panther leaders Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seale, human rights activists George Jackson and H. Rap Brown and poets Nikki Giovanni and Gwendolyn Brooks are among the renowned figures that published their life narratives in these crucial years. Moreover, even after the decline of Black Power, activists and artists have continued to reflect on their experiences as members of movements that so profoundly shaped their development as cultural critics and as agents of social and political change, offering their personal interpretations of a historical moment characterized by unprecedented instability and widespread social upheaval: Leroi Jones, Stokely Carmichael, Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown, Audre Lorde, Nina Simone, are only some of the public figures that published their considerations of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in autobiographical form.

Because of the wide variety of approaches to the genre displayed by black autobiographers in this period it is difficult to retrace common stylistic and thematic patterns. However, if in the decades between 1900 and the end of the 1950s black autobiographers seem to be mostly concerned with the process of redefining their status as citizens, establishing a stable and unified black identity and expanding the possibilities of the genre beyond those of plain testimony, it is possible to observe that “after 1961 the form shows a resurgence of political purpose and a trend toward more colloquial language” (Butterfield 7). Albert E. Stone argues that Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and DuBois’s *Dusk of Dawn* are the two main texts that helped shape and define the nature of the genre in the following decades, and suggests that these masterpieces offered the matrix for the two main tendencies that inform modern black life writing: the “novelistic” autobiography, and the political autobiography. According to the critic, *Black Boy* inspired a more lyrical and introspective trend which focuses on the young protagonist’s struggle for self-definition in a hostile environment, and whose style and tropes can be retraced in coming-of-age narratives such as Claude Brown’s and Maya Angelou’s. Stone deems this kind of narratives as historically unreliable, in that they “resemble novels more than biographies” (21), and he encourages the reader to approach all autobiographies, but especially those which conform to *Black Boy*, with “skeptical sympathy,” since these texts are not concerned with historical truth. He suggests, however, that although historically inaccurate, these “dramatically paced” stories, which “enfold like a plot” (30) and are often told in the

present tense to increase drama, offer a compelling interpretation of the sociohistorical conditions in which the youthful self is forced to display a precocious maturity and to develop an early awareness of racial dynamics. Moreover, Stone points out that the titles of these texts are often evocative of a situation that is common to millions of people who are confronted with the difficulties of living in a hostile environment, and that this encourages readers to generalize more freely: *Black Boy*, *Manchild* and *Caged Bird* are in fact generic and abstract images, strikingly different from the pragmatism and factuality evoked by titles such as *The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*.

Like *Black Boy*, “introspective” autobiographies of the 1960s and 1970s are often characterized by a violent opening scene, which establishes the surroundings of the protagonist as inimical and dangerous and makes clear that the young self will be soon compelled to abandon the innocence and naivety of childhood for an early entrance into the world of adulthood (Stone 30). In *Black Boy*’s opening paragraphs, for example, the four-year-old protagonist burns a window curtain, causing a severe fire that partially burns his family house. Richard’s gesture is explained as an act of revenge against his mother, who had admonished him to keep quiet after he shouted in delight for seeing a bird flying past the window. Stone reads the scene as the boy’s first encounter with racism, since the mother’s reprimand is motivated by the need to teach black children in Mississippi to be quiet at all time, to keep a low profile and not attract attention to themselves. Shortly after, this habit to silence black children is reiterated in another famous episode of the text, in which young Richard hangs a stray kitten to death. Richard knows that he is not supposed to disturb his father, who works in shifts and needs to sleep during the daytime, but the stray kitten he is playing with wakes him up by meowing constantly. Following the father’s furious order to “kill that damn thing” (10), Richard hangs the puppy, only to be accused shortly after by his entire family of having manipulated his father’s words for a petty revenge.

Similarly, the opening scenes in *Manchild* and *I Know Why* dramatize the tense climate in which the protagonists will learn to cope with their racial identities. *Manchild* opens in medias res with the thirteen-year-old protagonist Sonny—Claude Brown’s nickname—seeking shelter in a Harlem fish-and-chips joint after having been shot in the stomach as a result of a failed attempt to steal laundry from a neighbor’s clothesline. After his recovery, Sonny is sent to Warwick Reform School, which marks the beginning of a vicious circle of petty crime followed by reformatory institutions which lasts for most of his adolescence. The opening scene

immediately conveys the hazards of ghetto life that the young protagonist is about to confront: the “everyday” nature of potentially deadly violence in the streets of Harlem, in which a shooting could be the consequence of the most trivial confrontation, the criminalization of poverty and lack of resources, and the inability of parents and unwillingness of institutions to deal with the situation in a constructive way. The manchild is therefore portrayed as a lonely anti-hero, driven to self-destructive behavior by an antagonistic environment (Baker, “Environment” 53). In this context, it is not surprising that so much attention is dedicated to the protagonist’s process of self-fashioning: self-reliance is his only hope to escape the harmful dynamics of ghetto life, since there is no group or organized social movement to offer a vision of hope for a better future. In fact, it is through sheer willpower that Sonny can overturn his lifepath, leaving Harlem for several years to start a new life made of honest work, night school and piano lesson, which will eventually lead him to obtaining a degree at Howard University.

The importance of self-sufficiency is heavily stressed also in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The text opens with little Maya and her brother relocating from the broken home of their parents in California to their grandmother’s rural village of Stamps, Arkansas. The two children are forced to endure the long train ride alone, with only a hand-written sign hanging from their necks indicating their final destination and the name of the person who is supposed to pick them up. As the author emphasizes the feeling of loneliness and displacement of the two young siblings, the reader has immediately clear the kind of dangers that the protagonist will have to face in the rest of the narration: rootlessness, precariousness, fear of abandonment, ineffective parenthood, and lack of financial resources. To overcome these obstacles, Maya can count only on her inner strength. It is undoubtable that the protagonist inherits part of this strength from the two adults who most influenced her during her upbringing: her mother and grandmother, both independent and determined women who teach her different but complementary values and skills. In fact, as Stephen Butterfield has noticed, while grandma Henderson represents the religious tradition and its ethics of piousness, hard work, diligence and compassion, mother Vivian represents the street-blues tradition based on individuality and on the necessity to hustle and make ends meet (211). George E. Kent, however, has problematized these female role-models by pointing out their strong limits: despite her emotional strength and financial stability, grandma Henderson is powerless in her confrontations with whites; mother Vivian on the other hand is so focused on keeping up with her frantic lifestyle that she is unable to provide any kind of stability and emotional closeness for her children (169). In this context, Maya has to be able to critically assess the values and

coping strategies that her role-models offer, and to rely on her own courage and resolution to establish herself in an inimical world.

Stone seems to be right when he states that “novelistic” autobiographies invite generalization, since both Brown and Angelou point out how their respective situations were all but uncommon in their socio-historical settings. The fact that they are not the victims of a particularly unfortunate individual fate, but part of a majority of oppressed people, is immediately stated in the opening scenes of these autobiographies: the Harlem of *Manchild* is described as a place in which shootings for banal reasons are the norm, while Angelou states that the sight of children travelling long distance unaccompanied was normal and unremarkable. In fact, both *Manchild* and *I Know Why* identify self-reliance as the paramount characteristic that allows the protagonists to come up with a stable and positive identity, a characteristic that must be learned as soon as possible. However, it is important to point out that neither of these texts buys into the traditional archetype of the self-made man of the Western autobiographical tradition. The capacity of the protagonists to cope with the difficulties of an inimical setting may be described in a dramatic and “novelistic” way (Stone 30), however life in the ghetto or in the rural South is never romanticized, but depicted in all its brutality and precariousness. Despite the difference described by Stone between DuBois’s autobiographical production and “novelistic” autobiographies such as *Manchild* and *I Know Why*, the two autobiographical traditions are both skeptical of narratives that glorify the politics of personal responsibility without accounting for the systematic injustices that are routinely inflicted on minority subjects. In *Darkwater*, for example, DuBois divides his youth years into the Age of Miracles and the Age of Disillusion, remarking that the first period was characterized by the fact that he easily reached every goal he set his mind on: “I *willed* to do! It was done. I *wished*! The wish came true” (14). However, if the “miracles” of the first phase of his life seemed to come from mere willpower and dedication, the Age of Disillusion brings a bitterer awareness of the precariousness of black existence:

I began to realize how much of what I had called Will and Ability was sheer Luck! *Suppose* my good mother had preferred a steady income from my child labor rather than bank on the precarious dividend of my higher training? *Suppose* that pompous old village judge, whose dignity we often ruffled and whose apples we stole, had had his way and sent me while a child to a "reform" school to learn a "trade"? *Suppose* Principal Hosmer had been born with no faith in "darkies," and instead of giving me Greek and Latin had taught me carpentry and the making of tin pans? *Suppose* I had missed a Harvard scholarship?

*Suppose* the Slater Board had then, as now, distinct ideas as to where the education of Negroes should stop? Suppose and suppose! [...] Was I the masterful captain or the pawn of laughing sprites? (16-7).

DuBois's profound awareness of the ways in which the intersection of race and class can determine the fate of the black subject is therefore reevoked in all subsequent phases of black autobiography, regardless of the narratological style—"novelistic" or more pragmatic, to put it in Stone's terms—of the individual autobiographer. However, a more militant take on the issue of the color line is inevitably displayed in what has come to be known as "political autobiography," justifying in some way Stone's claim that *Dusk of Dawn*, *Darkwater* and the *Soliloquy* have provided the matrix for texts that "insist that communicating the 'Negro problem' directly is more important than niceties of individual expression" (Stone 29). These texts are characterized by a more pragmatic approach, in which the examination of the protagonist's inner life is subordinated to the narration of the main historical events that shape the history of the movement in which the author is involved. The self-effacement of the individual self seems to be one of the paramount characteristics of political autobiography, as explained by Margo V. Perkins in *Autobiography as Activism* (2000). In this seminal essay, Perkins defines the characteristics that make life narrative "political," specifying that Angela Davis coined the expression "political autobiography" and that her text can be considered a perfect example of the main stylistic and thematic patterns of the form.<sup>52</sup> According to Perkins, political autobiography is characterized by the following:

- (1) that the autobiographer will emphasize the story of the struggle over her own personal ordeal;
- (2) That she will use her own story both to document a history of the struggle and to further its political agenda;
- (3) that she will provide a voice for voiceless;
- (4) that she will honor strategic silences in order to protect the integrity of the struggle as well as the welfare of other activists;
- (5) that she will expose oppressive conditions and the repressive tactics of the state;
- (6) that she will use the autobiography as a form of political intervention, to educate as broad an audience as possible to the situation and issues at stake
- (7).

Political autobiographies are therefore informed by the idea that authors regard the text as a tool to promote their political views and accelerate the success of their struggle, but most

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<sup>52</sup> Actually, the expression "a political autobiography" had already been used by H. Rap Brown as a subtitle to his *Die Nigger Die*, published in 1970.

importantly by the fact that the advancement of the struggle and the development of identity are carried on as parallel, inseparable processes.<sup>53</sup> It is interesting that, according to Stone, political autobiography is characterized by a higher degree of authenticity than “novelistic” autobiographies, since the narrator is particularly concerned with historical truth and is motivated by the firm belief that an honest, documentable account of his or her experiences as activist will ultimately advance the struggle for black liberation. Thus, the “raw, naked truth” advocated by Malcolm X in his autobiography (278) is seen by Stone as a “historical claim” of veracity and of adherence to factuality (Stone 21).

Stone’s argument is not isolated: indeed, for decades political autobiographies of Black Power activists such as Malcolm X or Eldridge Cleaver have been read as representative of the authentic black experience of the 1960s, favoring interpretations of the Black Power movement as a male-dominated movement. Despite the fact that numerous examples of militant women’s autobiographies were published between the 1960s and 1970s, the “direct” and unadorned style of X and Cleaver has been seen as proof of their authenticity, with the consequence that these authors have established the criteria of the black authentic self of those decades as male and militant. More recent criticism, however, has emphasized the role of women’s autobiography in offering a more complete and balanced image of the gender dynamics of the Black Power movement, revising representations of the movement that focused exclusively on its male representatives.

Together with the contribution of feminist critique of Black Power, another interesting critical trend is that of taking into consideration the most literary aspects of political autobiographies, dismantling the idea that these texts are unfiltered testimonies of historical truth and highlighting their rhetorical artifices and aesthetical value. This has allowed critics to analyze how political autobiographers are in fact engaged in highly complex dynamics of representation of their public personas, and has helped to deconstruct the fiction that militant texts offer a

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<sup>53</sup> In the case of political autobiographies written after the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements by authors who were strongly involved in those movement, the purpose is clearly different: the text is not used to promote their ideas and advance their political struggle, but usually conforms to the characteristics of the apology narrative. As explained by Thomas Couser, apologies are texts in which the author explains his reasons for behaving in a certain way in the past, justifying his choices in the name of his ideals and beliefs and of the circumstances he had to face at the time. Apology narratives, in other words, are not used to “apologize” for the author has done in the past, but to explain the reasons why he did it. Couser points out that the classical example of apology narrative is the autobiography of a politician, such as an ex-president. However, the structure and intent he describes can be retraced in several autobiographies of activists who write years after their active involvement in the social movements of the sixties and seventies, such as Amiri Baraka, Assata Shakur, Nina Simone and many more (Couser 40).



privileged description of the unmediated, authentic black self. The importance of rhetorical devices to construct the literary self of the protagonist is particularly visible in collaborations between an activist and a creative writer, as in the case of Malcolm X and Alex Haley. If Stone remarks that “many black autobiographies written by another succeed in evoking an authentic personality by reproducing his or her voice and keeping the actual writer entirely in the background” (31), we also have to consider that it is especially thanks to Haley’s mediation that we can perceive Malcolm X’s personality as authentic. Haley achieves this effect of perceived authenticity not simply by standing in the background to register the authentic and “unmediated” voice of the Muslim preacher, but by subtly guiding him in the process of storytelling to reach the desired effect.

This is most visible in the epilogue of the text, in which Haley recalls the stratagems he used to get X to talk about himself. If it is true that political autobiography subordinates the narration of the self to that of the movement in which it is involved, it is also true that Haley, to produce the effect of an authentic black voice speaking, needs to retrieve the individual subject from the entanglements of history and let his individuality emerge. As a consequence, once Haley realizes that “my notebook contained almost nothing but Black Muslim philosophy, praise of Mr. Muhammad and the ‘evils’ of the ‘white devil,’” (395) he is not afraid to recur to minor expedients to trick X into talking more about himself, such as retrieving random notes he scribbled, or profiting from a moment of physical exhaustion to make him talk about his mother, as described in the following passages:

I began leaving two white paper napkins by him every time I served him more coffee, and the ruse worked when he sometimes scribbled on the napkins, which I retrieved when he left (395-6).

I don't know what gave me the inspiration to say once when he paused for breath, “I wonder if you'd tell me something about your mother?” Abruptly he quit pacing, and the look he shot at me made me sense that somehow the chance question had hit him. When I look back at it now, I believe I must have caught him so physically weak that his defenses were vulnerable (397).

At the same time Malcolm X, despite his insistence on “raw, naked truth,” seems perfectly aware of the power of literary devices in shaping the public opinion and, consequently, of the way in which a careful construction of his public persona could positively influence the image

of Black Islam. Haley notices in fact that, after he published several articles that attempted to give a balanced and objective description of the Black Islam credo, “Malcolm X began to warm up to me somewhat. He was most aware of the national periodicals’ power, and he had come to regard me, if still suspiciously, as one avenue of access” (392). Malcolm X’s final decision to collaborate with Haley comes therefore only after he realizes that the writer has a certain ability to shape the public imagination and channel it in his desired direction.

Haley’s process of retrieving the “authentic” Malcolm X to present it to the public complexly intertwines with that of Malcolm X developing and delivering his own definition of black authenticity. While Haley is most interested in letting X’s personal story emerge—to retrace the authentic self of the autobiographer—the preacher’s main concern is to define authenticity in a way that supports his political credo, with the intent of educating his black readers and inspiring them to work on themselves. Accordingly, X is depicted in a process of self-definition that begins during his prison years, after his brother Reginald tells him that he does not even know who he is (164), since the white man has kept his identity hidden and has erased every evidence of the glorious origins of black people. From this moment on, Malcolm X is inspired to educate himself with almost religious zeal on black history and on the racial dynamics that shape US society, a journey that he describes as thrilling and fascinating, in that it allows him to come to terms with his identity and cast his blackness in positive and empowering terms. The chapters dedicated to this process of self-discovery exemplify Margo V. Perkins’s claim that in political autobiography, the form itself pushes the autobiographer to pursue a “relational understanding of self,” in which personal identity can only be defined in connection with the ideals that the author will come to embrace, and that he will hope to extend to the community he represents (7).

Consequently, X formulates a definition of racial authenticity that he can extend to the whole black community and that culminates in his distinction between “Negroes” and “blacks.” While “Negroes” accept to identify themselves on the white man’s terms and do not contest the racial categorization imposed on them by former slavemasters, “blacks” actively oppose this categorization and resist oppressive definitions of who they are, developing in this process an autonomous way of thinking (257). Authentic blackness is therefore formulated in revolutionary terms, since it is developed in the process of rejecting the whole system of values and beliefs of white supremacy. As Butterfield has pointed out, this is typical of several black

autobiographies of the third period,<sup>54</sup> in which the protagonist can reach a stable sense of what black identity is only through militancy and through an active involvement in the struggles of the community: the self is tightly bound to historicity and cannot grow and evolve unless the community does it too (219). The embrace of blackness as a revolutionary act establishes therefore the basis of Malcolm X's black identity, and the same happens in other political autobiographies such as Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), H. Rap Brown's *Die Nigger Die* (1969) and Bobby Seale's *Seize the Time* (1970). In particular, H. Rap Brown offers a similar definition of blackness when he realizes that "Negroes" are created when white supremacy succeeds in erasing every trace of black identity from African Americans, who are consequently left bereft of a stable and healthy sense of who they are and of what they can accomplish. Being "black" means resisting this process of erasure and constructing one's identity on one's own terms: "the biggest difference between being known as a Black man or a negro is that if you're Black, then you do everything you can to fight white folks. If you're negro, you do everything you can to appease them" (*Die* 55). Authentic blackness is not a matter of race, but of adhering to values and practices that are in opposition to those of the mainstream.

As a result of the great migrations, the kind of unadulterated blackness that writers of previous decades had identified in the folk—Southern, rural, vernacular-speaking—is now found in the masses of black poor that cram the ghettos of Northern cities, whose inhabitants can provide the fuel for black revolution. The authentic black person of the sixties and seventies is therefore urban, working-class, militant, and disdains everything white, while the black bourgeois, the "Negro" who does not embrace the struggle for black liberation and is ashamed of his less "assimilated" brothers and sisters, is seen as the expression of everything that is fake and inauthentic. In this regard, autobiographers of this period appropriate and expand the thesis of sociologists E. Franklin Frazier and Nathan Hare, who support the idea that class and black authenticity are strictly linked, and that middle-class aspirations expose blacks to the risk of becoming "Negroes" (Frazier 1957; Hare 1965).<sup>55</sup> Most importantly, "Negroes" are not only

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<sup>54</sup> Though aware of the elements of continuity that inform African American autobiography from its origins to the present, and of the artificiality of any chronological division established by literary criticism, Butterfield divides the history of black autobiography in three periods: the slave narrative period (ca. 1831-1895), the period of search (ca. 1901-1961) and the period of rebirth (since 1961).

<sup>55</sup> There is, however, a remarkable difference between Frazier's and Hare's formulations of the link between middle-class status and black inauthenticity. Frazier in *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957) refers to middle-class as a whole and expresses the conviction that the achievement of financial stability exposes automatically black people to detach themselves from the commitment to black liberation. On the other hand, Hare in *The Black Anglo-Saxons* (1965) refers to single middle-class individuals who try to imitate middle-class whites but does not assume that middle-class status necessarily makes a black person inauthentic.

inauthentic, but dangerous, in that their morals and practices can jeopardize the success of the struggle for black liberation: inauthentic blacks must be therefore identified and distanced from the community. In this state of things, it is not surprising that, as Perkins notices, the most militant autobiographers of this period are uncomfortable with the personal “I,” and express their interpretation of what constitutes the authentic self as something that must necessarily invest the whole black community (Perkins 7). There is no “being black for me is...”: blackness is not a personal matter and its boundaries have to be clearly established and reinforced, since transcending them can potentially threaten the wellbeing of the whole collectivity.

However, if this intransigent interpretation of black authenticity can be understood as an attempt to protect and empower the most vulnerable strata of the black community, it can also become a versatile weapon to demonize certain individuals or groups. In *Soul on Ice*, for example, Eldridge Cleaver claims that gay black people are like a “white man in a black body,” and are all contaminated by a sickness that makes them believe that the only way to assimilate in America is to become white (101). According to Cleaver, “it seems that many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man” (102-103). Black homosexuals are described as an active threat to black culture, since their most intimate desire is that of erasing not only their own blackness, but the blackness of the generations to come by having white children with white men. Homosexuality is therefore regarded as a distinctively white disease, in that its alleged dynamics—the desire to have white children by white men and erase all traces of blackness from American society—is functional to the maintenance of white supremacy.

The homophobic and chauvinistic tendencies of some exponent of Black Power have long been denounced by feminist critics such as Pauli Murray, Michele Wallace, and most recently Stanley Crouch and Mark Anthony Neal, who suggested that questions of black authenticity in the 1960s and 1970s revolved primarily around heterosexual men. In “The Liberation of Black Women” (1970), for example, Murray argued that the main motivation behind black revolutionary literature is actually a “bid of black males to share power with white males in a continuing patriarchal society” (189). More recently, Stanley Crouch has suggested that some of the “identity types” developed in these decades are not only chauvinistic, but also ultimately inauthentic. For example, the scholar states that the figure of the “street brother,” celebrated as the truest expression of blackness during the 1960s and 1970s, is actually white in origin, and derives from a propensity to distrust refined intellectuals—seen as the expression of the moral

decadence of Europe—and privilege the American “common man’s culture,” a tendency that began after the Anglo-American War of 1812 (218-19).

The same problems that inform conception of black authenticity in the 1960s and 1970s also plague the Afrocentric theories that Molefi Kete Asante popularized during the 1980s and 1990s in his essays as well as in his recently published memoir *As I Run toward Africa* (2011). Asante became known to the wider public after the publication of his seminal *Afrocentricity* in 1980, becoming the main proponent of a movement that celebrated the need for African Americans to reconnect with their African roots. Unlike previous black nationalistic movements such as Garveyism, Afrocentricity does not call for a physical return to Africa, but encourages African Americans to a cultural return to precolonial Africa that will allow them to see themselves and their communities through an Afrocentric, not a Eurocentric perspective. According to Asante, this mental shift will liberate black people from a mental slavery that prevents them from reaching their full potential, empowering black communities culturally and economically. Like the Black Power leaders of the 1970s, Asante sees the development of an authentic black self as tightly linked to historicity, since it is only through the discovery of the authentic history of black people, seen through an Afrocentric and not a Eurocentric perspective, that the black subject can find himself: Asante declares in fact that “authenticity finds its triumph in allowing people to realize themselves through their own history.” If a black person fails to commit to an Afrocentric vision of the world, that person is inauthentic, and could be said to have a “false consciousness” or “Eurocentric consciousness” (125).

Of course, one of the problems with Afrocentricity is that one can never really speak of a monolithic African consciousness, since the invention of Africa as a monolithic and uniform culture is, ironically, a fiction of colonialism. Moreover, several critics have pointed out that the patriarchal ideals and homophobia that plagued discussions of black authenticity in the 1960s and 1970s are reiterated in *Afrocentricity* (Boyd 1997; Japtok and Jenkins 2011). For example, none of the Afrocentric role-models mentioned by Asante are women, and he believes that homosexuality does not conform to the values of Afrocentricity, but is the result of the moral decadence of Europeans (*Afrocentricity* 57). Also, similarly to Frazier and Hare, Asante argues that black educated elites, which he refers to as “assimiladoes,” are also inauthentic in that they have been assimilated into the white man’s culture and cannot be trusted to do what is best for their own communities (22). Given the expansion of the black middle-class as a result of the successes of Civil Rights and Black Power, the rise of womanism in the 1980s and queer

black studies in the 1990s, it is not surprising that these essentialist and male-centered definitions of black authenticity would be profoundly revised in the decades to follow.

### 3. Post-Soul and the Memoir Boom: The Crisis of Authenticity

*Realness: The genuine product, the real deal, etc. This can be the actual thing that the public wants.*

The Urban Dictionary (2004)

*Every black person has something “not black” about them. I don’t mean something white, because despite our easy dichotomies, the opposite of black is not white. This one likes European classical music; that one likes a little bit of country (hopefully the old stuff); this one is the first African American principal ballerina; this one can’t dance. Black people know this—any solidarity with each other is about something shared, a secret joy, a song, not about some stereotypical qualities that may be reproducible, imitable, even marketable.*

Kevin Young, “Blacker Than Thou” (2016)

#### From Authentic to Fluid Blackness

As we have seen, autobiographers of the Black Power movement present the reader with a rigid interpretation of what is or is not considered authentically black, and tend to discard as inauthentic everything that falls out of the boundaries traced by definitions of blackness based on militancy and on unshakable loyalty to the black community and to the ideals of the movement. Unity and cohesion among the members of the African American community was in fact considered paramount for the success of the struggle for black liberation, and every sign of disruption of this unity was inevitably perceived as something that could potentially threaten the success of the whole movement. This is an understandable consequence of the fact that activists were well aware that they were in the spotlight of media attention and that the eyes of the whole nation were fixed on them. Moreover, considering the government persecution that militant groups such as the Black Panthers (originally the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense) were subjected to,<sup>56</sup> loyalty to fellow activists and conformity to the practices and ideals of the

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<sup>56</sup> In August 1967, the FBI started the program COINTELPRO to fight what were defined as “black nationalist hate groups.” Members of the Black Panther Party were the main targets of the program, but targets included also the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Nation of Islam. The main goals of the COINTEPRO program were to weaken these movements by depriving them of their leaders, to prevent unions among different movements, and to discredit their members with the public opinion by portraying them as dangerous and as a threaten to national security. Part of the strategy of the COINTELPRO

movement were seen not only as desirable qualities that every self-respecting black person should have, but also as necessary safety measures to protect members of the movement and their allies.

The fixed construction of authentic blackness that derived from this situation undoubtedly provided many blacks with strong identity models to conform to and with an empowering sense of pride in their blackness and their cultural heritage. However, as already mentioned in the previous paragraphs, this monolithic conception of blackness is dramatically questioned and revised by following generations of African Americans, who denounce its unsuitability for the post-Civil Rights era. The aim of the following chapters is therefore that of investigating how post-soul autobiographers respond to constructions of authentic blackness that were shaped in previous historical moments and especially during the great social movements of the sixties and seventies, and to show how the post-soul generation(s)<sup>57</sup> elaborate and eventually debunk these constructions of authenticity. My suggestion is that, unlike in previous periods in African American literary history, in which older constructions of authentic blackness were interrogated, expanded and eventually replaced with new ones, in post-soul literature it is the very concept of racial authenticity that is explicitly attacked and exposed in all its artificiality and untenability. As explained in the first chapter, the ultimate goal of post-soul literature seems to be exactly that of dismantling the basis of authenticity, renouncing every essentialist stance and demonstrating instead that each aspect of identity—be it gender, race, class or sexuality—is ultimately performable, and that this performance is contingent and therefore unstable, in that it inevitably adapts to the expectations imposed by the various situations in which the performer operates.

This “crumbling” of the concept of authentic blackness is the direct consequence of the new social climate in which the post-soul generations are immersed. In fact, African Americans who

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program was to exploit existing disagreements between black nationalist groups, weakening them by turning them against each other (Bloom and Martin 110).

<sup>57</sup> There is disagreement on whether or not African American younger generations are still living in the post-soul phase. As mentioned in chapter 1, Nelson George frames the post-soul phase between the end of the 1970s and the end of the 1990s, therefore according to him African Americans are now living a different phase, which we might call post post-soul (George 2004). Other critics and cultural commentators agree with him, for example MK Asante terms the generation of African Americans born in the 1980s as “hip hop generation” and not post-soul (Asante 2008). However, Mark Anthony Neal situates the post-soul movement from 1978 (the year of the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* sentence, which introduced and supported affirmative action) to the present moment, stating that African Americans are still living in the cultural scene which he identifies as post-soul (Neal 2001). In the following chapters I will rely on Neal’s timeframe and consider the post-soul as an ongoing aesthetics.



were born or came of age after the end of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s find themselves in a conundrum of contradictory messages. On the one hand, the struggles of the previous decades have certainly had a positive impact: the ideals of Black Power have had an empowering and reinvigorating effect on the black community, inspiring people to embrace their blackness fully and proudly; opportunities for better education and employment have expanded thanks to initiatives such as busing and affirmative actions; moreover, the visibility of black people in the public scene, especially in the entertainment industry, has reached unprecedented levels. At the same time, racism remains a constant element of American society, as demonstrated by widespread resistance to the abovementioned initiatives and by documented ongoing inequalities that black citizens are still subjected to in fields such as housing, healthcare, public education, the job market and the legal system. New opportunities coexist therefore with “New Racism,” a term commonly used to refer to the less blatant, more pernicious and hidden forms in which racism is manifested in the twenty-first century, which encompass issues such as the disproportionate persistence of poverty and unemployment among black and Latinx communities, racial profiling, glass-ceilings, redlining, microaggression, and most notably, the mass incarceration of people of color and frequent episodes of police brutality perpetrated against unarmed black citizens (Collins, *Sexual Politics* 5).

Post-soul artists are therefore working in contradictory times, in an era in which the notion of race as a biological category has long been dismantled, but in which race as a social category still influence people’s lives in significant and often dramatic ways. To this we must add two other main factors that contributed to a reformulation of black identity after the 1970s. The first is of course the end of organized militancy in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements as a unifying force in the black community: if one of the main markers of authentic blackness had been active participation in organized resistance, after the end of the 1970s and the decline of Black Power one’s allegiance to the black community had to be manifested in different ways.<sup>58</sup> The second is the progressive loss of influence of the church—and of organized religion in general—as an institution in which communal identity is created and fostered. In black autobiographies of the third period—to adopt Butterfield’s already quoted chronological

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<sup>58</sup> The contemporary scene has actually witnessed a new resurgence of organized activism, led by #BlackLivesMatter and by dozens of other smaller grassroots movements that the group has inspired. We can say, however, that between the end of the 1970s and the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter in 2013 there was a phase in which black activism was stagnant. Contemporary black activism is, moreover, characterized by a different approach compared to the previous movements of the 1960s and 1970s, especially for what concerns the centrality of the role of women and LGBTQ people and the preference for a bottom-up rather than a hierarchical approach (Harris 2015).

frame—the church traditionally played a central role as a site in which the protagonist’s black identity was shaped and nurtured.

In Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, for example, the church is the place in which stable links with the black community are established and solidified. One of the most hilarious scenes of the text, in which during Sunday service one of the “mothers of the church” is suddenly possessed by the Holy Spirit to such an extent that she hits the preacher, is actually presented as Maya’s first encounter with the parish church of her pious grandmother, a community that will become for Maya and her brother a nurturing and loving—although at times annoying—extended family. The church is therefore an essential component of Maya’s evolving sense of black identity, since the values and aesthetics that she learns from the Baptist community of Stamps will accompany her for the rest of her life. Similarly, Nina Simone in her autobiography *I Put a Spell on You* (1991) describes the church as the site in which her understanding of her black identity starts to take form. It is in the church that she first learns to play the organ, and it is the local parishioners who will believe in her talent and finance her musical education, allowing her to become an activist musician, renown for her technical perfection as well as for her commitment to the struggle for black liberation. Religion is the starting point of a career in activism also for Malcolm X, for whom embracing the ideals of the Nation of Islam will mark a turning-point, transforming him from street-rebel to activist preacher. It is during his conversion that Malcolm starts to realize the distinction between “Negroes” and “blacks” and to understand what blackness means to him, a definition that he will strive to extend to the rest of the black community.

For post-soul autobiographers, on the other hand, faith does not play any relevant role in how they understand their blackness. In James McBride’s *The Color of Water*, for example, conversion from Judaism to Christianity is central in the definition of his mother’s identity, but not in James’s. Similarly, in Rebecca Walker’s *Black, White and Jewish*, “Jewish” is regarded as a cultural rather than a religious label: Rebecca is not actively part of the Jewish community and faith does not play any relevant role in the ever-shifting understanding of her racial identity. Even if the title splits the categories “black,” “white” and “Jewish,” in the text there is no clear distinction between whiteness and Jewishness: her father’s family is simply described as white and middle-class, and nobody is interested in the rituals and values of Hebrew culture anymore. If McBride and Walker are rather indifferent to religious practices, other post-soul autobiographers take a firmer position of criticism against religious institutions that shaped the life trajectories of their elders, but from which they decidedly detach themselves. In Danzy

Senna's *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?*, for example, institutions of the Catholic Church are clearly cast in negative terms: as the author researches her family history, she discovers that an Irish Catholic priest took her black, poor grandmother as his mistress, fathered her children and then abandoned her in poverty, which forced the woman to leave Senna's father for several years in the infamous Zimmer Home, a Catholic orphanage in which nuns sexually abused the most vulnerable children. And if Catholic institutions negatively impacted the history of her family in the past, they also seem to take advantage of her most helpless relatives in the present: in a remarkable scene in the memoir, Senna describes how her long-lost cousin Yvonne, who lives on Social Security and has a chronic kidney disease, worships the minister of her church, a expensively dressed woman who probably bought her new, shining car with the donation of her poor and overwhelmingly black congregation, whose members are convinced that she can directly speak to God. Similarly, in the memoir of #BlackLivesMatter co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors *When They Call You a Terrorist*, the protagonist's mother has been ostracized from her community of Jehovah Witnesses, who banished her from active participation in services for having had children while unwed. Khan-Cullors's activism with #BlackLivesMatter, however, demonstrates that unlike in previous decades, one can participate in activism without relying on the church as a unifying center of organized resistance: strategies are planned in secular spaces or even on-line, and the ideals that support militancy are not described as Christian values, but as human values.

As these examples suggest, in post-soul autobiography religion is either absent or actively rejected, and religious institutions do not influence the protagonists' understanding of their racial salience, not their allegiance to the black community. The consequence of the decline in importance of hierarchically organized militancy and organized religion is that post-soul generations tend to privilege a more personal and individual interpretation of their black identity. In fact, the desire to define blackness on one's own terms is not only the consequence of increasing educational and working opportunities for African Americans, which led to a more and more diverse range of black "identity types"<sup>59</sup> and to the consequent desire to expand pre-existing definitions of the "black experience," but also of the loss of authority of institutions in which a communal definition of black identity used to be created—and often enforced. The

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<sup>59</sup> As already mentioned in chapter 1, Nelson George is one of the first critics who tries to describe some of these new "identity types." He identifies four main characters types that enter the black community after the 1970s: buppies, b-boys, baps and bohos. These types refer, respectively, to black yuppies, break dancers and hip-hop artists, spoiled and über-sophisticated "Black American Princes and Princesses," and bohemian blacks with a taste for meditation and alternative spirituality.

post-Civil Rights era is characterized by undeniable elements of continuity with the “soul years”—such as the perpetuation of less blatant but equally harmful forms of racial discrimination, but it is also true that post-soul artists are faced with a socio-political context that is in many ways new compared to that of their elders. It is therefore not surprising that post-soul autobiographers tend towards a much more open and flexible interpretation of their blackness, one that is personal, contingent and always in motion. But how is the decline of authenticity, and the embrace of fluid and adaptable notions of blackness expressed textually in post-soul autobiographies? What are the new “metaphors of self” (Olney 1972) that characterize these texts? The following paragraphs offer a tentative answer to these questions, trying to pinpoint the characteristics that post-soul autobiographies share in terms of style and content.<sup>60</sup>

### Preference for the Memoir Form: Fragmentation and Relationality

Scholars of life writing agree on the fact that, after the end of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the publishing market has witnessed the explosion of the so-called “memoir boom” (Couser 140-144; Rak 306; Smith & Watson xii; Zinsser 3). As these scholars notice, despite the long history of this form of life writing, it is only recently that books with the subtitle “a memoir” have sky-rocketed in popularity in North America, a trend that post-soul autobiographers seem to fully embrace. Actually, although post-soul writers have often chosen for their life narratives subtitles such as “a personal narrative,” “a family history,” or simply “autobiography,” the structure of their texts is predominantly compliant with the conventions of what specialists term a “memoir,” making post-soul literature part of a global trend that has made this genre more marketable than ever before. But how can we define the memoir exactly, and what are the implications of the preference for this autobiographical form? G. Thomas Couser in *Memoir: An Introduction* (2012) offers what is probably the most complete overview of the memoir genre ever written, and his observations can be useful to elucidate the intentions of post-soul writers who engage in this complex genre.

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<sup>60</sup> My observations on the characteristics of the post-soul memoir are not exclusively based on the analysis of the six case studies I provide in this dissertation, but also on numerous other African American memoirs written by authors who were born or came of age after the end of the Civil Rights movement and that can, in my opinion, be read and interpreted as post-soul literature. These memoirs form of a corpus of about twenty texts, that I have read and pondered upon, but of which I cannot offer an extensive interpretation for obvious reasons of conciseness.

Couser defines the memoir as a subgenre of life narrative, and clarifies the difference between this particular form and traditional autobiographies as follows:

[memoirs] are non-fictional life narratives. They may focus either on the author, on someone else, or on the relation between them. They may try to narrate an entire life course or merely one of its temporal chapters, and they may attempt to include more or fewer of the dimensions of the author's life. *Autobiographies* are generally more comprehensive—in chronology and otherwise; *memoirs* are generally more focused and selective (Couser 23).

Although the repetition of the modal verb “may” clarifies that, even for one of the most renowned experts of the genre, the memoir remains difficult to define and classify, Couser points out that there are three main characteristics that alert us that what we are reading is in fact a memoir and not a generic autobiography: firstly, the life of the author is not told in chronological order and the structure tends to be fragmentary and episodic rather than linear; secondly, the text focuses on one part or one aspect of the author's life rather than on its entirety; lastly, the narration is often relational, meaning that memoirists explore the formation of their identity through their relation to another person, usually a family member or a beloved friend.

Moreover, several critics have pointed out that despite the present-day popularity of the term “memoir,” the genre had traditionally been associated with minor, “subliterary” forms of life writing. Both G. Thomas Couser and Julie Rak have in fact noticed that “memoir” has historically been used to refer to narratives of the self that were not considered “literary” enough to be canonical—and that therefore could not be described as “autobiography”—such as diaries entries and correspondence (Couser 18; Rak 306). In particular, Rak has interrogated the reasons of the marginality of memoirs in life narrative studies, noticing that the genre has been treated by most critics as a popular and amatorial sub-genre of more “serious” autobiography and that this is probably the reason why the memoir, until recently, has sparked so little interest among literary scholars. Rak argues that the roots of this scarce consideration are to be found in the attitude of several specialists of life writing, often prone to disregard forms of writing that are produced outside academia and that are highly popular among the general public (306). Rak also points out that autobiography, for a long time, had in turn been seen as less literary than the novel, and that critics who wanted to study the genre had to insist on its significance by building a canon for autobiographical studies, the same way that critics of the novel had established a canon for their field of inquiry. This early autobiographical canon was based on

notions of the individual self as conceptualized in European Romanticism, which assume that the individual is unique and separate from the collectivity.

However, several critics have pointed out that this vision of the self—and of autobiography as a depiction of the Romantic self—does not make room for life narratives that do not fit into this model, such as texts by authors whose cultures conceive the self as inextricably linked to the collectivity (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing* xiv; Collins-Sibley, “Who Can Speak”). As a consequence, autobiography has been regarded as a genre characterized by a certain degree of “literariness,” in that the Romantic self, despite being unique, is presented as the embodiment of passions, aspirations and concerns that are supposedly universal, while the term “memoir” has traditionally been used to describe less introspective—and therefore less “literary”—narratives of the self, and has been recently rediscovered to refer to narratives that emphasize pragmatic aspects of existence such as the professional achievements of well-known figures in the political sphere or in the entertainment industry.

Actually, as Georg Misch had already proved in the 1950s, the term “memoir” precedes “autobiography” by centuries, and was already in use in ancient Greece and Rome to describe something “loose and apparently unregulated” (Misch qtd. in Rak, 309), a sort of preliminary draft for further and more elaborate writing in another genre. As such, the term “memoir” originally indicated that the author was simply recalling certain events or aspects of his life—and not the entirety of it—without the pretense of coming forward as someone with literary ambitions, but in a rather informal and unpolished way. However, Rak interestingly points out that early scholars of life writing such as Misch attribute a moral value to the memoir form, linking the humbleness of the memoir’s “note-taking” structure to the humbleness of the author’s condition: memoirists have, traditionally, been regarded as writing outside the canon of high Western literature, a position that reflects the way in which “the writer of memoir actually lives in the world” (Rak 309). For example, Rak notices that the memoir has flourished among Victorian women, traditionally relegated to what were considered “secondary” genres, while Lee Quinby argues that the memoir has been particularly fruitful for writers who focus on the formation of a collective rather than an individual ethnic identity, such as Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of Girlhood Among Ghosts* (Rak 309; Quinby 299). As a consequence, the genesis of the memoir illustrates how this genre seems to be particularly suitable for writers who perceive themselves—and are in turn perceived by mainstream literary criticism—as “on the threshold” of Western literature: never completely part of the canon and therefore never fully compliant with the conventions of traditional autobiography.

Rak and Quinby's observations seem to be pertinent to the positionality of post-soul memoirists, who are uncomfortable with the personal "I" of traditional Western autobiography and who perceive their identities as socially constructed and embedded in the specificities of their black communities. Moreover, it is significant that post-soul life narrative overwhelmingly displays the characteristics that Couser identifies as typical of the memoir genre, especially for what concerns the fragmentation of chronology and the strong involvement of one relative in the narrative, whose point of view is often directly presented through extensive dialogues, interviews and even diary excerpts. The fragmentation that characterizes the memoir—both in its chronology and its point of view—has often a dubitative connotation, in that it questions the unity of the narrative self and criticizes the possibilities of the genre to reconstruct the experience of the subject in a coherent and cohesive way. In this sense, it seems reasonable to speculate that post-soul writers exploit the characteristics of the genre to reproduce on a stylistic level their desire to question the idea of a stable and coherent racial identity. Chronological fragmentation and the tendency to intertwine the protagonist's point of view with that of another main character demonstrate that memoirists who are conducting their "blaxploration" gradually deny the formation of a unified and permanent black identity. The form mirrors therefore the kind of blackness that post-soul memoirists embody: fragmented, shifting and contingent. Blackness changes according to the historical moment and social context in which it is examined, and according to the point of view from which it is described: the peculiar structure of the memoir, consequently, reflects the way in which contemporary black identities are constructed.

Two clear examples of how the chronological fragmentation and relationality typical of the genre are employed by post-soul writers is offered by Jesmyn Ward and James McBride in their respective memoirs, whose peculiar structure combines both of these characteristics to destabilize their process of identity formation. In *Men We Reaped*, Jesmyn Ward chronicles her life through the death of five young men she loved, including her brother, proving how her development of a sense of self is in fact inseparable from the events that involve the black community in which she grew up. The structure of her memoir is peculiar, since it alternates chapters about Ward's own life, which are presented in chronological order from childhood to adulthood, and chapters about the young black men whose death had such a profound impact on her, which are written in reverse chronological order, introducing the men from the last one to the first one who died. This unusual structure is functional in highlighting how Ward's attempts to move on with her life and to develop into an adult with a stable sense of identity are

continuously frustrated by the premature deaths of people she loves, who die for different reasons that are, however, all connected to the fact that they are black and poor, coming of age in a neglected area that offers scarce educational and employment opportunities. The progression of her life story is, on a stylistic level, continuously interrupted by the narration in reverse chronological order of events that, literally and figuratively, “hold her back,” preventing her from realizing her full potential and from associating black identity with positive and empowering situations.

On the other hand, James McBride in *The Color of Water* offers a similar structure in which the story of his life and that of his mother Ruth alternate in different chapters. Both narrations, however, progress in chronological order, signaling that mother and son are engaged in a similar and parallel journey of self-discovery, which will bring them both to embrace their respective racial and ethnic identities as “works in progress,” whose shifting definitions inevitably depend on the other person. The novelty of McBride’s memoir, however, lies in the fact that Ruth’s chapters are written in the first person, creating the impression that the memoirist is actually registering a conversation, allowing the reader to “eavesdrop” an ongoing dialogue between mother and son, and offering what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. would probably classify as a contemporary example of speakerly text. The direct voice of the protagonist’s mother is also registered by MK Asante, Jr. in his *Buck: A Memoir*, in which the young author offers the unmediated point of view of the woman through some of her diary entries, which are reported in the text. The same happens with letters he receives from his incarcerated brother and from his hospitalized sister, which he often inserts in the main narration. Therefore, the structure helps to understand the relational nature of Asante’s developing sense of self, which in this case is constructed in opposition to his father: it is in fact interesting that while the voices of other family members are reported in the text from original sources, the voice of his father always appears as thundering “from the outside,” imposing itself on the family members, who are intimidated by the father of Afrocentricity and must strive to please him.

The examples offered by Ward, McBride and Asante Jr.’s texts clarify that fragmentation and relationality are used by post-soul memoirists as textual devices that reflect the formation of a black identity that is not fixed and stable, and that therefore defies the concept of authentic blackness. These devices are used even more freely by post-soul writers who engage in innovative and hybrid forms of memoir, in which fragmentation and relationality are taken to the extreme and become part of an obvious and at times sarcastic performance of racial identity. For example, Baratunde Thurston in *How to Be Black* (2012) mixes the structure of a memoir



with that of a self-help book to reflect on how to perform blackness “the right way” through examples taken from his own lived experience of navigating US society as a young black man. These episodes, however, are not presented in chronological order but grouped by subject, such as “How to Be the Black Friend,” “How to Speak for All Black People,” and “How to Be the (Next) Black President.” To validate his suggestions of how to perform blackness correctly, Thurston inserts the opinions of black friends and colleagues whom he “felt were strong new models of ‘how to be black.’ These are seven people who do blackness well” (14). Of course, the peculiar structure and tone used by Thurston convey the exact opposite concept, that is the idea that there is no way of doing blackness right, and that it is impossible to summarize the “black experience” in a self-help book, let alone teach people how to perform a racial authenticity that is non-existent. In fact, as Thurston himself clarifies, *How to Be Black* is not at all about blackness per se, but is actually “a book about *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” (11, emphasis in the original).

If the novel has been the genre in which post-soul writers have most notably enacted their “blaxplorations,” these examples suggest that the memoir can be an equally powerful genre in which to displace constructions of identity that are perceived as more and more artificial and limiting. The fragmentary, often “sketchy” structure of the form, the focus on one aspect of existence—in these cases the meaning of blackness—and the investigation of the process of identity construction through the exploration of an intimate relationship are aspects of the memoir genre that post-soul authors have effectively utilized to demonstrate how black identity changes in the post-Civil Rights era. As John Paul Eakin notices, narrating the self is part of the process of constructing the self, and the form of the narration virtually influences this process (*How Our Lives* 58 and 99). The fragmented structure of the memoir seems therefore the perfect medium to represent a racial identity which is also perceived as fragmented and unstable, no longer dominated by a clear interpretation of racial authenticity.

### “And the Walls Came Tumbling Down:”<sup>61</sup> Precariousness and Shakiness

The rejection of fixed interpretations of blackness such as those privileged in the previous decades carries an idea of precariousness that accompanies the construction of the writer’s

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<sup>61</sup> “and the walls came tumbling down” is a line from the well-known African American spiritual “Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho,” and refers to the biblical story of Joshua leading the Israelites against Canaan. According to the Bible, the Israelites marched for seven days around the town, until the town walls fell on the seventh day. The line was used by civil rights activist Ralph David Abernathy as title for his autobiography, published in 1989, in which the author describes his close relationship to Martin Luther King, Jr. and several other leaders of the

racial identity throughout the memoir. The sources that might provide a stable and secure sense of authentic blackness for the coming-of-age writer are described as in constant motion, unstable, precarious and contradictory, so that the protagonist is unable to pinpoint a viable model of how blackness “should look like.” As a matter of fact, the triad suggested by Ashe in his formulation of the post-soul aesthetics—cultural mulattism, blaxploration and allusion-disruption gestures—is wholly based on the destabilization of every fixed notion of identity, whose stability is questioned through the engagement with cultural references from different traditions (cultural mulattism), the reflection on one’s development of an ever-shifting and always expanding racial identity (blaxploration) and the critical assessment of previous models of blackness (allusion-disruption gestures).

The consequence of enacting this triad is not an unstable or unhealthy sense of self—such as in the case, for example, of the literary trope of the Tragic Mulatto—but an understanding of one’s identity as comfortably flexible. Memoirists in fact realize that their black identities are always in motion, but this mobility is cast in positive terms: unlike tragic mulattoes, post-soul memoirists are at ease with the notion that they can endlessly redefine and adjust their interpretation of their own blackness. However, if by the end of the memoir authors are normally satisfied with their flexible and expandable identities, the process of reaching this self-awareness is usually not easy nor obstacle-free, and the insecurity that the protagonists feel in their quest for a stable sense of black identity is manifested textually in a variety of ways. For example, the precariousness of this condition is often expressed through images of things “attached to blackness” that fall apart, get broken, change dramatically, or are shaky and unstable: all the “sources of blackness” are troubled and lose their stability and durability.

One good example of this representation of precariousness is offered by Danzy Senna’s *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* In the text, the protagonist’s father is initially presented as the ultimate expert on blackness, a man with a strong racial consciousness who was involved in the Black Power movement, sent his children to an Afrocentric school, and works in the field of Black Studies. Still, the author feels that her father’s authentic blackness is just a façade and that there is often a contradiction between what he professes and what he actually does: for example, he only dates white women and he classifies his daughter’s friends according to their

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Movement. Abernathy’s autobiography has sparked much negative criticism in that it includes details of King’s private life, including allegations of marital infidelity: it is therefore regarded as one of the first texts to critically assess the Movement and its leaders, a characteristic that exposed Abernathy to accusations of being a traitor of the race.

ethnicity. As a consequence, her father—who is the source of her blackness and of her racial awareness—is ultimately described “a chameleon” and “a walking, talking contradiction” (7). The sense of authentic blackness provided by her father is therefore that of a chameleon, whose skin coloration can rapidly change, adapting to the surrounding environment for camouflage purposes, or displaying brighter colors to signal aggressiveness. Unlike his daughter, however, Carl Senna’s shifting blackness is not the manifestation of a fluid identity that he learns to accept and cherish, but a consequence of the untenability of his monolithic positions on blackness. This idea of precariousness and shakiness is reiterated when Carl Senna gives to his daughter, as a birthday present, a desk that is so cheap and poorly constructed that it is impossible to put it together. “The desk that does not stand” becomes therefore a metaphor not only of the troubled and somehow shaky relationship between father and daughter, but also of Danzy’s sense of racial authenticity, which is literally falling apart. In fact, the model of black identity provided by her father, like the desk on which she cannot write, is so shaky and untenable that Danzy cannot possibly elaborate on it.

Another example of images of precariousness associated with blackness is offered by Rebecca Walker in *Black, White and Jewish* when describing a ballet-class she took when she was six. When her teacher remarks that she will never be able to do a proper jeté because of the limitations of her black body, Walker starts to focus on the fact that her legs, compared to those of her classmates, “are not straight” (105) and that her awkward attempts to force her uncooperative black body into the right position are ultimately useless. A few chapters later, what could have been just an unpleasant childhood memory is recovered and transformed into a metaphor for her precarious and unstable racial identity. She remarks that her peculiar situation of being a “Child of the Movement” means that her parents raised her to believe that she is “entitled to whatever is available [...] to counteract the idea that being black or being a woman, or being Jewish, means having to settle for less, for the thing that is not the best” (198). Still, the self-assuredness that her parents instilled in her often crashes against a kind of memory that is older than herself and more powerful than progressive ideals of interracial solidarity:

memory is stronger than legacies, much stronger than principles, moral mandates, and progressive imperatives [...] in those moments that test all of us who haven’t grown up in the white ruling class, all of us who expect, at some point, to be held at the gate, interrogated and turned back, I am, in fact, trembling. This is how memory works. It reminds me that no matter how strong I feel in myself, I am still the little girl with the legs that aren’t right (198).

Rebecca's "trembling" and the recurring image of legs that "are not straight" or "not right" convey a sense of instability and shakiness that is clearly linked to her attempt to establish a clearly defined racial and ethnic identity through the imitation of the people who surround her—in this case her ballet-classmates—whom she perceives as having a solid and stable sense of self. The other ballerinas are not trembling, they do not expect to be "held at the gate," their legs are straight, and they can move through the world with secure and precise steps. Her physical ambiguity, on the other hand, makes her feel out of place in the predominantly white world of ballet, but at the same time she feels the duty to not disappoint her parents, who brought her up to believe that she is entitled to be in that class. The red and purple leotard chosen by her mother, which awkwardly contrasts with the more modest pink and white attires of her classmates, reminds Rebecca of exactly that: she is clearly there to defy expectations, to prove the arrogant teacher wrong, to confirm her parents' belief that she can do whatever she wants. But the double burden of her parents' expectations and of the microaggressions of the white world—represented in this case by the rude comments of her ballet teacher—make her physically and figuratively tremble. If by the end of the memoir she will learn to appreciate and be proud of her "shifting self,"<sup>62</sup> for a long time she will be just the girl whose shaky and unstable legs refuse to support her steps.

As these examples suggest, post-soul memoirs are often characterized by a first phase of "blaxploration" in which the protagonist attempts to pinpoint the markers of his or her blackness and wants to "perform blackness right," searching for role models to look up to—like in the case of Senna and her father—and trying to live up to the expectations of parents and friends—like in the case of Walker. However, notions of racial authenticity are soon revealed to be untenable: parents do not provide the kind of coherent black performance that children could learn to imitate; and despite the successes of the social movements of the previous decades, which encourage parents to instill racial pride in their children, protagonists still have to come to terms with a society dominated by white privilege. In these conditions, the fallacy of authentic blackness is inevitable: monolithic constructions of blackness need to collapse and disintegrate before the memoirist can learn to accept a more fluid and porous interpretation of his or her racial identity.

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<sup>62</sup> "autobiography of a shifting self" is the subtitle of Walker's text.

## The Floating Signifier: The Importance of Fluidity

In 1996 Stuart Hall presented a lecture on the meaning of racial signifiers at Goldsmiths College, London, in which he famously described race as a “floating signifier.” His argument was that the meaning of racial markers, such as skin color or hair texture, is never fixed but depends upon the cultural context and the historical period in which it is considered. Hall interpreted race as one of the principles that organize classificatory systems of difference, which operate in human societies to distinguish among people and assign them a certain social role based on their classification. As a mere classificatory principle, the critic argued, race has no essential meaning, but acquires meaning according to how we decide to define and interpret it. In fact, what was particularly innovative and provocative in Hall’s analysis was the idea that race works exactly like a language: in the system of a language, signifiers acquire sense in the context of the “meaning making practices” of a certain culture, and gain meaning only in relation to other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Since their meaning is relational and not essential, it can never be fixed, but will be constantly subject to redefinition and change: as such, race as a signifier “floats in a sea of relational differences.”

Hall’s argument has resonated strongly in the field of critical race studies, and the idea of race as fluid, mobile and indeterminate has been reformulated by scholars working in areas as different as visual studies, performance studies and queer theory. For example, Georgia State Professor Alessandra Raengo, in introducing the questions that originated the research project *liquid blackness* that she coordinates, seems to take Hall’s analysis one step further, by examining whether the fluid nature of blackness, once acknowledged and accepted, can be productively engaged in artistic practices: “there is no way for me to say, think, or write “blackness” without activating innumerable points of pressure. [...]” writes Raengo, explaining that “the idea of “liquidity”, placed alongside the idea of “blackness” has been a way to activate yet another series of (tender) pressure points” (“Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity”). As a matter of fact, as attempts at drawing the contours of blackness in the postmodern era seem to become more and more frustrating, the concept of liquidity applied to blackness appears to be particularly appealing to critics and artists that are trying to interpret and re-conceptualize black identities in the contemporary scene, marked by the instability of racial markers, the realization that race is a social construct and is strictly linked to social performance, and the hybridity of identities. Consequently, the notion of holding blackness in suspension and imagining it as something fluid, mobile and uncontainable like water resonates deeply in the work of contemporary African American artists.

In this context, Raengo describes blackness in two different scenarios: one in which blackness stands on its own, is acquirable, purchasable, able to travel and exist as separate from black people, and one in which it is considered as embedded in the black body, the case which is normally most discussed. The fact that blackness has been usually conceived exclusively as a bodily matter, explains Raengo, is one of the main reasons why the conversation on race has been mostly perceived as something that concerns only some people, specific bodies that are believed to carry the racial markers of authentic blackness. Instead, Raengo and her research group suggest that blackness, though in different ways, is everybody's matter, and can exist and produce an aesthetics of its own beyond black bodies, since it is constructed through the cooperation of everybody's perceptions. The fact that blackness can "travel" through different bodies, that it is constructed through everybody's sensorium, that it is contingent—namely its boundaries are negotiated according to the social and political circumstances in which it is analyzed—is therefore the basis of its potential liquidity and inclusivity.

It is in this framework, in the interstitial spaces between the two different conceptualizations of blackness that Raengo delineates, that the post-soul aesthetics can develop, as African American artists engage in an exploration of black identities from a non-essentialized perspective and stretch the boundaries of what it means to be black today. As a matter of fact, the idea of the liquidity of blackness can be successfully incorporated in the complex and sometimes messy motifs that inform the aesthetics of contemporary black memoirs, in which blackness is conceived as something mobile, porous and slippery. In fact, although *liquid* blackness itself is hard if not impossible to define, several critics have successfully tried to describe the kind of aesthetics that it triggers, and several post-soul memoirists incorporate those ideas in their texts. As Raengo explains:

The idea of the *liquidity* of blackness emerges both from an observation of salient contemporary aesthetic forms as well as a sort of thought experiment [...] What happens if we leverage, rather than condemn, this type of mobility? What happens when blackness is deliberately held in suspension, by the critical act one might perform in attempting to understand its contours? ("Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity").

In these questions Raengo excellently summarizes some of the ideas that haunt the work of black memoirists writing in the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, who are trying to make sense of their "black experience" in a society that professes its post-raciality, but demonstrates on a regular basis what political scientist Michael Tesler has repeatedly termed its *most-raciality*.

In fact, in the theoretical framework of the post-soul aesthetics the notion of the “liquidity” of blackness reveals itself as a useful and fruitful lens through which works that are concerned with the construction of a performative and non-essentialized black identity can be interpreted. As a consequence, post-soul memoirists have picked up on the idea that blackness can be described in terms that are typical of liquids: blackness is depicted as movable, porous, slippery and adaptable like a liquid that takes the form of the container in which we pour it. Blackness is also presented in its “thickness,” or lack thereof: being movable and able to travel on its own, blackness can be “diluted,” “watered down,” made more or less compliant with circulating ideas of black authenticity. One interesting example of the representation of fluid blackness in a post-soul memoir is offered by Rebecca Walker in *Black, White and Jewish*, in which the author, at the end of her path of self-discovery, proclaims the fluidity of her racial identity by comparing her blood to water. In the ending paragraph of her memoir, Walker states:

I stand with those who stand with me. I am tired of claiming for claiming’s sake, hiding behind masks of culture, creed, religion. *My blood is made from water* and so it is blood water that I am made of, and so it is a constant emphatic link with others which claims me, not only carefully drawn lines of relation. [...] I am flesh and blood, yes, but I am also ether (321-322, my emphasis).

By claiming that her identity is based on the liquidity of water instead of on the thickness of blood, Walker argues that adopting a fluid identity can have a liberating effect, allowing people to stand together in the name of human solidarity instead of in the name of essentialist notions of common culture and creed. Refusing fixed constructions of identity based on limiting notions of racial authenticity allows her to form connections with people that transcend the boundaries of race, and that are instead based on common feelings and experiences:

What I do feel is an instant affinity with beings who suffer, whether they are my own, whatever that means, or not. Do I identify with the legacy of slavery and discrimination in this country? Yes. Do I identify with the legacy of anti-Jewish sentiment and exclusion? Yes. Do I identify with the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War Two? Yes. Do I identify with the struggle against brutality and genocide waged against the Native Americans in this country? Yes. Do I feel I have to choose one of these allegiances in order to know who I am or in order to pay proper respect to my ancestors? No (318-319).

The refusal to accept and satisfy expectations based on racial authenticity does not result in an unstable or confusing sense of self, nor in a feeling of disloyalty towards her ancestors and the several communities she claims allegiance to. The author seems therefore to answer Raengo’s

question: “What happens if we leverage, rather than condemn, this type of mobility?” (2015). In the case of Walker, leveraging the mobility of blackness means accepting her identity as liquid and malleable—*shifting*, as the subtitle to her text explains—a stance that allows her to finally come to terms with different aspects of her self—white and black, Jewish and working-class—that she had previously perceived as contrasting and oppositional, but that she can now embrace as equally important parts of her unique black experience. In the end, the fluidity of her “shifting self” is remarked in terms that accentuate her capacity of changing state: her “blood water” can in fact evaporate and become just “ether,” an image that suggests the rejection of every notion of fixity in favor of extreme mobility and instability. However, at the end of her journey of self-discovery, this “volatile” condition, does not seem to be problematic for the author, who feels comfortable with the idea of being in a state of constant transition.

Another memoir that consistently engages the idea of race as a floating signifier and of blackness as liquid and malleable is James McBride’s *The Color of Water*. Already in the title, McBride evokes notions of color as changeable and contingent, since water is in itself transparent, but can also reflect the colors of its surroundings. However, when this happens, the shape of the original objects reflected on the water surface is inevitably altered: straight lines are twisted, borders become porous, and external forces such as wind and currents can rapidly dissipate the reflection. The extreme motility and instability of color is contrasted by the binary juxtaposition of racial categories in the subtitle: *A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother*. The combination of title and subtitle sounds like a perfect post-soul statement: in fact, the juxtaposition of “black man” and “white mother” immediately clarifies that McBride is not referring to the color of water in terms of its “transparency” and is therefore not evoking ideas of color-blindness or post-raciality, but is willing to complicate and blur the binary opposition of blackness and whiteness. This idea is carried on through the whole memoir, in which the notion of “liquid blackness” is productively engaged to reduce the frictions between James’s evolving sense of black identity and his discomfort with the fact of having a white mother. As suggested by Raengo, McBride “leverages” the mobility of blackness by displaying a post-soul attitude that allows him to embrace his biraciality as part of a flexible, expandable black identity that makes room for his extraordinary white Jewish mother.

As a consequence, Walker and McBride’s texts offer an illuminating example of the fact that post-soul memoirists actively engage the idea of the fluidity of their blackness to come to terms with aspects of their more and more hybrid and complex identities. Fixed notions of blackness cannot accommodate their unique experience of subjects who identify as black but are not



willing to discard other components of their identities, while “liquid blackness” offers the chance to do so. And if Walker and McBride explicitly reference water and liquids to convey the idea of a non-essentialized racial identity, other post-soul memoirists are usually less explicit, but still engage in the exploration of fluidity as a fruitful tool of identity construction. Fluidity does not mean dilution: post-soul memoirists are adamant in their understanding of themselves as black subjects, but this blackness might be exposed to the “currents and winds” of the contemporary socio-political scene, “wrinkling” its surface and complicating its color.

### Tests of Blackness and Conscious Performativity

The empowering possibilities of embracing a fluid identity, one that the subject can define and adjust at will, are continuously challenged in post-soul memoirs by the impositions of what we might call “conferred identity,” that is the attempts of both white and black people to “fix” the authors into a rigid racial classification based on how their bodies are read and interpreted. Several post-soul memoirs depict their struggle for self-definition in a society obsessed with labelling people according to racial markers that are recognized by the authors as arbitrary, but that assume absolute value in the eyes of observants. The power of the external gaze to define race “at face value” (Raengo 2013), as a consequence, interferes with the protagonists’ process of identity formation, forcing the subject to realize that self-definition has to come to terms with notions of racial authenticity that seem set in stone. Highlighting the discordance between racial identity as self-defined and as “conferred,” post-soul memoirists support the work of several scholars in the field of visual studies, who have recently pointed out the power of the visual to create race and have powerfully denounced the fiction of the neutrality of the gaze. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes in *Staring: How We Look* (2009),

an encounter between a starter and a stare sets in motion an interpersonal relationship, however momentary, that has consequences. This intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making. Staring bespeaks involvement, and being stared at demands a response (3).

A growing number of critics is exploring the consequences of Garland-Thomson’s argument in the field of critical race studies, shifting their attention from how race is represented—in literature, visual arts and the media—to how race is actively constructed through the gaze, by conferring meaning to what are otherwise irrelevant bodily characteristics. Recent publications by scholars in the fields of visual studies and media studies such as W. J. T. Mitchell, Alessandra Raengo, Nicole Fleetwood and Dereck Conrad Murray, to name just a few, are in fact seriously

questioning the fact that our gaze perceives race as an objective and undeniable evidence and reads its most obvious marker—skin color—in a clear and unambiguous way. In this sense, the so-called *visual turn* in critical race studies is pointing out that the visual can act as a complex epistemological mechanism that participates in the construction of race, and does not just perceive racial markers that are inherently present in the observed bodies: all signs of blackness and whiteness that the observer perceives are in fact the result of a certain historical, geographical and cultural context, and will be read and interpreted accordingly.

In line with this theory, post-soul memoirists often incorporate in their narratives episodes in which their racialized body is read by others in a way that strikingly contrasts with their self-identification: their bodies become Rorschach tests in which everybody sees what they want to see, according to their ideas of racial difference and of what constitutes or not an “unequivocal” marker of blackness. Highlighting the problematic nature of conferred racial identity is a way to resist the depersonalization and homogenization of the racialized subject that Albert Memmi has notably termed “the mark of the plural:” the idea that there is an essential set of behavioral characteristics that all members of a race or ethnicity share is in fact discredited by showing that race is projected and not inherently present in the subject. This realization allows memoirists to make room to assert their agency and subjectivity, resisting the depersonalization of the mark of the plural. Characterizing the racialized body as a Rorschach test is therefore functional in de-essentializing race and in deconstructing notions of black authenticity: authenticity is in the eyes of the observer, who decides which “signs” can be considered authentic markers of blackness on the base of preconceived notions of what blackness should look like. Of course, the efficacy of the “body as Rorschach test” archetype is higher in cases in which the subject is perceived as racially ambiguous: in other words, the arbitrariness of conferred racial identity is most evident when the Rorschach test fails to provide data that the observer deems as sufficient to clearly classify the observed.

The problematic contrast between conferred and chosen racial identification is one of the main themes of Danzy Senna’s works: in both her fiction and her memoir, Senna offers very clear examples of how the body of her protagonists is used as a canvas on which people project their ideas, desires and preconceptions about race. For instance, in her debut novel *Caucasia* (1998) the protagonist Birdie is a mixed race girl with light skin and straight hair, whose vaguely “exotic” appearance is read differently according to the people she is interacting with: her schoolmates think that she must be Latina (66), her maternal grandmother, who resents her daughter’s marriage to a black man, tells her that she could pass for Italian (107), while a

Pakistani fellow passenger on a plane guesses that she might be Indian or Pakistani (379). Birdie becomes therefore the reflection of her schoolmates' preconceptions, her grandmother's shame, and the passenger's nostalgia, while all the time she yearns to become a "black swan" like her beautiful and unmistakably black sister Cole (180).

However, if the novel genre allows Senna to interrogate people's expectations about blackness in a particularly intense and effective way, the examination of the implications of "conferred" rather than self-chosen racial identity informs also her memoir *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* Senna, who strongly identifies as black, is repeatedly perceived as white by the people surrounding her, who judge her racial salience "at face value," that is based on physical markers that she displays and that are traditionally associated with whiteness: light skin and straight hair. When she reclaims her black identity, her words are simply dismissed, as depicted in this short recollection of a painful childhood memory:

My first Halloween in Brookline, attending the school near [my father's] house. It was my new schoolmates who left the bananas on my father's porch. They did not know the black man who had just moved in there was my father. They did not know I was black, and they did not believe me when I told them (24).

The protagonist never tries to "pass" for white: on the contrary, she feels nothing but black and demands to be acknowledged as such. However, her demands are simply ignored by her schoolmates, who refuse to question their preconceptions about how blackness and whiteness should look like. The result is a painful sense of betraying her father, whose "visible" blackness results in his being the victim of the children's racist Halloween prank. In the last section of the memoir, having experienced first-hand the sad consequences of the mismatch between her self-chosen and her conferred racial identity, Senna vows to protect her newborn son from similar experiences in the future and to allow him to identify as he pleases. However, she is painfully aware of the fact that people will inevitably project on his tiny body their racial preconceptions:

People see my baby, and in the face of his racial ambiguity their own past hurts, desires, fears, and fantasies rise to the surface. He— the baby— becomes the Rorschach inkblot upon which all of their own projections come to the surface. [...] I want history to be something he's heard of, read about, knowledgeable about, but something he's not confined by, controlled by, limited by. And of course I know this is impossible (165-6).

The eyes of the observer become therefore in Senna's memoir a sort of mirror in which signs of authentic blackness can or cannot be reflected, a mirror that can display a totally different image from the one the subject is trying to project.

A similar concern for conferred versus self-chosen racial identification is expressed also in Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* (2005), in which the protagonist Emma, a light-skinned biracial girl who identifies as black, comments:

people ask me what I am, which is not an everyday question but one I get asked every day [...] I just tell them what color my parents are, which is to say, my father is black and my mother is white.

People don't usually believe me. You look \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank) *Puerto Rican, Algerian, Israeli, Italian Suntanned, or maybe Like you Got Some Indian Blood, but you don't look like you got any Black in you. No way! Your father must be real light-skinned* (2, emphasis in the original).

Senna and Raboteau highlight how their characters cannot control the external gaze, and how their capacity to racially define themselves is therefore limited by the fact that their blackness is constantly tested, evaluated and eventually dismissed as not "visible" and therefore not authentic by the people who stare at them. Incapable to control other people's gaze, Senna and Raboteau's protagonists control their own, offering interesting examples of what bell hooks calls the "the oppositional gaze" of subjects who respond to the classificatory stares by looking back in an analytical way, deconstructing the naturalized ideas about race that people project on their bodies (94).

If Senna explicitly evokes the image of the Rorschach test to refer to the racialized body as a projection of the observer's preconceptions about race, conceptual artist Adrian Piper in her autobiographical essay "Passing for White, Passing for Black" (1992) mentions a different kind of testing that "racially ambiguous" people often undergo, one that attempts to ascertain the degree of blackness of the subject relying on categories other than the visual. As Piper explains, when you do not match people's expectations of how blackness should appear, you often find yourself in the position of "the inadvertent impostor" even if you did nothing wrong (2), since criteria of racial authenticity are in this case not based on what you do, but on how you look like. Piper points out that counteracting charges of inauthenticity in this situation can be frustrating:

once exposed as a fraud of this kind, you can never regain your legitimacy. For the violated criterion of legitimacy implicitly presumes an absolute incompatibility between the person you appeared to be and the person you are now revealed to be; and no fraud has the authority to convince her accusers that they merely imagine an incompatibility when there is none in fact [...] the devaluation of status consequent of such exposure is, then absolute, and the suspicion of fraudulence spreads to all areas of interaction (2).

As a consequence, subjects who do not pass the “Rorschach test” of blackness risk to become an “inadvertent impostor,” a “fraud,” and their only hope to restore their authenticity is to enact a more obvious and explicit racial performance, one that the interlocutor can recognize as specific to blackness. This performance can involve passing a different test of authentic blackness, such as the one Piper ironically calls the “Suffering Test:”

I have sometimes met blacks socially who, as a condition of social acceptance of me, require me to prove my blackness by passing the Suffering Test: They recount at length their experiences of racism and then wait expectantly, skeptically, for me to match theirs with mine [...] I would share some equally nightmarish experience along similar lines, and would then have it explained to me why that wasn't really so bad, why it wasn't the same thing at all, or why I was stupid for allowing it to happen to me (2).

Having failed to satisfy the expectations of her interlocutors in terms of “epidermal blackness,” Piper is forced to prove her blackness in a different way, and to perform her affiliation to the black community by showcasing her experiences of racial discrimination. I interpret this scene as an example of racial performativity not to suggest that Piper might have actually made up or exaggerated her experiences of discrimination to validate her blackness in the eyes of skeptical interlocutors, but to highlight the fact that she is acutely aware that she is being tested and that she has to perform accordingly. In fact, what is interesting in Piper's quote is the fact that after a first phase in which she mistakes the Suffering Test for the exchange of experiences that is typical of every friendship, she realizes that the Test is, in fact, a “third degree” (2), whose goal is not that of fostering emotional connection, but to subtly put her down for not having passed the Rorschach Test in the first place.

If Senna and Piper offer very clear and explicit examples of how their blackness is continuously tested and often dismissed, in part because their phenotype does not conform to traditional expectations of black identity, scenes in which the blackness of the protagonist is tested and arbitrarily evaluated are common in all post-soul memoirs. The aim of these scenes seems to be that of proving how blackness is, in fact, in the eyes of the observer, who projects on the

protagonists' bodies whatever they want to see. Knowing that their racial salience will be tested in several ways by whites and blacks alike, protagonists feel the necessity to engage in very conscious performances of authentic blackness: for example, Piper elaborates on her experiences of discrimination to pass the Suffering Test (2), while Senna, in front of some white co-workers, feels the need to act closer to her father than she actually is, proving her racial salience by showcasing her affection for him (6).

What is remarkable about these scenes is the fact that the protagonists are fully aware of the fact that they are, in fact, performing, and that they are doing so to satisfy expectations of blackness that have nothing to do with who they really are: there are no essential, "innate" markers of blackness that they are trying to display, rather they are attempting to guess what their interlocutors want to see and hear, and they adjust their performance accordingly. Explaining the groundlessness of tests of authentic blackness and registering how racial performances can, in fact, be effectively carried on and "adjusted" according to the expectations of society allows post-soul memoirists to undermine the validity of notions of authentic blackness, proving that markers of racial authenticity are in fact unstable, contingent, and judged differently according to whom the protagonist is interacting with.

### [Mobility, Reverse Migration and the Reconstruction of the Family Tree](#)

As explained so far, the protagonists of post-soul memoirs are always presented as subjects in a perpetual state of transition, comfortable with the idea of spiritual and physical movement. The ability to move, to always be prepared to change one's surrounding and adapt to a new social and geographical environment is therefore presented as a prerogative of the post-soul subject, who constructs his or her identity "on the go," and is aware of the fact that this process of shaping the self is never completed. An interesting element of most post-soul memoirs is, consequently, the abundance of scenes in which the protagonist is depicted while travelling, specifically travelling for the purpose of investigating the family's past, to visit long-lost relatives, or to explore new settings that allow for more open and flexible racial performances. Means of transportation—particularly cars—acquire therefore a symbolic importance, in that they tend to represent the ability of the subject—or lack thereof—to escape from social constraints that prevent free self-definition. Travelling becomes, as a consequence, an essential part of the process of identity construction, especially when it is used as a strategy to retrieve lost branches of one's family tree or to escape social forces that limit the subject's potential.

One interesting pattern of several post-soul memoirs is what we could call the “reverse migration” leitmotiv. Several memoirists reverse in fact what Robert Stepto has aptly termed “the seminal journey in Afro-American narrative”: the journey North (*Veil* 67). Contemporary black memoirists, compared to their predecessors, travel in the opposite direction: they travel South, and they do so either to trace the roots of their family trees—like in case of Danzy Senna, James McBride and Jesmyn Ward—or to escape from an inimical urban environment that is perceived as hostile and dangerous—like in the case of MK Asante. Stepto has explained how the subversion of the leitmotiv of the journey towards the North starts with DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which the author reverses the traditional narrative of ascent—which moves along the South-to-North trajectory—in favor of a narrative of cultural immersion which brings him to explore the so-called Black Belt. Further elaboration on DuBois’s “reverse migration” is offered in his autobiography *Darkwater*, in which the scholar states that because of his race, a scholarship to a historically black college has been arranged to him, forcing him to choose Fisk instead of Harvard University. Hence, in *Darkwater* the “narrative of immersion” in the South is closely linked to DuBois’s process of black identity construction, since his journey coincides with the moment in which he most clearly perceives how his ambitions are, for the first time in his life, strongly limited by his blackness. The journey to Fisk is in fact described as a sort of ritual of transition between what he had termed the Age of Miracles, a phase in his life in which he seemed to easily reach all of his goals by mere willpower, and the Age of Disillusion, when the color line starts to impact his life trajectory in a more evident way (*Darkwater* 14).

According to Stepto, DuBois’ intention to reverse the archetypal journey of African American literature signals his resistance to the idea of progression—of ascent from slavery to freedom and from ignorance to literacy and authorship—that escaping North came to represent in most slave narratives. Similarly, post-soul memoirists establish their resistance to narratives of post-raciality by touring the territories in which anti-blackness originated: the sites of plantation slavery, Jim Crow laws and lynching. The reverse migration motif is not exclusive to post-soul memoirs, but is also registered in post-soul novels, in which the denunciation of the mechanisms and legacy of plantation slavery is usually displayed in a more explicit way than in memoirs, often through satire or paradoxical situations. In Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle*, for example, the protagonist Gunnar Kaufman explains how Swen Kaufman, one of his remarkable male ancestors, was a free black man who lived in the North and dreamed of becoming a professional choreographer. Eventually, unable to find employment in the North, the man

decided to try his luck in the South, becoming the first black person to ever run *into* slavery instead of *away* from it: in fact, the man's initial intention to study and imitate the rhythmic movements of plantation slaves to incorporate them into a dance routine is brought to its extreme consequences, since he ends up spending so much time imitating the slaves that he becomes a slave himself. Through this paradoxical scene of reverse migration, Beatty is able to show how slavery can become a state of mind, whose mechanisms are internalized and performed even when they are not enforced from the outside. Swen Kaufman's apparently nonsensical choice of travelling South in slavery times can be explained when we consider that the author, in enacting his "blaxploration," is trying to explore not only different ways of rearticulating black identity, but also various manifestation of anti-blackness to which the performance of a certain kind of blackness necessarily responds. Travelling South inevitably means investigating the roots of anti-blackness, but also exploring the possibilities of re-laborating the traumatic legacy of slavery in artistic terms and to develop new strategies of resistance: Swen Kaufman, for example, can examine the rhythmic dances developed by plantation slaves as a way of pacing their tedious work, and can witness the pattern of call and responses in their work songs, meant to signal to each other the approaching threat of the supervisor's whip.

In the case of memoirs, however, the move South is usually an attempt to retrace the missing branches of one's family tree, something that the memoirist attempts in order to reach a more complete sense of his or her identity and, often, to try and understand the circumstances of one parent's childhood and upbringing. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., trying to reconstruct one's family tree is, for every African American, necessarily part of the process of identity construction. Remembering his own attempts to reconstruct his family history, Gates writes in *In Search of Our Roots*: "Each name I was able to find and print in my notebook—almost always recollected by my mom or dad—was an enigma for me, a conundrum of the colored past that had produced, by fits and starts but also, somehow, inevitably, the person I had become and was becoming" (5). Though Gates can certainly not be considered part of the post-soul generations, his argument is relevant to my analysis of reverse migration and the search for one's family roots in post-soul memoirs. In fact, post-soul memoirists face the investigation of their families' past with a similar attitude: reconstructing the family tree, which usually implies traveling South, is seen as a necessary step towards a better understanding of the author's blackness and consequently towards a stable sense of self.



The recollection of one's family history is actually interpreted by post-soul memoirists as an act of resistance against the systematic attempts of American society to erase the sense of individual and collective identity of black people, attempts that began even before the Middle Passage when slaves, still on the African shore, were stripped of their names and identities and given new ones. The possibility of maintaining family ties and tracing back one's ancestry was therefore destroyed through the simple but effective process of erasing the slaves' names, an act of identity stripping whose consequences would have enormous implications in the generations to follow. In fact, what is interesting for me in Gates' argument is the fact the scholar points out that

denying African slaves the right to own and pass down their true names, at least before the law, reinscribed over and over, decade by decade, a *permanent state of fragmented identity* that slavery, as an organization, depended upon to maintain control as surely as it depended upon the threat—and practice—of violence and violation [...] it was this 'traceability', as it were, that the evil genius of slavery sought to take away from us on *both* sides of the Atlantic, making us fragmented and not whole, isolated, discrete parts, not pieces of fabric stitched together in a grand pattern, like some living, breathing, mocha-colored quilt (6 my emphasis).

Gates seems to link the fragmentation of identity, that theorists of the memoir genre signal as typical of our contemporary times and that post-soul memoirists convey through textual fragmentation and images of instability and fluidity, to the ancient practice of erasing the slaves' names even before they were shipped to the Americas. It is interesting that Gates defines this state of fragmentation as *permanent*, therefore having long-lasting consequences on how African Americans perceive themselves. It seems that according to Gates, the fragmentation of identities that many cultural commentators are pointing out in contemporary days is not a new phenomenon, but one that can be traced back to the beginning of chattel slavery and to the practice of stripping slaves of their original names. As such, fragmentation of identity as a consequence of slavery is interpreted by Gates as something that still affects African Americans and that could potentially prevent them from being reconnected with their past and from achieving a unified and healthy sense of identity. According to Gates, moreover, African American history would consist of stories generalized from the experiences of single actors of history, so that the act of retrieving one's past is not only useful to the individual to gain a sense of stable, comfortable identity, but also to the whole black community in order to add pieces to the larger puzzle of African American history. Looking for evidences of one's ancestry, at this

point, becomes almost a moral imperative, a way to contribute to the struggle against the erasure of African Americans' past. In this light, African American memoirs can be interpreted not only as an act of actively constructing identity through the creative process of writing the self, but also as a way of contributing to the collective sense of identity of the African American community by adding the author's "patch" to the greater quilt of the black experience in America.

Gates convincingly argues that lack of collective memory can lead to an unstable sense of identity, which can not only make individuals wonder about who they really are and about their place in society as individual and ultimately as artists, but can also prevent them from achieving their goals:

I am convinced that this 250-year process of dehumanization continues to have an impact upon a significant sector of African Americans today, crippling our ability to know ourselves and understand our past [...] For many African Americans, not knowing our own history—not knowing our individual histories [...] continues to serve as a profound limitation of what we can achieve. [...] We've internalized generations' worth of doubts and fears about who we are as a people, and therefore as individuals (8).

Retracing one's family history, in this sense, is crucial in establishing a healthy sense of black identity, which directly impacts black people's ability to achieve their full potential as human beings and, in the specific context of African American literature, as writers and artists. According to Gates, the most promising way to answer black people's interrogations about their past is DNA testing: as the critic explains, geneticists can nowadays compare people's DNAs with samples taken from other people around the globe, and a match means that we have found someone with whom we share a common ethnic identity, which should give African Americans the possibility to know which African tribe they most probably descend from. Overjoyed about this possibility, Gates started to retrace the ancestries of several prominent African Americans with the goal of creating a documentary film for PBS, which would later become the critically acclaimed series *Finding Your Roots*. However, as thrilled as he might have been about the possibility to locate black Americans' original ethnic groups, Gates had to admit that this was not what interested most of the people he involved in his experiment. In fact, he commented that "judging by the emotional impact upon the individuals interviewed in this book [*In Search of Our Roots*], learning about the names of one's kinsmen on this side of the Atlantic carries even more emotional weight than learning about one's more remote African ancestry. Frankly, I was initially surprised by this" (12). Authors of the post-soul generation seem to share the

same concerns of Gates' interviewees, since their main preoccupation is to understand the circumstance that shaped the lives of their parents and grandparents, and there are no attempts to investigate the upper branches of their family trees. Post-soul memoirists are mostly concerned with the experiences of the soul generation, since the sense of unstable or incomplete identity that they display in the first phases of their memoirs usually comes from not knowing enough about one parent—usually the father—who has been particularly secretive about the past.

Post-soul memoirists are therefore not concerned with ancestry in biological terms: they are not looking for a definitive answer on who they are based on which ethnic group they might ostensibly descend from, and link their achievement of a satisfactory sense of identity to a more intimate knowledge of their immediate relatives, namely parents and grandparents. This is confirmed by the fact that many of these memoirs end with a scene of a family reunion, in which several generations—which often include family members of different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds—meet in the same household to celebrate a festivity. It is the case for example of the memoirs of Danzy Senna, James McBride and Nelson George, all of whom end their life narratives with a family reunion in which several family members demonstrate that they have acquired the ability to navigate their initial differences and misunderstandings. In the case of MK Asante, Jr., on the other hand, the memoir is concluded by a scene in which the protagonist and his father travel to Africa together, proving that they have successfully bridged the generational gap that divided them and that prevented reciprocal understanding and forgiveness. The memoirists' journey to investigate the unknown branches of their family trees is, consequently, identity producing, in that it allows the protagonists to make peace with aspects of their familial background that used to upset them and to prevent them from reaching a satisfactory sense of identity.

However, at the end of these memoirs the reader has always the impression that the journey of self-discovery is still not complete: there are still events that the protagonist struggles to come to terms with, old wounds that are not healed, aspects of identity that are not yet fully acknowledged and accepted, and these open questions are hinted at in various ways in the texts' ending scenes. For example, in Danzy Senna's memoir the racial tensions that continue to divide the family along color lines are symbolized by the struggle of her siblings' children over a Golliwog doll; in Jesmyn Ward's texts the painful and unresolved aspects of her past are represented by the protagonist's scars, the consequences of having being attacked by one of her father's fight dogs as a child, that continue to itch; in Nelson George's *City Kid*, the problematic

relationship between the protagonist's father and the rest of the family, a still unresolved issue at the end of the memoir, is symbolized by the fact that the man shows up at a family reunion missing several teeth, therefore proving that his fancy lifestyle ultimately left him broke and with no health insurance: the fact that the reunion was organized to celebrate the admittance of George's niece into a college where she decided to study dentistry is, in the eyes of the author, a remarkably ironic coincidence.

These unresolved issues are, however, a substantial part of a process of identity construction that is clearly still in the making: post-soul memoirs are in fact characterized by the fact that, by the end, authors come to accept their identity, and specifically their black identity, as comfortably unstable and always in transition. In this sense, the fiction of traditional autobiography as a "finite" genre is revealed in all its untenability: the protagonist's journey of self-discovery is never completed, since there is always room left for yet another shift in the interpretation of defining aspects of identity such as blackness.<sup>63</sup> In conclusion, memoirists create their own version of "how to be black," and continue to adjust and reinterpret it as time goes by: "authentic" blackness has to crumble and provide space for a new take on black identity that follows the demand for openness and flexibility of the post-Civil Rights scene.

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<sup>63</sup> The fact that all the memoirs analyzed in this dissertation are published when authors are still relatively young seems to confirm that the texts' intention is not that of chronicling a journey of self-discovery that is complete and that ended with the achievement of a stable identity, but that of registering a process of self-construction that is still "in the making."

## 4. Cultural Mulattism

*African American: The most common form of mulatto in North America [...] Often believe themselves to be “pure.”*

*Jewlatto: The second most prevalent form of mulatto in the North American continent, this breed is made in the commingling of Jews and blacks who met while registering voters down South during Freedom Summer or at a CORE meeting.*

Danzy Senna, “The Mulatto Millennium,” (1998)

*I was of two nations  
like a mulatto  
who appears un-black*

Emily Raboteau, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Post-Blackness (After Wallace Stevens)” (2015)

### Not Blacker, but More than Black

The present chapter aims at discussing the first “pillar” of Bertram Ashes’ post-soul triangular matrix: cultural mulattism, defined by Trey Ellis in 1989 as the peculiar attitude of a black person who has been “educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures” and who “can also navigate easily in the white world” (235). Through the analysis of Danzy Senna’s *Where Did You Sleep Last Night? A Personal History* (2009) and James McBride’s *The Color of Water: A Black man’s Tribute to His White Mother* (1995), I will examine how cultural mulattism is used as a productive tool of identity construction, and how on the other hand multiracialism is not seen as an adequate frame of reference to explain the complex and hybrid identities of post-soul authors who identify as black but have a white parent. As already mentioned in the previous chapters, being a cultural mulatto has little or nothing to do with miscegenation and with a “biological” understanding of mulattism as bi- or multiraciality, but is based on the idea of the heterogeneity of cultural sources that post-soul authors incorporate into their works, and that in Ellis and Ashe’s opinion is a direct consequence of their having grown up in a legally desegregated society that allowed them to be socialized in multicultural environments.

However, as Michele Elam notices in *The Souls of Mixed Folk* (2011), the rise of cultural mulattism roughly coincides with the years in which multiraciality started to be praised as a desirable characteristic of people born after the end of the social movements of the 1960s, seen as living symbols of a post-racial era in which, thanks to the victories of the Civil Rights movement, diversity is celebrated as a powerful driving force of an increasingly “browning” America. Elam points out that after the 2000 census, which firstly introduced the MATA (Mark All That Apply) option, the movement to legally recognize mixed race as a distinct racial category gained momentum, and that in the midst of this campaign dozens of organizations and websites emerged that focused on spreading the idea of “mulatto pride,” depicting mixed race people as belonging to a “new” race, the living proofs that, indeed, American society had succeeded in bridging the racial divide and that the success of the social movements of the 1960s in overcoming racial discrimination was to be witnessed in the mixed features of new generations of what author Danzy Senna has ironically termed the “Mulatto Millennium.” (Elam xiv; Senna, “Millennium” 12).

Advocates of the multiracial identity movement argued therefore that multiracialism was to be seen as an evidence of progress and modernity, a uniquely post-Civil Rights experience that would inevitably usher the country into a post-racial phase. In fact, although miscegenation has been not only common but systematic since the very beginnings of slavery (Spillers 257-79), Elam argues out that supporters of the multiracial movement have depicted the end of “monoracialism” as a new phenomenon, typical of the post-Civil Rights phase.<sup>64</sup> She also points out the popular belief according to which in the near future there will inevitably be a mixed race baby boom as a result of 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision,<sup>65</sup> while statistics actually show that the number of people self-identifying as mixed is steadily declining after the 2000 Census. Basing her argument on the extensive research data provided by scholars Kim M. Williams and Kimberly McClain DaCosta,<sup>66</sup> Elam argues that the sudden visibility of mixed

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<sup>64</sup> The cover of the 1993 special issue of *TIME Magazine* was emblematic of this tendency to cast mixed race identity as “new.” The cover, whose title was “The New Face of America: How Immigrants Are Shaping the World’s First Multicultural Society,” featured a computer-generated portrait of a woman created by mixing images of fourteen women of different racial backgrounds. The woman was named “Eve,” a name that suggests the uniqueness of her position as “virtual mother” of a new race of mixed Americans.

<sup>65</sup> The *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court Decision is the sentence that abrogated all state laws against interracial marriage. The case was brought by Virginian couple Mildred and Richard Loving, a black woman and a white man who had been sentenced to one year in prison for violating the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which prohibited interracial marriage and miscegenation. The Supreme Court ruled by unanimous decision that the Racial Integrity Act was to be considered unconstitutional, ending all race-related restrictions on marriage in the United States.

<sup>66</sup> Kim M. Williams is a political scientist interested in social movements, immigration and racial policies in the United States; in *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America* (2006) she offers a critique of the

race people is, in fact, not the result of an actual increase in their number and/or political, economic and cultural influence, but a smart “market invention” (6) aimed at reinforcing the idea of American society as liberal and racism-free. In fact, Elam argues that mixed race is celebrated for the very reason that it appears to validate the most treasured national ideals, epitomized in the motto *a pluribus unum* (9), and that its democratic appeal is strategically exploited for political purposes: for example, she points out that Barack Obama during his presidential campaign was often celebrated as a biracial candidate, the living proof that mixed race people would be the future of the nation, while after his election he was usually identified as simply black.

The celebration of multiracialism, ironically, happens therefore at the same time in which race starts to be perceived as irrelevant and everything seems to converge towards the end of racial essentialism. This is reflected in academia by the flourishing of publications that promote the concept that race as an identity category is over: Debra Dickerson’s *The End of Blackness: Returning the Souls of Black Folk to their Rightful Owners* (2004) and Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature* (2011) are probably the most quoted essays that question the validity of blackness as a category of ontology, while Paul Gilroy’s *Against Race* (2002) encourages readers to envision a new humanism based on a utopic renunciation of race. The supposed end of race celebrated by these texts, however, coincides with national debates based on “old-fashioned” notions of racial authenticity and of “pure” monoracialism that bear traces of the legacy of the one-drop rule, such as the “extent” of Obama’s blackness, the revelation of Anatole Broyard’s passing, and the controversy over Rachel Dolezal’s self-identification as black. The theorization of cultural mulattism, the emergence of the multicultural identity movement, the celebration of post-raciality, and the ongoing legacy of racial labels that originated in slavery times are therefore themes that are intensely discussed both in academia and among the wider public in the post-Civil Rights years, and that inform the work post-soul writers.

In particular, the post-soul generation has powerfully explored the intersections between multiracialism, cultural mulattism and authentic blackness. Danzy Senna, for example, has repeatedly questioned the arguments of the multiracial identity movement and has denounced

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potential political implications of mixed race identification. Kimberly McClain DaCosta is a sociologist whose work focuses on contemporary production of racial boundaries; in *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line* (2007) she explores the cultural and social consequences of the movement for the creation of a multiracial collective identity in the United States.

how the imperative to identify as mixed race can turn into a new version of supposedly “old-school” notions of racial essentialism. In line with Elam’s arguments, in her satirical “The Mulatto Millennium” Senna points out how multiracialism does not question the basis of racial classification: paradoxically, to avoid being “boxed in” by racial labels considered inadequate for the new millennium, advocates of the multiracial movement multiply these labels instead of dismantling them altogether (12). Senna claims her right to monoracial identification but at the same time she also challenges the notion of “unfettered” choice in self-identification by pointing out the structural, economic and social constraints that have historically limited individuals in defining themselves. As a consequence, she argues that the celebration of multiracial identity does not provide concrete answers to racism, but on the contrary risks to turn into an identity trap for people who, like herself, demand to define their racial identity on their own terms.

Senna’s criticism of “multiracial pride” is echoed by Jared Sexton in *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (2008), in which the author claims that, far from dismantling racism by challenging white supremacy, the multiracial project often relies on anti-black arguments to define itself in oppositional terms to “monoracial” black identity. In the text, Sexton offers a compelling critical overview of multiracialism from its emergence as academic discourse in the 1980s to the debates on federal ethnic classification in the late 1990s and early 2000s, highlighting the relationship between racial politics and normative sexuality. His main argument is that the emergence of the multiracial movement is cast as an effort to modernize American society: in this sense, blackness is portrayed as an antiquated state of confinement from which the multiracial population can be liberated, and people who identify as simply black are depicted as an anachronism and an obstacle to the progress of a liberal society. On the other hand, Sexton argues that multiracialism confirms rather than debunks the one-drop rule, providing validation for racial classification based on blood heritage even in a contemporary context. Paradoxically, this does not foster the modernization of American racial relations, but reminds of nineteenth century notions of miscegenation, which is now celebrated instead of demonized. Moreover, Sexton points out how multiracialism involuntarily supports heteronormative sexuality, since reproductive sex is depicted as the site in which racial difference is mediated and eventually nullified. The range of sexual practices contemplated by multiracialism is therefore confined to heterosexual sex acts: if one thinks of race as biological, race mixture is conceivable only in the context of reproductive sex. As a consequence, Sexton claims that the acceptance of biological notions of racial purity and of the possibility of



“undermining” this purity through interracial intercourse endorses rather than criticize racism: it is white supremacy and anti-blackness that produce what is defined as miscegenation, not the other way around.

Saxton’s arguments are explored creatively by numerous post-soul writers and artists, who want to recognize different aspects of their cultural heritage but still identify as black. Post-soul artists are in fact much more interested in expanding existing definitions of blackness to include the various aspects of their complex and hybrid identities, rather than in classifying as “more than one:” black is always the preferred self-identification and allegiance to the black community is never questioned, even when claiming the right to define blackness according to non-traditional expectations and to incorporate in these shifting definitions cultural influences that are not typically black. In the memoir genre, examples of how a hybrid cultural background influences ongoing definitions of blackness are offered by Danzy Senna in *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?*; by Rebecca Walker and James McBride, who both acknowledge the influence of their Jewish upbringing in their respective texts *White, Black and Jewish* and *The Color of Water*; by Kim Ragusa, who identifies as Italian and black in *The Skin Between Us* (2006); and by Lacey Schwartz, who in her documentary *Little White Lies* (2014) professes her love for her white Jewish family but ultimately identifies as black.<sup>67</sup> The intersections of multiracialism and cultural mulattism are explored also in post-soul fiction, notable examples being Danzy Senna’s novels *Caucasia* (1998) and *Symptomatic* (2001) and Emily Raboteau’s *The Professor’s Daughter* (2005). In the visual arts, artists elaborating on the ineffectiveness of mixed raced identification are Lezley Saar and Glenn Ligon, while in the performing arts a good example is offered by Dave Chappelle in “The Racial Draft” (2004), one of the most popular episodes of his *Dave Chappelle Show*.

These artists demonstrate how biracialism is not necessarily in contradiction with blackness, but on the contrary can favor a deeper investigation on what really defines it, encouraging new and more nuanced interpretations of black identity. Their cultural mulattism can therefore engender a flexible conception of blackness that embraces and cherishes multiplicity and

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<sup>67</sup> Film maker Lacey Schwartz was raised by white parents, but her biological father is an African American man her mother had an extra-marital affair with. Schwartz was raised to believe that she was Caucasian, and that she inherited her skin tone and hair texture from her paternal Sicilian grandfather. However, when she applied for college she was classified by the school as black based on a photo attached to her application: this marked a turning-point in her life and pushed her to confront her mother about her biological background, until she revealed the truth and introduced her to her biological father. Schwartz claims that she had long suspected that part of her racial and cultural heritage was being hidden from her, and that identifying as black allowed to finally reach a stable sense of who she is.

heterogeneity, refusing the fiction of a uniform and monolithic black community. As a consequence, the two case studies analyzed in this chapter suggest ways in which biracialism can be seen as part of an expanded understanding of black identity that makes cultural hybridity one of its salient characteristics. The cultural mulattism explored by Senna and McBride has actually more in common with DuBois's double-consciousness than with mixed race advocates' concept of miscegenation as the solution of racial tensions. In fact, DuBois understood race as a cultural process rather than a biological given, and interpreted double-consciousness as a consequence of the social tensions generated by the fact of living as a black subject in America. As Elam points out,

DuBois's original notion of double consciousness, then, was never simply reduced to a question of biracial identity or loyalty (am I black or white?) but was always an occasion to set in motion questions about social justice and enfranchisement (How can one be black in America? How can one be a citizen in a country that does not recognize one's humanity?) (130).

The experience of twoness in DuBois's double-consciousness is not produced by what is inherently "inside" the individual—the supposed mix of white and black blood—but by a national obsession with racial classification. Similarly, cultural mulattism is to be understood as something that originates from the cultural influences that surround the subject, and that have an impact on his or her artistic production: post-soul authors elaborate on the consequences of the social forces that produce double-consciousness, however they also look for ways of engaging productively the twoness—or multiplicity—that results from this condition.

To conclude, the following case studies will reflect on how cultural mulattism intertwines with multiracialism, although I do not intend to suggest that there must be a correlation between cultural mulattism and biraciality, or that only authors who have a white and a black parent display the heterogeneity of cultural sources and the ability to effortlessly navigate different cultural contexts that Ellis defines as cultural mulattism. In other words, my decision to analyze the memoirs of authors who have a black and white parent in a chapter dedicated to cultural mulattism does not originate from a biological or essentialist interpretation of Ellis's theorization of the cultural mulatto archetype, but from the observation of the fact that mixed race memoirists who identify as black investigate the permeability of racial borders in a particularly clear and effective way. Their choice to identify as black is not an implicit, resigned acceptance of the law of hypodescent, but resonates against anti-black arguments implicit in

the celebration of multiracialism. For Senna and McBride, blackness is not something to be transcended or surpassed: once artificial notions of racial authenticity are debunked, blackness can become flexible and malleable enough to become a useful tool of identity formation.

## Fluid Blackness in James McBride's *The Color of Water* (1995)

### Reading *The Color of Water* as Post-Soul Literature

*The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1995) is the memoir of African American journalist, creative writer, composer and saxophonist James McBride. To properly analyze this text and understand its potential as post-soul literature, it is firstly necessary to summarize the peculiar circumstances in which the McBride family constituted itself, grew and eventually prospered. James McBride is the eighth son of Ruth McBride Jordan, a white woman whose Orthodox Jewish family migrated from Poland in 1921, when she was two, and Andrew Dennis McBride, African American violinist, artisan and fervent Baptist who lived and worked in Harlem, New York. Ruth was raised in Suffolk, Virginia, where her family owned an emporium in the black section of the then segregated town. Sexually and psychologically abused by her father, and repeatedly teased in school because of her immigrant and Jewish background, Ruth identified with the sufferings and the condition of marginality experienced by the black customers of the emporium. Pregnant by a black boyfriend at age fifteen, she was sent by her mother to spend the summer with her relatives in New York, where she had an abortion and could eventually go back to the bitter reality of Suffolk. The trip to New York, however, was beneficial to Ruth, who experienced for the first time the thrill of the big city and the possibility to roam freely, away from the cruelty of her father and the tense racial climate of the South. Consequently, after her graduation Ruth decided to move to New York, where she met Andrew Dennis McBride, who would become her first husband and would encourage her to convert to Christianity. Dennis would also be the father of her first eight mixed-raced children, of which James, the author, is the last. When Ruth was pregnant with James, her husband suddenly died of lung cancer and Ruth, after a mourning period of about a year, married again with an equally kind-hearted and compassionate African American man, Hunter Jordan, who would give her four more children and adopt the previous ones as his own. After her second husband's death, Ruth had to struggle to raise her twelve mixed-raced children on one income, in an unfriendly racial atmosphere, but benefiting from the emotional and

financial support of the members of the Baptist church that she and her first husband had founded. *The Color of Water* is the story of the coming of age of James between the 1960s and the 1990s, as he struggles to find his identity in the complex intersection of these racial, class and religious tensions. His story intertwines with that of his mother as she digs up the past in order to provide James with information that might help him to retrace the missing branches of his family tree, contributing in this way to his journey of self-discovery. This beautiful juxtaposition of Ruth and James' voices is functional to guide the reader to understand James' path towards the achievement of a stable and satisfactory black identity, after his initial struggles to accept his white mother and his own biraciality.

The present chapter wishes to analyze *The Color of Water* as a post-soul text, since I believe that this kind of approach allows to reflect on James' journey of identity-formation in an original and illuminating way, contributing with a fresh perspective to the analysis of a text that has by now become a classic of American literature. Born in Brooklyn in 1957, James McBride can actually be considered a post-soul author as far as chronology is concerned, since he was still a child when the Civil Rights Movement reached its peak in intensity, and was not old enough to be actively engaged in the Black Power Movement. According to Bertram Ashe, Mark Anthony Neal and several other critics, the post-soul era should be restricted to artists who were born or came of age after the end of the Civil Rights Movement, who therefore can discuss the legacy of the movement with the kind of detachment that comes from not having been directly engaged in political activism (Ashe, "Theorizing" 609; Neal, *Babies* 3). In fact, regardless of his actual date of birth, what is important to consider is the fact that McBride was influenced by the events of the Civil Rights Movement, and later by the philosophy of Black Power, only in an indirect way, mainly through the experiences of his older siblings and through his mother's comments about the news, but that he had no first-hand adult experience within these movements. Thanks to this chronological distance, James<sup>68</sup> can observe the events of the 1960s and 1970s and elaborate on them critically, with an objectivity that his mother and his older siblings cannot display. This emphasizes the kind of generational fracture that many critics notice between late baby boomers and the previous generations and that characterizes McBride as a post-soul author, although his work is not usually read as such, but is rather

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<sup>68</sup> Throughout the chapter I will refer to James McBride as "McBride" when mentioning the author of the memoir, and "James" when I intend to discuss the protagonist of the memoir as a fictional character.

interpreted through the theoretical framework provided by multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and sociological theories on biracial identity (Chang 64, Harper 381, Kai 1062, Watson R. 101).

The above-mentioned generational fracture that is so present in the text, together with the social and political situation that provides the background for the author's childhood and adolescence, and that could have potentially fostered a militant, radical, essentialized sense of blackness, are two of the main points that spur me to read this text as decidedly post-soul. The author, in fact, emphasizes how the climate that Black Power contributed to create, together with the social pressure exercised by his older siblings and friends, had a strong influence on his establishment and performance of a black identity: James longed to embrace the ideals of Black Power while at the same time feeling that they would clash with the fact of having a white mother.<sup>69</sup> The apparent contradiction between James' self-identification as black and his actual biraciality will be another focal point of my reading of *The Color of Water*: post-soul literature's main feature is, by definition, that of being written by an author who identifies as black (regardless of his biological background), and who reflects on blackness from a non-essentialist perspective, displacing our preconceptions on what constitutes a marker of black identity, challenging stereotypes, and dealing with definitions of blackness that are more and more fluid and unstable. If James McBride (both as the author and as the protagonist of the memoir) certainly embodies these characteristics, the same cannot be said—at least apparently—of the co-protagonist of the text: James' white Jewish mom, Ruth McBride Jordan. But is this truly the case? Or is it possible that Ruth, despite her whiteness, displays some features that can be considered post-soul? My suggestion is not that Ruth can be read as a “transracial” character, nor that she is operating a kind of reverse passing like some scholarship has suggested (Chang 64; Harper 381) but rather that regardless of her racial classification she manifests traits that are typical of black characters of post-soul literature, such as her continuous will to understand, explore and value blackness—her “blaxploration”—which Ashe defines as an exploration of black culture to the benefit of black people, not to their detriment (“Theorizing” 614).

While previous scholarship has insisted on reading James as a biracial character working to figure out which race he belongs to, and Ruth as an abused woman trying to operate a reverse passing to escape her original family, I believe that post-soul theory can offer new elements to

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<sup>69</sup> I will discuss at length in the following paragraphs the scenes in which James reveals how much peer pressure, coupled with the spread of the Black Power philosophy, contributed to his choice to claim a black instead of a biracial identity.

interpret these characters from a different perspective. Accordingly, in the next paragraphs I will focus on several themes that are at the hearth of this text, and that are also seen as crucial in post-soul critique, namely cultural mulattism, “blaxploration”, the importance of movement as a coping strategy, the struggle to put together one’s family tree, and a reflection on the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s and on the achievements of previous generations. I will reflect on these topics by examining the characters of James and Ruth together comparatively at similar ages, echoing the same beautiful intertwining of the voices of mother and son that the book presents and underlining how the disruption of a traditional time line—typical of much post-soul life writing—is functional to present identities that are more and more fluid, non-linear, disrupted. I believe that this kind of analysis will be fruitful not only to interpret *The Color of Water* in a new way, but also to throw some light on the direction that post-soul memoir is taking and on how the genre as a whole is evolving.

### Blackness as Fluid as Water

*The Color of Water* challenges the reader to consider the arbitrariness of racial labels already from its title, which is inspired by one of the few moments in the text in which Ruth talks about race, an issue she usually prefers not to tackle. After church, when asked by young James about the race of God, she answers that God is a spirit and therefore he has no color, but is black and white and all colors at the same time: God is the color of water, his color cannot be defined (51). After her conversion to Christianity, Ruth finds consolation in the fact that God makes no distinctions between blacks and whites and welcomes everybody regardless of their race, class and past experiences, and this sense of unconditional love and acceptance is what makes her long to go to church as often as she can. Moreover, she firmly believes that God will forgive her despite the fact that she abandoned her family in the South to marry a black man and live in the African American community, because he will not consider a sin the racial difference between her and her loved ones. If for Ruth the element of water as attached to race symbolizes the color-blindness of God and the possibility to successfully overcome the racial divide, for James the transparency of the liquid element clearly carries a more complex and nuanced symbolic value. Water moves, changes state, is uncontrollable and uncontainable, and its contours cannot be traced. Water as attached to a racial identity becomes therefore the perfect metaphor of the impossibility to be contained and defined. The notion of the boundlessness of water, coupled with the idea of colorism in racial classification, conveys a clear message to the reader: water has no inherent color, its color is conferred to it by the space it occupies. Like a mirror, water takes the color of the things that surrounds it, and functions therefore as a

Rorschach test in which everybody can see what they want to see. As a consequence, water symbolizes the kind of fluid, mobile, ever-changing racial identity that McBride chooses for himself: one that is in perpetual motion, that he can navigate, that fills all available spaces and interstices, and whose boundaries cannot be tied to fixed definitions.

Moreover, the idea of a racial identity as fluid as water helps to understand the connection between James and Ruth: water can dissolve, bringing different elements together, it can erode sharp edges and reduce frictions. By adopting fluid identities, in the course of the memoir Ruth and James will be able to overcome their differences and understand each other's life choices. As the members of the *liquid blackness* research project point out, one of the main areas in which a liquid racial identity is visible is the sphere of affectivity: "liquid blackness exists and moves in between bodies" ("Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity") and acts therefore not so much as a bridge, but rather as a solvent that brings together potential sources of conflict, mediating between them. The theme of mobility and change of state to solve conflicts underpins the whole memoir: it is the capacity of moving that allows the protagonists to cope with a hostile environment, and with the fact they do not adhere to the strict binarisms that oppose black and white, Christian and Jewish, old and young.

The subtitle *A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* also offers valuable elements to interpret this text. While apparently buying into the logic of the one drop rule according to which the son of an interracial couple is solely black even if his mother is white, the combination of title and subtitle actually engages the reader in a more complex and nuanced interpretation of black identity, the kind that post-soul writers are privileging. James in fact perceives himself as a black man despite the acknowledgement and appreciation of his biraciality, and at the same time he tries to gain a deeper and clearer knowledge of his racial identity from Ruth, his white mother. This self-identification appears in contradiction with the common assumption that the offspring of a white mother and a black father should identify as bi- or multiracial, and recalls the work of several other contemporary memoirists who identify as black despite their mixed ancestry, such as Danzy Senna and Rebecca Walker: race is exposed in all its arbitrariness and blackness becomes a choice that has nothing to do with biology, and all to do with culture and racial solidarity. Moreover, the fact of choosing blackness as his preferred identification does not prevent McBride from carving space for other elements of his identity: he sees himself as black, but acknowledges his biraciality as something that he can reconcile with his blackness. Having a white mother does not "dilute" his blackness

and does not undermine his racial authenticity: his is a blackness that embraces and encompasses plurality instead of denying it.

Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David Brunsma, in their sociological study on biracial identity in America, point out that, “prior to the 1960s, biracial identity was equivalent to black identity” (21). According to them, prior to the end of the Civil Rights Movement researchers working in the field of identity formation operated under the assumptions of the one-drop rule, and adopted therefore the same theoretical frameworks and research patterns to investigate the process of identity formation of both black and biracial people. In the 1980s, researchers started to perceive bi- and multiracial people as having specific concerns that informed their processes of self-definition, most notably the necessity to come to terms with conflicts about their dual or multiple racial and ethnic identities. This trend of research was definitely confirmed in the 1990s when, Rockquemore and Brunsma report, researchers tended to assume that “an integrated biracial/bicultural identity is the healthy goal, as opposed to a black identity. [...] Individuals having a black identity are described as “having overidentified with their black parent” and are considered to have made an unhealthy resolution of developmental issue” (23). The choice of James as far as his racial identity is concerned stands in opposition with these conclusions. He definitely does not overidentify with his black biological parent, whom he has never seen, nor with his black stepfather, whom he loved and respected, but saw only during the weekend since he did not live with them. James, as is obvious from the text, was profoundly influenced by his white mother, nevertheless he decided to identify as black and not as biracial.

This preference emerges clearly in the subtitle of the memoir, which reads “a *black* man’s tribute to his white mother” [my emphasis]. This lexical choice could be interpreted as evidence that James has internalized the logic of the one-drop rule, which implies that he should be classified as black because of the African ancestry of one of his parents. However, this reading is repeatedly contradicted by the author, who points out how his self-identification emerges out of a sense of racial solidarity with the black community and not out of a passive acceptance of the implications of miscegenation. In the chapter “School”, for example, James emphasizes the kind of background that molded his racial consciousness, and his early attempts to reconcile his sense of blackness with his love for his mother: “I thought it would be easier if we were just one color, black or white. I didn’t want to be white. My siblings had already instilled the notion of black pride in me. I would have preferred that Mommy were black. Now, as a grown man, I feel privileged to have come from two worlds” (103). This quote has often been interpreted as evidence that James, growing up, has learnt to come to terms with his biraciality and to accept



his white and Jewish ancestry as important parts of his identity. Instead, I propose that James here is reminiscing moments of his childhood in which he was trying to come up with his own definition of blackness: in fact, James needs a definition open and flexible enough to make space for his white mother but, at least in his mind, this wish for a more encompassing blackness is in open contrast with the kind of approach that *Black Pride* is advocating for. As a solution, eight-year old James imagines that Ruth be black, in order for her to fit into the white/black binarism that American society seems to impose.

As a matter of fact, the author often remarks how all of his siblings, during their childhood and adolescence, had difficulties in coming to terms with their racial identities, and how each of them came up with different solutions on how to deal with it. His brother Richie, for example, imagined to be neither black nor white, but green like *Incredible Hulk* (52). At first, this fantasy could be interpreted as a simple phase in which a boy identifies with his favorite superhero, but the positioning of this childhood memory is important, since it comes right before an episode in which Richie demands for a clear answer about the color of Jesus, and stops going to Church after the inability of the adults to come up with a definitive, reasonable answer. It is therefore evident that Richie's fantasy of green skin, together with the idea of super-strength and invincibility that *Incredible Hulk* evokes, is not just a meaningless role-game, but part of his process of identity formation. The other sibling that seems split between his love for Ruth and black solidarity is Dennis, James' older brother. James recalls how Dennis was one of the most active civil rights students at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, he marched on Washington and took part in several sit-ins in the South, but felt the necessity to keep his fight against the system out of the house. This strategy allowed him to be Ruth's favorite, the kind of role model she wanted for her other children, but it is evident that Dennis' silence about his civil engagement alienated Ruth from a very significant part of her son's life.

However, the sibling who most clearly manifests signals of discomfort with her biracial heritage is James' sister Helen. In fact, while Dennis is able to keep his active involvement in the struggle for civil rights hidden from Ruth, Helen continuously seeks to engage her siblings in the fight against white privilege. Torn between her adherence to the ideals of Black Power, which demand to "Fight the Man", and the fact of having a white mother, Helen turns to her siblings for support, imagining that they must feel the same, but she is regularly met by them with a mix of indifference, sarcasm, and outright hostility. As a result, she decides to leave the house, hoping to solve her inner conflict by putting distance between herself and the source of her insecurities: her white mother. In doing so, Helen seems to follow the same pattern of several

of Ruth's relatives, like her sister, her brother, and eventually Ruth herself, who left home and cut every form of communication as a way out of familial problems. However, Ruth is determined to have her daughter back, since she understands that her escape is the result of her youth, her confusion about her racial identity, and the peer pressure that she endures in the political climate of the time. As a fervent Christian, Ruth seems to find inspiration in the parable of the good shepherd: she leaves the rest of her flock in Brooklyn and goes to find her lost lamb in Harlem, where she found refuge. The comparison between Helen and the proverbial lamb seems accurate, since she is described as an innocent, good-intentioned but confused girl who is struggling to find her identity and space by adhering to ideals which seem to provide her with a stable sense of who she is. However, her intention is not that of leaving her family behind, since she repeatedly seeks to engage her siblings in thoughtful discussions about race and power, and tries to talk them into following her into what James describes as a hippie, bohemian life-style. The one who is left out is Ruth: given the color of her skin, Helen does not feel that her mother fits into the struggle for black liberation. Being young, inexperienced and easily influenced by other people, Helen does not realize that the binarism of whites against blacks is exactly what she needs to fight, and that this would enable her to make peace with her mixed identity. She chooses instead to tackle the problem by leaving the space dominated by her white mother, although she will eventually come back after five years with a degree in midwifery and a baby girl.

In opposition to readings of *The Color of Water* that underpins the resentment felt by James towards his white mother (Chang 65) I assume that the main feeling experienced by James and his siblings is that of confusion about their identities, mixed with fear of losing Ruth because of the racial divide that exists between them. This is visible when James starts to believe that he may have been adopted, and that Ruth might decide to get rid of him. In this episode, eight-year old James is convinced by his brother Richie as a joke that Ruth adopted him, and that an unknown biological black mother will eventually claim him back (23). Although he does not believe it at the beginning, after a while James is persuaded that this must be the explanation for the different color of their skin. It is evident that James is terribly afraid of losing Ruth who, even as a source of uncertainties about his racial belonging, is still his only point of reference in a world that offers no answer to the questions that keep forming in his young mind. What is curious is that James' confused sense of racial belonging concerns only himself and his mother, and does not extend to other people with an equally ambiguous racial identity. For example, he does not wonder if his siblings might be adopted too, and he classifies a classmate's mother

who has white skin and red hair as decidedly black (23). James sees himself and his mother as exceptions in a society in which everyone else knows who they are, and although this is clearly not the case, this obvious conclusion is not evident for the young protagonist, who cannot realize that he and Ruth are not the only ones that do not fit in the black and white paradigm of American society.

This confusion about racial identity carries on well into James' adolescence, and is exacerbated by the political climate of the time, when his older siblings and the greater Black community are drawn to Black Power. The author admits that as a boy he had absorbed completely the image of the Black Panthers proposed by the media, and was worried about the movement's alleged violence and by its supposed hate towards all whites. The difficulty of James in assessing Black Power is symbolized by the car races organized by the black youth of the neighborhood, in which cars named after the heroes of the movement are driven at full speed while the drivers are engaged in various proofs of resistance and driving skills. James watches this show from a distance, clearly feeling not excited, but alienated and overwhelmed at the same time by the performances of the drivers: he is not involved by the action that is taking place in front of him and is rather afraid of the consequences of this game. His attitude can be read as emblematic of the fear and confusion he experiences as part of a world that spins around him way too fast, and in which Black Power, symbolized by the cars' names, is a powerful, fascinating, but also scaring ideal. Ambivalence towards Black Power is also shown in a previous episode from James' childhood memories, in which he is waiting for the bus that will take him to summer camp and notices a handsome black father wearing the typical Panthers' garments who is saying goodbye to his son before the departure. James is fascinated by the complicity of father and son, by their beautifully convoluted handshake, by the black attire of the socially conscious father, but is also scared for his white mother, who is standing right next to the man. In a desperate attempt to protect her, James tries to warn her through the window of the bus, and when his voice fails to reach her, he manifests his frustration and fear by punching the Panther's son in the face for no apparent reason.

The author repeatedly comments on how Ruth was able to create a world for her children in which race was subordinate to education, religion and hard work, and how she kept all twelve of them constantly busy with studying and with the kind of free entertainment that the city of New York could offer, managing to keep their questions on her whiteness and their blackness at bay by simply not finding the time for them to ask, and for her to answer. But as the older children reached adolescence, and with it the time in which their questions on identity could no

longer be ignored or silenced, her defense strategy started to show its shortcoming. James himself, reaching adolescence and with it a growing awareness of his own black masculinity, feels the need to distance himself from his mother: if as a kid shopping with Mommy and walking with her to the bus stop was a pleasure and an honor, as a teenager he is ashamed of being seen in her company by his black friends. The process of taking the distance from one's parents is certainly typical of every adolescent, who wants to prove his or her independence in transitioning from childhood into adulthood, however for James it carries a deeper meaning, especially in the political climate of the sixties and early seventies. As the author recalls: "The sixties roared through my house like a tidal wave [...] Mommy was the wrong color for black pride, which nearly rent my house in two. One by one, my siblings broke with her rules, coming home bearing fruits of their own confusion, which we jokingly called their 'revolution'" (96). As this quote makes clear, what threatened to split up the family was not the philosophy of black pride itself, but the confusion of the McBride-Jordan children about their racial identity, which in the political climate of the time was amplified. As a way to solve this inner conflict, McBride has to investigate his mysterious mother, whose past represents the main source of this lacerating confusion.

### Fluid Whiteness and Cultural Mulattism

Spiritual and physical journey to discover a parent's past is a typical pattern in many post-soul autobiographical works, such as the memoirs of Danzy Senna, Rebecca Walker, Ta-Nehisi Coates and MK Asante. McBride's memoir is no exception, since the reconstruction of Ruth's past is essential to understand his path of identity formation. As the author makes clear in the preface to the text: "betwixt and between the pages of her [Ruth's] life you will find mine as well" (xix). James' life is in fact described alongside that of his mother, who is insistently encouraged to talk and to reveal details of her past by the pressing questions of her son. However, the main characteristic of Ruth throughout the memoir is her unwillingness to talk about her childhood and adolescence: her past is a mystery, James has no clues about the origins of her family, and this impacts his ability to understand himself. However, James realizes that to make sense of the complications of growing up biracial in the United States he has to investigate his mother's family tree for answers, although the maternal branches of this tree seem to have died long ago. The text, in fact, starts with a simple, blunt statement by Ruth's on her early life: "I'm dead" (1). This clearly represents Ruth's unwillingness to dig into a part of her life that she considers concluded, and that only at the insistence of her obstinate son she starts to recall. If numerous details about Ruth's past are presented to the reader already in the

first chapter, we learn at the end of the memoir that McBride had to insist for eight long years to convince her to disclose these pieces of information, which for the author represent a precious source of knowledge about his family. Actually, Ruth's previous self, represented by the name Ruchel Dwajra Zylska, Americanized in Rachel Deborah Shilsky after her family moved to the United States, "died" when she decided to leave Suffolk, Virginia, where she had been raised, to marry a black man she met in New York: Andrew Dennis McBride, the author's father. At that moment, her parents sat shiva for her,<sup>70</sup> making her social death official and banning her from the family. Rachel Shilsky therefore dies, and is reborn in New York as Ruth McBride, the white wife of a Black Christian man, who soon converts to Christianity herself. Given the official social death of Ruchel/Rachel, and the unwillingness of her original family to keep in touch with her, Ruth seems to come from nowhere, since she has no ties with any of her relatives and does not want to reveal anything about aspects of her life that have been traumatic and painful. This is a source of confusion for James, who understands that to make sense of his own identity he needs to know more about his quizzical mother.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *In Search of Our Roots* points out the importance to know one's family history in order to achieve a stable and satisfactory sense of identity. In particular, in describing how African slaves were stripped of their names, he points out that traceability of one's past is possible only to a certain extent for African Americans, who, historically, have experienced what he defines as a "permanent sense of fragmented identity" because of the virtual impossibility to know where their families came from. This lack of traceability, he continues, can affect African Americans negatively since it prevents them from achieving a unified sense of self (6). If slavery has been perfectly efficient in erasing the roots of African Americans, what is unusual about James' story is that it is the white side of his family that needs documentation, not the black one. The black side of the family is present and happily remembered: his paternal grandparents are mentioned by Ruth several times when her children ask if they have other relatives beside her, and although they are not actively present in the children's lives because they live out of town, Ruth gratefully acknowledges their acceptance of her and their support in the difficult aftermath of her husband's death. However, given that Ruchel/Rachel has been banned from her family, and that she is unwilling to talk about it, the white side of the family is shrouded in mystery, and Ruth emerges from the words of young

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<sup>70</sup> Shiva is a seven-day mourning period observed by the first-degree relatives of a deceased person. During this period, the family stays home, discussing the loss of their loved one and receiving condolences calls and visits by relatives and friends. Sitting shive for Ruth, therefore, officially marks her social death in the Jewish community.

James as if she was an apparition, a creature with no history, no parents and, what is most disturbing for James, no racial identity. Ruth in fact always avoids defining herself in racial terms: she does not identify as white, but simply as light-skinned, and when asked about her biological family, she answers: “God made me” (xix). As Ruth’s story is slowly revealed, her refusal to identify as white is explained in light of her difficult childhood in the South, where she witnessed the serious consequences of segregation, the conditions of extreme poverty and marginality endured by the black population of Suffolk and the climate of constant fear inspired by the frequent appearance of the Klu Klux Klan. Being marginalized herself because of her Jewish and immigrant background, and subject to the abuses of her domineering father, Ruth sympathizes with the blacks of Suffolk, but recognizes nonetheless that she was privileged when compared to the majority of the black customers of her father’s shop.

At this stage of Ruth’s life, clear racial classification according to American standards is hard: she is not considered completely white because of her Jewishness and Polish ancestry, and she herself does not identify with a racial label that she sees as a synonym of violence and prevarication. Ruth can only associate whiteness with distressful experiences: from the condescending attitude of her teachers, to the cruel comments of her classmates, to the open resentment of the people of Suffolk towards Jews and their hate of blacks. As a consequence, Ruth clearly perceives that she is not a member of the white community, and this causes an ambiguous and contrastive reaction. On the one hand, she refuses to identify as white and is naturally inclined to sympathize with the black community of Suffolk, but on the other she strives towards successful Americanization by changing her name and trying to engage in what she sees as the typical pastimes of white American girls, such as cheerleading and shopping for fashionable clothes. Ruth also points out how the acquisition of an American identity symbolized for her the kind of self-confidence she was lacking, and which she admired in her sister Dee-Dee, who had been born in the United States: “See, she was the first American in my family, while [my brother] Sam and I were immigrants, and we kind of had that immigrant thing on us. The kids would make fun of us for being Jewish at school, but they wouldn’t make fun of Dee-Dee. You just didn’t do that to Dee-Dee. She had confidence” (200). Dee-Dee’s confidence is seen by Ruth as something that is clearly linked to her Americanness: as a “truly” American citizen, she is able to get the approval of her peers, she can excel in school, and is even treated better by their father, who pays for her piano and tennis lessons. Americanness, in fact, means for Ruth emotional as well as financial stability and comfort, the kind of things she knows she will never be able to attain in the South. It is only after her marriage to Dennis, and

their relocation in the Red Hook Housing Projects of Brooklyn, where their children can have a playground with slides and can play with Italians, Puerto Ricans, Jews and blacks, that she feels truly American: “It was a real American life” she remarks “the life I’d always dreamed of” (239). Nevertheless, this sense of Americanness, of fulfilling the promise of a happy, comfortable life, is given to Ruth not by a change in her citizenship or by a better ability to integrate, but by the healthy relationship she enjoys with her husband, who finally provides her with the kind of safety, love and acceptance that she has been missing during her unhappy youth in the South. After her marriage, Ruth feels completely satisfied, and the question of her Jewishness and immigrant background never surfaces again: “I loved that man. I never missed home or my family after I got married. My soul was full” (240).

If at the beginning of the memoir we see Ruth as a character who stands out in the black community because of her fair skin, during the course of the narration the tale of her whiteness is gradually muddled and questioned. Ruth’s whiteness, in fact, is assessed in very ambiguous terms: in the South it is openly questioned, since her Jewish and immigrant background prevents her from being “fully” white, while in New York it is continually remarked, especially when considered against the black background provided by the neighborhoods in which she moves. At the same time, her relationships with black men are considered scandalous both in the North and the South exactly because, as far as the logic of miscegenation is concerned, she is classified as white in both rural and urban setting. This ambiguity and the contradictory nature of Ruth’s whiteness evidence the fact that whiteness, and not just blackness, is based on a social agreement that relies on unstable and mutable physical and cultural markers. Her white skin is therefore seen as an indicator of whiteness only in certain social contexts, while in others it is completely irrelevant and is not enough to make her part of the mainstream community. In fact, as Michele Elam argues, “in the field of representation, blackness and Jewishness are joined at the hip: Jews [...] became white, and simultaneously American, through and against blackness” (112). If Ruth’s fair skin is rare and stands out in Harlem and the Red Hook Projects, making her white in the eyes of the observers, in contexts in which black people are not present, like in her segregated high school in Suffolk, Jewishness serves as the next best contrast agent against which mainstream whiteness can be constructed and made visible. Ruth’s whiteness is therefore as fluid, mutable and contingent as her kids’ blackness, and she is classified differently depending from the geographical and social spaces she moves in. However, if her children’s blackness is a conferred but also a chosen racial identification, one that they can claim with pride and that inspires in them a sense of community and solidarity, Ruth’s whiteness is a totally

conferred label that completely depends from the assessment of her physical characteristics by other people, since she deliberately refuses to be labeled as anything else than a creature of God.

By knowing more of his mother's story, and by understanding the circumstances that led her to live in the African American community and to refuse to call herself white, James is finally able to make sense of his apparently odd mother and to eventually make peace with his own biraciality. Through the knowledge of his mother's exceptional life, James slowly evolves from experiencing a sense of incompatibility between his blackness and Ruth's alleged whiteness, to appreciating the possibility of enjoying aspects of both cultures. However, this does not erase or dilute his sense of being authentically black: he feels biracial, but also black, and the two labels do not contradict each other since biraciality does not imply his distancing himself from the black community. In this sense, James can well represent what Trey Ellis terms a "cultural mulatto", since he was educated in a mix of different cultures but does not feel the need to deny nor hide any particular aspect of his mixed cultural baggage in order to conform to traditional expectations of blackness. James can in fact incorporate in his daily life relevant aspects of non-black cultures—such as what he perceives as a typically Jewish concern for education and professional achievement—while still considering himself black. The fact of going to predominantly white Jewish schools, for example, and having several white friends, does not intact his sense of authentic blackness, which he implicitly defines as a sense of solidarity with black people and loyalty to the black community and its leaders.

However, if Ellis points out that cultural mulattos "navigate easily in the white world" ("NBA" 235), this is not completely true for James, who seems to "navigate" without a compass and often feels lost and split. This is reflected in the sense of twoness he continuously experiences, and that is emphasized in many episodes throughout the text. As a child, for example, he often fantasizes about talking to his alter ego, a boy like him who lives in the mirror, has his features and color, but not his problems because his world is free of racial prejudices and of material concerns such as sufficient food and clothes. As the quintessential heterotopia, the mirror represents the liminal space in which James can come into contact with the ideal version of himself, a version that has overcome the twoness he continually experiences, and that he can only describe as a vague, indistinct "ache" (*Color* 91). Young James tries to get closer to the boy in the mirror, which he perceives as his true self—"I believed my true self was a boy who lived in the mirror"—and this reflection resonates in spatial terms: "If I'm here and you're me, how can *you* be there at the same time?" but being unable to enter the space inhabited by the



concern-free version of himself, he is frustrated: “ I hated him. ‘Go Away!’ I’d shout. ‘Hurry up! Get on out!’ but he’d never leave” (91). The unattainable image of an alternative self who seems comfortable in the space he inhabits is something that haunts the author, and is represented as a presence that never leaves, that stays as a memento of what James could be if he could only reconcile the various aspects of his self and reach a stable sense of identity. The mirror seems to be a recurring theme of post-soul literature: Birdie, the protagonist of Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, also refuses to identify with the image she sees in the mirror, determining instead that her own living mirror will be her sister Cole, with her dark skin and kinky hair (180). The mirror is therefore described as a sort of internalized Rorschach test, in which the protagonists see images of themselves that people have projected on them, and with which they do not identify.

The sense of twoness, of painfully split identity, that characterizes the scene of the mirror is a leitmotiv of McBride’s text, and is remarked again at several stages in James’ life: during adolescence there are many episodes in which James feels torn between his love for Ruth and the embarrassment that her white skin causes him; during college he feels compelled to agree with black friends who denigrate white people, while mourning the death of a white man who had been particularly kind to him; while as a young professional he is unable to choose between a career as a writer and one as a musician. Although the fact of being biracial is certainly an issue for James, his difficulties in reconciling different aspects of the multicultural world in which he is brought up, and the consequent feeling of being continuously split, are also partly due to the fact that his story is set in a historical moment of transition, when the struggle for civil rights is still going on and being part of a multicultural educational experience is not common. For example, James points out that although schools were officially integrated, he did not benefit of busing, so that it was very rare to see a black kid in one of the schools he attended, and that he was able to reach only after a long, tiring commute. Ellis interestingly remarks in his 1989 essay that “today, there are enough young blacks torn between the two worlds to finally go out and create our own”, but this was not the case during James’ childhood and adolescence, when his “growing sense of self” (25) was developing. In these conditions, after his exhausting verbal battles with the boy in the mirror, who seems to know who he is and to be at peace with his own identity, James can only conclude: “I myself had no idea who I was” (91).

However, if fictional James has difficulties in adjusting to the reality of being a cultural mulatto, McBride, as the navigated post-soul writer he is, has completely managed the task of moving easily among several cultural spaces. Writes Ashe: “Of course, all African Americans are, to

one extent or another, naturalized ‘cultural mulattos,’ as are all white Americans, and any other Americans, of any race or ethnicity, who grew up in this country. But these artists [post-soul artists] and their characters, their music, their filmic and painterly representations are consciously crossing the traditionally separated racial lines in US popular culture in a way that, although it did indeed exist, was either unlikely or unseemly in earlier black artistic eras” (“Theorizing” 614). It is exactly through the process of writing his memoir that McBride seems to gain the ability to “navigate” the color of water, to flow and transition towards a flexible and fluid blackness that allows him to make space for different aspects of his background. The process of assessing his own blackness through the lens of his mother’s past experiences is therefore liberating and cathartic, and is clearly reflected in McBride’s stylistic choices.

In fact, the very structure of this unusually double-voiced memoir compels readers to question their assumption about racial identification and to notice how strongly a man’s perception of his own blackness can be influenced by a non-black person and by experiences that take place outside of the African American community. Mother and son’s voices alternate through the memoir, as each chapter is dedicated to portions of their life in which they are compared at similar ages, so that we can read about their experiences at similar stages in life. The classical linear time structure of autobiographical narration is therefore discarded in favor of a fragmented one, which allows the past to surface through the present: time, like water and racial identity, is fluid and can be manipulated by a conscious writer. This emphasizes the idea of two very different voices who can nevertheless engage in a dialogue in which both parties receive equal amount of space and attention, and in which none of them interrupts the other, although the author’s voice ultimately maintains control. In fact, Ruth addresses James, while James addresses the reader directly, and in this way McBride does not break what Philippe Lejeune terms “the autobiographical pact.” This guarantees that the narration has a good level of credibility and authenticity, although the narrating voice is continuously shifting. The finished product is therefore not a mingling of voices but a juxtaposition, a beautiful patchwork in black and white whose structure mimics that of Ruth and James’ separate but connected journeys of self-discovery.

The technique of the double-voiced memoir seems to be the only way for McBride to present two antithetical identities: black and white, Christian and Jewish, man and woman, creative and pragmatic. However, there are several clues in the text pointing at the interstitial spaces between these binarisms that James and his mother can cohabit harmoniously, and that are discovered by the protagonists as productive sites of self-knowledge. Towards the end of the memoir

McBride, reminiscing the time in which he listened to his mother talking while he interviewed her, remarks that “I felt like a Tinkertoy kid building my own self out of those toy building sets; for as she laid her life before me, I reassembled the tableau of her words like a picture puzzle, and as I did, so my own life was rebuilt” (270). This process of self-discovery is cathartic for the author, who in the end is able to accept all parts of his heritage without denying or compromising his blackness. It is significant that the book ends with two consecutive chapters in which James speaks, without a chapter dedicated to Ruth’s memories in between: the author seems to have found a stronger voice, he no longer needs a clearer understanding of his mother’s past to talk about himself, he has all the elements he needs to assess his present and make predictions about his and his family’s future. Moreover, it is clear at the end of the book that not only James’ identity has been strongly influenced by Ruth, but also vice versa. Ruth, at the end of the eight-year long interview that she had with her son in preparation for the book, has changed, is more serene about her Jewish origins, and seems to suffer less. The voices of Ruth and James are both, in this sense, identity-producing: not only they contribute in helping the other find his/her true self, but they modify these selves, since the acts of telling and writing operate changes in both parties.

### The Role of Mobility: Identities in Transition

Together with liquidity, the concept of mobility is also paramount in McBride’s text, and is explored by the author by pointing out Ruth’s strategy of constant physical movement as a way to escape social constraints, cope with dramatic situations, and adapt to the several changes that occur in her and her children’s lives. If moving is emphasized as an important element in all of the characters’ lives, it is in fact in Ruth that this need is manifested with greater intensity. Her wanderlust shows already from her childhood when, instead of spending time enjoying the usual pastimes of children her age, in her scarce free time she learns to run as fast as she can through the woods to avoid the sexual and psychological abuse of her father: “Hobbies? I had none. Running. That was my hobby. [...] Of course, I had something to run from” (42). Already as a young girl, Ruth understands that running can be a strategy to deal with aspects of her life that she wants to leave behind, as well as a way to carve emotional and physical space for herself.

It is not a case that she always describes the space of abuse as cramped and suffocating—the store full of goods, the house where she has no privacy for lack of space—while the destination of her running is usually an open place, like the woods behind the store, where she feels free and not constrained and which are the setting for her first love story, the first time in which

Ruth, away from the confined space dominated by her father, feels loved and valued. She later experiences the same sense of freedom in the streets of New York, where she enjoys the sight of people constantly rushing somewhere and wishes to imitate them: “I wanted to rush like them [...] Sometimes I’d just go out and walk with them so I could rush with the crowd. I had nowhere to go. Just going crazy, rushing with the rest!” (130). New York seems therefore the perfect place to be for Ruth, since despite its overcrowded streets it provides the means to move freely: subway, buses, trains, are all things Ruth loves. Moreover, the rushing crowd gives her a sense of anonymity that she finds reassuring: since everyone seems busy going somewhere, she has the illusion that nobody will care about people’s race or religion, an idea she finds extremely liberating and full of possibilities for reinventing herself.

On the contrary, Ruth links confined spaces and the impossibility to move to ideas of suffering and abuse, which later results in a form of claustrophobia: as an adult, in fact, she cannot stand lack of space, she has to drive with the car windows open and is terrified of anything that may close behind her. Ruth has witnessed the consequences of immobility for her mother (affectionately called Mameh) and tries to avoid imitating her at all costs. Being paralyzed on the left side of her body as a consequence of polio, Mameh is at the mercy of her cruel husband, who mistreats her and makes her life unbearable. The only spaces where she moves are the store and the attached house, places in which she occupies a marginal position and that offer no possibility for empowerment. Mameh’s longing for movement and freedom is epitomized by her love for birds, which she feeds and takes care of. While she does not care much for her chickens, Mameh respects and admires birds that can fly, and never tries to limit their freedom by caging them: “A bird who flies is special. You would never trap a bird who flies” (218). If Mameh longs for movement and tacitly encourages Ruth to go to New York in search of a better future, a different idea of movement is represented by Old Shilsky, Ruth’s father. His greatest ambition had been that of relocating from Poland to the United States, but instead of forging new paths for himself like Ruth and her children would do, he exploited those created by his wife’s relatives. As explained by Ruth, her parent’s marriage was not the consequence of love and mutual respect, but of Old Shilsky’s desire to use Mameh’s connections in the New World to support his request of a visa. In fulfilling his American dream, Old Shilsky seems more involved in an act of parasitism than one of self-realization. His subsequent movements once in the United States follow more or less the same pattern: he exploits the communities in which he continuously relocates by proposing himself as a self-appointed rabbi even if he does not have the knowledge nor the spirit of a religious and moral leader, and the result is that, at the

end of a trial period, he is always invited to leave by a very unsatisfied flock. When he finally relocates in Suffolk and starts his business, he does so in a space that he clearly despises, since his store is set in the black section of the town despite his strong prejudices against African Americans.

Ruth is therefore confronted by restricted notions of space throughout her childhood: the physical and social immobility of Mameh, the parasitic use of space of Old Shilsky, the Southern towns segregated along racial lines, are all issues that Ruth seeks to leave behind in her incessant running and rushing. Ruth never has a precise destination, she does not move towards a specific goal in life, but she moves nonetheless to escape the social constraints she faces. Interestingly, in recalling the time when she moved with her first husband into a tiny room, in which they lived together with their first eight children, she describes it as the best time of her life. It is the first and only time in which the reader experiences Ruth as a stable character, happy in the place she inhabits, and unwilling to move despite the obvious lack of space that her humble accommodation can provide. In fact, her stability is not given by the physical space she lives in, but by the reassuring presence of Dennis: from their marriage on, Ruth often uses expressions that highlight a vertical use of space, since Dennis' love uplifts her and raises her above the distressing circumstancing of her previous life.

After the death of both of her husbands, who provided, although in different ways, the kind of emotional support she needed, Ruth starts to wander again but this time her movement is slow, odd, hindered. She slowly rides an old-fashioned bicycle that her second husband found in the streets, challenging the danger of cars speeding past her, and the agile running of her youth is substituted by a bow-legged walk that her children would soon name "Mommy's madwalk". What James describes as Ruth's oddity is explained in spatial terms, since she is now unable to move as she used to, and the weirdness of her old, unusual blue bike and of her crooked walk seem to symbolize Ruth's position in the African American community after the death of her black husbands: she does not seem to fit in completely and only seems comfortable in that space as long as she is reassured that she can move in spite of everything:

While she weebled and wobbled and leaned, she did not fall. She responded with speed and motion. She would not stop moving. She rode her bicycle. She walked. She took long bus rides to faraway department stores and supermarkets where she'd window-shop for hours and spend fifty cents. She could not grasp exactly what to

do next, but she kept moving as if her life depended on it, which in some ways it did (164).

Moreover, it is interesting that during all of her life, but especially after the death of her first husband, Ruth is not concerned with keeping a house: she cannot cook, she does not clean and chaos is part of the family's routine. This, in my opinion, is to be interpreted not so much as a rejection of traditional gender roles, nor as simple lack of time, but as an unconscious desire to continue the move, to avoid making the nest too comfortable because investing too much energy in a house could prevent her from moving again in the future. However, without the support of her husbands and lacking the agility and freshness of her young years, Ruth is unable to move properly, and ends up taking the unwise decision of relocating to Delaware, where buying a house is much cheaper, but public transportation is lacking and her children are forced to use the second-rate facilities reserved to black people for lack of better options at reasonable distance. Unable to stand social and physical immobility, Ruth responds once again with action: she learns to drive despite her claustrophobia and the unwanted attentions of her driving instructor.

The possibility to move is central to the construction of an identity based on negotiation, in which a perennial state of transition allows characters to redefine themselves outside of the constraints imposed on them by suffocating social spaces: for a woman like Ruth, the idea of always having the option of leaving is comforting, and this coping mechanism is transferred to her children, as she instills in them the concept of always moving towards a new goal in life and of leaving home to become self-sufficient. Ruth pushes her children to remain constantly active, as a way not to think about the complications of race and to achieve personal and professional satisfaction despite their race and class. Movement is therefore used as a distraction and as a way to be constructive rather than self-destructive.

As a teen James starts to appropriate this strategy in order to make distance between himself and his white mother, whom he naively identifies as the source of all his identity concerns: "I left home in the morning and simply didn't go to school. Just like Mommy did years before me, I began my own process of running, emotionally disconnecting myself from her" (138). However, as soon as he reaches maturity and with it a more nuanced understanding of the intersections of race and class in America, James uses running in a more constructive way, rejecting spaces that clip his wings in favor of places in which he can mold his identity more freely: "Boston was not an easy place to have a racial identity crisis either. Its racial problems

are complicated, spilling over into matters of class, history, politics, even education. It was more than I wanted to face. I had to run” (204). We can notice how for James movement is strictly linked to the need of throwing light on his racial identity, a process in which his mother plays a central role. It is therefore not surprising that both protagonists utilize the same technique in their process of identity formation, expanding their movement both horizontally (in a geographical sense, from South to North) and vertically (in the social ladder, as they achieve increasing levels of education and financial autonomy). In their continuous process of map-making, Ruth and all of her children have to exit traditional pre-established paths to create their own: this fosters the creation of innovative ways of self-definition that challenge standard classification and allows for a greater freedom to express one’s individuality.

In the final chapter “Finding Ruthie”, Ruth is shown as a woman who has chosen this nomadic state of mind as a sort of personal philosophy: “My mother is the only individual I have ever known who has been in the process of moving for ten years straight” (268). Even after ten years of living comfortably in Germantown, Philadelphia, Ruth is constantly looking for a new house, despite the evident fact that she does not really want to relocate. It is in this phase of her life that Ruth finds the courage to finally go back to Suffolk to make peace with the ghosts of her past and to meet her long-lost childhood friend Frances, whom James tracked down for her. Thanks to the reassuring knowledge that movement is always an option, and to the increased self-knowledge she possesses after the cathartic experience of narrating her life to James, Ruth is able to confront the place she ran from with no sorrow nor regrets.

### Conclusions: Liquid identity as “Orchestrated Chaos”

At the end of “Finding Ruthie”, McBride describes how Ruth’s strategy of running from upsetting situations, inherited by her children and grandchildren, led to the creation of a huge multiracial family constituted by a mix of individuals characterized by hybrid, transitional identities, over which Ruth reigns supreme: “In running from her past, Mommy has created her own nation, a rainbow coalition that descends on her house every Christmas and Thanksgiving and sleeps everywhere” (277). We can clearly perceive that each member of the McBride-Jordan clan is a cultural mulatto who has been or will eventually be involved in his or her own process of *blaxploration*, so that the family presents itself as decidedly post-soul. In this definition, the prefix “post” is to be intended as in “post-colonial:” like post-colonial cultural practices are new practices that emerge out of the contact between colonizer and colonized, the racial identities of the McBride-Jordans derive from the mingling of different racial

identifications, not from the simple “addition” of one racial identity to the other, it is a new form of self-knowledge that lives in the zones of contact between the different members of the family, and that those of them who identify as black can incorporate in their blackness. James’ initial assertion that it would have been easier if the whole family had been of the same color (103), which stands for a fixed and binary way of conceptualizing race, is replaced at the end of his and Ruth’s journey of self-discovery by the awareness that racial identity can be fluid and expandable. James accepts and appropriates his mother’s love for movement, and learns that a constant state of transition can be an efficient coping strategy against essentialist notions of race that are too restrictive for him.

The idea of “orchestrated chaos” that James often uses to ironically describe how Ruth organized his and his siblings’ lives while struggling financially is picked up again at the end of the memoir, in which the family moves in a decidedly “messy” but comfortable space, where different cultural and racial identities are in continuous dialogue and affect one another. As far as the two protagonists of the memoir are concerned, Ruth’s pain about her past is not dissolved by the experience of disclosing her past to James, nevertheless it has been at least tackled, and this feels liberating for her. On the other hand, James’ process of identity construction is still going on at the end of the text, but the fact of knowing more about his mother’s story allows him to feel more secure about his own identity and to explore his blackness from new perspectives. To conclude, the post-soul features displayed by both protagonists—the cultural mulatto archetype, the performance of *blaxploration*, the focus on movement and liminal spaces, and the consideration of the legacies of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements—allow us to read this classic of American literature not just as a reflection on biracial identity in America, but as a testimony of the new directions taken by post-Civil Rights black artists in their exploration of blackness.

## Multiracialism and Black Authenticity in Danzy Senna’s “To Be Real” (1995) and *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* (2009)

### Performing Realness

*Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* is the 2009 memoir of renowned Bostonian author Danzy Senna, famous for the insightfulness with which her essays and works of fiction explore the porosity of racial borders, the tendency of society to racially classify people according to bodily



traits, and the necessity to debunk outdated and limited constructions of racial authenticity. The peculiarity of Senna's work is in fact the leitmotiv of the supposed contradiction between her Caucasian appearance and her will to identify as nothing but a black woman, which leads the author to expose the complications caused by discrepancies between conferred and self-chosen racial identity. Always skeptical of the supposed progressiveness of the multiracial identity movement, in *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* Senna tries to push the reflection on multiracialism further and to investigate it on a more personal level, by making sense of her experience of growing up biracial and bicultural in the paradox of a society that seems to celebrate multiculturalism, colorblindness and essentialist notions of race all at the same time. In her quest for a racial identity, Senna cannot avoid coming to terms with the most painful aspects of her life: her childhood, troubled by the disastrous divorce between her parents, and the difficult relationship with her smart, cultured, but emotionally distant father. The result is, at once, a memoir, a family history, a detective story and an essay on the power of race and class in shaping relationships in the United States.

Admittedly, the book was started out of a spirit of intellectual curiosity towards Senna's paternal heritage. Danzy Senna is in fact the daughter of Fanny Howe, a poet and novelist herself and the descendant of a WASP family of illustrious pedigree whose family tree can be traced back to the *Mayflower*, and Carl Senna, an African American scholar and "enfant prodige" of the black intelligentsia with no family history to document. Being the father the source of her blackness, Senna realizes that, in order to come to terms with her mixed racial heritage, she has to investigate this side of her family history for answers, to have a more complete and satisfactory picture of herself. Clearly, on the other hand her goal is also that of being reconciled with her father, a man she loves and fears at the same time, by trying to understand more about the difficult social and financial context in which he was raised. In the process of investigating the paternal branches of her family tree, Senna tries to get to know her father on a more intimate level and to make sense of the many ways in which he disappointed her as a child, hoping that this will enable her to forge a more stable identity for herself and to make peace with her troubled childhood.

"Don't you know who I am?" is the key-question that marks the beginning of the quest for identity depicted in the memoir: it is the question that her father asks her when, after years of not seeing him, five-year old Danzy opens the door and cannot recognize the handsome black man that stands in front of her, and whose presence makes her feel uneasy and evokes memories vaguely described as "both good and bad" (3). The author remarks that, thirty years after that

episode, Carl Senna is still asking her that same question: “Don’t you know who I am?” and that this is what prompted her to research her and her father’s past (4). In fact, it is clear that this time her father is not simply asking if she recognizes him, but demands a deeper level of knowledge and understanding from his now adult daughter, who is appalled by the sudden realization that she knows virtually nothing about him and his past and that this could be one of the reasons for the coldness and lack of communication that characterizes their relationship. To answer this question, Senna decides therefore to embark on a journey with her father that will bring the two of them to the South, touring the several towns in which the long-lost members of his large extended family are scattered, in an attempt to reshape their family tree and know more about each other. As typical of the memoir genre, the protagonist’s identity is immediately presented as constructed in relational terms: in fact, for most of the book, the reader sees how Senna shapes her identity as a black woman and post-soul writer only through the narrative of how she reacts to her father’s actions and teachings. Carl Senna’s initial question, thirty years later, begs to be reinterpreted as “don’t you know who *you are*?” since the author’s identity, particularly with reference to her racial affiliation, is presented as fundamentally shaped by a man she claims to barely know.

As a consequence, Senna’s wish to know more about her paternal lineage clearly originates not only from her desire to finally bond with her father and make up for a disappointing childhood, but also from the necessity to answer interrogations about her racial belonging. As a matter of fact, although Senna unequivocally identifies as black, this choice has always been up to debate, since her blackness does not show on her body. The supposed dissonance between her Caucasian appearance and her racial affiliation, therefore, makes her the target of the puzzled reaction of white people, who do not understand why somebody so light-skinned might wish to identify as black, and of the contempt of part of the black community, who see her as a fake and an intruder. In fact, despite the efforts of her parents to instill black pride in her and her siblings, Senna’s difficulties in merging into the black community appear clear from her schooldays, when she is teased and roughed up by the children of the Afrocentric school she attends for looking so white. The messages that little Danzy receives are therefore contradictory and open to many interpretations: on the one hand she is pushed by her family to identify as black and be proud of doing so, while on the other hand people keep hinting at the fact that she will never be black enough. Unlike traditional narratives of passing, blackness is the category that Senna aspires to, craving for the validation of the black community.

The consequences of this longing for authentic blackness are beautifully registered in her essay “To Be Real” (1995), published in the homonymous collection of essays edited by Rebecca Walker:

Growing up mixed in the racial battlefield of Boston, I yearned for something just out of my reach—an “authentic” identity to make me real. Everyone but me, it seemed at the time, fit into a neat cultural box, had a label to call their own. Being the daughter of both feminist and integrationist movements, a white socialist mother and a black intellectual father, it seemed that everyone and everything had come together for my conception, only to break apart in time for my birth (5).

In this passage Senna describes her awareness of being, in Rebecca Walker’s words, a “Movement Child,”<sup>71</sup> the offspring not of rape and/or financial exploitation, but of an interracial couple whose love for each other originated in the context of a shared commitment to racial progress. However, if Walker in her memoir casts this awareness about her origins in strikingly positive terms, Senna’s case the interracial union of her parents seems to be doomed for failure from the start. Interracial marriage and miscegenation, as she soon understands, are not the cure for racial tensions, which originate from social forces that are larger and more powerful than her parents’ progressive political ideals. As a consequence, the recognition of being a Movement Child does nothing to ease Senna’s painful feeling that she does not belong to any group: the lack of a stable “label” to call her own is not liberating for Senna, on the contrary it makes her feel alienated and removed from any possible allies. In this phase of her life, the “box” of racial classification is not seen as confining, but as a safe space to which she can never be granted full access. The only way to access the desired space of authentic blackness is, ironically, to perform it: to “be real” then means enacting a complex set of behavioral and aesthetic codes that change overtime, and that she needs to acquire and update as time goes by. She comments:

I yearned for Blackness, which, like femininity, was defined by the visible signifiers of the times. In my father’s era, these had been daishiki, an Afro, a fistad

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<sup>71</sup> “I am not a bastard, the product of a rape, the child of some white devil. I am a Movement Child. My parents tell me I can do anything I put my mind to, that I can be anything I want. They buy me Erector sets and building blocks, Tinkertoys and books, more and more books. Berenstain Bears, Dr. Seuss, Hans Christian Andersen. We are middle class. My mother puts a colorful patterned scarf on her head and throws parties for me in our backyard, under the carport, and beside the creek. She invites all of my friends over and watches over us as we roast hot dogs. She makes Kool-Aid and laughs when one of us kids does something cute or funny. I am not tragic” (Walker 36).

pik. No longer. This was Boston in the 1980s and to be authentically black meant something quite different. Now you had to wear processed hair and Puma sneakers (1995, 9).

In this passage Senna recalls the beginnings of her *blaxploration*, meant as the conscious process of examining blackness with an almost analytical attitude, trying to discern and eventually appropriate the visual and linguistic codes of authentic blackness. In doing that, Senna clearly troubles blackness (Ashe 623) exposing the layers of its construction and the temporality of its markers, but she also troubles whiteness by highlighting the fact that her Caucasian features are not enough to make her white. However, this troubling of race is not expressed as a naïve belief that race does not matter, but as an interrogation of its signifiers.

### Blaxploration: “To Be Black Is to Contain All Colors”

In “To Be Real” as well as in her memoir Senna criticizes the binary of blackness and whiteness from within, exposing the constructed nature of race and the absurdities of labeling people according to physical markers. Her experience of blackness—as well as that of her siblings—is obviously meant to testify to the inexistence of a racial self based on essentialist notions of race: race is in the eyes of the observers, who see in her features and those of her relatives a projection of their own conceptions of racial authenticity. As a consequence, Senna is usually classified as a Jew or a Southern European, her sister as a light-skinned African American and her brother as a Latino. Her aspect and that of her relatives are depicted not as an indication of which race they belong to, of racial and ethnic authenticity, but rather as a sort of Rorschach test in which everybody sees what they want to see. Senna’s parents may have taught their children that they are all black, but this sense of shared blackness is constantly challenged by the gaze of society.

Senna is fully aware of this gaze and of the power it exerts on her. It is significant, at this regard, that one of the first episodes presented in the memoir strongly emphasizes a performance of blackness, carefully staged to satisfy the curiosity of white spectators. Senna describes a visit of her father to the artists’ colony in which she was working, and skillfully reports the climate of tension that was created in the common living room as more and more artists came out of their rooms to see her father. It is evident that they wanted to see if someone as light-skinned as Senna could have a “really” black parent, and that they wanted to check for themselves just how black he was. When her father enters the living room, Senna recalls that “I made a show of being more affectionate toward him than I would have been if we were unobserved. I felt the

need to perform our closeness. In that embrace I wanted to show that I was with him, not them [...] they did not know the real me. I imagined I had gone from being just one of the other colonists to being something far more interesting because of this man by my side.” (*Where* 5-6). It is paradigmatic that to show her “real” self, Senna has to put up a performance of identity, which she enacts to satisfy the voyeuristic curiosity of the other colonists. At the same time, while her behavior is intended to show affection and complicity, the performance is admittedly marked by anxiety, since Senna fears that her father may be drunk and say something that could embarrass her, ruining the picture of the happy interracial family she has just painted for her friends.

After describing this episode, Senna starts to randomly list a series of terms, with positive as well as negative connotations, that she may use to describe her father: “intellectual,” “race-man,” but also “alcoholic” and “exile.” The last of these terms, however, is the one on which the attention of the reader focuses: “chameleon” (7). This image par excellence of mimicry and shifting is positioned immediately after a scene in which the performability of race is clearly hinted at, and this destabilizes the reader and erodes even more prescriptive notions of race. The reader in fact, at this point of the memoir, has just come to see Carl Senna as the depository of blackness, the African American scholar who is concerned about white privilege and wants to pass on to his children the ideals of black power. How can he be a chameleon? The tendency of her father to shift, to adapt to his surroundings by “changing color” to metaphorically camouflage or stand out, makes perfectly sense in light of the quote from “To Be Real” reported above: the signifiers of authentic blackness, as noted, have to be updated according to the socio-historical context in which the subject is situated, so that “being a chameleon” is not necessarily a sign of incoherence but, ironically, a requirement of authenticity.

However, her father’s capacity and willingness to adapt, as he gets older, seems to vacillate. He refuses to abandon constructions of authenticity that have been shaped in the soul years, to ditch the signifiers of blackness of the 1970s and adopt those of the 1980s, and this fixity results in a compromised and incoherent performance of identity. In fact, the apparently monolithic racial identity of his father is slowly deconstructed through the memoir, as contradictory aspects of his blackness come to the surface. First of all, a gendered perspective on blackness is added: Carl Senna, his daughter states, “rarely dated black women, but [...] he would give the solidarity nod to every black man we passed on the street” (7). Carl Senna’s wives, Danzy Senna’s mother as well as his second wife, are actually described as an antithesis to his ideals of blackness: they are both white, blond, frail, slender, the first comes from a WASP aristocratic family of Boston,

the second is a Canadian Catholic. And yet, the author reports, Carl Senna used to classify people according to their ethnicity, to distrust non-black people, to give an exaggerated importance to the surnames of his daughter's friends, in short "he saw people as symbols rather than individuals" so that "growing up, [she] could never keep track of which group in the population he mistrusted the most" (7). The fact that Carl Senna spent his life writing essays on the constructed nature of race and then reinscribing racial paradigms in his everyday life is clearly symptomatic of how ideals of authentic blackness may be incoherent and fractured, so that race-man Senna becomes, in the eyes of her daughter, "a walking, talking contradiction" (7).

Carl Senna's contradictory racial policies are presented as a result of the black pride politics of the 1960s, that Danzy Senna both emulates and criticizes. In fact, in "To Be Real" she recalls trying to validate her blackness through the appropriation of the language and ideals of the 1960s, only to realize shortly after that the cultural markers of that decade simply do not work anymore: "my friends and I sought to construct authenticity where there was none. Into this vacuum, we recovered the language of our Golden Age, the 1960s, appropriating its vocabulary for our world, when in fact it didn't quite apply" (14). Danzy seems to replicate her father's error of mistaking the markers of authentic blackness for something stable, always valid and easily replicable, while in fact the performance of racial realness must be constantly updated in order to function to some extent. Her attempt to acquire authenticity by replicating the cultural signs of the mythology of the 1960s becomes particularly disappointing when applied to activism: at the end of her freshman college year, Senna is in fact arrested and charged with trespassing for barricading herself into the university president's office building with a list of requests for ethnic studies faculty, only to realize that her defiant act was ultimately a cheap replica of the fights of the previous generation, insufficient to sustain a stable sense of black identity:

I realized in fact the whole protest had seemed simply a cheap imitation of the 1960s protests I had seen and heard so much about [...] It was a crude imitation of my parents' life experience [...] close, but not quite the real thing [...] I had once again constructed a "real" image of myself. As a "radical Afrikan" I took over buildings and, ironically, developed a fierce disgust for miscegenation (13-4).

The imitation of the radical politics and aesthetics of the 1960s not only fail to provide her with answers about how to achieve black authenticity, but ultimately push her to despise a substantial part of her identity. Significantly, in a 2002 interview for *Callaloo*, Senna stated that "relative

few have benefited from the civil rights achievements of the 1960s, in part because those achievements were racialized, and didn't take into account class," adding that "we need to acknowledge that some of the liberal educational philosophies of the 1960s were in fact failures" (Senna and Arias 2002, 425). Being disconnected from the nostalgia associated with the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, Danzy Senna, unlike her father, seems in the position of giving a more objective assessment of the Movement's legacy, and feels free to state the limits of its successes. Nevertheless, her critique of the 1960s is never sterile and simplistic, since it is based not on abstract considerations on the Movement's results, but on the actual effects of black pride policies on the lives of her family members. In particular, she is aware of the fact that the emergence of an exaggerated and contradictory black pride in her father has to do with the kind of troubled childhood he had to endure, with the instability of black existence in the Jim Crow South, with the ever-present image of a single black mother struggling to bring up her children. In this sense, Senna shows a kind of critical approach to the legacy of the 1960s that is typical of the post-soul aesthetics. As Dereck Maus writes in the introduction to *Post Souls Satire: Black Identity After Civil Right*, "the potentially oxymoronic notion of art that is subversively respectful toward its ancestors shows up repeatedly in the theorizations of what makes contemporary African American cultural discourse distinct from that of the previous period" (xiv).

Post-soul artists actually manifest a desire to be respectful to the previous generation, to acknowledge their concerns and the fact that they paved the way for a new inspection of blackness, but at the same time this grateful acknowledgement does not preclude an unbiased assessment of this legacy. In this sense, describing her father as "a chameleon" and "a contradiction" is exactly the kind of "allusion-disruption" strategy that critic Bertram Ashe theorized as one of the central aspects in the work of post-soul artists. Ideals of authentic blackness are named—in this case the rhetoric of the race-man, of the enfant prodige of the black intelligentsia—only to deconstruct their supposed authenticity by means of an analysis in terms of what Bertram Ashe calls "nontraditional expectations of blackness" ("Theorizing" 615). Traditional expectations of blackness are not completely rejected but expanded, and black identity is reinterpreted as something fluid, multiple, unstable, and profoundly contingent. Recognizing the fallacy of notions of authentic blackness, Senna realizes that what she has been looking for her whole life is actually something that does not exist, an abstract and too simplistic version of blackness that cannot be a useful tool of identity construction in the post-Civil Rights scene. As a consequence, towards the end of "To Be Real," she admits her distrust for identity

politics that are too limiting and exclusive: “I have become suspicious of kente cloth and womyn symbols, the sale and mass consumption of cultural artifacts. My yearning to be real has led me in circles” (20).

Accordingly, in *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* Senna asks her father for answers not on theoretical, abstract blackness, but on her personal experience of blackness, even if she knows that her request is doomed to go unheard:

In place of a flesh-and-blood black family, in place of black roots, in place of a coherent black community with a history we could touch or feel, [my father] grew obsessed with the idea of blackness, the idea of race, and how to hammer racial consciousness home to his three light-skinned children.

[...] My father constructed for himself—and imposed on us—a blackness that was intellectual and defensive, abstract and negatively defined (always in relation to whiteness). And it worked: My siblings and I never once felt ourselves to be anything but black” (35).

Carl Senna keeps talking about race in abstract terms, so that his children are unable to link this intellectual, defensive blackness with their actual experience of blackness. They all feel black, but their black identity is not stable nor comfortable. Images of instability and of things crumbling are actually abundant in the text, as we can see in the episode of the desk. Senna recalls asking her father for a writing desk as a birthday present, and being surprised when he actually came to her birthday party with the desired gift. Unfortunately, the desk was not only cheap and ugly, but defective and impossible to put together, so that young Danzy spent the rest of the day crying in her bedroom consoled by her sister, the only one who actually understood the real reasons of her sadness beyond her disappointment for a bad gift.

The desk symbolizes in fact the unreliable, defective kind of paternal love that her father provides, which seems to mirror his and her daughters’ unstable and wobbly black identities. The desk is so defective that nothing can be written on it, it offers no stable support for work and creative ideas, it is the idea of a desk and not an actual desk: the cheap gift becomes therefore a clear metaphor for the kind of blackness Carl Senna keeps imposing on his children, so wobbly and cheap that they cannot elaborate on it. The author acknowledges the role of the social circumstances that lead her father to develop his “defensive, abstract and negatively defined” blackness, to disappoint her all the time, to become an alcoholic and ultimately an abusive husband, but this understanding is not healing, and is definitely not enough to forgive



him and to fully appreciate his teachings. Senna recognizes that her father provided her with invaluable gifts: political and racial awareness, a sassy sense of humor, the central elements on which she would later build her successful writing career. However, her father's gifts are always perceived as faulty, so that in the end she comments: "I accepted his gifts, the fire and the fury, but I wanted a proper desk to write it on, and because he failed to give me this, I could not thank him for the rest" (182). Again, the desk functions as a token of stability, that cannot be replaced by theories on blackness.

Besides the desk, which becomes a symbol of the instability and fallacy of essentialized notions of authentic blackness, the author mentions another "gift" that her father gave her, and that represents her problematic relationship to blackness: her eczema. It is interesting that early in the text the skin disease is referenced as something reassuring, the proof that the author is indeed Carl Senna's daughter and that his epidermal blackness lives in her. The eczema patches that her father has on his fingers become therefore the tangible connection between she and blackness, the only one that shows on her body. In fact, when the eczema patches start to emerge on her fingers she states that she "felt an odd relief in this connection, as if I'd needed proof that I was [my father's] daughter" (36). Later in the memoir, however, eczema is seen for what it really is, namely a disease, and is compared to her father's obsession for epidermal blackness: "My father's racial obsessions live in me. He passed them down to me just the way he passed down his eczema and asthma. In lieu of an inheritance, I have his diseases as proof that I am his daughter" (166). The eczema patches, both blessing and curse, represent her ambiguous stance towards a father who seems to be the source of everything that is negative in her life, but who is also the source of her black identity.<sup>72</sup>

### Miscegenation as Blaxploration

Senna's memoir exemplifies very well a fundamental aspect of Bertram Ashe's theorization of the post-soul: the impulse to trouble blackness ("Theorizing" 615). In her writings there is never a given in terms of identity: there is not such a thing as a true identity, even less a true black identity, but only the kind of hybrid, malleable, fluid identity that Senna slowly and painfully

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<sup>72</sup> The significance of skin diseases such as rashes, eczema and dermatitis as an expression of racialized anger is explored in greater depth by Emily Raboteau in *The Professor's Daughter*. In the text, the protagonist Emma, whose blackness also does not show on her body, has rashes so severe as to disfigure her face. Later in the novel, she discovers that she can bring on the rashes at will, forcing people—especially her father—to stare, to finally notice her. In Danzy Senna's *Symptomatic*, undiagnosed symptoms ranging from nausea to skin diseases also come to symbolize the effects of racial tensions on the protagonist. For a more detailed analysis of the significance of skin diseases in post-soul novels, see Elam 133-138.

shapes for herself in an act of self-affirmation and self-definition. This process is destabilizing, but allows her to forge a kind of blackness that is specific to her, and that takes into account different aspects of her background. As she comments in “To Be Real:” “I no longer believe in a single ‘authentic Negro experience.’ I have come to understand that my multiplicity is inherent in my blackness, not opposed to it, and that none of my ‘identities’ are distinct from one another [...] To be black is to be all colors” (18). By identifying as a black person that contains all colors, Senna perfectly fits into Ellis’s definition of a cultural mulatto, epitomizing another central aspect of Ashe’s theorization of the post-soul literary aesthetics. In fact, the black identity she chooses for herself is one that discards every simplistic accusation of inauthenticity based either on her skin color or her racial salience:<sup>73</sup> in this way, Senna learns to allow for discomfort, without craving acceptance neither from the black nor the white community.

As a consequence, Senna’s white and Mexican heritage, far from opposing and invalidating or “diluting” her blackness, start to fit into a conception of blackness that is multifaceted, contingent, and can include multiraciality. In contrast with traditional notions of passing, black is the ideal, desired identity, an identity that is chosen rather than assigned. This is also the main reason why Senna is critical of the term “multiracial” as one that might apply to her, and prefers “black” instead: while multiraciality is a concept that seems to accept the reality of race as biological evidence, the fact of declaring herself black despite of her light skin and straight hair exposes the intangibility of race and allows her to deconstruct it from within. Senna, in fact, refuses the image of the mulatto as an evidence of assimilation, successful coming together of the races, end of discrimination: mulatto identity is never romanticized, and Senna shows just how easily racism can coexist with the acknowledgement and even celebration of miscegenation and biraciality. Moreover, Senna is critical of a system that takes into account only black and white, making other groups virtually invisible. The Mexican heritage of her father, therefore, becomes illuminating in showing how nuanced black identity can be. While the mulatto has been seen as a symbol of the joyful mingling of the races, other groups—like the Mexicans—threaten this vision by evoking images of poverty, marginalization, failed assimilation. The mulatto can easily fit into the black-white paradigm, but troubled conceptions of blackness—a nuanced, contingent blackness—complicate things in a way that mainstream society finds discomfoting.

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<sup>73</sup> On the concept of racial salience, see Bracey 3.

The impulse to trouble blackness is not a prerogative of the post-Civil Rights generation, as Danzy Senna herself makes clear in one of the first scenes of her memoir, when she is studying the marriage certificate of her parents and notices that while her mother is described as “white”, her father is simply listed as “brown”, not “black” or “Negro.” Senna writes: “Apparently my father insisted on this term. He was trying to make a point about race as a social construct rather than an essential biological category. If they wanted to know his color, he would give them the literal color of his skin” (27). She adds: “[...] Looking at the form now, the word *brown* seems to point as well to the murkiness of my father’s origins” (27). We can observe how Senna picks up her father’s battle to expose the constructed nature of race, pushing it to a more complex interpretative level. While her father wanted to highlight the fact that race was not just a question of color, but rather of class and power imbalance, Senna points out that the word “brown” has a different significance *now*, meaning for a daughter of her generation. In fact, in her mind, “brown” evokes not only the absurdity of racial categorization according to skin color, but also and above all murkiness, a sense of unclear, unknown, unspoken, “dirty” past. It is not a case that, immediately after this scene, the memoir starts to outline the details of the origins of her father in the Jim Crow South, where “miscegenation was a crime punishable by imprisonment and, more often, lynching—though in Louisiana the races had been mixing for a long time” (27).

The reflection on miscegenation is a central aspect of the memoir, and is clearly referenced in the title. “Where Did You Sleep Last Night (Black Girl)?” is actually the title of a Southern folk song, and it is used by the author as a way of paying homage to the great tradition of Southern black music and to her paternal grandmother, a talented jazz and folk pianist. However, the title also alludes to the secrecy of the sexual life of many black women, often forced to carry on a relationship out of violence or critical economic circumstances. The title also quotes Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* in a famous scene that focuses on the relationship between black women slaves and white masters, in which the protagonist Dana has just spent the night with her white husband, who has time-travelled with her to the antebellum South and is pretending to be her white master. When Dana leaves her husband’s bedroom in the morning, she is confronted by the mistress of the house, who slaps her and furiously asks: “Where did you sleep last night?” (93). The title therefore, although intended as an homage to black music, also reminds readers who are familiar with neo-slave narratives of the violence that has usually characterized miscegenation in the South. Senna’s comment that “oppression is so often an act of intimacy” (*Where* 178) highlights the weight of both race and gender in relations based on power

imbalance, and points out that racial violence was frequently the consequence not so much of the separation of the races, but of their coming together on an intimate level.

Throughout the memoir, Senna elaborates on the theme of miscegenation through two parallel but opposite narratives. The main narrative is the one in which she chronicles the findings of her investigations in the South, where she discovers that her paternal grandmother Anna had an affair with a white Irish priest, who might be the biological father of all of her children, including her father, who had always believed that he was the son of Anna's second lover, a Mexican professional boxer named Francisco Jose Senna. The second narrative is that of her parents' marriage, the union of two progressive intellectuals who met and married in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, but whose inability to overcome their respective differences clearly casts a shade of doubt on the possibilities of miscegenation as a cure to the racial divide.

The discussion on her parents' marriage is also the occasion to tackle a thorny subject: the violence committed by a black man (her father) on a white upper-class woman (her mother), which the author openly discusses despite the delicacy of the question and its historical implications. Senna describes her father's abusive behavior in two distinct occasions. The first happened when her mother decided to leave him, after which "he followed her one night to a friend's dinner party and in front of all the guests dragged her down the steps by her hair and beat her in the street" (9). The second time left her mother with a permanently crooked nose, which Senna explains as follows:

My father's fist had made her nose crooked. She is five foot two and he is six foot two, and one time he beat her in an alley in front of two witnesses: a laughing, drunk homeless man who just happened to be there, and my four-year-old brother, who banged on my father's legs with his tiny fists, begging him to stop (96).

As is often the case with post-soul artists, Senna does not fear that by airing "house business" she might be considered as a race traitor, and honestly addresses an issue that may be discomfiting to the black community. While soul culture insisted on the importance of positive images of the black community, post-soul artists actually focus on the diversity and contingency of experiences of blackness, subverting the canon of positive images and submitting it to explicit questioning. The frank treatment of this subject has eventually caused Senna to be sued for libel by her father, and the relationship between the two is now marked by tensions (Brown 2015).

## Conclusions: Post Post-Soul and Self-Definition

The final chapters of the text reflects of what blackness will be for the generation to come—a post post-soul generation?—who might avoid the trauma of being forced into a conferred rather than a self-chosen racial identity thanks to the efforts of their parents and grandparents. This reflection arises from the birth of the child of Danzy Senna and African American scholar and creative writer Percival Everett during the writing of the memoir. Senna takes note of the curiosity of people who look at her newborn baby trying to assess his level of blackness—the color of his skin, his curls or absence of them, even the size and color of his genitals—and shows us the perversity of attaching meaning to the racial features of a nude newborn baby:

people see my baby and in the face of his racial ambiguity their own past hurts, desires, fears, ad fantasies rise to the surface. He—the baby—becomes the Rorschach inkblot upon which all of their own projections come to the surface (165).

Again, race is in the eyes of the observer, but Senna tries to protect her baby from this classificatory gaze. It is not a coincidence that she and her husband decide that their son will grow up in California, which she describes as “the land of amnesia” and where, she notices, both the story of her father’s origins and that of her mother’s do not make sense. Of the baby she writes that “I am protective of his freedom to define himself in a way I never could do myself” (166): the possibility of self-definition seems to be real and tangible for the baby, who will hopefully be free to decide how to interpret his blackness according to his own needs and desires. The smile of the baby is therefore symbolically described as a smile that has no history and no irony, but only sweetness, since it is not burdened by the implications of race.

Possibilities of a constructive self-definition are extended to Senna’s family at large in one of the last scenes of the memoir, in which her multicultural family sit together for Christmas lunch. The family, which includes her siblings and their partners and children, has by now white, black, Mexican, Pakistani, Jewish and Chinese background, and their sitting together despite of their differences is seen by Senna as a victory, the happy coming together of people who are comfortable not when they choose a single, stable identity or when they refuse to acknowledge the importance of race and ethnicity altogether, but when they are given the possibility to shift, to be always in transition and reinterpret themselves as time goes by. The epilogue is not characterized by a “happily ever after” message, since conflicts and tensions continue to exist—the fight of the children over a Golliwog doll exemplifies these frictions—

and the multiculturalism and relative happiness of the family are not enough to heal the different individual traumas of its members. However, there is a feeling that the process of writing has been beneficial for the author: her familiar and personal problems have been, if not solved, at least tackled, and the verbalization and elaboration of traumatic experiences will enable Senna to not pass them on to the next generation.

## 5. Blaxploration

*The philosophy of integration, for all its incremental improvements, has not altered the basic conditions for most blacks in America.*

Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (1988)

### Post-Soul Ambitions: Social Mobility and Black Authenticity

This chapter focuses on different ways of executing “blaxploration,” the exploration of blackness from a non-essentialized perspective, which Bertram Ashe theorizes as the central element of the post-soul literary aesthetics (2007, 614). Aim of the chapter is presenting very different and almost opposite ways of carrying on blaxploration through the analysis of two memoirs: *City Kid* (2009) by Nelson George, a cultural commentator, journalist, filmmaker and music critic born and raised in Brooklyn, who presents an enthusiastic assessment of the opportunities opening up for young black intellectuals in New York between the late 1970s and the 1990s, and *Men We Reaped* (2013) by Jesmyn Ward, a Mississippi-born author who focuses on the perpetuation of various forms of institutional racism in rural Southern communities. The juxtaposition of these two case studies can, in my opinion, be particularly interesting and productive: criticism of the post-soul aesthetics has often implied that the exploration of black identity, especially when rejecting every essentialist stance, can only be carried on by a privileged minority of middle-class, college-educated, upwardly mobile black intellectuals, while the black masses will inevitably be left out of this discourse and will continue to focus primarily on more pressing problems such as contemporary manifestations of institutional racism and racialized poverty.

The case studies I present can productively oppose this argument, first of all because both George and Ward come from impoverished, working-class environments and do not consider themselves privileged individuals, secondly because they both show how the exploration of blackness can go hand in hand with the critique of contemporary manifestations of anti-blackness, and lastly because both *Men We Reaped* and *City Kid* point out that social mobility is seen by many as a mechanism that distances black people from the traditional sites of black authenticity, namely the urban ghetto and the rural South, but stage protagonists that actually maintain close connections with these sites. George and Ward’s analysis of the implications of

social mobility for black people born in the post-Civil Rights era is particularly interesting, in that both of them, in chronicling their struggle to seize the opportunities that open up for young African Americans after the 1960s, emphasize how upward social mobility is a way to shape their black identities according to non-traditional expectations of blackness. At the same time, in both of their texts the construction of alternative models of black identity coexists with the denunciation of the fact that, while the memoirists are engaged in their efforts to climb the social ladder, the rest of their communities of origin are stuck in social immobility, since the socioeconomic barriers that continue to disproportionately impact impoverished black communities prevent them from enjoying the results of the victories of the Civil Rights movement.

George and Ward's memoirs are therefore fascinating case studies not only because they depict radically different ways of executing black exploration, effectively undermining the idea of a single, monolithic authentic black experience, but also because they both demonstrate how the exploration and redefinition of black identity can coexist with the denunciation of the persistence of racism. These memoirs show in fact that "troubling blackness" does not mean condoning racism, nor joyfully celebrating the end of every form of racial discrimination and the arrival of a blissful post-racial era. The protagonists of these texts break up essentialized notions of black authenticity, since they continually question the expectations of conformity of their communities of origin, but at the same time they also maintain strong allegiances with these communities. As Bertram Ashe notices, the exploration of blackness that post-soul authors perform is "ultimately done in service to black people," in the sense that "these post soul artists maintain a dogged allegiance to their communities, however non essentialized and gorged with critiques said allegiance might be" ("Theorizing" 614). The narratives of ascent of George and Ward present exactly the kind of dogged allegiance to black people that Ashe describes, an allegiance that is not jeopardized by the fact that the protagonists eventually move out of their communities and learning to navigate new spaces that have opened up for them as a consequence of the successes of the social movements of the previous decades.



## Ambitions of a Black Nerd: Nelson George's *City Kid: A Writer's Memoir of Ghetto Life and Post-Soul Success* (2009)

### Post-Soul and the Emergence of New Identity Types

One of the most interesting aspects of post-soul theory is the investigation of how the range of “character types” that make up black identity expands in the post-1960s scene. Journalist, author, music critic and filmmaker Nelson George is certainly one of the figures that most prominently contributed to this investigation, since in the period between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s his conspicuous literary production—thirteen non-fiction books and several music-themed novels—has guided his readership in an exploration of the ways in which black identity has been reshaped as new generations of African Americans have profited from the opportunities opening up for them as a result of integrationist politics. In particular, George has focused his attention on how the evolution of black popular music, and of the ways in which it is produced, distributed and consumed, reflects the changing sociohistorical conditions that shape the experiences of black people in America: for example, he has carefully analyzed how the shift from traditional genres such as blues and jazz to hip hop coincides with the emergence of new ways of declining black identity in the 1980s and 1990s. George's work as a cultural critic focuses in fact on the ways in which traditional identity politics and racial essentialism are substituted in the post-Civil Rights era by a more diversified approach to what constitutes black culture, an approach that rejects cultural separatism in favor of hybridized forms of expression that draw upon different cultural traditions, and whose mechanisms of production and distribution are usually integrated within mainstream corporate industries (George, *Buppies* xi; Jones D. 686).

As the inventor of the term “post-soul,” George has been one the first critics to notice that something decidedly new was happening in the post-integration African American cultural scene, and to pinpoint the symptoms of this new aesthetic sensibility in the changing tastes of consumers of black popular culture. Identifying the release of Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) as the moment in which soul culture starts to decline and a new black aesthetics appears, George has devoted his life to identifying exactly what has changed and why, clarifying the shift from soul to post-soul for the millions of engaged readers who have regularly browsed his contributions to nationally acclaimed platforms such as *The Amsterdam News*, *Billboard*, *The Village Voice* and *The New York Time* in search of answers

on the evolution and future developments of black culture in a social scenario in which unprecedented opportunities for social mobility coexist with the persistence of racialized form of injustice. George's work shares therefore the concern of other cultural commentators of the post-soul moment—most notably Mark Anthony Neal—who have sought to delineate the aesthetic tendencies of a contemporary black culture that, many argue, has lost part of its distinctiveness as a consequence of its increased appeal to mainstream audiences.

If most of his literary production focuses on the evolution of black popular music, in his critically acclaimed “Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos,” first published in 1992, George offers a broader overview of the post-soul moment, considering how changes in the construction of a black collective identity can be summarized in the emergence of four new “character types” that embody the change from the “we-shall-overcome tradition of noble struggle, soul and gospel music, [and] positive images” to an era dominated by “goin’-for-mine materialism, secular beat consciousness, and a more diverse, fragmented, and even postmodern black community” (George, *Buppies* 1). The first of these character types is represented by the “b-boy,” a term originally coined to describe break dancers and later repurposed to refer to anybody who is deeply involved in hip hop culture. The second is the black yuppie or “buppie,” the wealthy urban professional who aspires to financial success and social prestige. The third is the “bap,” the black version of the JAP (Jewish American Prince or Princess), the privileged, spoiled, sophisticated urban black whose main traits are wordliness and sense of style. Lastly, George mentions the “boho,” the black bohemian who believes in alternative forms of spirituality and self-realization and disdains everything commercial and mainstream.

George's theorization of these four “b-types” is not to be interpreted as an attempt to reclassify African Americans in the post-Civil Rights era, boxing them into neat categories that alone define every aspect of their values and aesthetics. On the contrary, his four “character types” are meant to challenge antiquated notions of uniform, monolithic and ahistorical black identity by examining the plurality of attitudes and aesthetics that characterize black Americans in the contemporary scene. In fact, George points out that not only these types, in real life, blend in infinite combinations, but also that the characteristics that define each group can rapidly change. For example, he argues that one interesting recent development is the blending of b-boy and buppie aesthetics, so that the fascination for material possessions reiterated in so much hip hop music is often manifested by displaying those symbols of financial success that used to be the distinctive feature of buppies (*Buppies* xv). Moreover, George points out that one interesting

aspect of these “b-types” is that they emerged as alternative, non-traditional lifestyles for African Americans, but that in an incredibly short span of time they have become common, if not mainstream. In fact, while the existence of black yuppies, not to mention black bohos, was still a relatively new idea in the early 1980s, George notices that when Spike Lee celebrated these four identity types in his groundbreaking film *She’s Gotta Have It* (1987) many African Americans enthusiastically embraced how the main characters were portrayed, recognizing themselves in at least one of the cosmopolitan urbanites the movie depicted.<sup>74</sup> As for George, in the new edition of *Buppies, B-Boys, Paos and Bohos* (2001) he describes himself as a special “blend” of all four types, in which the percentage of each type increases or decreases as the years go by:

At one point in the ‘80s, I took to describing myself as a B-Boy with Boho/Buppie tendencies. Well, my inner B-Boy is more submerged than ever (though I still have the ghetto-reared tendency of using the “N” word liberally around my peers). The Boho side of me has found free reign in yoga and flirtations with vegetarianism (though I like steaks too much to fully convert), while recent interest in Hugo Boss suits and the bond market suggest the Buppie in me is not ready to renounce capitalism (xvii).

The Bap component is missing from this self-description, but resurfaces in George’s memoir every time he describes one of his many glamorous lovers. As he himself reminds us, Baps’ “wordliness, sense of style, and self-possession made them attractive mates for B-Boys, Buppies, and the many blends in between” (xvi), including himself. As a consequence, all four post-soul identity types converge to create the quintessential post-souler that is the protagonist of *City Kid*, who enthusiastically embraces the several opportunities for social mobility that New York City seems to offer in what he perceives as two magical decades: the 1980s and the 1990s.

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<sup>74</sup> *She’s Gotta Have It*, set in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Fort Greene, chronicles the sexual adventures of Nola Darling, a young and sexually emancipated advertisement illustrator, and of her three lovers Jamie Overstreet, Greer Childs and Mars Blackmon (interpreted by Spike Lee). Nola, who believes in complete personal freedom and refuses to commit to one single man, represents the quintessential boho; Jamie is a successful businessman who epitomizes the values and aesthetics of the buppie; Greer is a model, obsessed by his good looks and by the necessity of being constantly admired and complimented, and can be interpreted as a vain and beautiful Bap; Mars, with his passion for fashionable sneakers and bling, exemplifies the archetype of the b-boy. The film has been remade into a Netflix television series, also directed by Lee, released in November 2017. The series is set in today’s Fort Greene and emphasizes how gentrification has affected the neighborhood. The characters have also been “updated” to more contemporary versions of the b-types they represent, confirming George’s statement that character types evolve according to the sociopolitical context in which they are immersed. For example, in the series Nola Darling is no longer an illustrator, but a portraitist and conceptual artist whose work is heavily influenced by black feminism and by the ideals of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

## Between Soul and Post-Soul Masculinity

In *City Kid: A Writer's Memoir of Ghetto Life and Post-Soul Success*, George chronicles his progress from an impoverished childhood in the Tilden Project of Brownsville, Brooklyn, to the apex of a successful and rewarding career as a music critic, journalist, writer and filmmaker. George was born in 1957, the son of Arizona Bacchus and Nelson Elmer George, a young working-class black couple who had recently moved from the coastal town of Newport News, Virginia, to Brooklyn, as part of the new influx of African American and Puerto Rican migrants who would rapidly populate the neighborhood and spark the frenzy of white flight. The author describes how after the birth of his sister Andrea his father decided to leave them, fascinated by the promises of a care-free and glamorous lifestyle in the streets and nightclubs of Harlem, so that his mother, an aspiring school teacher, became the only provider of the family. George's coming-of-age was therefore marked by the experience of witnessing his mother struggle to raise two children while working full-time and attending night school, trying to move them out of a neighborhood that was rapidly falling prey to the consequences of the heroin epidemics of the mid-1960s. The description of the young protagonist's concern for the family's precarious economic situation is, however, balanced by a loving recollection of afternoons of playing stickball with a multicultural group of neighboring children, of weekend commutes to the many theaters of the Village, and above all of long hours spent in front of his mother's most cherished possession: her Motorola stereo, stacked with an ever-growing pile of Motown records.

Arizona Bacchus is in fact presented as an enthusiastic "soul girl," a devoted mother and hard-working provider, but also a woman who, "though burdened with raising two kids alone in a Brooklyn housing project, [...] didn't allow herself to become a stranger to fun" (13). His mother's love for soul music and her impressive collection of records are described by George as the catalysts of his future career as a music critic: as he writes, "my interest in these records stemmed from a desire to better understand my mother's life," a life solidly rooted in the values and aesthetics of soul culture. The stability and coherence of Arizona's race and gender performance—she is repeatedly described as the quintessential soul girl—seems to reflect positively on her relationship with her son, who finds in the maternal figure a dependable caretaker, a strong role model, and an enthusiastic teacher of soul culture. Arizona, unlike her ex-husband, is in fact depicted as entertaining, but also reliable and self-possessed, providing the kind of emotional and material stability that her children need. Consequently, she is affectionately portrayed by George as the source of everything good in his life: his vibrant

artistic temperament, his sensible professional choices, his ethic of hard-work and fearless ambition, are all traits that he seems to have inherited from her.

On the other hand, the author struggles to find equally positive models of black masculinity. His father is in fact unable to provide such a model, trapped as he is between the responsibilities of fatherhood and his burning wish to adhere to the more exciting models of black masculinity that seem available to him in an urban environment. In fact, once in New York City, Nelson Elmer George feels comfortable leaving his wife and children behind and renouncing the prospect of a stable middle-class family life for his “big city desires” (16). The author points out that, thanks to a GI bill job in the post office, Nelson Elmer George could have easily guided his young family into the growing African American middle-class and realized his mother’s ambitions of home ownership and of the stability of a traditional nine-to-five lifestyle. Instead, he “remade himself into an uptown cool cat, the kind of man he’d probably wanted to be since boyhood in Newport News” (17). The desire to “remake” himself is signaled by the different names he takes in every borough he visits: George or Elmer in Brooklyn, Pete Smith in Harlem, Joe Robinson in the Bronx and Clarence Robinson in Queens. The author never really understands the reason of this constant renaming—he speculates that it might have something to do with his father’s involvement in drug dealing and the necessity to disappear quickly if necessary—but what he does understand is that his father is trying to reinvent himself through an odd series of new names, new precarious jobs, new lovers, new pieces of clothing and showy accessories.

This ever-changing performance of identity seems to be dictated by a desire for personal freedom and social mobility that has been constantly frustrated in the South, and that Nelson Elmer now seeks to realize in the streets of New York. His dream of a “cool cat” lifestyle is in fact the product of the necessity to have his masculinity affirmed and validated: what he seeks is not so much financial stability—which his post office job would have easily granted—but the kind of “ego boost” that the streets of Harlem seem to provide. One particular episode in the memoir seems to confirm this interpretation, and that is when Nelson Elmer appears in his children’s apartment bearing Christmas gifts: a couple of fashionable and highly impractical pairs of shoes for his son, and his long overdue child-support money. The author vividly describes the dramatic impersonation of a wealthy, suave “soul brother” performed by his father, which betrays a deep-rooted need for self-validation:

The centerpiece of his visit [...] was his theatrical presentation of money to his two children. Sitting cross-legged for a time on our plastic-covered sofa, like a visiting potentate, Nelson Elmer placed a stack of bills on the living-room table. [...] I imagine the idea of sitting there calmly, with the money on the table, must have appealed to his desire to seem important. He must have enjoyed the rush of power he received watching us sit anxiously, wondering how much was there (22).

However, this performance of generosity is short-lived, since immediately after his departure the children realize that, under a couple of twenty-dollar bills, the pile mostly consists of five- and one-dollar pieces. The young protagonist cannot understand his father's self-possessed attitude, his ability to keep a straight face during the whole scene, knowing the whole time that his trick would soon be discovered by the family, feeding his children's disappointment and sense of abandonment. However, later in life he comes to realize that the reason behind his father's craving for a short taste of power has to do with his experience of growing up black and working-class in Jim Crow South. This is not something that George can understand by himself, since having grown up in the city in a post-Civil Rights scene he has no first-hand experience of the kind of everyday humiliations his father must have been confronted with in Newport News. The author can only come to terms with his father's behavior thanks to the wise words of an elderly record-promotion man he meets years later in Atlanta, who explains to him the bitter realities that many Southern black men like his father ran from:

“you gotta understand your father probably never felt free a day in his life until he got to New York.” The promo man painted me a picture of the South as a landscape dominated by women, noting that “in those small towns you can't make a move without someone seeing you [...]” He told me that brothers were constrained by racism when they moved outside black areas, and by social conventions within the black community, especially if they were working men. The promotion man suggested that “when men started moving up North to the bigger cities, it was the first time they could actually be alone. You walk two blocks in New York and no one knows your name, or who your father and mother was” (23).

Though the old promotion man's depiction of a world “dominated by women” is problematic, in that it seems to endorse a vision of gender dynamics in the South close to the one depicted in the Moynihan report, his words confirm the author's impression that his father's questionable behavior was dictated by the necessity to reinvent himself profiting from the anonymity that the city provides. For Nelson Elmer the opportunity of a fresh start in an urban

environment is liberating and empowering, since for the first time he can have the impression of being in control of how people perceive him: the fact that in New York no one knows his past gives him the illusion that he can reshape his public persona constantly. However, for the young protagonist this fluid identity is confusing and destabilizing: as a little boy, George cannot grasp the complex sociohistorical reasons that inform his father's actions, all he knows is that he was abandoned for the streets of Harlem, a faraway place so abstract and remote from his everyday reality that he keeps confusing "Harlem" with "Holland" and images his father wandering in a space filled with windmills and people with wooden shoes (17).

Consequently, as a young boy on the threshold of adolescence, George acutely feels the lack of a viable model of black masculinity, and tries to overcompensate for the lack of a trustworthy paternal figure by imitating the "hip" male friends his mother invites over for parties and the tough older boys of the neighborhood, impressed by the sense of style and the beautiful women shown off by the first, and by the alleged sexual prowess of the latter. However, when the protagonist tries to enact this kind of "macho" performance to convince his first girlfriend Cynthia to be intimate, it is immediately clear to him that these models of masculinity do not work for a nice, bookish boys with artistic aspirations: the girl, who had chosen him among many suitors precisely for his quiet temperament, leaves the apartment and cuts ties with him, leaving him profoundly disappointed. The sadness he feels in that moment is a clear symptom that the protagonist is trying to come to terms with the necessity to establish his own model of manhood, different from the ones that are available to him and characterized by the necessity to overcome the "super-fly" attitude of his peers. He recalls in fact that he was "trying to figure out how to balance what the local culture demanded," namely a virility based on the display of material possessions and sexual prowess, "versus who I was," that is a shy, studious boy more interested in books and music records than girls (44).

This passage can be interpreted as the recollection of his first attempts to develop a post-soul masculinity for which, at the time, there are not yet any role models. Young George wants to be a confident, distinguished, cultured black man, the kind of man he has not yet encountered in real life, but has admired on screen in the characters interpreted by Sidney Poitier. The author notices in fact that "to see an entitled black man projected on a huge movie screen was an amazing thing in 1967" and adds that, through Poitier's movies, he can enjoy a glimpse of the kind of black masculinity he hopes to achieve:

At ten years old, I was given a crash course in sepia-toned white-collar masculinity. Because of his character, intelligence, and confidence, Sidney Poitier became the man I wanted to be. If he existed, even if it was just onscreen, I could, maybe for a moment, maybe just when I needed to, be Sidney Poitier. For a boy without a father, Sidney became a very useful role model (50).

Poitier embodies the change in gender expectations that affect black men who have had access to higher education and have aspiration of upward social mobility through corporate jobs. His “white-collar masculinity” represents therefore the kind of model that George can aspire to, since his love of literature and music and his boundless ambition push him to envision himself not as the neighborhood’s macho or the suave soul brother, but as a cosmopolitan black intellectual. Sidney Poitier offers therefore a model of black masculinity that anticipates the careerism of the Buppie, the sense of style of the Bap, the cosmopolitanism and liberalism of the Boho, and the righteous anger of the B-Boy, embodying the perfect transition figure between the soul models of masculinity represented by the protagonist’s father and friends, and the kind of post-soul attitude he is trying to forge.

### Interrogating Representations of Blackness

Since George grows up in a moment of transition between soul and post-soul culture, the challenge to find viable models of blackness is presented as a constant throughout his childhood and adolescence. The central chapters of the memoir are therefore dedicated to young George’s attempts to displace, interrogate and reorganize old constructions of black identity to make room for new ones that might successfully incorporate the experiences and mindsets that were previously unavailable for most black citizens. As a consequence, the chronicle of George’s late childhood and adolescence is constellated by moments in which the protagonist reflects on how blackness is represented, and on how this might impact how people see him and ultimately how he sees himself. These feelings are particularly emphasized in the chapter “A Theater on Pitkin Avenue,” in which George describes his teenage reflections on cinematic representations of blackness that have a deep impact on his evolving sense of racial identity. In particular, he describes his feelings after having watched two movies that spark a reflection on how visual strategies can be used not only to offer more or less negative representations of black people, but also to favor or on the contrary discourage identification and empathy: the two movies in question are *Zulu* (1964) and *Planet of Apes* (1968).



When watching *Zulu*, the protagonist is vaguely conscious that, as a black boy, his loyalty should be reserved for the people who look like him. However, the representation of the Zulus as a sort of uniform mass in which it was impossible to distinguish individuals discourages any emotional connection with the black warriors, so that young George is unable to feel the kind of emotional response he so ardently wished he could feel. He argues that “the Africans were photographed in a distant, impersonal manner. The Zulus were bodies; the British soldiers had faces. As a child, I very much wanted to root for the people who looked like me. But the film’s visual strategy left little room for anything but the mildest racial identification” (47). As a consequence, young George feels very attracted to the heroism of the British troupes, and even tries to visually identify with the Redcoats by buying a red baseball cap. However, he has a vague feeling of having betrayed the Zulu warriors, and needs to justify his purchase by commenting that “after all, the Zulu may have been brown skinned, but they were African, and I was a Negro” (47).

A different reflection is sparked by *Planet of Apes*. The movie does not openly misrepresent or belittle blacks, however the ancient practice of interrogating the authentic humanity of people of African descent and of comparing them to primates influences George’s interpretation of the world scenario depicted by the movie. Moreover, George notices that the idea of the similarity between apes and black people has been appropriated by the youth of Brownsville, who use the term “monkey” as an insult against one another. In this sense, *Planet of Apes* can be interpreted in many ways according to how one decides to self-identify:

The idea of a world controlled by primates who treated whitey like crap raised a number of interesting questions. If you accepted being called a monkey, by friend or foe, was *Planet of Apes* a vindication? If you didn’t accept being called a monkey and remained a Negro, did the film mean you wouldn’t exist in the future, since Negroes were scarce? [...] if you identified with the apes because your nose or forehead betrayed simian origins, did that mean you felt the desire to enslave whites? Finally, if you identified with the apes, did you dare tell your friends? (48).

The passages on *Zulu* and *Planet of Apes* describe a young protagonist who is engaged in the process of shaping his racial identity through a redefinition of what Stuart Hall, in his essay “New Ethnicities,” calls “relations of representation” (1989, 224). Hall claims that the last decades of the twentieth century mark a new phase characterized by an unprecedented attempt to reflect on two issues: firstly, the right of black people to access the venues in which representations of themselves are created; secondly, the necessity to contest the

marginalization, stereotypical nature, and fetishized quality of images of blacks. Hall points out that one of the most common predicates of racism is that “you can’t tell the difference because they all look the same” (224), and that in this sense diversifying representations of black identity becomes an essential anti-racist practice.

George’s position is interesting, in that in the above quoted passages he situates himself at the very historical moment that Hall discusses, when anachronistic representations of blackness are questioned and redefined. George as a memoirist is in fact deeply aware of the effect that this kind of representations had on his young self, and as a filmmaker and producer himself, he contextualizes his reaction to these biased representations as a moment in his life in which his future aesthetic practices start to take form. In his cinematic productions, George is never really interested in investigating how the “authentic black experience” should be represented, not is he simply concerned about substituting degrading portrayals of black life with more positive images. His interest as a producer lies in portraying the diversification and pluralization of black identity models available for African Americans who grew up in the post-soul moment, as evidenced by the list of productions he mentions in the later chapters of his memoir. In fact, though George has produced a long list of movies and documentaries, in *City Kid* he focuses on describing his involvements with only three productions that seem to represent the cornerstones on his post-soul aesthetics: Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It*, which he partly financed, *CB4*, produced and co-written with Chris Rock, and *Life Support*, which he both produced and directed. These three productions, as diverse as they are, have all in common the desire to represent new ways of experiencing blackness in the post-Civil Rights moment, investigating one or more of the four character-types that George theorizes in *Buppies*, *B-Boys*, *Baps and Bohos*. His early introduction to the “relations of representation” through the movies he regularly watched at the theater on Pitkin Avenue provides therefore the basis for a more mature reflection on the politics of representation in post-Civil Rights America, a reflection that will lead him to deconstruct the portrayal of a uniform black community to privilege the depiction of diverse and heterogeneous ways of interpreting black identity in the contemporary scene.

#### Cultural Mulattism and Class Mobility: Post-Soul v. Ghettocentricity

George’s reflection on the politics of representation in cinematic portrayals of black life coincides in *City Kid* with the discovery of a variety of literary and musical works that will transform him into a quintessential cultural mulatto. The chapters “Soul Songs,” “Hanging

with Captain America” and “Joining the Literary Guild,” in particular, accurately describe his discovery of a mix of diverse cultural sources, and convey the protagonist’s desire of exploring new artistic traditions while continuing to celebrate the values and aesthetics of the soul tradition in which he was raised. What is remarkable in the memoir, besides his almost pedantic description of all the records and texts that concurred in making up his impressively hybrid cultural baggage, is that unlike other post-soul writers, George’s cultural mulattism is always informed by a sense of joyful exploration, a sort of hunger for new cultural sources to dissect and investigate. If his mother’s soul records were what initiated him to the dream of writing about music professionally, during his late adolescence and his college years George starts to open up to music that, at least in the Tilden Projects, was considered decidedly white, such as Led Zeppelin and, surprisingly, Jimi Hendrix. Interestingly, the person who will initiate George to this new musical aesthetics is Dan, a friend who does not seem to fit in with the other boys of the neighborhood, and who will later reveal his homosexuality to the protagonist. George notices in fact that “Dan, perhaps because he was always being picked on in the Ville, felt freer to step outside the cultural boxes we then all lived in” (62), a statement that seems to suggest that Dan’s sexuality is what distanced him from the demands of traditional black masculinity that the local culture imposed, encouraging him to explore his musical tastes more freely than the other boys. Dan developed a contagious passion for Jimi Hendrix, which the author considered unusual since, as he notes,

in the early seventies the conventional wisdom was that he played “white-boy music,” that Jimi had no relevance to “black is beautiful,” or to the funky grooves rocked at the neighborhood house parties. Dan, however, stuck to his guns. Embracing Hendrix in a black ghetto circa the early seventies was raising your freak flag high. It was stating that you were an individual and you didn’t give a damn who judged you (63).

Dan’s fearless exploration of cultural source that were not considered traditionally black inspires the protagonist to begin his own process of blaxploration, embracing new opportunities to shape his black identity according to non-traditional expectations. However, George explains that this “crossover” attitude for music was not a symptom of his rejection of the soul tradition he embraced in his childhood and early adolescence, but merely an attempt to broaden his horizons, reconciling novelty and tradition. He states in fact that it is exactly the desire to conserve the old soul music values that drove him to musical criticism, but that his taste never crystallized: “there’s a space where tradition and innovation coexist, where to revere the past is not to close your ears off to the present” (55). According to the author, it is exactly the

peculiarity of living at the intersection of soul and post-soul traditions that allowed him to emerge as a music critic in a very competitive market: what distinguished him from “being just another critic using the past to beat up on the present” (54) was the fact of having solid cultural roots in soul music, but also of allowing himself to explore what was beyond this tradition without surrendering to peer pressure or to accusations of listening to “white-boy music.”

The same attitude of openness and of enthusiastic exploration of a variety of cultural sources is displayed when discussing literature. His literary tastes are in fact shaped by an interesting mix of texts borrowed from his mother bookshelves—mainly classics of African American literature such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* and Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land*—and masterpieces of mainstream American literature such as the novels of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner that he acquired through a monthly subscription to the *Atlantic Monthly*’s Literary Guild. The author recalls the anxiety that pervaded him when opening the Literary Guild’s box for the first time, wondering if he was mature enough to approach these classics, but also his surprise in finding out that he could not only understand the content, but also identify with the main characters. Of *The Great Gatsby*, for example, he says: “I totally identified with Nick Carraway. [...] Even at fourteen I knew that Nick was me” (73). However, George’s relation to the authors of mainstream canonical literature is ambiguous and marked by tensions, since he realizes that, even if race difference does not prevent identification with the characters they create, the marginality, misrepresentation, or total absence of black people in their works is problematic: “Fitzgerald and Hemingway became heroes of mine. The irony being that if I’d encountered either man, it’s likely that they would have seen me as a potential shoe-shine boy” (76). George’s ambivalence about Fitzgerald and Hemingway’s works can be read as a symptom of the problematic positionality of cultural mulattos, which are often caught between the desire to display their allegiance to black people and the wish to acknowledge the role of different cultural sources in molding their identity as artists.

However, what is interesting is that George also explores his appreciation for “white” literature through a generational lens: since his politically active mother has always pushed him to read exclusively African American literature, falling in love with the works of Fitzgerald and Hemingway becomes a way to assert his desire for independence and to construct his black identity in terms that are different—and more inclusive—than those dictated by the previous generation: “Through my socially conscious, dashiki-wearing, school-teaching mother I’d

sampled the books ‘for black boys looking for images of themselves.’ Sadly, like food that is good for you, those books interested but didn’t excite me” (77). George proceeds to explain that he was not looking for empowering sociology or inspiring role models when reading their work, but for drama, excitement and examples of a sophisticated literary style. Unlike the generation of his “dashiki-wearing mother,” young George has no first-hand experience of the struggle for civil rights and reclaims the right to read for the pleasure of immersing himself into an engaging plot, and not for personal uplift or racial awareness. In fact, he points out that he experienced the changes brought by the victories of the Civil Rights movement only indirectly, namely through how the events of the 1960s impacted Arizona’s outlook on life. As he states:

The many movements that shaped the sixties and seventies truly ripped down to me through how they affected my mother, her friends and the other adults I encountered. The most direct impact was that the era’s heightened sense of possibility inspired Arizona’s B. George to change her life (30).

For Arizona, a young single mother of two living in the projects, becoming a schoolteacher was not only a way to improve her financial situation and guide her family into a stable middle-class lifestyle, but also a political statement. As the author points out: “while righteous brothers and sisters were marching for their rights down South, and angry black folk were rioting for respect up North, my mother was engaged in her own battle for advancement” (33). The author recognizes therefore that he can only indulge in the pleasure of enjoying art for art’s sake because of the battle that his mother fought for him: for Arizona, education is inextricably tied to the struggle for black liberation, and reading is a political act. In this sense, George embodies one of the main characteristics that mark post-soul authors, namely the fact of being only indirectly invested by the social changes brought by the Civil Rights movement, and the tendency to gratefully acknowledge the work of the previous generations while critically assessing certain aspects of their work and aesthetics—in this case, the creation of “cultural boxes” that prevent his mother from exploring literature that has not been penned by African American authors.

However, it is ironical that while Arizona is engaged in a process of self-definition that is part of her personal battle for racial advancement, many of her neighbors in the Tilden projects consider her “uppity” for desiring education and financial stability (89). Actually, George emphasizes one interesting aspect of the challenges for upward social mobility, and that is the idea, shared by most of their neighbors, that if his mother climbs the social ladder this

automatically entails that she will distance herself from the “authentic” black people, the ones who live in the ‘hood. The relation between upward social mobility and back authenticity would be extremely interesting to further investigate, but unfortunately the author does not delve into it, limiting his reflection to the description of how people gossip about Arizona and her “bourgie” ambitions. What is certain is that the neighbors do not seem aware of the fact that, for Arizona, access to the middle-class is not just an opportunity for personal advancement, but a political act aimed at making up for the time in which black people were denied education and formal schooling. On the contrary, her determination to obtain a university degree is interpreted as a racial disloyalty: the author comments in fact that “when word got around that we were trying to move there was definitely lots of ‘playa hating.’ It was as if Ma’ ambition somehow made others look bad. Even close friends and relatives doubted her” (89). The desire for upward mobility is therefore often seen as something that distances the black subject from the “authentic” experiences of the “black folks,” trapped in the bottom steps of the social ladder and unable or unwilling to climb.

As a matter of fact, profiting from new opportunities for upward social mobility is not always the preferred solution for everybody, as clearly exemplified by the protagonist’s sister Andrea, who displays an attitude that George describes as “ghettocentric” (92). When Arizona succeeds in moving her family out of the project and into the suburban neighborhood of Spring Creek, she and the author are extremely relieved, feeling that the move will enable them to not only be safer, but also less limited in their aspirations. On the other hand, Andrea shares the feelings of their neighbors in the Tilden projects, and feels that by leaving the ‘hood she will turn into the quintessential sellout, abandoning what she considers the “real” black experience for a bourgeois lifestyle. George comments: “Ma and I were trying to escape the physical and mental limitations of life in the project, whereas Andrea found a sense of community and personal freedom in that chaos [...] Andrea still carried the ‘hood with her wherever she went” (92-93).

On the other hand, the move is liberation for the protagonist, who feels freer than ever to open up to cultural sources that he had been afraid to publicly embrace in the projects: the Rolling Stones, Elton John, the Beatles, are just a few examples of the innumerable “discoveries” he lists as a result of moving in a less segregated and more multicultural environment. The move to Spring Creek allows him to finally embrace the post-soul identity he was already starting to forge in the Tilden project, and from this moment on, the memoir registers a blossoming of his aspirations. The subsequent chapters consist in fact of a detailed description of his professional

collaborations, and of the hard work he put into becoming one of the most credited musical critics in the country. The essence of the decades that marked his professional development can be summarized in this quote:

The transition from the seventies to the eighties can be defined by one word: ambition. It burned in us and lit up everyone I knew. This wasn't civil rights movement "we shall overcome" optimism, but a desire to take advantage of all the doors that that struggle had opened (137).

George in these lines expresses the quintessential post-soul attitude that Trey Ellis theorizes in "The New Black Aesthetic:" flamboyant, enthusiastic, even naïve in its firm belief that everything is possible for those who have talent and ambition. The "enthusiasm of the born again" described by Ellis (234) pervades every page of George's memoir in the sections that describe his experiences between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. However, this burning desire to profit from every open door at times betrays a sense of racial anxiety, the menacing feeling that the doors opened through the struggles of his mother's generation could suddenly close forever, pushing him again at the bottom of the social ladder: "I ached to do something, to be someone [...] I'd roll around in my bed at night frustrated if I felt I hadn't worked hard enough, or anxious if I thought I hadn't worked well. I'd think there was a white writer out there who was already out ahead of me [...] I don't think I was at rest the entire decade" (*City Kid* 138).

Cleverly, George understands that, to establish his niche into the extremely competitive world of the entertainment business, he has to profit from his peculiar position of "mediator" between the soul tradition and the new genre that has emerged from the South Bronx, a genre that most cultural commentators despise and that the general public is welcoming with mixed feelings: hip hop. It is interesting that George, in the spirit of continuity with the past that animates the post-soul moment, does not consider hip hop as a genre that breaks with the past and erases previously established genres, but as a natural evolution of those genres in a different sociohistorical context. He states in fact that "many saw hip-hop as a disreputable break from the traditions of the past [...] Yet the young people who created hip-hop actually loved the traditions. They just found their own way of honoring them" (156). As a consequence, his role as a music critic becomes that of "translating" hip hop for a wider public, and to make it acceptable as a genre worthy of serious critical efforts for the "reluctant old heads in the record industry and the media" (157). As a matter of fact, George is eventually able to establish himself

as the spokesperson of a post-soul generation that easily navigates the spaces between the traditional models of soul culture and the emerging ones of hip hop culture, capitalizing on the productive spaces in between.

The next move that definitely consecrates George as one of the most acclaimed music critics of his time is to Fort Greene, a neighborhood that he describes as the cradle of black creativity during the 1980s and 1990s. It is in this cultural environment, surrounded by a generation of like-minded artists, that he can finally reap the benefits of his hard work. He comments: “I was overstimulated by all the vitality of that period’s black culture [...] The crackle of creative energy animated the air, as black folk made art all around me” (179). George explicitly mentions Trey Ellis’s “The New Black Aesthetic,” explaining that he was thrilled to be included in a group photo that should have originally accompanied the essay, and that portrayed most of the brilliant minds of Fort Greene in the 1980s, namely Spike Lee, Lisa Jones, Lorna Simpson, Vernon Reid, Bill Stephany and Chris Rock. George concludes therefore his overview of the cultural climate that pervaded Fort Greene in the 1980s by comparing this period to the vitality of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s or the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, explaining that “that generation, post-soul and mostly pre-hip-hop, both capitalized on existing opportunities and created new models for success” (187).

### Conclusions: Embracing Post-Soul Success

In the conclusive chapters of the memoir, George describes himself as having successfully completed the transition from ghetto life to post-soul success that the title anticipates. The determination to seize the opportunities available to him in the post-soul moment allows the “city kid” to turn himself from “ghetto boy” to sophisticated cosmopolitan intellectual, embodying the kind of black masculinity that he had once admired in the characters interpreted by Sidney Poitier. This transformation is only possible after he understands his position in the broader cultural scene of his time, establishing himself as a successful commentator of the post-soul aesthetics. Through his professional achievements, George can come to terms with his identity of black man living in a moment of transition, and this realization helps him to deal with other aspects of his private life, such as his complicated relationship with his sister. As a matter of fact, the moment in which he starts to reconcile with Andrea is when he decides to make a movie based on her life, in which he depicts her experience as an HIV-positive mother who struggles to educate herself and her community about the virus. The movie is *Life Support* (2007), a critically acclaimed HBO production with Queen Latifah interpreting Ana, the



character based on Andrea. The chapter dedicated to the production of *Life Support* starts with an interview by the author to Andrea in which the two of them rediscover each other by talking in front of a camera, which suggests that a real dialogue between them can only open up after George forges his identity as an artist and cultural commentator, mastering the aesthetic tools necessary to mediate between his post-soul and Andrea's ghettocentric vision of the world.

## To Transcend the Circumstances:<sup>75</sup> Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013)

### Post-Soul Aesthetics and the Critique of Anti-Blackness: A Viable Interaction?

Post-soul literature and post-black visual arts have often been interpreted as cultural practices whose focus lies in the exploration of black identity to the detriment of discussions on the maintenance of structural racism. Bertram Ashe, in his formulation of a literary theory of post-soul, remarked in 2007 that “[post-soul] artists and texts trouble blackness [...] in ways that *depart significantly* from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity” (“Theorizing” 614, my emphasis). Similarly, Derek Conrad Murray in describing the features that characterize the production of post-black visual artists declare that his interest “issues from the absence of overt political engagement in the work of many young black artists, as well as disengagement with the troubling realities of contemporary black life” (“Post-Black Art” 5). If taken in isolation, these quotes seem to confirm criticism that accuses post-soul writers of voicing the opinion of a fortunate college-educated black elite, while ignoring the conditions of second-class citizenship that continue to burden the existence of millions of working-class African Americans.

While theoreticians of post-soul culture (Nelson George, Mark Anthony Neal, Bertram Ashe among others) never excluded the possibility that post-soul artists might be deeply interested in denouncing contemporary forms of racism, several critics expressed the view that post-soul should be seen as an elitist movement that buys into the logic of neoliberalism and posits the

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<sup>75</sup> The title quotes a passage from the memoir in which Ward refers to the five young black men whose deaths she chronicles: “In death, they transcend the circumstances of this place that I love and hate all at once and become supernatural” (14).

necessity to “transcend” blackness. Trey Ellis in “The New Black Aesthetic” already seemed aware that this accuse of elitism was likely to happen. Voicing Lisa Jones’ concern that “it’s going to be a real challenge for people in our little group to make sure that our movement isn’t a little elitist, avant-garde thing,” he conceded that “at least for now, that is exactly what it is” (Ellis 1989a, 240). The accusation of expressing the identity concerns of a small group of intellectuals and of evading political issues came soon enough, indeed in the very same issue of *Callaloo* in which his essay was originally published, when Eris Lott criticized Ellis by stating that “a certain evasion of politics is going on in [Ellis’] piece, a refusal to spell out the bup/mass relationship. If, as Ellis says, ‘most black Americans have seldom had it worse,’ where is the class critique?” (245-6), to which Ellis replied that “being a middle-class artist, black or white, has always been the rule rather than the exception” (“response” 251).

The evasion of politics and the refusal to critique the status quo pointed out by Lott seem to position the work of post-soul artists as antithetical to that of the representatives of afro-pessimism. The latter group evidences in fact that anti-blackness represents the matrix of every form of discrimination, since the structures of power imbalance that originated in slavery times have shaped the black existence as something outside of the human experience, thus negating every connection between blackness, citizenship and social recognition. As such, anti-blackness is embedded in the social death of the black subject that occurred under slavery and is carried on through contemporary forms of racism (Patterson 1982; Sexton 2016). Afro-pessimists see anti-blackness as a foundational part of contemporary capitalist society, to such an extent that it would be impossible to dismantle white privilege without dismantling much of the social and politics institutions of the contemporary Western world. As a consequence, their position seems to be in contrast with that of post-soul artists, who, at least in the words of the first theoreticians of the post-soul aesthetics, are apparently less concerned with a critique of the contemporary institutions of Western society and more focused on the reorganization of black culture after Civil Rights.

At the same time, the work of several young African American authors who *do* engage in the “troubling realities of contemporary black life” and that point out the perpetuation of systemic racism even after the successes of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements oftentimes contains all, or at least some, of the main aspects that Ashe identifies as the cornerstones of post-soul aesthetics, such as the cultural mulatto archetype, the exploration of blackness from a non-essentialized perspective, and the enactment of allusion-disruption gestures. Is it then possible to carry on a critique of anti-blackness through texts that display a post-soul attitude?

Can these two apparently antithetical positions act in synergy to highlight the ways in which blackness is conceived and experienced in the twenty-first century while at the same time evidencing the effects of pernicious forms of racism that support the idea that black subjects are less than human? And what is the role of the memoir genre in this process? In analyzing Jesmyn Ward's memoir I will try to elaborate on these questions, conscious of the fact that such a complex subject can only be partially tackled in this chapter, and that the issue of the role of socio-political engagement in post-soul literature would deserve a dissertation on its own.

I had the possibility to ask Dereck C. Maus, who co-edited with James J. Donahue the groundbreaking collection of essays *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil-Rights* (2014), if he thought that post-soul aesthetics can successfully incorporate a reflection of anti-blackness, pointing out to him that this is what several memoirs written by young black authors seem to do, and his response seems to be in line with what I suggested earlier in this chapter:

Personally, I think it's absolutely possible (perhaps even necessary) to engage with problematic racial realities and be working from the "post-soul aesthetic" perspective. I suspect it might be somewhat simpler in fiction if only because one can displace constructions of identity somewhat more effectively than in memoir (cf. why Percival Everett has not and surely will not ever write a memoir, as opposed to why his wife Danzy Senna works equally comfortably in fiction and memoir), but they don't seem mutually exclusive to me in any way.<sup>76</sup>

Though I agree with Maus that fiction allows more freedom to play with constructions of black identity, it was in Jesmyn Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013) that I most clearly saw the interaction of post-soul aesthetics and the denunciation of anti-black racism at play. I read therefore Ward's memoir as an excellent example of text that "troubles blackness" (Ashe 2007, 614) while at the same time powerfully denouncing the perpetuation of systemic forms of racism that devalue black lives and mark them as disposable.

### The Role of Fragmented Chronology in *Men We Reaped*

*Men We Reaped* is the 2013 memoir of novelist Jesmyn Ward, most noted for her National Book Award winning novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011), which chronicles the difficulties of a working-class black family in Mississippi as they prepare for Hurricane Katrina. Characteristic

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<sup>76</sup> Dereck C. Maus, personal communication with Monia Dal Checco, 23 November 2017.

of Ward's work, her fiction as well as her memoir and essays, is a poetics that Anna Hartnell<sup>77</sup> has aptly described as "post-Katrina in its sensibility, one that depicts a slow-burning disaster" (208), a quality that seems to contradict the optimism expressed by theorizations of post-Civil Rights black literature such as Trey Ellis's, who proclaims a new era of black aesthetics marked by the enthusiasm of the youth and a new sense of freedom in exploring the unbounded possibilities of black identity. What is most interesting then in Ward's memoir is the fact that the author chronicles the experiences of people who have not been invested by the economic and social improvements available to many African Americans in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement and who, against common critical trends that celebrate a supposedly post-racial era, cannot "transcend" the structural barriers that race and class impose on them. Ward focuses her attention on the living conditions of impoverished black communities of Mississippi, presenting the rural South in decidedly disenchanted and non-romanticized terms. As noted by Hartnell, her prose seems to "retreat inward," bringing the reader in conversation with communities that represent a sort of "internal other," left behind by the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism (206). Ward's declared goal in *Men We Reaped* is to give a voice to the most disregarded members of these communities, to humanize the black men who routinely feed statistics by passing on their names and histories, showing how their life trajectories inextricably intersect with her own.

*Men We Reaped* combines in fact Ward's personal and familial history with the stories of five young black men close to her who died between 2000 and 2004: her friend Roger, who overdosed on heroin; her sister's boyfriend Demond, who witnessed a shooting and was murdered before he could testify; her cousin C.J., hit by a train at a gateless railroad crossing in which both bells and flashing lights were not working; her first sweetheart Ronald, who after years of self-medicating depression with drugs eventually committed suicide; and lastly her beloved brother Joshua, killed by a drunk white driver while he was coming home from work. The feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability and uncertainty about the future that these deaths produce in the writer are all evoked in the title, which references a famous quote pronounced by Harriet Tubman after the disastrous defeat of the all-black fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry at Fort Wagner, Charleston, on July 18, 1863: "We saw the lightning and that was the guns; we heard the thunder and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain

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<sup>77</sup> Anna Hartnell is senior lecturer in Contemporary Literature at the University of Birkbeck in London and her research focuses on the intersections of race and environmental justice. She is the author of *Rewriting Exodus: American Futures from DuBois to Obama* (Pluto, 2011) and *After Katrina: Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century* (SUNY Press, 2017).

falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped" (Tubman qtd. in McGowan and Kashatus 107). Tubman's words are therefore appropriated by Ward and repurposed to refer to the men "reaped" by the rural community of DeLisle, the small town on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in which she grew up, where the disappearance of steady factory jobs as a consequence of globalization and neoliberal policies caused chronic joblessness and pervasive poverty, and where fatal incidents involving young black people seem to happen with systematic regularity. The narration of the events in the lives of these five young men intertwines with that of Ward's problematic family life, marked by her father's infidelities, the consequent bitter divorce between her parents, and the strenuous efforts of her mother to support Jesmyn, Joshua, and their little sisters Nerissa and Charine on a maid's salary.

The structure of the text is peculiar, in that Ward alternates chapters that explore in chronological order the story of her upbringing, education, familial and social life to chapters that narrate in reverse chronology the circumstances which led to the death of each young man, starting with the most recent death and proceeding to the furthest and most painful one: Joshua's. This non-linear, fragmented structure is therefore functional in emphasizing that her process of identity formation is inextricably linked to what happened to the men whose deaths she chronicles, as the author herself makes clear at the beginning of the memoir: "Because this is my story as it is the story of those lost young men, and because this is my family's story just as it is my community's story, it is not straightforward" (8). A fragmented, "sketchy" text seems to be the only way in which Ward can chronicle the events of her life, since the structure closely reflects how each new death causes a fracture in the development of her identity that discourages linear narration. After the loss of each beloved friend or relative, Ward's life seems to reach an impasse, so that the narration of her life incidents is paused to make space for introspective, lyrical passages, in which the author stops to reflect on her emotional response to each new tragedy or to document the social plagues that routinely claim victims among the young population of DeLisle. Chronicling the lives of the five young men she loved becomes therefore an act of resistance against unjust geographies of control, a way of showing the connection between the broader social phenomena that affect DeLisle and the impact they have of the personal sphere of affect. Ward's text is an example of the fact that the genre of the

memoir, as Theresa Warburton<sup>78</sup> argues, “connects affective and territorial dimensions,” highlighting through the narration of personal experience how geographies based on power imbalance can affect the development of a healthy sense of communal and personal identity (43).

The symmetric arrangement of the memoir’s chapters is mirrored in their titles. In fact, Ward uses a collective “we” to title the chapters dedicated to her personal life (“We Are in Wolf Town,” “We Are Born,” “We Are Wounded,” “We Are Watching,” “We Are Learning,” “We Are Here”) while those dedicated to the young men who died are titled with their respective names, written in all-capital, bold characters. This graphic choice highlights Ward’s will to give names and histories to men who would otherwise end up being nameless casualties, just numbers in a statistic. The disposability of their bodies, the sense that their lives are simply swallowed up by an inimical environment that deprives them of any hope for the future, is therefore contrasted by Ward’s attempt to re-humanize them by boldly stating their names and by celebrating how much each of them meant for their respective families and friends. On the other hand, her choice to title chapters dedicated to her own life with the first-person plural pronoun reinforces the idea that Ward is uncomfortable with the “I” of Western autobiographical tradition, and rejects both the linear chronology and the reference pronoun of said tradition. In fact, Ward’s goal in writing her memoir is not to celebrate the exceptionality of her experience—after all, she did become a successful writer and professor despite the odds—but to situate it into the broader history of her community of origin.

Ward claims that James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) was one of the most important sources that inspired her during the writing process and that influenced the way in which personal and communal collide in *Men We Reaped* (Hartnell 218). Baldwin’s ability to use episodes taken from his own life to comment on race relations in America is what Ward seeks to recreate in her memoir, in which the author’s personal experiences are used as a starting point to examine how larger socioeconomic issues impact members of disadvantaged communities. Ward seems therefore to emulate Baldwin’s attempts to balance the narrative voice between a singular “I” and a collective “we” in order to observe larger social phenomena from an insider’s perspective. The structure of the text also points out the impossibility to speak of a past that is really gone: the past continues to hunt the protagonist, who seems stuck in an eternal present

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<sup>78</sup> Theresa Warburton is Assistant Professor of English and Affiliated Faculty in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Western Washington University. Her research focuses on the intersections of literature and radical social movements.

marked by the death of her loved ones and especially of her brother. In fact, the chapter dedicated to her brother's death is defined by the author as the place in which "the past and the future meet" (213), as if the future would stop moving forward, blocked by the specter of past memories that are too painful to allow the protagonist to move on. If on a personal level this signals Ward's inability to let her brother's ghost go, on a communal level the persistence of the past hints at the fact that the legacy of slavery is still painfully present, and that a "post" condition is simply unimaginable. Ward depicts black life in the South during what political scientist Michelle Alexander has termed the New Jim Crow era: a world in which the persistence of racial discrimination has killed any hope in the possibility of redemption through economic uplift. This environment deprives the characters of any sense of meaningful future, so that mere survival is the ultimate goal. The idea of a post-racial society in which your race and the socioeconomical circumstances of your birth do not determine your future is therefore revealed in all its untenability by Ward, who depicts a South in which the echo of the victories of the Civil Rights movement resonate less powerful than that of the consequences of slavery, de facto segregation, and racialized poverty.

#### Blaxploration, Geography and Class Mobility: Nostalgia for the South as a Site of Authentic Blackness

In "Postmodern Geographies of the U.S. South" (2002) literary critic Madhu Dubey, drawing on the work on spatial justice of Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper, points out that "the emphasis on locally based micropolitics is a defining feature of the postmodern turn in US culture, and that a renewed focus on spatiality is central to this politics" (351). Dubey notices in fact that since the mid-1970s, there is a general trend in the humanities to revive the cultural debate about what makes the South of the US distinct from any other region in the country, and that the movement to establish the cultural distinctiveness of the South is based on literary representations that construct the region as a premodern, non-industrialized hinterland. As a consequence, the South is depicted as the site of values that have been lost in the urbanized and industrialized North, such as "localism or rootedness in place, close-knit racial communities, face-to-face forms of social interaction, and folk-cultural traditions" (352). Dubey theorizes that such a depiction of the South can only be sustained at a discursive level, since economic studies of the region have actually pointed out that the economic gap between industrial areas of the South and the North started to close around the 1980s, after private capital had been attracted South in the 1970s by the promise of cheap labor force, abundance of natural resources, and tax advantages, transforming the region into a lucrative site for industrial relocation.

However, Dubey also points out that although the racial desegregation that followed the Civil Rights movement and the industrialization of the South happened in tandem, this by no means must suggest that the region was suddenly ushered into a new phase characterized by a more equitable racial order. On the contrary, she claims that “scholarship on the southern economic boom provides overwhelming evidence to the contrary, demonstrating that the economic modernization of the South since the 1970s has been highly uneven and has in fact bypassed the majority of African Americans living in the South” (356). Yet, despite persisting racial oppression, ethnographer Carol Stack in *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (1996) points out that after the 1970s there was, for the first time in history, a significant trend of reverse migration from the urban North to the South of African Americans who were returning to their birthplaces. While Dubey explains this new influx of African Americans as a consequence of the recent industrialization of the South, Stack offers a culturalist approach that is particularly useful in the analysis of Ward’s memoir. According to Stack,

the people who are moving south are leaving cities where the economy has stagnated and returning to cities where the economy has all but disintegrated—to homeplaces categorized by the US Department of Agriculture as counties of “persistent poverty” [...] bad times back home can pull as well as push. People feel an obligation to help their kin or even a sense of mission to redeem a lost community...or simply a breathing space, a refuge from the maelstrom [...] The South, scene of grief and suffering for black Americans, never ceased to represent home to many city dwellers. The people returning there are not fools, they are not seeking a promised land. They know that home is a vexed place, and they often consider it a virtually unchanged place (xiv-v).

Dubey and Stack’s considerations find a powerful literary representation in *Men We Reaped*. Ward depicts a community devastated by Reaganomics and the delocalization of factories that had provided stable blue-collar jobs during the 1970s and 1980s. The author explains in fact that the economy of the region had gradually shifted in the 1990s from manufacturing to service and tourism, and that black people who lacked the resources to attend college did not qualify for these administrative positions, and were lucky if they could land low-paying jobs as waiters, valets, or food preparers (66).

The “call to home” described by Carol Stack in her ethnographic work is represented by Ward as a curse: as many of her relatives and friends, she wants to leave the South, but when she has the chance to do so the homesickness she experiences is so strong as to make her physically ill. In her teenage years Ward is tempted to follow the advice of two friends and apply for a



scholarship to a boarding school in California and is tremendously disappointed when her mother does not agree because she is supposed to help her with her younger siblings. The impossibility to leave is then lived as a curse that the South puts on all black women, condemned to fixity by the combination of poverty and familial responsibilities: “When [my mother] said that, I felt all the weight of the South pressing down on me, and it was then that I resolved to leave the region for college” (195). However, when she actually leaves for Stanford, she describes the time spent away from DeLisle as a terribly lonely and depressing period of her life: “Going to an elite college far from home hadn’t molded me into an adult, made me confident and self-assured; instead, it had confused me, made me timid and unsure of myself. I yearned for the familiar” (214). All she wants is to go back home, and she does not consider the fact that, as a newly graduate in creative writing, she will have a very hard time finding any kind of employment in Mississippi. The necessity to stay close to her community—the obligation to help her kin, as Stack would put it—imbued in her since her adolescence, lead her to a self-imposed fixity that reflects badly on her career and her self-esteem: while her ex classmates find easily a job in the urban spaces of the North, she goes back to live in her mother’s trailer and starts a depressing and fruitless job search that leads her nowhere.

Interestingly, Ward does not seem eager to profit from the post-integration opportunities that her elite college education might provide, and when she does, it is only because of a sense of obligation towards her mother, who is still supporting them all on a maid’s salary: “I wanted to appear brave and adventurous and smart, be the child she’d always wanted, the kind who took advantage of all the world offered, who journeyed forth from Mississippi with no remorse” (226). Hers is the pain of the forced migrant, who leaves home in search of a better future but always looks back, craving the familiarity of the homeland: “How could I know then that this would be my life: yearning to leave the South and doing so again and again, but perpetually called back to home by a love so thick it choked me?” (195). When she eventually leaves for New York for a job interview at Random House, the scene of her departure is marked by deep sadness, an exile rather than a journey towards new and exciting adventures: taking advantage of the opportunities afforded to her in the post-Civil Rights North becomes an obligation to pay homage to the sacrifices of her ancestors and her mother and not a way to finally realize her professional ambitions. Consequently, New York is perceived as an oppressive and scaring place, in which the protagonist gets lost in a maze of subway lines and skyscrapers that obscure the sky. The landscape of Manhattan is described as gloomy and almost surreal, as if pervaded by an omen of death: “I looked up at the thin strip of sky between buildings, felt the city like a

giant hand closing over me. I felt the energy of the place, the feel of limitless possibility and potential, but I was afraid” (227). And soon enough, the omen becomes reality, as Ward is informed that while she was being interviewed for a job, her brother was being killed in a car accident. The protagonist’s searing pain is expressed in spatial terms, as a terrible remorse for having left the only place she belongs to: “*What am I doing here? I thought. Why am I here and they are there? Where is my brother? Where is he?*” (229, emphasis in the original).

Significantly, Ward at the beginning of the memoir had already informed us that DeLisle’s original name was Wolf Town, so that by time we learn of her brother’s death, the metaphor of the town as a ravenous predator starts to fully make sense. The author’s birthplace is in fact described as a hunter that will never stop chasing its black preys, so that the author comments: “Sometimes, when I think of all the men who’ve died early in my family over the generation, I think DeLisle is the wolf” (14). Wolves and dogs have actually a highly symbolic significance in Ward’s prose, and are always depicted as threatening and unpredictable. If for the mainstream public dogs are usually associated with unconditioned loyalty, Ward seems to associate them with the ferociousness with which these animals have historically been turned against the African American community: the dogs used by slave hunters to track down runaways and those used by the police to attack Civil Rights protesters. At a symbolic level, there is virtually no difference in her prose between dogs and wolves, since even the most loyal dogs can turn into ferocious and uncontrollable beasts. It is the case, for example, of her father’s most precious dog Chief, an all-white pit-bull whom he trained for fights, who attacked her and almost killed her when she was a little girl, leaving terrible scars all over her body. The ambivalence of Ward and of her whole family towards dogs seems to reflect their relation to DeLisle, the wolf town, and to the natural world in general, a world that can turn on them for no apparent reason, and that must therefore be cherished and feared at the same time. In her interview with Anna Hartnell, Ward has clarified the metaphor of DeLisle as a wolf, and explained the importance of geography in her identity formation:

DeLisle, where I’m from, was originally called Wolf Town, and so there’s that extended metaphor where I’m saying that sometimes I think the wolf is DeLisle, it’s this thing that’s stalking us and that troubles us in our lives [...] I feel like everything about who I am, the choices that I make, the choices that I think that I have, the way that I express myself, the way that I think [...] I feel like all of that is informed by place (211-12).

In fact, place is at the center of Ward’s blaxploration, which is carried on through an investigation of various sites in which blackness can be performed. As a cultural mulatto, born

and bred in the rural South but educated in a predominantly white Episcopalian school and later on at Stanford, Ward has to learn to shape her black identity in relation to the different demands and expectations of the many cultural scenes in which she moves. Ward's cultural mulattism, in fact, is not characterized by the ability to, in Trey Ellis's words, "navigate easily" the different social settings in which she is immersed ("NBA" 235), but has more in common with the problematic cultural mulattism sketched by Reginald McKnight's in his short story "The Honey Boys" and discussed by Bertram Ashe in "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" (613). McKnight depicts a protagonist who self-identifies as a cultural mulatto, but for whom cultural mulattism is a nuisance, an unchosen condition that deprives him from a stable sense of identity. Consequently, Madhu Dubey, In "Postmodernism as Postnationalism," argues that "For McKnight, 'mulatto' signifies the tragic plight of 'victims' of the Civil Rights movement, caught between two worlds and burdened by anxieties about their racially ambivalent status" (11). In fact, socially as well as geographically, Ward is caught between two contrasting worlds: the impoverished black community of DeLisle, which offers little material resources but steady emotional support, and the Episcopalian private school she can attend thanks to the financial help of her mother's generous employers, where she can nurture her love for literature but is confronted with veiled as well as blatant manifestations of racism.

As a matter of fact, as the only black girl in the school the relation with her white classmates in marked by tensions: for example, she states that "I didn't want them to look at me after saying something about Black people, didn't want to have to avert my eyes so they didn't see me studying them, studying the entitlement they wore like another piece of clothing" (5). The distance between Ward and the other schoolchildren is also evident in their different consideration for New Orleans: while for her it is just the place in which her father relocates after her parents' divorce, for her classmates New Orleans is the capital of murders, a scary place in which people—meaning white people—get mugged at gunpoint, a city to avoid. More blatant episodes of racism, in which her uncomfortable condition of cultural mulattism is evidenced, happen when her classmates tell jokes about lynching that involve a black person, a rope and a pic-nic (187) and when a boy tries to elicit an aggressive reaction from her by telling her "nigger jokes" while the teacher is out making copies, and none of her other classmates make any attempt to defend her (192). Ward is taking a history test when this last episode happens, which is highly symbolic of the fact that not only her knowledge of textbooks, but also and foremost her familiarity with black history and her allegiance to the black community is being tested. Ward seems to be well prepared: recognizing that the boy just wants to provoke

her, she enacts the techniques of passive resistance so often performed by Civil-Rights activists, and quietly ignores him while continuing her work.

Ward complicates Ellis's enthusiastic celebration of cultural mulattism by adding a class dimension to it, the kind of reflection that Eric Lott had suggested in his response to Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic." Ward does not fit in at school not only because of her skin color, but above all because of her working-class origins. In fact, later on in the text she mentions two other black students, a boy and a girl, who started to attend her school but whose culture was so different from her own that they never became friends. Their cultural mulattism is depicted in positive terms, for example she says of the boy that "he was comfortable with the boys in the school, would hang out with them in the hallways looking like a clone to them: polo shirt, khaki shorts, slide-on boat shoes" (183). Looking at these two students who, unlike her, seem comfortable and well-integrated at school, Ward understands that the difference between them and herself is that they come from upper middle-class families with both parents and a house in a nice neighborhood. As a consequence, she comments that, despite their shared blackness, "that culture was totally alien to my own, one of government assistance and poverty and broken homes" (183). The only way to fit in would be to satisfy traditional expectations of blackness: for example, she notices that later on several black students who also came from working-class black families were admitted as basketball recruits. However, since she does not satisfy these expectations—she is into literature, not sports—she is condemned to alienation: "because of my distaste for team sports and my love for books, I was still an outsider" (183).

If the reflection on class dynamics dominates her performance of cultural mulattism, a class dimension also informs her process of blaxploration. In fact, the possibility of upward social mobility afforded her by her "white" liberal education is often perceived as something that removes her from the sites of authentic blackness and alienates her from "real" black people. The idea that class ascension makes her somehow less authentic is expressed several times throughout the memoir. First of all, as already mentioned, her ambition to climb the social ladder pushes her away from the South and from the places that she associates with authentic blackness: it is interesting in fact that while she describes herself as reluctantly mobile, the other members of the community, especially women, are always characterized as fixed, rooted. If this rootedness seems to provide them with a clear and stable sense of who they are, the impossibility to move freely in space also condemns them to class immobility. The connection between geographical and social mobility has been interestingly discussed by Patricia Hill Collins in *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (1998), who describes the

condition of upwardly mobile African American women in the post-Civil Rights era through the old adage of “the more things changes, the more they stay the same.” The feminist scholar argues in fact that

The fact that a sizable minority of African-American women have experienced social mobility into middle class by gaining formal entry into historically segregated residential, educational, and employment spaces represents bona fide change. At the same time, however, other Black women remain “glued to the bottom of the bag” [...] this connection between change and fixity, travelling and standing still, migration and containment generates a new outsider-within location for African-American women (13).

Hill Collins’s statement on African American women in the contemporary scene is perfectly exemplified by the positionality of Ward and her mother, which she depicts in various scenes of the memoir. One of the most telling episodes she references happens at the house of her mother’s employer, an easy-going white woman who, while her mother cleans the kitchen, engages Ward in conversation and inquires about her plans for the future. The fact that the woman treats her like a peer embarrasses Ward, who is made uncomfortable by her mother’s lack of engagement in that conversation: “Why was my mother so silent? Why did she seem so meek? I’d never seen any of that in her. My attention was split between two worlds” (201). While watching her mother clean by hand the beautiful hardwood floor of her employer’s mansion, Ward does not feel enthusiastic or lucky at the prospect that she will probably find a less vexing and more rewarding job, on the contrary she feels split between two parts of her identity that she finds difficult to reconcile: on the one hand she is eager to help her mother cleaning, thus proving her loyalty and gratitude to her, on the other she knows that she is not supposed to, since the employer, who is paying for her expensive education, expects her to be fully engaged in their polite conversation about the benefits of learning foreign languages and travelling. In this moment, Ward does not exhibit the enthusiasm of a new generation of educated black youth celebrated by Ellis, but rather the more traditional melancholy that characterizes double consciousness. As the author comments:

Years later, in college, I would encounter W.E.B. Du Bois and the term *double consciousness*. When I read it, I thought about sitting in my mother’s employer’s family room, watching my mother clean while I waited for her to finish or we could go home [...] I was aware that the wife was talking to me like an intellectual equal, engaging me, asking me about my college plans. How the privilege of my education, my eventual ascent into

another class, was born into the inexorable push of my mother's hands. How unfair it all seemed (201).

The attempt to reconcile the “two worlds” between which she feels split reflects on her linguistic choices: in fact, Ward has to quickly learn how to switch between the standard English she is required to speak at school and the black vernacular English spoken by her family. However, once she forgets to “switch,” she is bitterly rebuked by her mother:

I began telling her about a school project, and she interrupted me speaking to the pebbly asphalt road, the corridor of trees leading us home to our trailer, and said: “Stop talking like that.” As in: *Why are you speaking so properly?* As in: *Why do you sound like those White kids you go to school with, that I clean up after?* As in: *Who are you?* I shut my mouth (208).

The conflict around language is clearly a site of tension between a mother who is stuck in a forced immobility and a daughter who has chances of upward class mobility through education. If Eric Michael Dyson, in his introduction to Touré's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, theorizes linguistic code switching as the peculiar ability of blacks who are “rooted in, but not restricted by” their blackness (2011, xi) for Ward switching to “talking white” almost feels like racial betrayal. In fact, she interprets her mother's intimation to “stop talking like that” as a question of identity: “*Who are you?*” The point, however, is not that one way of speaking is more “authentic” or “blacker” than the other, but that each linguistic shift signals affiliation to one community, and Ward is now affiliated with both the white upper middle-class and black working-class communities of DeLisle. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam point out, language is a potent symbol of collective identity and can be used to signal “loyalties existing at the razor's edge of national and cultural difference. Although languages as abstract entities do not exist in hierarchies of values, languages as lived operate within hierarchies of power” (191). In the above quoted passage, the relation between black vernacular English and standard American English is depicted as representing the power imbalance between impoverished African Americans and middle-class whites, and the reaction of Ward's mother to her daughter “proper” English is clearly a request of performing her racial loyalty the first group. In the end however, being caught in between these power relations simply silences the young protagonist, who has not yet figured out how to successfully mediate between her two worlds. Her difficulty in mediating, in finding a compromise between traditional notions of authentic blackness and the requests of a new world of possibilities that the predominantly white school could open up for her, reflects on her assessment of blackness and on her ability to mold and sustain a coherent

and stable performance of black identity. The result is that the different cultural environments she frequents influence not only her way of speaking, but her entire racial performance: “At home, I’d have moments of clarity while riding down the street with one of my friends, listening to Tupac, and I’d think: *I love being Black*; then a few hours later, I’d wrestle with my hair while obsessing over my antiseptic dating and social life at school, and loathe myself” (207-208).

The archetype of the outsider-within postulated by Hill Collins is therefore represented by Ward’s inability to easily fit into either of the cultural scenes she moves in. It is interesting to notice that Hill Collins describes the position occupied by women like Ward as a “*new outsider-within location*” (*Fighting Words* 13, my emphasis), thus theorizing an identity type that seems to be directly tied to the sociohistorical peculiarities of post-Civil Rights America. Similarly, Bertram Ashe in his foreword to Trey Ellis’s novel *Platitude* postulates that the protagonist Dorothy, who comes from a working-class, single-parent family but has great aspirations of upward social mobility “may have to carry some old baggage, but she is, at least, in a *new location*” (xviii, my emphasis). The same can be said about Ward: while Dorothy negotiates the tensions between old and new, poor and middle-class, in her daily commutes from Harlem to Downtown Manhattan, Ward does the same in her trip from school to home, and later on in her periodic migrations from Mississippi to Northern cities and back. Like the protagonist of one of the fundamental texts of post-soul literature, Ward explores her blackness through mobility, and re-negotiates the tensions that emerge from her peculiar position as a cultural mulatto by trying to adapt her performance of blackness to the requests and expectations of different cultural environments. Her process of blaxploration is difficult and tormented, but perfectly representative of the ambiguous situation of generations of African Americans who, despite the promises of upward social mobility brought by the victories of the Civil Rights movement, struggle to be fully recognized as citizens—and ultimately as humans—in contemporary American society.

### Gender Dynamics and Allusion-Disruption Gestures: The Critique of the “Strong Black Man” Archetype

The third pillar of the post-soul triangular matrix, allusion-disruption gestures, is explored by Ward through a sharp analysis of gender dynamics in the South that can be essentially summarized in the idea that men can move freely, while women remain stuck by familial responsibilities. If Ashe theorizes allusion-disruption gestures as the strategy of post-soul writers who poke fun at their nationalist elders, signifying on their “superblackness,” we can

see that Ward, in line with the tone of the memoir, enacts this mechanism in a less satirical way. The target of her allusion-disruption is in fact the Strong Black Man, the archetype of tough, confident black masculinity based on patriarchal notions of family and community that that Mark Anthony Neal theorizes in *New Black Man*. As is the norm in most post-soul texts, the protagonist's father is criticized for embodying this kind of antiquated black masculinity, whose performance has deleterious consequences for himself and his family. Ward recognizes that her father's desire to act as a Strong Black Man emerges from an attempt to overcompensate for the chronic lack of power and self-esteem that being black and poor in the South imposed on him. However, she also condemns what she sees as selfish and immature behaviors: cheating on her mother with a teenage girl, then persuading her to take him back and to support him while he established a kong-fu school that never took off, only to cheat on her time and again with the same teenage girl.

Ward explains that his behavior is not isolated but endemic in the black community of DeLisle and has to do with the habit of separating black families during slavery times, a practice that has left deep scars in the African American community: "this tradition of men leaving their families here seems systemic, fostered by endemic poverty. Sometimes color seems an accidental factor, but then it doesn't, especially when one thinks of the forced fracturing of families that the earliest African Americans endured under the yoke of slavery" (131). Leaving the family is described by Ward as a "tradition," a routine that allows men to have an illusion of freedom and self-determination, when in fact the scarce possibilities for self-realization offered by impoverished rural communities condemn them to be perpetually dissatisfied. The toll of this illusion is paid by black women, tied to the domestic walls by the responsibility of raising children and taking care of the elders. The burden of being a poor black woman in the South, with all the responsibility that this entails, seem to be passed on from one generation to another: Ward's grandmother raised her seven children by herself, her mother will raise her four children by herself, and after her father leaves, Ward is immediately put to work by her mother, who as a first thing teaches her how to hang laundry (134). These unbalanced power dynamics between black men and women seem impossible to break, as the author herself soon finds out. While after school she is in charge of looking after her siblings and doing housework, her brother, when asked to complete small chores like taking out the trash, refuses to do so. The final scene the chapter "We Are Watching" is dramatically symbolic of what is expected from her and Joshua: while she is washing dishes inside the house, Joshua is outside trying to avoid duty and getting away with it. Their respective positions symbolize the constraints of their



gender roles: she is trapped by the domestic walls, a child with the responsibilities of an adult woman, while he can stay outside, waiting for something to happen. The look they exchange through the window contains all the knowledge they have already absorbed about the specificities of their gender roles: “Both of us on the cusp of adulthood, and this is how my brother and I understood what it meant to be a woman: working, dour, full of worry. What is meant to be a man: resentful, angry, wanting life to be everything but what it was” (162).

Men are usually depicted as trying to be mobile, in an illusory attempt to run away from “the wolf,” the combination of lack of resources and self-destructive behavior that slowly but inexorably claims the black men of DeLisle. Her father, for example, has both a car and a flashy motorcycle he always brags about, while after the divorce her mother is stranded and has to commute to work with a relative. If the irresponsibility of her father’s childish behavior is harshly criticized in the text, it is noteworthy that Ward also points out how this yearning for mobility is ultimately fruitless. This seems to be the moral of an episode narrated at the beginning of the chapter “We Are Watching,” in which Ward and her siblings, coming home with their father after their kung fu class, run out of gas and are forced to push the car to the nearest gas station, where their mother eventually picks them up (142). Cars are clearly depicted as symbols of freedom in suburban and rural areas where public transportation is scarce or non-existent, and can be essential means of survival in emergency situations, as has been tragically evident in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when several people in poor Mississippi communities were left at the mercy of the elements because they did not own a car with which to evacuate the area.

However, as Anna Hartnell points out, the function of cars in Ward’s prose is not always connected to their practical function as means of transportation, but is that of providing a place of refuge, a space in which to recreate a sense of communal identity, a necessity that churches used to fulfill (205). Cars are in fact almost always parked or out of gas, symbolizing the condition of those who, left out of the dynamics of the American Dream, are not rushing to go to work and be productive. The connection between cars and the possibility to be part of the American Dream is referenced again and more explicitly at the end of the chapter “We Are Wounded,” when the author, her siblings, and their cousin Aldon play *That’s My Car*, a game in which every kid is assigned a number that corresponds to the order in which cars will randomly pass by, and whose aspect will symbolize the kids’ future: the author’s car is white, shiny and expensive-looking, her sister’s car is modest but nice, Aldon’s car is old and ugly,

and the chapter simply ends before Joshua can see his own car, signaling that he will not live long enough to see how his future looks like (103).

Her father's attempts to accumulate vehicles that are beyond his means and very unpractical for a family of six represents his will to escape at all cost the limitations of his condition, and to flaunt a personal freedom that he does not really have. The author is keenly aware that this attitude has to do with the chronic devaluation of black men in the area, and points out that men acting like her father were

perhaps searching for a sense of freedom or a sense of power that being a Black man in the South denied them. If they were not called "sir" in public, at least they could be respected and feared and wanted by the women and children who loved them. They were devalued everywhere except in the home, and this is the place where they turned the paradigm on its head and devalued those in the thrall (84).

Ward is clearly reading her father, and many of the men of DeLisle, as Strong Black Men, and pointing out how their behavior is contributing in damaging not only their families, but the community at large. In fact, the illusory sense of power they derive from being feared in the house and from collecting young lovers and expensive possessions does not really contribute to their liberation but makes them feel more and more frustrated and unfulfilled. As Neal has pointed out, "the black man is under siege, but it's not as if the saving of the black man should come at the expense of black women and children who continue to be under siege also, often at the hands of so-called "Strong Black Men" (2015, 26). It is also interesting that the father's attempts to recreate the Strong Black Man is depicted by the author in a way that not only criticizes said archetype, but also rejects the politics of respectability so often invoked by the previous generations, according to which one should be secretive about problematic aspects of familial a communal life that could shed a negative light over the entire community. On the contrary, Ward is not afraid to disclose the darkest sides of her father, his passion for violence and dog fights, how he alternately cuddled his dogs and trained them with deflated bike tires or cut their tails with machetes, how he once beat her toddler brother, who still wore diapers, for having crawled too far from the house porch while he was napping inside (51).

If these scenes explicitly depict a family that is all but perfect, reversing the traditional policy according to which blacks should avoid "airing dirty laundry" as much as possible, the criticism to respectability politics is reiterated and reinforced when Ward argues that patriarchy and the traditional nuclear family are not necessarily the solution to the problems of the black

population of DeLisle. As a matter of fact, her friend Demond, the only boy in her social circle to live in a two-parent household in which both parents have solid factory jobs, is also one of the first to die, shot by a local drug dealer who did not want him to testify against him in court. His death might seem an unfortunate coincidence that has nothing to do with the way in which he was raised, but it is interesting that Ward points out that Demond “had spent the last couple of years dodging the kind of bad luck that afflict the innocent in drug-plagued neighborhoods, where every older cousin or friend is a drug dealer, every older cousin or friend an addict” (75). The cramped, dark rooms of Demond’s house, which Ward describes as “cavelike” (67), are seen by the author as spaces filled with the ghosts of the past and haunted by an inescapable destiny. Unlike the other men of the community, who try to outrun “the wolf” of DeLisle through mobility—cars and motorcycles—Demond seems to try a different strategy, that of finding refuge in the stability of a “cave,” a nest he shares with his fiancée and his daughter. However, the nurturing environment that his parents provided for him, and that he in turn tries to provide for his family, is not enough to spare him from a brutal and premature death. The author shows us that the politics of personal responsibility miserably fails in communities plagued by endemic social evils such as poverty and substance abuse: despite Demond’s best efforts, he still falls victim to an inimical environment that only far-reaching social reforms could improve.

In conclusion, in *Men We Reaped* Ward does not engage in the kind of satirical, sharp allusion-disruption gestures that much post-soul fiction enacts, nonetheless she critically assesses the legacy of the previous generations by attentively considering the gender and family dynamics at play in the black community of DeLisle. The author repeatedly demonstrates how the performance of the Strong Black Man archetype is ultimately ineffective to escape the consequences of institutional racism; moreover, she rejects positivist images of the black community that tend to overlook sexist behavior, and instead denounces practices that threaten the wellbeing of black women and children. Lastly, Ward exposes the shortcomings of the politics of personal responsibility, advocated by several African American leaders in the past, by showing that even in the presence of strong nuclear families black youth living in impoverished and neglected areas can still fall prey to crime and other social evils that can be prevented only through socioeconomic reforms.

## Conclusions: Learning to Survive

The last chapter of the memoir is aptly titled “We Are Here,” a declaration of agency and resilience. Ward explains that the pain for her brother’s death has not faded overtime, and that her family will forever be scarred by the huge loss of his young life. However, the process of writing the memoir seems to have been almost therapeutic for the author, who by the end celebrates the capacity of the community of DeLisle to survive, to be there, despite all adversities. For the author, surviving seems to be strictly linked to the capacity of narrating what has happened, of re-elaborating traumatic events to create meaning out of situations that seem to defy any logic. In her interview with Hartell, Ward explains in fact that “in everything I write I like to at least leave the reader with something to hang on to—this was harder with *Men We Reaped*. I think there has to be hope in any story [...] Hope equals meaning, and for me there has to be some sense of meaning to any story” (216).

The little girl who used literature as a means to escape the world she was born into (85), to get away from her parents’ fights and sink into a universe in which little girls could fight dragons and explore secret gardens, has now decided to come back and confront the ghosts of her past by writing about the people of DeLisle. Ward informs us that this process has not been easy and that the tension between truth and fiction is something that has informed all her work prior to *Men We Reaped*. As a young student of creative writing, Ward comments:

I knew the boys in my first novel [*Where the Line Bleeds*], which I was writing at the time, weren’t as raw as they could be, weren’t *real*. I knew they were failing as characters because I wasn’t pushing them to assume the reality that my real-life boys [...] experienced every day. I loved them too much: as an author, I was benevolent God. [...] I couldn’t figure out how to love my characters less. How to look squarely at what was happening to the young Black people I knew in the South, and to write honestly about that. How to be an Old Testament god (70, emphasis in the original).

What Ward is researching in this passage is not the abstract idea of the “authentic black experience” that has informed much fiction and creative nonfiction set in the South, but the kind of intellectual honesty that will allow her to denounce the multiple and systemic forms of injustice that affect her community. In turning into an “Old Testament god,” Ward can embark on a journey of self-healing that allows her to create meaning out of the tragedies of her past, collocating them into the broader picture of the construction of unjust geographies based on the

legacy of slavery and imperialism. Her denunciation of systemic racial injustice can successfully be expressed through a post-soul aesthetics. First of all, Ward constructs her character as a cultural mulatto, uncomfortably mediating between the different signifiers of authentic blackness demanded by the two main cultural scenes she navigates: her black working-class community of origin and the predominantly white and middle-class institutions of her education. Secondly, through a thorough examination of the class dynamics that impact the community of DeLisle she performs a complex and nuanced blaxploration, in that she carefully considers how the possibility of upward class mobility—often expressed in terms of geographic mobility—will impact her relationship with the people she loves, who unlike her are stuck in a social and geographical immobility that cannot be overcome. Lastly, her awareness of how traditional gender roles impact impoverished black communities allows her to perform an allusion-disruption strategy that is mainly based on the refusal of the Strong Black Man archetype and on the denunciation of the ineffectiveness of the politics of respectability. To conclude her memoir, Ward appropriates one of the most typical images of African American literature, leaving the reader with a contemporary interpretation of the Trope of the Talking Book: she can finally face the ghosts of the past and “write the narrative that remembers, write the narrative that says: *Hello. We are here. Listen*” (251, emphasis in the original), bearing witness to the resilience and the capacity for survival of the protagonist and of the entire community she gives voice to.

## 6. Allusion-Disruption Gestures

*You are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know*

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (2015)

### The Critique of the Nationalist “Race-Man” Father

This chapter focuses on the last pillar of Bertram Ashe’s theorization of the post-soul literary aesthetics: allusion-disruption gestures, namely the tendency of the texts’ protagonists to “make fun” of their nationalist elders to expose the contradictions and shortcomings of their political agenda, while at the same time recognizing that it is their nationalist zeal that shaped their conception of black identity and consequently their artistic practices. Allusion-disruption gestures are probably the most interesting aspect of the post-soul triangular matrix, in that they evidence how the authors’ gratitude for the battles fought by their elders can—and does—coexist with a desire to critically assess their legacy. In fact, through the enactment of allusion-disruption gestures post-soul artists reclaim their right to self-definition, to interpret and live their blackness according to their own wishes and to the new sociohistorical context in which they grow up, detaching themselves from prescriptive notions of black authenticity imposed by their elders. As Ashe notices, “through the allusion-disruption process, post-soul authors [...] oppose reductive iterations of blackness in ways that mark this post-Civil Rights movement African American literary subgenre as compellingly different from those of earlier literary periods,” and this difference is most evident in the authors’ desire to shape their performances of blackness according to new models and to reject the cultural separatism and essentialism promoted in the previous decades (“Theorizing” 616).

As such, in the memoir genre the sharp and often sarcastic criticism expressed by allusion-disruption gestures is usually aimed at the author’s “politically conscious” parents, and especially at strong-willed, authoritative fathers, while mothers tend to be remembered in more endearing terms. Fathers are in fact often described as domineering patriarchs who, guided by the ideals of the impending black revolution, involve their families in a “crusade for justice” that exasperate their children and spouses, who feel that they are being neglected for the sake a movement that absorbs all the energies and attentions of the father/husband. Memoirists reflect

therefore on the contrast between their fathers' celebration of a "theoretical," abstract blackness, and their inability to be emotionally available for their "actual" black families. This critique of the "Race-Man" nationalist father usually coexists with that of the father as "Strong Black Man," according to the archetype of patriarchal, self-righteous black masculinity theorized by Mark Anthony Neal in *New Black Man* (2005) and already described in the previous chapter. As a matter of fact, politically engaged fathers are usually described as not only way too absorbed in their activism, but also prone to dismiss behaviors that might jeopardize the emotional wellbeing of their families, such as cheating on their wives or administering corporal punishments to their children in order to command respect and impose their patriarchal authority.

These issues emerge very clearly in the two case studies that I analyze in this chapter, namely Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* (2008), and M.K. Asante, Jr.'s *Buck: A Memoir* (2013). Despite the age difference of their respective authors—Coates was born in 1975, Asante, Jr. in 1982—these texts bear striking similarities in their portrayal of the protagonists' path to racial awareness and of their troubled and ambiguous relationship with their nationalist, "über-Conscious" fathers. Both texts depict the coming-of-age of the authors, specifically the period between their early childhood and their admittance to college, living in a hostile urban environment characterized by racialized poverty, gang crime and drug-related violence. To counter the threats of these negative forces are their intellectual, politically conscious but emotionally distant fathers: W. Paul Coates, ex-Black Panther and founder of the publishing house Black Classic Press, and Molefi Kete Asante, acclaimed scholar known as "the father of Afrocentricity." In both cases, the fathers' weapons to contrast this combination of systemic racism and ghetto violence is a commitment to their children's Afrocentric education, the firm belief that their sons will escape the destructive forces that surround them only if they are culturally rooted in the Afrocentric tradition.

According to the protagonists' fathers, their sons need to discover their African past, to re-establish their cultural connection to an ancestral motherland, and to be aware of how white supremacy works in order to understand who they are and shape a positive and healthy sense of black identity. Consequently, their idea is that black boys can live up to their full potential only if they are firmly rooted in an empowering cultural tradition that provides positive models of blackness and gives them the necessary intellectual tools to decolonize their minds by understanding the economic reasons behind the construction of racial hierarchies. On the

contrary, black boys who do not have a strong sense of who they are and where they come from will most likely internalize negative projections of blackness and experience a chronic lack of self-esteem that might lead them to dangerous and self-destructive behavioral patterns. The protagonists' fathers are therefore committed to guiding their sons on the path towards racial consciousness by every means necessary, but their commitment is described by their children as suffocating and almost obsessive. It is easy to understand that the fathers' zeal is dictated by the fear of losing their sons and by the awareness that black adolescents in impoverished communities are continuously at risk of succumbing to the violence of street life or to manifestations of "new racism" such as police brutality and mass incarceration. In the cases of Coates and Asante, moreover, the fathers' concerns seem all the more justified, given that their older brothers have already fallen prey to the dangers of a hostile urban environment and have been implicated in drug-related crimes.

The portrayals of W. Paul Coates and Molefi Kete Asante offered by their sons in their respective memoirs contrast therefore negative representations of black fatherhood such as those theorized in the infamous Moynihan Report and supported by several leaders of the African American community such as Louis Farrakhan or Bill Cosby. As a matter of fact, these memoirs depict fathers who, despite their eccentricities and imperfections, are deeply committed to keeping their sons out of danger and to providing them with the financial support and moral guidance they need to turn into healthy and responsible adults. At the same time however, the fathers' authoritarian and preachy attitudes, though inspired by paternal love and by an almost desperate struggle to protect their sons, are perceived by the protagonists as unnecessary impositions based on outdated notions of black authenticity. The protagonists are in fact trying to shape their black identity according to principles and aesthetics that are remarkably different from those that their fathers would like to enforce on them, and they resent this parental intrusiveness into their process of identity construction.

Both *The Beautiful Struggle* and *Buck* can be productively read and interpreted through the lens of post-soul theory. It must be noted that the cultural mulatto archetype is not consistently explored, since the protagonists of both memoirs grow up in a virtually segregated environment and are only marginally influenced by non-black cultural sources. However, both texts depict black boys who are engaged in a complex process of blaxploration, in that they are actively trying to learn the aesthetic and behavioral codes of various kinds of performances of blackness, from the "survival performances" of machismo needed to deal with youth gangs, to the performance of racial salience required by their Afrocentric parents. Most importantly, these



protagonists consistently execute allusion-disruption gestures in order to deconstruct essentialist notions of black authenticity imposed by their fathers, while at the same time celebrating these fathers and their admirable commitment to advancing the struggle for black liberation and to raising racially conscious black children.

### The Focus on Embodied Blackness in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* (2008)

#### The Problem with Post-Soul: Embodied Blackness and the Threat of Disembodiment

In *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003) renown performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson offers an interesting reflection on the difference between theories of black identity as performed, and blackness as a marker of conferred racial identity that is inscribed on the racialized body. In line with the most recent debates on identity performance, Johnson argues that the continuous construction and deconstruction of the dynamics that underpin the production of blackness as an identity category are ultimately what constitute blackness itself, and that the physical and behavioral markers that define who is black constantly shift, producing new definition of what black identity is and how it should be properly acted out (2). But what happens once blackness is embodied? What are the social and political consequences is this embodiment in a racist society? And ultimately, as Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it in his acclaimed bestseller *Between the World and Me* (2015), “how [does one] live free in this black body?” (12). In *Between the World and Me*, Coates pushes the reflection on black corporeality to a whole new level by explicitly reflecting on the systematic, methodical and efficient ways in which black bodies have been harmed and violated in the history of the United States, and on how current manifestations of anti-black violence are simply the predictable, desired outcome of this legacy.

If *Between the World and Me* is the text that definitely established Coates as one of the most acclaimed authors of our days and as one of the most influential voices on racial relations in contemporary America, the reflection on the threats to which black bodies are routinely exposed was already fully developed in his debut book, the compelling memoir *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* (2008). The text focuses on Coates's coming of age in West Baltimore during the horrible crack epidemic that swept the city

throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, in a hostile urban environment dominated by gang culture and drug-related violence. It is in this tough social context that his father, an eccentric ex-Black Panther committed to publishing long forgotten texts on African and black diasporic cultures, tries his best to keep the seven children he had from four different women out of danger and into school. Coates describes himself as an unfocused and easily distracted boy, badly equipped to understand the codes of street-culture that regulated his neighborhood, who would have gladly spent his days watching cartoons and daydreaming but was instead forced by his militant father to educate himself on the history of black people and to work for his burgeoning book publishing business. Throughout the text, Coates offers a loving description of his unconventional father who, despite his aversion to monogamy and his belief in administering “tough love” to his offspring through the hits of his black leather belt, managed to be a present and involved parent, a source of financial stability and moral guidance in a neighborhood subjected to rampant violence, in which the possibility of being the target of deadly assaults dramatically escalates.

In his memoir, Coates consistently focuses his attention on the materiality of the black body, and particularly on the vulnerability of this body in a society that systematically threatens to destroy it, an aspect that performance theory and post-soul theory often fail to account for. In fact, while both performance theory and post-soul theory focus on the construction of blackness and the necessity to deconstruct fixed notions of black authenticity, on the fluidity of a blackness that can “travel” distinctly from black bodies, and on the commodification of markers of “authentic blackness,” Coates describes what it means to actually live blackness in a hostile environment that constantly puts the integrity of the black body at risk. As a consequence, his memoir adds an important aspect to our reflection of the construction of black identity in the post-soul moment, since it forces us to reflect on what happens when blackness, however performed and non-essentialized, takes corporeality, and on the risk of theorizing blackness discursively while neglecting to account for the material reality of living in a black body. In fact, while the performance of blackness can be effectively theorized, race, ethnicity, gender, and class are all categories that also exist beyond abstraction in the “real” world, and whose embodiment consistently affect the subject.

Coates’s text presents an occasion to reflect on the black bodily experience, since the vulnerability of his own body, emphasized in various occasions throughout the memoir, forces us to bear witness to the devastating consequences of constant threats of disembodiment on his psychological wellbeing. Coates’s construction of black identity relies in fact on the ways in

which he acts out various performances of blackness in order to protect his body and guarantee its integrity in a particularly risky social context, namely West Baltimore in the 1980s. As a matter of fact, to the young protagonist of *The Beautiful Struggle*, a defining feature of being black in 1980s Baltimore is that your body can be taken from you easily and with little consequence, so that a complex net of proper connections, behavioral codes and speech acts must be established in order to guarantee a certain level of physical safety. This upsetting reality is already hinted at in the initial pages of book, in which Coates situates his experience of living as a young black male very clearly within a specific sociohistorical context, which is defined by a rather sketchy map of the neighborhoods of West Baltimore in which used to live and go to school and by a family tree that represents the members of the “Coates clan,” as he calls it, namely his grandparents, parents, and the numerous siblings born by his father’s various relationships. The map is particularly interesting, in that it is accompanied by a legend that seems scribbled on a piece of parchment from which a dragon and a sword poke out. The insertion of these mythical elements seems to suggest that the young protagonist perceives the urban environment as a dangerous battlefield or a labyrinth, and that it is only by learning to navigate this inimical space that he will turn into a conscious adult. The capacity to move through space safely is in fact a critical factor in the development of “Tana,” as friends and family call the protagonist, and in his and his family’s ability to survive the ghetto and ultimately moving out of it.

The suggestion of a troubled relation between the black body’s safety and the gruesome reality of the environment in which it is immersed is confirmed in the first chapter of the memoir, aptly titled “There Lived a Little Boy Who Was Misled,” after a verse from Slick Rick’s hip hop track “Children’s Story” (*The Great Adventures of Slick Rick*, 1988). The title not only maintains the fairy-tale motive already established by the allegorical elements in the Baltimore map, but also evokes, at least for hip hop connoisseurs, a world characterized by “manchildren” forced to grow up too fast because of the demands of a violent environment. The chapter opens in medias res with Tana and his brother Big Bill frantically running from the fearsome members of the Murphy Homes crew, one of the many Baltimore young gangs that used to be named after their local civic associations. Coates does not address why he and Big Bill were chased by the crew, but simply registers the feelings of panic and anxiety that the sight of the gang causes in him, and reveals that his first thought was that of finding a payphone to call his father, who promptly came to his rescue.

It is significant that this scene, in which his young black body is exposed in all of its vulnerability, is immediately followed by a detailed description of the reason that had pushed him and Bill to go out that night: the possibility to attend a wrestling match in which some of their favorite wrestlers were scheduled to fight. The protagonist emphasizes in fact how wrestling had become an early obsession for him and his brother, who were fascinated by the strength and confidence of the fighters and by their elaborate costumes and stage performances. The contrast between Tana's vulnerability and the supposed invincibility of his favorite wrestlers is startling, and hints clearly at the fact that the young boy is attracted to wrestling precisely because he admires the fighters' lack of fear and the fact that they move on the ring as if they owned it. In fact, the impression that the wrestlers are invincible is partly conveyed by the fact that they are in full control of the space in which they fight, a control that Tana lacks in what is his personal "stage:" the dangerous streets of West Baltimore.

However, his father tries to warn him that the supposed invincibility of the wrestlers is, in fact, a carefully staged performance that he should not envy nor imitate, not because solving conflicts with brute force is always a bad idea, but because even professional wrestling seems to be imbued with racism. To expose this truth, Paul Coates buys for the two brothers tickets to go see a match, pointing out that they will probably realize that the wrestler they admire so much, Kamala the Ugandan Giant, is in fact from Alabama.<sup>79</sup> This observation is uttered with a bitter and sardonic tone, and watching actual footage from Kamala's matches, it is fairly obvious why the politically conscious Paul Coates must have been annoyed by the stage performance of the black wrestler. Kamala's stage persona involved in fact the use of African-inspired masks, "tribal" make-up, a spear and shield, and a loincloth with leopard print. His portrayal of an African headhunter, who approached his "enemy" bulging his eyes and protruding his lips in full minstrel-show style, is promptly perceived by Paul Coates as "coonin'," which for the politically engaged ex Black Panther immediately casts Kamala as inauthentic, a real sellout. It is notable that one of the few things the author remembers of the match he attended is that he was surrounded by a predominantly white audience, which confirms the father's idea that Kamala was exploiting the cliché of the "African savage" to please a white crowd eager to re-inscribe the black male body into familiar stereotypes.

Kamala's majestic black body, far from being untouchable, was in fact as vulnerable as can be in the Mississippi of his youth, where lynching was common and could be triggered by the most

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<sup>79</sup> James "Jim" Harris, known by the stage name of Kamala, was in fact born in Senatobia, Mississippi, in 1950.

futile reasons. In the social scenario depicted by Coates, the black male body has to be either destroyed or confined into a clearly defined role, so that African American men seem to have only two options: facing the constant threat of disembodiment or aligning their performance of identity with one of the several controlling images that inscribe their bodies as easily readable. As Patricia Hill Collins has noted:

Historically, African American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of promiscuity and violence. The buck, brute, the rapist, and similar controlling images routinely applied to African American men all worked to deny Black men the work of the mind that routinely translates into wealth and power. Instead, relegating Black men to the work of the body was designed to keep them poor and powerless. Once embodied, Black men were seen as being limited by their racialized bodies (*Sexual Politics* 152-3).

Far from being empowering, the performance of Kamala as an African brute was actually designed to reassure his predominantly white public, since it re-inscribed his body into an accepted controlling image. To escape disembodiment, Kamala chose what was probably the safest option: the staging of the stereotypical Mandingo, in a context in which the hypermasculinity and dangerous bestiality associated with this cliché were not only socially acceptable, but also celebrated: Kamala, despite the formidable impression he made on the ten-year old protagonist and his older brother, was in fact threatened by the same “thievery of your own person” that the two brothers experienced on a daily basis (Coates, *Struggle* 7). The question of the fear of disembodiment is mostly described in *The Beautiful Struggle* through examples of how black men around Tana try to cope with it, adapting their performances of black identity to the demands of a social environment that treats their bodies as disposable: Kamala chooses to adhere to the stereotype of the hypermasculine Mandingo, his brother Bill and most of the youth of his neighborhood decide to stick to a performance of “thuggish” aggressiveness that involves carrying weapons and learning the complex behavioral codes of their respective gangs. His father, on the other hand, chooses the path of “Consciousness,” certain that the struggle for black liberation can only be advanced through a deeper understanding of how black bodies have historically been exploited and annihilated.

### Performing the Black Cool as a Strategy for Survival

In Coates’s world, the fear of disembodiment governs the lives of black boys, dominating every aspect of their process of identity construction, and can lead to a performance of blackness

based on aggressive and to self-destructive behavior that originate from a deeply internalized sense of the disposability of black lives, a visceral concern over the safety and integrity of one's body. In *Between the World and Me*, disembodiment is described as a "dragon that compelled the boys I knew into extravagant theaters of ownership [...] the demon that pushed the middle-class black survivors into aggressive passivity" (114). In *The Beautiful Struggle*, the fact that aggressiveness is often the response to a pervasive climate of fear for one's safety is demonstrated by the sudden change in his brother Bill, who after the aggression at the hands of the Murphy Homes crew buys a pistol and brings it with him wherever he goes. Coates notes that his brother's response to the aggression evidences the rapidity with which black boys in his neighborhood were expected to grow up and react to the demands of a tough and merciless environment, "the quickness between child and child-man" (27). The fact that his brother shows him the weapon "without bravado" (28) signals in fact that Bill is not carrying a pistol to act "hip" in front of his friends, but simply to feel safer and ready for everything that might happen whenever he leaves the house. To carry a weapon—"to be strapped," as the local boys calls it—becomes therefore a way to try and gain control over one's life, "to become more than a man whose life could be simply seized and hurled about" (*Struggle* 35).

It is evident that the fear of disembodiment conditions the protagonist and his brother even when their body is not actively being violated, since they still have to think in advance about all the possible scenarios that might await them just outside of their front door. Both Tana and his brother Bill are therefore compelled to educate themselves to a different kind of Knowledge than the one their father would like to instill on them, namely the Knowledge of the many codes that govern street culture. The author points out his brother's familiarity with these codes, which contrasted sharply with his own awkwardness and isolation from the local culture:

Bill's logic was taken from the Great Knowledge, the sum experience of our ways from the time the Plymouth Rock landed on us [...] he never measured his life in years but style—how he walked, who he walked with, how he stepped to jenny, where he was seen, where he was not. This man turned his life into art and pledged himself to the essential truth: No matter what Civilization says, academic intelligence is overpriced and ultimately we are animals [...] I was a monument to unknowledge. I walked to school alone, a severe violation of the natural order of things (*Struggle* 36).

However, Bill's expertise in staging a performance of coolness that might be taken seriously by his peers is not the result of his innate confidence and sense of style, quite the contrary, it derives from the deep personal insecurity generated by his first aggression at the hands of the

Murphy Homes gang. The attack, from which Tana managed to escape, is presented as the source of Bill's subsequent performance of identity, a scar that never healed and impacted all of his actions and thoughts. As Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson argue in *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1993), "posing cool" can serve as a survival strategy in environments dominated by random violence. The authors note in fact that

Cool pose is a distinctive coping mechanism that serves to counter, at least in part, the dangers that black males encounter on a daily basis. As a performance, cool pose is designed to render the black male visible and to empower him [...] Being cool shows both the dominant culture and the black male himself that he is strong and proud. He is somebody. He is a survivor, in spite of the systematic harm done by the legacy of slavery and the realities of racial oppression, in spite of the centuries of hardship and mistrust (5).

Bill's cool pose is in fact characterized by a detached, removed attitude, aimed at suggesting that he is above it all and is not scared by the possibility of a sudden aggression. However, the author suggests that his brother, far from being over fear and insecurities, was actually "caged by a backward psychology" that removed him from his most authentic self: he adds in fact that Bill "saw himself strictly in the mode of athletes and rappers" and that their father "struggled to make Bill see what he covered with a street pose, what he didn't even know was there" (*Struggle* 31). As a consequence, the fear of physical harm steals Bill's energy, time and freedom, compelling him to live with the double burden of being perpetually scared, but being paradoxically perceived as scary. What is more, as Majors and Mancini Billson argue, the performance of a certain type of cool pose can reinforce already widespread ideas about black men as perpetually angry and therefore menacing, leading to a vicious circle in which the more the black subject is perceived as dangerous, the more he will feel vulnerable and at risk, and therefore prone to enact defensive behaviors.

The paradox of the contrast between the vulnerability of the black male body and its perception in mainstream society as dangerous and threatening is hinted at in various stages in the memoir, and becomes particularly evident as Tana grows up, turning into a tall and broad-shouldered boy. As a matter of fact, in the shift from childhood to adolescence the risk of his body being mistakenly perceived as threatening and dangerous dramatically increases, compelling him to pay attention to aspects of his performance of black male identity that he had not yet considered. This becomes painstakingly clear in a scene in which a high-school teacher wrongly accuses him of having assaulted him. Coates explains that the teacher was probably just irritated by the fact that he constantly defied his authority and talked back to him, but that this was enough to

make him cry assault when, walking past him, he simply bumped into the teacher's arm (172). Luckily for him, both the school principal and his father quickly realized that the teacher was probably either sincerely intimidated by his blackness and size, or was using these bodily traits as evidences of an assault that had actually never happened, so that Tana ends up being suspended for a couple of days, but not further punished by his father. Young Tana seems in fact still genuinely unaware of how controlling images will regulate the perception of his body in mainstream society, and it is his father who explains it to him during a rare moment of father-son bonding:

Son, you're growing into a big man. You're going to have to be more conscious of yourself. You are not a mean kid, but because of your size you will do things that will be seen as a threat. You need to be conscious especially around white people. You are big, and you are a young black man. You need to be careful about what you do and what you say (173).

The father's talk reveals to the protagonist another aspect of his vulnerability, namely the one that derives from white people's misperception of his growing body. By pointing out his tallness and skin color, the father makes him aware that these physical markers will be actively utilized to connote him as a dangerous and threatening individual, conferring to him a "thuggish" black identity that he has little control over. This conferred identity is not the result of a neutral gaze that simply ascertains his size and color and assesses that they are threatening characteristics: as several scholars of visual studies have recently pointed out, the gaze is never neutral, and actively constructs images of black masculinity that are compliant with the assets of a society rooted in anti-blackness (Fleetwood 2011; Bordin and Bosco 2017). In fact, as bell hooks has argued, there is a direct link between white supremacy and the way in which black people are routinely represented, so that "control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination" (*Black Looks 2*).

A presumption of physical strength and aggressiveness could be admired in Kamala the Giant, and these characteristics could be commodified as spectacular and entertaining in a context in which brute force is expected and even encouraged, but in a different context, controlling images of young black men as dangerous and threatening can justify racial profiling and other manifestations of what Patricia Hill Collins calls "new racism." As she explains:

In some cases, the physical strength, aggressiveness, and sexuality thought to reside in Black men's bodies generate admiration, whereas in others, these qualities garner fear. On the one hand, the bodies of athletes and models are admired, viewed as entertaining, and



used to sell a variety of products [...] On the other hand, the image of the feared Black male body also reappears across entertainment, advertisement, and news. As any Black man can testify who has seen a purse-clutching White woman cross the street upon catching sight of him, his physical presence can be enough to invoke fear, regardless of his actions and intentions [...] Racial profiling is based on this very premise—the *potential* threat caused by African American men’s bodies. Across the spectrum of admiration and fear, the bodies of Black men are what matters (*Sexual Politics* 153, emphasis in the original).

As a consequence, Tana has to learn to adapt his performance of black masculinity to the various demands of the different environments he inhabits, not to be accepted and “fit in” as every adolescent would, but simply to safeguard the integrity of his body. He has to be tough and “badass” with the youth of his neighborhood to avoid a beating; deferential and submissive at school, especially around his white teachers, to dodge disproportionate disciplinary actions against him and bypass the school-to-prison pipeline;<sup>80</sup> respectful and hard-working at home, to escape the hits of his father’s leather belt. Tana’s shifting performance of black male identity is therefore intimately bound to his search for a viable “defense strategy” to protect his body from different forms of abuse. In the case of our protagonist, blaxploration is not just an exploration of the new boundaries and definitions of blackness in a post-Civil Rights context, but an interrogation of which interpretation of blackness he should appropriate and act out in determinate social contexts in order to stay safe. Through his in-depth reflection of the consequences of embodied blackness in a disadvantaged community, Coates presents a particularly somber aspect of blaxploration, namely the necessity to investigate and try out various performances of blackness, adjusting them to the requests of a hostile environment that continuously puts the integrity of his young body at risk.

### The Conscious Black Patriarch

The focus on the necessity to interrogate blackness through shifting performances of black identity coexists in the memoir with a series of allusion-disruption gestures aimed at criticizing, but at the same time lovingly celebrating, the protagonist’s father. W. Paul Coates

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<sup>80</sup> The “school-to-prison pipeline” is an expression used to refer to the widespread tendency of criminalizing the behavior of minors coming from disadvantaged social context, who will face increased possibilities of being incarcerated. Sociologist Nancy Heitzeg has defined it as follows: “The school to prison pipeline refers to this growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via —zero tolerance policies, and, directly and/or indirectly, into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. The school to prison pipeline has emerged in the larger context of media hysteria over youth violence and the mass incarceration that characterize both the juvenile and adult legal systems” (1). For a more in-depth analysis of this social phenomenon, see: Kim, Losen and Hewitt.

has in fact a central place in the memoir and is described throughout the text as the quintessential representative of black authenticity, a man who has dedicated his entire life to the struggle for black liberation and to the decolonization of people's mind through the knowledge of African and African American history and literature. Coates describes his father as "Conscious Man" (12), an Afrocentric intellectual who by day curates the history hall at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center of Howard University, and by night and on weekends cooks vegan food for his family and collects out-of-print manuscripts with the intent of bringing them back to life through a radical operation of republishing.

Paul Coates is presented as the patriarch of an unusually-structured but loving and nurturing family for the protagonist, composed by the seven children—two daughters and five sons—that he had with four different women, some of whom were best friends who had a relationship with the same man and even gave birth in the same year. As the author ironically explains, this peculiar family structure was the consequence of his father's good-looks, intellectual charm, and commitment to the ideals of the local Black Panther's chapter, in which nothing was stamped as exclusive and monogamous marriage was perceived as one of the many impositions of Western capitalist societies. The first example of allusion-disruption gesture that occurs in the text coincides in fact with the author's statements that "the Panther's brought politics to match [Paul Coates's] studly quest" (17), and with the realization that the ideal of communal living his father espoused actually served as the perfect justification for his many and messy relationships. Coates notes that his father was a formidable presence in the party's initiatives, but that his brightness and inquisitiveness in discussing racialized social injustices was not matched by an equally remarkable emotional intelligence when it came to actual human relationships: he comments in fact that "even young, Dad had more vision than most for the big picture, but paired this with a stunning blindness for the intricacies of actual people" (18). For example, Coates reveals that his father, in the occasion of both Bill's and of his younger brother John's birth, revealed to their respective mothers that he had other children on the way right after the women had given birth and were still resting in their hospital beds. Coates' critical assessment of his father's involvement in the Panther Party is not just limited to his prioritizing abstract ideals of communal love over actual commitment to his wives, but is also expressed in the form of a reflection on class, since the author hints at the fact that his father dedicated all of his energies to raise as the leader of the Panther's local chapter, and lost his union job as a consequence of his political ideas. Coates explains that this brought his family from the

threshold of middle-class to downright poverty, and turned his father “from honorable, hard-working [Vietnam’s] vet to someone who justified food stamps and the projects” (18).

The second moment in the text in which a major example of allusion-disruption gesture occurs is when the author discusses his father’s decision to leave the Panthers Party after it fell apart because of unsolvable internal divisions. In this case, Coates celebrates his father’s down-to-earth attitude and his practical realization that the revolution could not be the result of one glorious action but had to be built gradually and painstakingly; at the same time, he signifies on his comrades in the party and their inability to move with the times. As a matter of fact, Coates argues that his father was often seen as an outsider simply because he was an intellectual born among uneducated people, but that his ability to adapt to various social contexts allowed him to cope with a hostile social environment in a way that his comrades could not. He argues in fact that his father

thought his country rotten, but he was a better fit than he knew. His comrades were ill equipped. They flocked to their revolution because the real revolution, the one that won out—with its marching automation, its theology of efficiency and goods—had nothing for them. A radical undoing was their only way out. Behold how they died: scrounging for crack rocks; infested by AIDS; or, if lucky, under the honorable hail of gunfire (82).

Coates remarks on his father’s comrades in the party point out the bitter reality that, despite the political successes of the Civil Rights movement, large masses of black people were left out of the mechanisms of upward social mobility that should have granted them a place in the growing black American middle-class. In this context, the author argues, they flocked to “their revolution” not so much out of an actual belief in the ideals of Black Power, but as a way of compensating for the disappointment and frustration they experienced after these promises were not actualized. Coates’s observations about his father’s involvement with the Panthers Party perfectly illustrate Bertram Ashe’s point that “the chief [...] target for post-soul allusion-disruption gestures is the Black Power movement” (2007, 615). His critical assessment of the comrades’ motivations for joining the party and of the many instances in which his father acted in an insensitive and “studly” way once he started to be involved in the group’s local chapter is in fact often expressed in tones that oscillate between satirical and bitter, denoting a desire to signify not so much on the party’s political agenda, but rather on the reasons why its local members supported it.

At the same time, the author also presents a strikingly positive depiction of his eccentric father and of the extended family he built, whose members provided him with unconditioned love and emotional support: of this remarkable family structure, the author comments that “this is all a mess on paper, but it was all love to me, and formed my earliest and still enduring definition of family” (16-17). Moreover, the text also contains countless references to moments in which the author celebrates his father’s political ideals and his commitment to the struggle for black revolution, as well as his strenuous efforts to raise his children in the Afrocentric cultural tradition. Paul Coates, despite his many personal shortcomings, is repeatedly presented as a loving and supportive father, a man who was always consistently present in his children’s lives in a time when, as the author remarks, many black men of his neighborhood “actually bragged on running out on kids” (19). Paul Coates is deeply aware of the dangers that his children are exposed to, and of how vulnerable they might be to the random violence that is destroying their community. As a consequence, he is depicted as constantly engaged in providing them with the right instruments to face the negative influences of the toxic environment in which they grow up: racial awareness, discipline, and a positive image of themselves. Coates notes: “On our life map, [our father] drew a bright circle around twelve through eighteen. This was the abyss where, unguided, black boys were swallowed whole, only to reemerge on corners and prison tiers. Dad was at war with this destiny” (20). His weapons in this war against the fate of unguided black boys are his beloved books, as well as a firm commitment in keeping his children occupied at all times with housework, chores for his publishing press, a list of assigned readings, and regular discussions about what they were learning about the black experience.

### Conclusions: Coming to Consciousness and The Refusal of Prescriptive Notions of Blackness

The portrayal of Paul Coates as an attentive and present—although strict and authoritarian—black father not only counteracts widespread stereotypical accounts of absent black fatherhood supported by the Moynihan report, but also guides the protagonist on the path of forging a positive relationship to his own black identity. However, the grateful acknowledgement of his father’s loving guidance is coupled with a certain resentment for the fact that Paul Coates does not allow his children to forge their black identity autonomously, but forces on them his own vision of racial consciousness and political awareness. During his childhood and early adolescence, the protagonist repeatedly rebels to this paternal imposition, either by skipping his

assigned readings and carrying on his work for the publishing press as slowly and carelessly as possible, or simply by dreaming of ruining the father's business through various tricks, such as dropping matches in the basement and burning each and every one of those books for which he has no interest. What his father does not seem to understand at this stage is that Tana has actually already started his own process of blaxploration, but wishes to shape his black identity autonomously, finding his own path to "Knowledge." Interestingly, it is only after Tana discovers hip hop, and specifically the music of Public Enemy, that his racial consciousness starts to blossom, leading him to reconsider the significance of his father's teachings. Tana finds in hip hop a new and fresh way of articulating his racial anxieties, a language that departs significantly from that of his father's academic treatises, but that expresses the same concern for the plights of the African American community. The author notes that hip hop is what awoke him to political consciousness, but that his father and other people of his generation could not understand their fascination with these new, aggressive sounds. He comments in fact that "the music boosted the words of my father, though he only partially understood. He was frustrated with me, even as my Consciousness bloomed" (109).

Nevertheless, despite the generational gap that does not allow Paul Coates to share his son's undivided admiration for this new musical genre, hip hop sparks Tana's curiosity for black history and culture in a way that no assigned reading or thoughtful discussion had ever done, pushing him to delve into the previously untouched piles of his father's "Conscious" books. This period marks a turning-point for young Tana, who from then on seems to be insatiable in his desire to explore his black heritage. Through hip hop, Tana enters a new phase of his life, marked by a new awareness of his cultural roots. In this sense, it seems significant that only at this point the author decides to reveal the meaning of his unusual name, since only after he starts digging into his father's books he seems to acquire the necessary competence to actually discuss his identity. Of that period of intellectual curiosity, spent between his father's manuscripts and a notepad on which he incessantly scribbles hip hop s rhymes, he says:

That was how I found myself, how I learned my name. All my life my Dad had told me what it was, that Ta-Nehisi was a nation, the ancient Egyptian name for the mighty Nubians to the south, but I could not truly hear [...] But seeing that handle among the books of glorious Africa, I knew why I could never be Javonne or Pete, that my name was a nation, not a target (111-12).

When chronicling his father's coming to "Consciousness" through the discovery of the masterpieces of black literature, the author had interestingly noted that "all the truly living, at

least once, are born again” (74), and that it was thanks to the classics of African American literature—books like Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and James Baldwin’s *Another Country*—that his father had found his mission in life and was reborn a conscious black man. For Tana, this rebirth is sparked by the discovery of hip hop, which pushes the protagonist to embark in a similar voyage of self-discovery—signaled by his new desire to fully understand the significance of his own name—that will eventually bring him to enroll at Howard University, the Black Mecca, as he repeatedly calls it throughout the memoir.

The protagonist expresses therefore a strong desire to “come to Consciousness” on his own terms, but also gratefully acknowledges the positive impact of his father’s ideals on the construction of a positive and stable black self. In this sense, Tana perfectly exemplifies Lisa Jones’s belief, noted by trey Ellis in “The New Black Aesthetic,” that “the works and protests of the nationalists 'made us possible' [...] Though we make fun of them, if it wasn't for [them] we wouldn't have the freedom now to be so nonchalant” (Jones L. qtd. in Ellis 236-37). In Tana’s case, the work of his father to retrieve lost knowledge about the African and African American history and culture literally provides him with the foundation from which his process of blaxploration can start, leading him to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of his black self. Through allusion-disruption gestures aimed at his “über-conscious,” annoyingly nationalist, but loving and nurturing father, Tana can in fact question limiting impositions of black identity that he sees as no longer fit for the post-Civil Rights period, and embark in a process of self-discovery that will eventually lead him to become one of the most acclaimed African American writers of the contemporary scene.

## Post-Post Soul Babies: New Racism and Generational Fractures in M.K. Asante’s *Buck: A Memoir* (2013)

### Introduction: Young Buck in Killadelphia, Pistolvania

African American literature has a long tradition of works portraying the environment in which young and inexperienced black protagonists move as hostile and inimical: from the Chicago of Bigger Thomas in Wright’s *Native Son*, to the New York of Ralph Ellison’s “invisible man”, Claude Brown’s “manchild” and James Baldwin’s Rufus in *Another Country*, urban areas have often been described as settings in which black protagonists are surrounded by negative forces

that inexorably condemn them to either self-destruction or a continuous struggle to keep afloat. MK Asante's "Killadelphia", as he calls his hometown, follows this tradition, in that the environment forming the background of the "young buck's" coming-of-age is described as an intricately net of violence, random death and degradation, in which constant movement and a street-wise attitude are the only ways to escape—literally and figuratively—the brutality of the city. *Buck: A Memoir* presents the struggle of Malo (a.k.a. MK Asante's nickname as a teenager) to overcome the difficulties of growing up in an environment characterized by street violence, police brutality and bad schools, while his family is falling apart. The self-identification of the author as a young "buck," together with the dedication of the memoir to "all young bucks," is an interesting element to analyze, since it signals a remarkable appropriation of the stereotype of the aggressive, muscular, oversexualized, but ultimately unintelligent African American man that the term historically connotes. The title immediately evokes for the reader the image of a young black man that adheres to the values of what is traditionally denoted as "street culture," but the fact that the author chooses to identify as a "young buck" clearly indicated that he is repurposing the term to refer to a conscious performance of a certain type of black identity.

The struggle of the adolescent protagonist to reach maturity and self-fulfillment follows several steps in which Malo relates to the city of Philadelphia and the environment surrounding him in an alternation of lyrical passages and cynical realistic descriptions in which the author, through the symbolic use of colors, shapes and natural elements, describes the city as the site of new forms of slavery that especially target young black men. An examination of Malo's experience, therefore, can be useful to throw light on the literary representation of forms of so-called neo-racism—police brutality, redlining, disproportionate incarceration—in contemporary autobiographical writing, as well as to discuss the ways in which a recent memoir by a very young author engages some of the literary conventions of slave narratives to represent a sort of "circular history", that is a history of oppression that is doomed to repeat itself. Asante's text, moreover, is interesting because the portion of the author's life analyzed in the memoir is limited to the years between twelve and eighteen, a stage in life in which the boy learns to define and perform his black masculinity in relation to the other characters that surround him in the book, especially his brother and his father, influencing his perception of what authentic blackness is. In fact, as I will point out in the rest of the chapter, racial authenticity in terms of loyalty and commitment to the community is another leitmotif of this text, which makes it

particularly valuable in an analysis of the literary conventions of contemporary black autobiographical writing.

In a study of memoirs of the post-Civil Rights period that engage in the formation of a black self in a contemporary scenario *Buck* plays an important role in mainly three aspects. First, it shows very clearly how the burden of a particularly hostile environment and of forms of oppression that are at the same time different but perniciously similar to those confronted by the previous generations of African Americans exact a heavy toll on many young black men, influencing their perception of themselves as racialized bodies, and potentially compromising their development of a healthy and stable sense of identity. Secondly, the prominence of the parental figures in *Buck* is functional to discuss the generational shift that occurs after the end of the Civil Rights Movement and that several critics have pointed out, especially in the disillusionment that younger generations experience towards the revolutionary potential of ideals spread by their elders. In particular, Asante considers the discipline of Afrocentricity that his father founded, and discusses how this theoretical field has been little helpful to his brother's, his sister's, and eventually his own life, all marked by the negative effects of contemporary forms of systematic discrimination, and points out how the father's focus on idealism and political engagement contributed to disrupt rather than unite the family. Lastly, *Buck* focuses on education alternatively as a site of oppression and of personal empowerment: this collocates the text in the tradition of works which have criticized the traditional school system as a place of indoctrination rather than education, especially for black boys, but at the same time reverses this narrative by showing the potential of alternative education as a weapon to actually contrast systematic discrimination and its negative consequences and to allow the black subject to "write himself" anew.

### Painting a Hostile Environment: Nature, Colors and Shapes of New Racism

"The fall in Killadelphia. Outside is the color of corn bread and blood" (3). The opening line of *Buck* immediately paints for the reader the image of a threatening environment in which the protagonist situates himself: it is fall in Philadelphia and the traditional colors of the season, yellow and red, are coating the city. However, instead of the sense of melancholy and languor that is typically associated with fall, an atmosphere of alarming danger is evoked, since the view that the protagonist is watching from his kitchen window reminds him of blood spilled on corn bread. From the very first line of the text, Asante associates a typical soul dish to blood, and situates both elements in the natural environment of "Killadelphia", preparing the stage for



the description of the kind of violence that is routinely experienced by his peers in his hometown. This opening line is remarkably effective, since Asante, with just a couple of words, is able to introduce the reader to the main leitmotifs of the text: the caducity of life, the fact that this caducity is induced by violent behavior (blood, Killadelphia), and that the main target of this violence is the black population of the town. At the same time, he draws our attention on the fact that violence seems to be ingrained in the environment of the city, in fact it is part of its very name, and dominates the scene like the cycle of seasons dominates the natural world.

In the following image, Asante's training as a filmmaker is put to use to literally draw the reader into the kitchen in which the still unnamed protagonist is admiring his big brother rolling a perfect joint. The sensations sparked by the opening line are consolidated through the mention of a cultural reference that contributes to situate the two boys in time and space, since Uzi, the protagonist's brother, is rolling his joint "on top of the *Source*, the one with Tyson on the cover rocking a kufi" (3). The mention of this particular issue of *Source* is significant, in that it allows us to collocate the two brothers as hip-hop enthusiasts, and to restrict the time frame of the scene to September 1995. At the same time, the title of Tyson's interview that appears on the cover contributes to reinforce the idea of a hostile environment that the author is trying to impress on the reader's mind: "The Rebirth of Mike Tyson. 'I'm not good. I'm not bad. I'm just trying to survive in this world.'" Likewise, the two brothers are presumably just trying to survive a world dominated by "the rawest crews in Philly" (3), whose names Uzi proceeds to list.

The language used by Asante at this point is carefully constructed to make the reader part of the brothers' world: the cryptic acronyms that constitute the names of the crews mentioned by Uzi are explained in their entirety, some jargon is clarified—a whole paragraph is dedicated to the meaning<sup>81</sup> of *jawn*—and the origin of Uzi's real name, Daahoud<sup>82</sup>, is made clear together with that of his several street names. The tense used throughout the chapter is present continuous, sentences are short and concise, and dialogues never amount to more than a couple of words: everything contributes to the feeling of immediacy of the scene, and to make the

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<sup>81</sup> "Jawn" is a Philadelphia slang term used to indicate either an unspecified person or thing. Its most correct standard English rendition would most likely be "thing" or "dude," depending from the contexts. In certain cases, it can even indicate a place, such as a new business or meeting place.

<sup>82</sup> The name "Daahoud" evokes the preference of the protagonist's parents for African names, in line with his Molefi Asante's commitment to an Afrocentric vision of the world. However, the young man's decision to opt for the nickname "Uzi" clearly signals his desire to depart from this tradition to embrace a street culture in which nicknames inspired by weapons are usually characterized as empowering.

reader a part of it, even if the events are filtered through the point of view of the protagonist/narrator, who narrates them in the first person. Malo's identity is constructed through that of his brother: the protagonist does not introduce himself the way he introduced Uzi, and his name only comes up in the dialogues between Uzi and his visiting friend Ted. Even Malo's age is stated in relation to that of his brother: while Uzi is sixteen, Malo is much younger, only twelve, and therefore looks up to his "taller, and older, and smarter" hero, whom he follows "like a shadow" (6). Again, in a very concise style, Asante manages to achieve a triple goal: to draw readers into the scene making them part of it, to clarify the relationship between the two brothers by evidencing the fact that Malo's black male identity is being shaped as a mirror image of Uzi's, and to make the setting in which the protagonists move more familiar to the readers by making Uzi explain things to young Malo, who has just started to approach a world that he does not understand completely. These combined strategies are very effective in stimulating empathy towards the two brothers—and especially towards Uzi, who is portrayed as protective of his little brother—in preparation for the next episode, in which a case of police brutality is poignantly described.

Again, colors are used in a symbolic way to paint an environment that is antagonistic to the two brothers, as disastrous natural elements are evoked to describe the imminent catastrophe that is about to hit the family. "Reds, blues and a gang of whites" suddenly enter the property, "an earthquake hits the house," the front door "flies off," "a tsunami of blue" invades everything, "they flood the house" (8). It is easy to link the red, blue and white colors of the police lights and of the officers' skin to the official colors of the American flag, but these hues, instead of representing patriotism and a sense of inclusion, are clearly used to establish an immediate separation between "them" and "us", and to remark the liminal position of the protagonists in terms of citizenship and national identity. Red has already been associated with blood in "Killadelphia", blue is the color of the "tsunami" which breaks into the protagonists' house, flooding it with destructive force, but white is the most interesting color, since it is used to inscribe the color of the officers' skin into the flag, that is as an integral part of the national identity of the country, while the two brothers are, symbolically, not represented in this color palette. This opposition between "Officer Red Face" on one side and Malo and Uzi on the other is clearly yet subtly expressed in that Officer Red Face is presented as someone who belongs to the elements composing the hostile urban environment, while the brothers are described as liminal subjects: they belong and do not belong to the city and they are forced to live in a constant state of vigilance in order to survive it.

The description of the city in terms of hostile colors and natural elements is of fundamental importance throughout the memoir, since it underlines the peculiarity of Malo's experience of coming of age amidst the dangers of an environment which is inimical of young black men like him. This situates Malo in a tradition of black males who are the victims of the threatening environment that surrounds them and are forced to learn how to navigate its perilous streets at a very young age if they do not want to succumb. At the same time, the reader's awareness that Malo is now an accomplished writer who obviously had his memoir published emphasizes the protagonist's exceptionality, and the fact that he was able to resist the self-destructive logic that dominated the neighborhood of his teen years. The leitmotiv of the "young buck" who has to resist the negative forces confronting his community is therefore introduced with a particular emphasis at the beginning of the text, and will be reiterated throughout the rest of the narration to point out the systematic oppression of young African American men in various circumstances.

The initial disillusionment with the urban environment is reiterated in the chapter "Friends of Foes?", whose opening line provides the reader with a description of the school attended by Malo that leaves little to the imagination: "My school colors are piss yellow and shit brown" (29). Again, colors are used as a reflection of Malo's feelings towards the object of his observation: if the police wagon and the officers' faces inspired fear and were therefore best described through alarming primary colors, Philadelphia Friends Select School evokes in Malo a feeling of disgust, which is evident in the associations that the school colors spark in his mind, as well as in the description of the school principal—whose name is, ironically, Mr. Roach—and of the space in which he moves. Mr. Roach and his office, in which Malo is summoned to appear more often than necessary and for no apparent reason, are described by borrowing images from the natural world that inspire revulsion and the urge to escape. Roach has "food crumbs stuck in his red beard that look like little insect eggs in a crusty nest," and his clothes are so filthy that one "can see the dirt on the inside from the outside like dead bugs in a lamp shade" (36). All senses are invoked to witness the squalor of Friends: the disgusting colors of the school building, the terrible smell of Roach's breath, his unpleasant voice and insistent yelling, the image of greasy fingerprints on the office windows.

The principal's office is described as small, messy, greasy, the space is full of objects and papers and the overall impression is that of a suffocating atmosphere in which Malo has no room to breathe. From Mr. Roach's office Malo can see Love Park, where skaters perfect their routines and where he and his best friend Amir spend their free time, but the red letters that spell *LOVE*

in the center of the park can only be seen in the distance, through “tall, thin windows” (38). This suggests a physical separation between Malo and the idea of love, which is possible only outside of the school building, in the heterotopic space of the park he shares with his beloved friend, a space that is at the same time part of and separated from the urban tissue of Philadelphia. Once again, the protagonist does not belong to the hostile environment of a predominantly white private school in which his parents sent him as a way to claim the right to good education that was denied to themselves when they were young: “I’m at this school for everyone in my family and all the black people who never got a chance to sit here. I know who I’m here for, but I still don’t know why I’m here in Roach’s office.” (36) Not only does Malo resent the school and is unwilling to conform to its rules, he does not even know what the rules are, so that he navigates the school’s corridors like a stranger. The fact that this sense of alienation is linked to the color of his skin is evident when someone writes *nigger* in his locker, confirming that racism hovers in the supposedly progressive school. Everything contributes to the idea of Friends as a place that is all but friendly, and in which Malo’s journey towards self-realization will not be fostered nor encouraged.

Traditional schooling is again associated to a limiting environment when Malo, after his parents’ separation, moves to Germantown with his mother and is sent to a public school, Fels High. The new school is described as a prison, in which police patrol the hallways with nightsticks, windows have thick bars, and the classrooms are so overcrowded that students are forced to stand against the wall by frustrated teachers who do not know their names. Fights between students are everyday matters that, significantly, result in “textbooks facing down, pages open like dead birds” (156). In this case, a simile taken from the natural world is used to depict something that had the potential to elevate, but ends up killed and dismembered by a discouraging environment. The same image is used to describe the ghetto of Germantown where their new, cramped apartment is located and where at night police helicopters patrol the area: “ghetto birds—vultures—fly around with their thirsty searchlight” (132). Again, birds are used metaphorically: the only birds that can survive in this environment are vultures, rapacious beings that profit from the death of other creatures.

The idea of the environment as an enemy is not limited to Philadelphia and its surroundings. When Malo and his mother drive to Arizona to meet Uzi, imprisoned for having sex with a thirteen-year-old white girl who told him she was sixteen, the view they can see from the car windows reinforces the idea of an inhospitable environment: a desert sprinkled with Indian casinos and wild horses, in which the protagonists agonize in a sweat, a setting that feels

alienating to Malo since it is Christmas time, but the only trees they can see are thorny cacti. Ironically, when they speak to the lawyer who is supposed to defend Uzi, a white man who is clearly indifferent to his case and who promptly points out that he has been a cop for twenty-five years, Malo imagines bad weather coming out of his mouth: ““They’re going to try to try him as an adult since he’ll be eighteen by the trial date. I’m going to push for getting him tried as a juvenile since he was seventeen when the incident occurred.’ He goes on and on and on with the bad weather: *clouds, rain, storms*—” (80). The image of rain in the desert, far from being seen as a blessing—as a symbol of the relief provided by a professional who is supposed to help Uzi—is used in this case as a premonition of the destructive forces that are about to tear the family apart: it is clear that this white old lawyer sees Uzi as a statistic, and is therefore resigned to let him drown in the system. The idea of water resurfaces again when Malo, alone in the hotel room, tries to pray for Uzi’s sake as his mother instructed him to do, but sees the image of Emmet Till’s face disfigured by torture and by the action of river water whenever he closes his eyes. It is clear that Asante is preparing the stage for what follows: Uzi is sentenced to ten years in solitary confinement, becoming indeed one more victim of mass incarceration and of the random violence which has historically targeted black men who have been involved with white women.

At sixteen, Malo is closer than ever to being destroyed by the hostile environment which has already killed his best friend Amir and caused the imprisonment of his beloved brother. He tries to resist the self-destructive dynamics of the ghetto by embracing the thug lifestyle that his mother abhors and by adopting a strategy of constant movement to escape the dangers of criminality, but it is clear that the possibilities of premature death or imprisonment are more real than ever. Even joining the UPK gang is not going to protect him: after the punching he has to endure as an initiation rite he notices that “even the sky bleeds” (110) as a clear signal that the environment has not turned into something more tolerable because of the gang’s solidarity. The city, more than ever, turns into a space dominated by angles, hard lines and tight boxes that suffocate him, so that the only possibility for survival is running, turning the next corner and disappearing from sight: “Philly is a city of shapes. Out there everybody has an angle. Like geometry. Squares trying to box me in. Octagons trying to stop me. Circles trying to throw me for a loop. Everything on the line. The sooner I catch the angle, the better off I am” (179).

However, the determinist stance taken for most part of the memoir is reversed towards the end of the text, after Malo’s enrolment in an alternative school that will change his future. Part of

the originality of the book lies in fact in outlining a change in the environment that mirrors the protagonist's inner development and personal growth as he learns to cope with the difficulties of living in an underprivileged area. In fact, the representation of the environment does not remain stable but changes throughout the memoir, shifting according to the conditions in which Malo finds himself, and to the ways in which he chooses to react to the many obstacles that are disseminated onto his path towards maturity. At the beginning, nature, when evoked, is always an enemy, colors are never representative of Malo's experience, and the city in which he moves is made up of angles, sharp edges, and hard lines; however, this somber picture is slowly re-painted as Malo finds his purpose in life and reconciles with his family, suggesting that possibilities to "befriend" the inimical environment might exist. The first hint that something is changing in Malo's attitude towards the environment is seen in the chapter "On the Road", where he and his friend Ryan drive to Malo's relatives in Texas in an attempt to outrun the various drug dealers waiting to collect their money. While driving, Malo watches the sun "rise, set, and then rise again, like watching reruns of a miracle. I bask in the miracle, in the warmth of its rays, in its rise, fall, and redemption. [...] In front of us, the horizon trembles in haze" (183). The sunset, previously associated to blood, is now an almost mystical experience, and the cyclical rhythm of nature is contemplated as something that brings a promise of salvation. The impression that Malo is about to reach an inner balance is confirmed when he reaches the house of Uncle Howard, a mystical eighty-one-year-old who welcomes him as a long-lost son: "his house is like an oasis. Like calm in the middle of a storm" (185). Malo, after years of constant running, has finally stopped and the environment around him reflect his newly found calmness.

From here on, sharp edges and angular shapes disappear and leave space to circular forms that suggest a reconciliation with the cycles of nature. The new, alternative school that Malo attends after he comes back to Philadelphia is finally in harmony with the surrounding territory, and its position suggests the possibility of elevation as well as openness: "Foes [Friends High] looked like shit. Fels looked like jail. Crefeld is perched on a hill and looks like a gingerbread house. [...] All the doors to the rooms are wide open" (197). The possibility to re-paint his environment is confirmed when Malo meets Stacey, the English teacher who will change his future by simply allowing him to write whatever he wants on a white page. While the white page is the symbol for antonomasia of a new beginning, the possibility to reinvent himself is inscribed in the figure of Stacey, whose skin is "the color of art gallery walls" (199). If the whiteness of Officer Red Face and Mr. Roach was rendered through similes that suggested, respectively, fear and disgust,

the description of Stacey's skin implies that her whiteness is not threatening nor revolting and that she is open to any color. Like the walls of an art gallery, Stacey represents the structure that will support Malo's creativity and will finally endorse his artistic ambitions. Stacey also encourages Malo and the other students to sit in a circle while they write, and points out that their energy will flow better this way. Consequently, the teacher symbolically breaks the angular shapes of Philadelphia and creates a circular space in which Malo does not have to run and turn the next angle to be safe. If angles were functional to compartmentalize and separate people, the circle created during English class makes students feel part of a common creative experience. Nature endorses this change and blesses his newly found sense of purpose when he decides that he will become a writer: "the sun slopes across my face like a blessing. Falling rays light up the page and make my words glow" (206). His inner light is metaphorically transferred to his mother, who has followed a parallel path of inner healing and, after seeing that at least one of her sons is finally out of trouble, is able to fight depression and focus again on her career as a choreographer. Watching her work, Malo comments that "it's like watching a flower bloom [...] her face glows like it's backlit" (207).

In the end, the endorsement provided by the new, positive and supportive environment bears fruit: in line with the circular structure that represents rebirth and self-fulfillment throughout the memoir, Malo sits in English class and reads to Stacey and the other students the opening paragraph of *Buck*. The chapter of his graduation of Crefeld is aptly titled "Bearing Fruit" and represents the culmination of his creative efforts into something productive and a reconciliation with the environment that surrounds him. "Graduation. Birds crisscrossing above our heads. The audience is under a white tent" (245). It is the first time that birds are actually seen flying in the sky: they are no longer ghetto vultures, but participate in the celebration of the students' achievements. In the final chapter "Rivers", Malo and his father, finally reconciled, travel to Africa so that the protagonist can finally return to the continent in which he was born.<sup>83</sup> The cycle of his coming-of-age story is complete, he has gone back to his roots, and the final image of him standing with his father at the peak of a mountain and contemplating the rising sun symbolizes that he has overcome the obstacles of the initially hostile environment. The journey has not been victimless—Amir has died in the process, Uzi is still in jail and his sister is in a psychiatric hospital—but the promise of a bright future can shine at the horizon.

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<sup>83</sup> M.K. Asante was born in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1982.

## Generational Conflicts and Black Authenticity

The generational shift that occurs between the generations involved in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and later generations—the so-called late baby boomers, born between 1956 and 1964, and the “hip-hop” or post-post soul generation—has been the center of much attention in post-soul critique. Mark Anthony Neal has famously pointed out how the generation that was born right after the end of legalized segregation undertook major efforts to liberate contemporary interpretations of the American black experience from an aesthetic that had been shaped during previous decades. He locates this generational shift in the African Americans born between the 1963 March of Washington and the *Bakke* case of 1978,<sup>84</sup> and defines these *soul-babies* as:

children of soul, if you will, who came to maturity in the age of Reaganomics and experienced the change from urban industrialism to deindustrialism, from segregation to desegregation. From essential notions of blackness to metanarratives of blackness, without any nostalgic allegiance to the past (back in the days of Harlem, or the thirteenth-century motherland, for that matter) but firmly in the grasp of the existential corners of this brave new world (3).

Todd Boyd, in his discussion of how hip-hop overwhelmingly took over the civil-rights specific music of 1960s Motown, takes the discussion a step further, and while he confirms that “one of the most interesting shifts that continues to take place in Black America is one of a generational nature” he focuses his attention on changing constructions of black masculinity that have taken place after the decline of the respectability politics of the 1960s and of the Afrocentric and black pride philosophies of the 1970s. He considers approximately three generations and suggests that “black male culture has gone from the prevalence of ‘Race Man’ ideology to that of the ‘New Black Aesthetic’ and then has moved squarely into the realm of the ‘Nigga’” (5). Interestingly, Boyd goes on to argue that “this post-generation exists somewhere between the poles of both the race man and the nigga, between the true civil rights generation and the hip-hop generation. The occupation of this liminal space is transitional, though, somehow loosely connected to both other eras but not really a part of either entirely” (6).

In both Neal’s and Boyd’s vision, the post-soul generation and the generation that followed—variously defined as post-post soul or hip-hop generation—have been in the process of

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<sup>84</sup> *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* was a court ruling that supported affirmative action, confirming that race could be a considered a relevant factor in college admission procedures.



redefining their take on blackness for the contemporary scene, dominated by a society that has become, for the first time, legally integrated, and by insidious forms of discrimination that continue to persist. In their attempt to redefine black identity, soul and post-soul babies have liberated themselves from their elders' "nostalgic allegiance to the past" and, some critics argue, from the burden of any obligation to racial loyalty, and can evaluate with a certain critical distance the results achieved by the battles for civil rights. Oversimplifying, we can state that the outcome of this critical assessment is mostly a profound disillusionment due to the persistence of racism even after civil rights have been legally achieved, and disenchantment with the philosophies of Black Power and Afrocentricity after witnessing that black people have been empowered only to a certain degree. It is interesting that while the post-soul and the post post-soul generations differ significantly in their way of expressing this disillusionment, the sentiments at the base of the artistic production of both groups remain similar.

The "liminal space" occupied by the post-soul generation (Boyd, *H.N.I.C.* 6) has been a very productive one in creative terms, ripe with occasions for strong social critique and for articulating a changing discourse on American blackness in response to the new socio-political and cultural paradigms in which African American artists operated, a discourse that has been appropriated and re-articulated by the hip-hop generation. This generational shift, and the new take on black identity politics it expresses, is evidenced in the father-son dynamics outlined in *Buck*. If Malo, having been born in 1982, is already part of the post post-soul or hip-hop generation, his and his brother's take on Molefi Asante, Sr.'s Afrocentricity clearly mirrors the disillusionment and almost resentment expressed towards the rhetoric of the race man that is typical of the works of several post-soul authors. An analysis of how the complex relationship between Malo and his father is portrayed is therefore interesting in that it reveals that the critique towards some of the ideals and philosophies of the 1960s and 1970s continues to be popular among young African American writers. However, the fact that Malo's relation to his mother is, although equally problematic, still strikingly different than the one he establishes with his father, reveals that the generational fracture that can be evidenced between his and previous generations is deeply affected by gender dynamics that have seldom been explored.

Significantly, Dr. Molefi Kete Asante Sr. is firstly introduced to the reader of *Buck* as a "prison guard" (10) who fills the doorway to Uzi's bedroom in a display of patriarchal authority after having decided that his stepson will be sent to Arizona as a corrective measure to his numerous misdemeanors. In the scene, Asante Sr. is wearing one of his elaborate dashikis, which gives

Malo the chance to explain how his father's identification as African is a continuous source of ironic puzzlement to Uzi and to himself:

"I'm African," he told Uzi and Ted the other day on the porch. Ted calls Pops "Dr. Africa."

"That's why I wear African clothes."

"But you're from Georgia," Uzi said.

"Being born in Georgia doesn't make me an American any more than being born in an oven makes a cat a biscuit."

"Huh?"

"There's an African proverb that says, 'No matter how long a log sits in a river, it will never become a crocodile.' That means that even in a foreign habitat, a snail never loses its shell. Even in America, I'm still African."

"Here he goes." Uzi shook his head. "Always in his Afrocentric bag" (11).

From the very first interactions registered in *Buck*, it is clear that not only father and sons have different aesthetics and ideals ("always in his Afrocentric bag"), but also that they do not share a common language ("Huh?"). Significantly, Asante Sr.'s attempts at conversation with his children are usually described as "preaching": he "is always preaching Afrocentricity" and "sounds like he's in the pulpit" (11). His rhetoric, interspersed with African sayings and lapidary condemnation of whoever violates his ethic of hard work and middle-class respectability, is mocked by his children as old-fashioned, empty theory with no significance to their contemporary situation. Moreover, if Uzi's style was clarified by Malo in the opening scene of the memoir by explaining the acronyms and some of the vocabulary he used, Asante Sr.'s language remains a mystery: in recalling a debate among his father, Cornel West and Arthur Schlesinger, Malo concludes that "half the time I didn't even know what he was talking about—*hegemony...pedagogy...subverting the dominant paradigm*—but I was proud" (11). This shows that Malo is becoming more and more familiar with the language and style of the hip-hop generation represented by Uzi, but has difficulties in interacting with the previous one, whose ideals remain obscure, abstract and not at all applicable to his lived experience of blackness. The fact that Malo underlines how proud he is of his father's achievements is significant in that it reveals the kind of grateful acknowledgement of the work of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements that several post-soul authors express, but that does not prevent them from criticizing certain aspects of this legacy. Malo is genuinely trying to understand and appreciate the work of his father, and there are several passages that suggest that the narrator, who is looking back at his adolescence and recalling his confusion about the

philosophy professed by his father, has reconsidered Afrocentricity and now recognizes its value to empower black people.<sup>85</sup> However, this cannot change the fact that neither Afrocentricity nor any of the ideals of racial uplift promoted during the previous decades is helpful in facing the different forms of discrimination that Malo and Uzi encountered daily when he was growing up. As Bertram Ashe points out, “the generation of black artists and writers who were born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement were born or raised into a far more complicated African American milieu than earlier generations, at least in terms of the way blackness was addressed and practiced” (“Theorizing” 617). Afrocentricity, Malo seems to imply, has served well into the milieu of his father’s generation, but is no longer sufficient to make sense of the complex reality in which he and Uzi were born, marked by a hostile environment in which new and pernicious forms of racism often prevent black youth from achieving their full potential.

In fact, if Malo shows a certain familiarity with and respect of the heroes of African American history—he calls them by name when stating that his house is covered in portraits of “Martin, Malcolm, Harriet”<sup>86</sup> (11)—he seems impatient towards the rhetoric of the “race man” displayed by his father, whose language is portrayed as distant. While Asante Sr. talks about blackness in abstract terms and emphasizes the connection of American blacks to their ancestral homeland, his children are concerned with more practical aspects of their life as young black men. With a good dose of irony, Malo makes clear that his only appreciation of Afrocentricity in real life is manifested in his preference for the porn movies produced by the company Afro-Centrix Productions: “I tell Pops about the other Afro-Centrix and he’s disgusted. *Say what?* But he’s the one who’s always talking about how black people should have their own stores, own banks, own schools—shouldn’t we have our own porn studios too?” (12) This scene is a very clear example of what Ashe defines *allusion-disruption* strategy, that is a signifying on traditional tropes of blackness or on previous eras of black history: in this case, both forms of signifying are present, since Malo is being ironic about both the figure of the race man, and the he ideals of racial uplift and patriarchal respectability endorsed during the Civil Rights Movement.

As a consequence, I read the figures of father and sons in *Buck* as the repositories of two different and sometimes oppositional takes on black authenticity. Asante Sr. clearly embodies

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<sup>85</sup> “Back then I didn’t get it, but now I think I do. Afrocentricity basically means that black people should view the world through our own black eyes” (12).

<sup>86</sup> The author is referring to Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and Harriet Tubman.

the race man of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and his manifestations of racial salience are expressed in his almost obsessive desire to uplift his people through education, academic excellence, rigid politics of respectability, and the glorification of nuclear black family. On the other hand, Uzi and Malo represent the “keepin’ it real” philosophy that summarizes the system of beliefs of the hip-hop generation, which links authentic blackness to the necessity to be true to one’s values and loyal to one’s community. As Todd Boyd suggests: “the race man is truly a product of the civil rights era, having been raised at a time when legalized segregation was still a reality that would forever inform his world, even after this legal practice ended” (5). In this sense, the aesthetics and system of beliefs of “race man Asante” are portrayed as static, since the father is shown to be unable to relate to the rapidly changing society in which his sons are growing up, and his Afrocentric theories cannot be applied with satisfactory results to help Uzi and Malo to make sense of their lived experience of blackness.

Moreover, there are in the text several passages in which Asante Sr.’s take on racial authenticity is openly criticized as contradictory in that his professed ideals do not coincide with his actual lifestyle. For example, Malo points out that his father is aware of the shortcomings of traditional institutions when addressing the educational needs of black students, but sends him to a white school anyway: “I remember him tell the interviewer that: ‘I can honestly say that I have never found a school in the United States run by whites that adequately prepares black children to enter the world as sane human beings.’ *So what the hell am I doing here in this white-ass school then?*” (41). This contradictory attitude between academic commitment and activism on one side, and pragmatic decisions affecting his family on the other, is made all the more evident when his father is repeatedly shown to contribute to the dissolution of the Asante’s household despite his continuous efforts to stress the importance of the black nuclear family. In fact, not only Asante Sr. refuses to bail Uzi out of jail, basically endorsing his subsequent ten-year sentence, but, unable to put up with the depressive disorder affecting his wife, decides to leave the household altogether. As a consequence, if Asante Sr. had been presented in the previous chapters as possessing a monolithic, uncorrupted racial authenticity (in the form of loyalty to the race in general and to the cause of black liberation in particular), throughout the memoir there are various hints indicating that his performance of authentic blackness is controversial and uncoherent.

In my view, what the author is suggesting is not that his father’s racial salience is to be questioned and that his black authenticity is fake—after all, Malo is proud of his father’s achievements and of his unshakable faith in social and political activism—but that father and

sons have two very different ideas of what “being authentic” actually means. As legal scholar Christopher A. Bracey rightly argues when discussing the “keepin’ it real” philosophy, racial “realness” acquires a very specific meaning in the context of hip-hop culture, a meaning constructed in opposition to the exact same values the author’s father—and to a certain extent all fathers of previous generations—represents:

The phenomenal rise of hip hop culture exemplified this fetish for authenticity, as poor and urban youth began to express themselves culturally and artistically in defiance of dominant social values and middle-class propriety. “Keep it real” emerged as a mantra, signaling one’s intention to be true to oneself, one’s values, and importantly one’s community. Fronting – the practice of inhibiting oneself or pretending to be something other than one’s genuine self – was frowned upon. In hip hop circles, keeping it real carried a distinct racial component – maintaining one’s pride of and fidelity to the race, and refuse to “sell out” in order to satisfy prevailing societal expectations (45).

As a consequence, when Asante Sr. is worried about his reputation instead of about Uzi’s safety after the boy is known to have had sex with a white girl—“A white girl! My enemies will love this” (74).—Malo cannot help but “frown upon” his father’s lack of genuine empathy and paternal concern and his preoccupation with image and “prevailing societal expectations”, which in this case refer to both the expectations of Asante Sr.’s enemies and of that part of the black community—enemies or not—that identified with a vision of essentialized blackness, according to which sex with a white girl is inappropriate at best.

Malo’s version of racial authenticity, on the other hand, is based on shared values between him and his peers and is de-essentialized in that African ancestry does not play a fundamental role in his vision of blackness. In fact, he refers to his Cambodian friend Dah as a real “nghz,” explaining that his allegiance to him is based on class solidarity, shared aesthetics, and a similar awareness of being outcasts:

Dah and all the other Cambodians in Olney are nghz. They look like nghz—dark, thick features; dress like nghz—baggy and colorful; talk like nghz—fast and raw; and are even poorer than nghz, with like forty people in a two-bedroom apartment. They don’t own shit—no nail salons, no beauty stores, no laundromats, no check-cashing points, no corner stores. No banks, no take-out spots with cloudy bulletproof glass—just like nghz. I think the other Asians look down on them too...just like nghz (115).

Dah might not be of African descent, but he is clearly accepted as part of the community in that he not only experiences the same condition of second-class citizenship and destitution that Malo and his peers express, but also establishes for himself a very specific role in that community, being the go-to tattoo artists of all Olney youth. As a consequence, Dah is familiar with the symbols and signs used by other “nghz” to convey shared values and express belonging to a certain group, and can appropriate this semiological system through his art. On the contrary, Malo’s classmate Fred at Friends High, although of African descent, cannot be considered a “ngh”, not because of his pigmentation or ancestry—Fred is, in fact, mixed race—but because he chooses to ignore years of close friendship with Malo and his family and prefers to hang out with posh white boys and, more generally, to side with traditional institutions that oppress young blacks. This is exemplified in a scene in chapter nineteen in which Malo is trying to outrun Principal Roach, and Fred reveals to the man the direction he has taken, acting as a traitor and compromising his escape. Real racial solidarity, the author seems to imply, is not based on an essentialized notion of black authenticity, but on a flexible system of common values and beliefs, among which loyalty to the members of the community is paramount.

It is evident that Malo’s black authenticity is best expressed when he shows his love for his peers not by emphasizing common ancestry or by being a part of organized political and social militancy, but by being true to its ethics. This is demonstrated, for example, when he eventually embraces a thug lifestyle and starts dealing crack, but categorically refuses to sell it to the grandmother of one of his homeboys: lyrics by 2Pac follows the scene, explaining that Malo declines the opportunity to make some easy money because he prefers to remain loyal to the community: “cuz being a ngh means you love nghz, so how could you love nghz if you tryna drug nghz?” (177). Malo’s conception of authentic blackness is in fact based on the values of loyalty and racial solidarity expressed in the fourteen commandments of the Thug Life Codes of UPK members listed in the chapter “A Hunnit Knuckles”, in which the protagonist undergoes the ritual punching that will constitute his initiation to thug life and will officially make him a recognized member of the UPK gang. Although operating outside the realm of legality, the gang appears to have precise rules meant to protect the weakest members of the black community, such as “no slinging in schools, [...] no slinging to pregnant sisters, [...] harm to babies and old people will not be forgiven, [...] no rape, [...] respect brothers and sisters if they respect themselves” (107-8). The emphasis on these rules points out that even in his most difficult time, after succumbing to the hostile environment of “Killadelphia” and embracing the lifestyle his parents dreaded so much, Malo never loses his authenticity, which is the sparkle

that distinguishes him from the most abject members of the community, such as his fellow dealer J-Money, who eventually sells crack to his own grandmother: in doing so, the young man betrays the values of loyalty and unity that characterize “true nghz” and consequently commits an unforgivable act of selling out.

In fact, J-Money represents the essential Sellout according to Randall Kennedy’s definition, that is: “someone who is dangerously antagonistic to blacks’ well-being,” someone who not only is not true to his own values, but does not mind endangering the most fragile members of the black community (5). It is easy to notice that, according to this definition, Malo’s father, in spite of his passionate black militancy, is very close to becoming a sellout himself, in that he is “dangerously antagonistic” to the family’s well-being, since he refuses to do all that is in his power to get Uzi out of prison and he abandons his wife in a moment in which her psychophysical health is seriously at stake. The lack of authenticity and coherence of his father’s side is what Malo resents most, and only after an actual physical fight between the two, which spurs the father to finally admit his unconditional love for Malo, restoring in this way a semblance of his loyalty to the family, can father and son start the difficult process of their reconciliation (221). Significantly, the scene of the fight between Malo and Asante Sr. is followed by one in which father and son celebrate their reconciliation by eating soul food: it is interesting that while Asante Sr. tells Malo the story of how he was born, the author periodically interrupts the father’s narration to list in detail the dishes they are being served. Such a detailed description of food suggests that the rediscovered intimacy between father and son is linked to allegiance to the black experience in a form that both individuals can share and enjoy.

A more similar take on black authenticity is shown to characterize the relationship between Malo and his mother Amina. From the beginning of the memoir, Amina is depicted as an understanding and caring mother who, despite experiencing a terrible nostalgia for the past and struggling against depression, still tries to bridge the gap between her generation and that of her sons. Because of her condition, Amina is often numbed by medications and appears in the text as a silent and voiceless presence, so that the reader can know something of what she thinks only through the pages of her diary, which Malo reads without her knowledge. The opposition between Amina and Asante Sr. is therefore immediately established in that the father is “always preaching” and does not listen to his sons, while Amina is silent but appears to be a keen observer and a good listener. Contrary to stereotypes of black emasculative women that enjoyed

increased popularity after the release of the infamous Moynihan Report,<sup>87</sup> Amina is depicted as not only uncommunicative, but also dependent, emotionally and financially, from her husband, so that her efforts to find a common ground for dialogue with her sons are undermined by her position of subjugation.

The chapter “Open Secrets” is entirely dedicated to Amina and the discovery of her journal. The section opens with the woman being brought to the hospital after her attempted suicide, and the narration of her recovery is interlocked with that of Tupac’s death, which happens the same night Amina is carried away. The bringing together of Amina’s and Tupac’s stories, together with the rap lyrics that punctuate the chapter, clearly hints at the fact that this particular mother is considered by the author as a representative for all black mothers suffering because of the random violence that afflicts their sons. Both Amina and her sons are the receiver rather than the owners of patriarchal authority, and this shared position seems to draw Amina closer to Uzi and Malo than their father will ever be. This is emphasized by the fact that Amina and her sons, although they do not enjoy regular and fulfilling communication, share the same frustration towards the rhetoric of the race man. Through the pages of Amina’s diary, we read that: “Chaka [Asante Sr.] is not a child’s person. He barks orders and expects little people to obey. [...] I wish I could really talk to Chaka. But it is all pronouncements and sermons” (63). Moreover, besides complaining about the incommunicability that exists between her husband and the rest of the family, Amina, similarly to Malo, notices that Asante Sr. is contradictory in the discrepancies between his “pronouncements and sermons” and the lived experience of the Asante household. In her diary she writes that “Chaka is abandoning me and I’ve given up hope that he’ll *reflect on his role* in abandoning the family even as he preaches about the black family. What is that? Why is that? The whole community loves Chaka and they don’t know the internal rhythms of pain and destruction that are happening in the family” (57, my emphasis). In this passage Amina seems particularly aware of the performative character of Asante Sr.’s position, she understands that the whole community is looking up to him for inspiration and guidance, but that group pressure, although having a strong influence on the kind of public image he has to maintain, do not necessarily influence the everyday reality of his family life. It is also interesting that the rhetoric questions Amina asks—“What is it? Why is that?”—seem to mirror the same kind of difficulty to understand the rhetoric of the race man that Uzi and Malo

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<sup>87</sup> For a more extensive explanation of how the Moynihan Report and similar essays impacted the development of the stereotype of domineering and emasculative black women see Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies*, chapter 3 “Baby Mama (Drama) and Baby Daddy (Trauma): Post-Soul Gender Politics,” pp. 57-98.



manifested earlier. These misunderstandings seem all the more evident when Asante Sr. refuses to bail Uzi out of jail and Amina protests: ““You don’t understand [...] What it’s like...for a mother”” (75). The passage seems to suggest not only that the experience of motherhood gifts Amina with a sensitivity that makes her *feel* differently, so that her capacity for empathy allows her to bridge the generational gap that exists between mother and son, but also that mothers are struck particularly hard by the violence that targets black youth. This impression is confirmed in the following scene, in which Malo looks up in the Internet for information about the killing of Emmet Till: significantly, the scene closes with lines from Amina’s diary in which she wonders what will happen to her son in jail (76).

Asante, Sr.’s intransigence towards Uzi’s lifestyle and his fear that his actions will ruin his public image is understandable in the light of black identity politics of the late twentieth century, which are at the base of his political and social engagement. Mark Anthony Neal remarks that:

the soul aesthetic was the cultural component to the most visible black nationalist ideas of the twentieth century. Subsumed within these efforts to build and support a “nation within a nation” was a litany of ideological and identity constructs that were often perceived as undermining black efforts at inclusion. [...] blacks rigorously closed ranks around common notions of black identity, even if such homogeneity was a fictive gesture. [...] The strict code of discipline directed toward black children is just one example of the violence directed within the community to protect it from the violence directed towards the community from beyond. But such inward violence—and *violence* is not too strong a term—was also associated with patriarchal and heterosexist tendencies that denied full agency to women, queers, and others within the black community (5).

As Neal makes clear, Amina feels closer to Uzi and Malo than her husband does because she, as a woman, occupies a liminal position in the cultural arena dominated by Asante Sr., a cultural arena that her children experienced only through the activism of their father and in which, similarly to Amina, they never had any first-hand experience of activism. Amina was supposed to support her husband in his political engagement but never to “speak up”, and this is reflected in the expectations of Asante Sr. towards both her and Uzi and Malo. In fact, both Amina and her sons emphasize how Asante Sr. does not listen to them, how he expects “little people” to obey, and how he asks Amina rhetorical questions about her health, demanding to hear that everything is under control and that she is feeling better when she clearly is not.

Amina’s position, as a consequence, allows her to understand her sons deeply, although she clearly differs from their generation in many respects. We can in fact state that she belongs, not

only chronologically but also behaviorally, to the generation of late baby boomers who preceded the post-soul group, since she displays the exact opposite of all the characteristics that are considered the defining features of the post-soul generation. She is not a “cultural mulatto” (Ellis, “NBA” 235; Ashe, “Theorizing” 613) in that she was raised in a segregated black community and had little contact with white people, and she expresses a clear nostalgia for the days of her childhood. Mark Anthony Neal argues that soul babies are “without any nostalgic allegiance to the past [...] but firmly in grasp of the existential concerns of this brave new world” (3), while Amina, in a long stream of consciousness that follows her second attempt at suicide, expresses a strong longing for the clearer social order of when:

Easter meant new cloths and Cuban-heeled shoes and nobody seemed to mind that Jesus and the Easter bunny were white [...] when everybody knew they were colored and nobody wanted to be white—just don’t call them black [...] when old folks were grandma and grandpa and all children should stay out of grown folks’ business [...] when certain things were said in front of white folks and white folks said everything...when we knew they weren’t right but we didn’t know nothing about our rights...when the weather was on our side and God only had one name [...] when was it when everything was in place, or so it seemed? [...] when home meant the projects, and when was it that the projects meant the ghetto? (193-4).

Amina’s reminiscing of her childhood days evidences how black identity politics based on racial essentialism were often inextricably tied with a concern over black masculinity. The desire to unify black identity under one nationalist agenda silenced members of the community who did not enjoy leadership roles in a patriarchal system—notably women and queers—as well as those who did not conform to respectability politics and who were thought to jeopardize the public image of the race. As a consequence, Amina’s, Uzi’s and later Malo’s voices have to be silenced by Asante Sr. as a way to foster his attempt to shape a defensive, although fictive, monolithic black communal identity.

The same erasure of “alternative” voices is displayed in Asante Sr.’ attitude towards his daughter, Malo’s stepsister Anika, who appears to be suffering from a form of psychosis. Anika’s favorite pastime is family genealogy, and she enjoys indulging in the research of documents that can prove her connection to European and Native American people. Malo reports how their father loses his temper in hearing Anika deny her African ancestry, so that instead of trying to understand the origins of the trauma that prevents her from reconciling with her blackness, he silences her: “He got heated. ‘Anika, we are African. African American.

Black” (41). Ironically, even in her state of confusion Anika seems to understand that Asante Sr.’s racial essentialism is in fact a pose, so that she eventually feels free to ignore his rebukes: “Dad’s African royalty is adopted African royalty,” she whispers Malo, “because he went to Africa and became a king and that’s how he got his African royalty” (43). It is interesting that Malo reports that every day Anika sees what she calls “the neighbors”, white people who chase her and throw racial slurs at her. The letter she sends Malo, and which is entirely reported in the text, describes the neighbors’ appearance and racist behavior, but Anika complains that nobody believes that someone is threatening her. This seems to mirror one of the main characteristics of modern-day discrimination, which is the fact of being something hidden and hard to prove. Anika, however, knows that she is the target of discrimination and that the source of the threats is close to her—the *neighbors*—even if she cannot demonstrate it. Interestingly, the conclusion of the letter reinforces the impression that the silencing of her voice is not an isolated case, and that black women’s pain has historically been belittled and overlooked, even by other black women: “P.S.S. The reason why my mon doesn’t believe me is because her mom didn’t believe her!” (43). At this regard, Anika’s words seem to recall the impossibility to break the circle of violence against black women described by Amina in chapter two, when she tells Malo that she saw her mother raped and was unable to yell for help because her voice refused to come out.

It is noteworthy that both Amina and Anika seem to be the victims of a patriarchal system that systematically ignores or silences their voices, a fact that strongly contributes to their disorders: severe depression in Amina’s case, and psychotic disorder in Anika’s. Both women have difficulties in shaping a stable and healthy identity: Anika is clearly unable to reconcile with her African ancestry, while Amina seems to have a sort of split identity in that the pages of her diary are addressed to Carole, her former name before changing it for an African one. However, if Anika’s difficulties of making sense of her black heritage are evidently destined to remain unaddressed—by the end of the memoir she is still hospitalized and the “neighbors” visit her daily—Amina makes a conscious effort to bring together her split “souls” on the blank page. The constant dialogue she establishes with Carole allows her to heal overtime, and in reading her diary Malo becomes acutely aware of his mother’s will to survive. Malo and Amina’s journeys towards self-determination, in fact, run in parallel directions, since both of them will choose writing as a successful strategy of survival and rebirth.

## Conclusions: The Slave Narrative Revisited

In defining new racism, Patricia Hill-Collins has pointed out that

the persisting of poor housing, poor health, illiteracy, unemployment, family upheaval, and social problems associated with poverty and powerlessness all constitute new variations of the negative effects of colonialism, slavery, and traditional forms of racial rule. The new racism reflects sedimented or past-in-present racial formations from prior historical periods (55).

Despite the fact that Malo's family can be considered middle-class, *Buck* exemplifies the above statement very well in that the text shows just how easily the achievements of the 1960s and 1970s in terms of financial stability can be overturned. The fact that the family experienced acute poverty and that both sons, influenced by the hostile environment that surrounded them during their adolescence, ended up involved in petty crimes demonstrates that access to the middle-class did not automatically save black families from the dangers of ghetto life and from forms of discrimination that carried on well beyond the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The social and academic prestige enjoyed by both Amina (aka Kariamuwelsh-Asante) and Molefi Kete Asante, Sr. is not enough to protect the family from financial difficulties, bad schools and from a criminal justice system that systematically targets urban young blacks. In fact, when Uzi asks Amina to use their "clout" to get him out of prison, she knows that this will not be a viable strategy: "they don't look at me and see an educator, a choreographer that's traveled the world. They see a nigger. A nigger" (82).

Actually, one of the most striking characteristics of *Buck* is the frequent use of tropes derived from the slave narrative genre, as well as a structure that reminds readers of African American literature of what Robert Stepto defined "the integrated slave narrative" (1991, 11), that is a narration in which several documents validating the author's statements (for example letters or newspaper articles) are integrated harmoniously in the body of the text. In this light, the coming-of-age of the "young buck" is more akin to the journey from slavery to freedom that characterizes all slave narratives than to the classical stages of Western Bildungsroman. As a consequence, the depiction of a hostile environment is functional in emphasizing the conditions of modern-day slavery under which a large part of urban black youth lives, and that push the protagonist Malo to escape. The association between the urban environment of Philadelphia and plantation life is emphasized through several rhetorical strategies, notably the insistence on terms denoting the semantic field of physical pain (for example in the first scene, when Uzi is

merciless beaten by the police and Malo is forced to watch), and the frequent use of similes that convey the identification of young Malo in a run-away slave, and of figures of authority (Mr. Roach, but also his father) in patrollers. Already in 1974, Stephen Butterfield in his comprehensive study of black autobiographies argued that

the descriptions of black life in the recent books closely resemble the descriptions of slave life in the old ones: what it feels like to rot in a jail cell, what happens in the normal prison routine, what ghetto existence is like on the day-to-day level, what police brutality means, are subjects that parallel what it was like to pick cotton, fix railings, take a whipping, wear chains, and get sold on the auction block. They serve to show how little has changed in the basic quality of the black man's experience with white society (259).

The generational fracture between father and sons is therefore understandable in this light: after the legal victories of the 1960s and 1970s, the hope was that opportunities would continue to grow for the following generations, and that black youth might use these new routes for social mobility to improve their situation. Instead, the hip-hop children coming of age between the 1980s and the 1990s, despite growing up in a time of unprecedented visibility of black people in public life and corporate jobs, found that economic, political and social barriers that prevented them from achieving their full potential still existed. This situation often led to the reassessment of the agendas of Black Nationalists and of the legacy of their activism on the part of black youth, and to misunderstandings with their elders, who complain of the fact that new generations are ignoring the lessons of the previous decades. Significantly, it is only after the father candidly confesses how much he loves Malo that both can embark in a process of self-healing that will overcome both the difficulties imposed by the hostile environment and the misunderstanding of generational divides. In this newly found state of awareness, Malo's artistic ambitions can be fostered and bear fruit.

## Final Remarks: A Balanced Consideration of the Strengths and Limits of the Post-Soul Aesthetic

*The end of the essential black subject is something which people are increasingly debating, but they may not have fully reckoned with its political consequences.*

Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities” (1989)

In this dissertation I have argued that the validity of notions of “authentic blackness” is seriously questioned in memoirs written by African Americans authors who were born or came of age after the end of the Civil Rights movement. In particular, I have tried to demonstrate how in these texts the search for a stable and coherent black identity is replaced by the acceptance of a fluid, non-prescriptive, ever-shifting blackness, a blackness that might be endlessly re-interpreted and re-signified over the course of a lifetime. The six case studies analyzed in this dissertation, which features authors coming from very diverse social and familial backgrounds, show that post-Civil Rights memoirists are overwhelmingly engaged in a redefinition of “what it means to be black” that challenges conventional notions of black authenticity and makes room for new interpretations of racial salience. Specifically, the memoirists I consider show how their process of identity construction is consistently shaped in opposition to ideas of authentic blackness imposed by the militant activism of their nationalistic parents.

Throughout this dissertation, the theoretical framework of the post-soul aesthetics, and specifically of the post-soul triangular matrix developed by Bertram Ashe in 2007, has proved to be a fruitful lens through which memoirs written between the late 1990s and 2013 can be analyzed. All the texts I consider display in fact the three “pillars” of post-soul literature described by Ashe, namely cultural mulattism, blaxploration and allusion-disruption gestures. This can lead us to two main final considerations: the first is that the post-soul can be successfully theorized as a literary aesthetics—as Ashe already claimed—and can be fruitfully applied as a theoretical framework to better understand life writing, and especially memoirs, written in the post-Civil Rights era; the second is that the exploration of *non*-traditional expectations of blackness that the post-soul aesthetic theorizes, and that was thought to be a prerogative of fiction—especially in the novel, and particularly the satirical novel—is actually carried on consistently also in non-fictional genres such as the memoir. However, two

considerations must also inform our conclusive thoughts on post-soul memoirs. The first is that the concepts of cultural mulattism, blaxploration and allusion-disruption gesture are much more complex and multi-layered than generally acknowledged, and can acquire many different meanings and interpretations according to the author's personal, familial, geographical and educational background; the second is that the closer we move to the contemporary scene, the less tenable and effective the post-soul triangular matrix becomes. Both considerations deserve to be explored at length.

First of all, let us consider the implications of cultural mulattism. While Trey Ellis initially theorized cultural mulattoes as a group engaged in a joyous exploration of multiple cultural traditions that they navigate with ease, Ashe in his 2007 essay had already pointed out how cultural mulattism can in fact be much more difficult to actualize. Actually, Ashe had noted that the expression "cultural mulatto," first appeared in Reginal McKnight's "The Honey Boys," was originally used by the protagonist of that short story to describe his rootlessness, his feeling of not belonging to any specific cultural tradition. Similarly, the protagonists of the memoirs I analyze in this dissertation engage in different manifestations of cultural mulattism, all of whom are closer to the troubled attempt to reconcile multiple cultural backgrounds theorized by McKnight and Ashe than to the effortless and unproblematic "navigation" speculated by Ellis. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly true that the end of *de jure* racial segregation drastically changes the cultural landscape in which post-Civil Rights black writers operate. The most obvious example of this in the memoir genre is the fact that, in all of the texts I examine, the protagonists spend a considerable amount of time describing their experiences as black children attending newly integrated schools. On the other hand, if the possibility to attend a multicultural—although at times predominantly white—institution is culturally enriching and bears promises of upward social mobility, this "navigation" of diverse cultural spaces is never simple nor painless, and protagonists are often overwhelmed by the necessity to "switch" their behavioral and aesthetics codes to the demands of the different social environments they move in.

Another point to consider is the different ways in which authors engage in their process of blaxploration, trying to understand what being black means to them and how to "act black" in a world in which black identities seem to have become more hybrid and pluralized than ever before. Generally speaking, we could state that blaxploration is a troubling process for most memoirists, who struggle to define themselves in a social context in which they are subjected to the double expectations of authenticity imposed by mainstream society—mostly in terms of

stereotypes associated to black life—and by the black community itself. As a consequence, post-soul memoirists often find themselves “switching” from one identity performance to another, according to the social space they move in. Actually, despite their efforts to contest the validity of the concept of authentic blackness, post-soul memoirists are often engaged in a conscious effort to be perceived as more or less black according to what the situation requires of them.

Of the six case studies here analyzed, Nelson George seems to be the only one for whom the process of redefining black identity in the post-Civil Rights scene entails moments of boundless, ecstatic creativity. However, his description of Fort Greene in the 1980s and early 1990s and of the explosion of creative energy in the African American cultural scene that characterized the neighborhood in those decades seems to suggest that his experience was a fortunate exception rather than the rule. This does not mean that the emergence of the New Black Aesthetics that George describes should be overlooked as a fleeting phase simply because it does not reflect the experience of the majority: quite the contrary, I believe that this period of blossoming creativity in the black community of Fort Greene should be further investigated, and that the experience of George and other black artists who were able to emerge and find a fertile ground for their talent in those years represent an essential aspect of the reorganization of black life after Civil Rights that critics such as Bertram Ashe, Mark Anthony Neal and George himself have long theorized.

Unfortunately, his experience seems to be very different from those that the majority of his fellow post-soul memoirists describe. For authors such as Jesmyn Ward, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and MK Asante, the principal marker of their black identity is still the possibility of falling prey to random, unjustified violence, and to experience on a daily basis forms of systematic anti-black discrimination that range from *de facto* housing segregation to racialized poverty, from inequalities in the penal justice system to a general sense of devaluation of their lives and of the lives of their loved ones. This does not mean that these authors do not engage in blaxploration: on the contrary, the reflection on what constitutes blackness and on how it should be properly performed in different social settings is not only pervasive, but sometimes even vital (think for example of Ta-Nehisi Coates and his attempts to perform a “thuggish” blackness to avoid being beaten up by local youth gangs). Blaxploration is an essential part of the process of identity formation of these artists, but what I am arguing here is that we should maybe re-signify blaxploration: the exploration of blackness that these artists accomplish is not simply about trying to fit *non-traditional*—and by that I mean “bourgeois,” “preppy”—lifestyles into



acceptable definitions of black identity, it is also and maybe uppermost about challenging *traditional* expectations of blackness. For examples, when Ta-Nehisi Coates and his brother Bill have to carefully stage a thuggish attitude to safeguard the integrity of their vulnerable black bodies, what does this tell us about images of aggressiveness and hypersexuality traditionally associated to young black males? It seems to me that blaxploration can work in two directions: to ward off the demands of racial authenticity of the black community, allowing artist to interpret their blackness in *non-traditional* terms, but also to contest the validity of images that are *traditionally* associated to black life, usually as a form of social control. If re-interpreted in this way, blaxploration becomes one of the main features of a series of texts that have been produced since the end of the Civil Rights movement, and that not only reflect on the reorganization of black culture in the post-integration scene, but also denounce the enduring legacy of anti-black practices (for example, racial profiling).

If cultural mulattism and blaxploration can be tricky concepts that probably need to be deeply re-signified to still hold true in most post-soul memoirs, the allusion-disruption technique is a characteristic that all of these texts share. The need to re-evaluate the legacy of “Conscious,” nationalist black parents seems to be a constant for all post-soul memoirists, who express a strong admiration and respect for their elders’ struggles, but cannot help feeling trapped by the rigid definitions of authentic blackness that their parents often imposed on them. That allusion-disruption gestures can be considered a signature trait of post-soul texts, and not just an expression of rebellion to parental control typical of most coming-of-age narratives in any literary tradition, seems to be confirmed by the fact that, of all the texts I consider in this dissertation, the only one that does not consistently engage in allusion-disruption moments is James McBride’s. *The Color of Water* presents in fact a white mother who, though deeply conscious of the implications of race and ethnicity in American society, is not explicitly involved in any form of social and political activism, but supports the Civil Rights and Black power movements “from afar,” conscious that her skin color is a problem in the nationalistic agenda of some of the leaders of the black community. As a consequence, though the author consistently makes fun of the quirky ways of Ruth McBride, his satirical remarks sound more like benevolent jokes towards his “bizarre” but resilient mother rather than actual allusion-disruption gestures.

In short, I would argue that the post-soul aesthetic, especially as the post-soul triangular matrix is concerned, can be utilized as a fruitful and productive interpretive tool for African American texts produced by authors born after Civil Rights only when it is applied as a flexible grid,

whose “pillars” can be interpreted in different ways according to the authors’ intentions and social background. However, this discussion of the post-soul aesthetics would be too simplistic if I did not recognize that the significance of the post-soul starts to drastically dwindle around the year 2013 and after. Admittedly, at the beginning of this dissertation I considered the post-soul as an on-going phenomenon, to be more precise, I actually understood the post-soul not as a specific period in African American literary history, but more as a theoretical frame, a school of thought if you will, according to which certain texts could be interpreted. I was therefore unwilling to put an “expiration date” to what I saw essentially as a way of reading African American contemporary literature. However, as my work progressed, I had to admit that the validity this theoretical frame started to vacillate in the most recent texts of my corpus: Ward and Asante’s, both published in 2013. These texts are more concerned with denouncing the enduring legacy of anti-black racism, with exposing the consequence of institutional racism, and with unveiling the vulnerability of black bodies than with a joyous exploration of new patterns of black identity.

After 2013, the panorama of black literature seems to change dramatically, following the new and painful events that impacted the African American community: the more and more numerous episodes of police brutality sparked a wave of outrage that resulted in the founding of #BlackLivesMatter and of dozens of grassroots movements focused on denouncing and fighting the consequences of contemporary forms of anti-black racism. In literature, and in life writing in particular, this has coincided with a more intense reflection on embodied blackness, particularly the ways in which the black body is vulnerable to the attacks of several forms of structural racism, of which police brutality is just the most obvious example. This is evident, for instance, in texts that have quickly become classics of the contemporary black cultural scene, among which we must necessarily mention Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* (2015), but also Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), Danez Smith’s *Don’t Call Us Dead* (2017), Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* (2017), and the anthology edited by Jesmyn Ward *The Fire This Time: A New generation Speaks about Race* (2016). It is also interesting that authors who have been previously marked as quintessentially representative of the post-soul phenomenon are now less concerned with exploring the limitations of racial authenticity, and are dedicating their attention to more tragic questions: for instance, Colson Whitehead’s last novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016), is a neo-slave narrative in which the sufferings of the black body are at the center of the texts, with abundant scenes of torture, lynching, and forced sterilization.

For what concerns the memoir, the most recent examples of the genre predictably follow the general trend: Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* (2014) and above all Patrisse Khan-Cullor's *When They Call You a Terrorist* (2018) are just two recent examples of how memoirists are turning their attention away from the construction of black identities and the performance of blackness, and are dedicating themselves to denouncing systemic racism. To conclude, I have started this dissertation with the belief that I was analyzing an ongoing phenomenon: the decline of the concept of authentic blackness in the post-Civil Rights scene, and specifically in the post-soul memoir. However, I end it with the awareness that this concept is resurfacing, re-inscribing itself in the bodies of those who still need to assert the apparently self-evident truth that their lives matter.

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## **Selected Videography**

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