

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: BRAVE NEW NARRATIVES: POSTRACE
IDENTITY AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN
LITERARY TRADITION

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This study examines late twentieth-century and millennial black middle-class fiction, often described as the New Black Aesthetic (NBA), as a vital and expansive aspect of literary studies and racial discourse. I focus on fictional depictions to analyze the narration of race in a so-called postrace era. The novels in my study have in common protagonists who are writers that resemble their NBA authors. As imagined writers creating narratives in texts, these protagonists show how narratives make race. Because they exhibit the unique position that the NBA occupies in a post-Civil Rights U.S., the protagonists featured here provide both counter-narratives and dominant narratives of race.

The term “postrace” dominates current discourse about race in the U.S., often to imply a class arrival and an advance beyond racial constructs. I argue that NBA fiction characterizes the post-Civil Rights black middle class as not moving past race, but rather inexorably engaging and confronting race in tandem with gender, class,

sexual orientation, and/or nationality. Black middle-class protagonists in NBA fiction occupy a transient social position in which they experience figurative returns to the past. I call these returns “postrace moments”—narrative moments that connect contemporary protagonists to collective memories and political histories of race and other forms of social identity.

My introduction historicizes twentieth-century constructs of blackness and postraciality in African American literature. In Chapter One I argue that fiction is the ideal form for examining the narration of race. I show how the protagonist of Trey Ellis’s *Platitudes* narrates himself both in and out of heteronormative definitions of social identity. Chapter Two illustrates how Percival Everett’s *Erasure* allows the author and protagonist to disappear into multiple narratives and counter-narratives of identity and authorship. In Chapter Three I argue that the protagonist of Danzy Senna’s *Symptomatic* narrates herself in relation to a foil to challenge and confirm conventional tropes. And, in Chapter Four, I show how the protagonist of Andrea Lee’s *Lost Hearts in Italy* narrates black femininity both on the periphery and at the center of empire. My conclusion shows how the NBA and postrace identity can expand literary studies.

BRAVE NEW NARRATIVES: POSTTRACE IDENTITY AND THE AFRICAN
AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

By

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Dedication

For my parents, Odell and Isora Williams.

Acknowledgements

In an article for the *New York Times*' "Writers on Writing" series entitled "Goofing Off While the Muse Recharges," novelist Richard Ford concludes that the hardest part of being a writer lies in the conviction that "nothing in the world outside the book is as interesting as what I'm doing inside the book that day. What's most demanding is to believe in my own contrivances and to think that unknown others with time on their hands will also be persuaded." My advisers, colleagues, friends, and family took turns locating and recharging my muse to persuade me that I was not alone in believing that this project was worth completing.

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Introduction: Brave New Narratives: Postrace Past and Present

Perhaps now more than ever, there is a general awareness that race is a story under constant revision in the United States. Following the course set by Critical Race Theorists, like Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Michael Omi, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, and Howard Winant, who argue that the story of race is told through dominant narratives and counter-narratives, I am concerned here with how we narrate race. Unlike Critical Race Theory's focus on the narration of lived experience, I focus on the fictional depiction of imagined experience. My project examines late-twentieth century and millennial fiction that depict the narration of race in a so-called postrace era. The authors featured in my study are middle-class Americans of varying degrees of African descent who were educated in legally desegregated environments in the U.S. Their parents are, or were, educators, doctors, writers, and ministers, sometimes even second-generation members of these professions. And, as the generation that shouldered the Civil Rights Movement, their parents changed the story of race in the U.S. Their parents' generation advanced a narrative of racial progress through marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, and civil disobedience and litigation that led to voter registration and desegregation. I feature the next generation in my study because, as the heirs to the legacy of the Civil Rights story, these post-Civil Rights authors are primed to narrate a new version of the race story. Given their class privilege and legal recourses, we might imagine that these writers featured would create a new narrative to continue the story of racial progress advanced by

previous generations. While these writers do give us something new, it is not about racial progress.

My dissertation determines how fiction produced by post-Civil Rights authors helps us to understand the current discourse that surrounds the narrative of race, particularly blackness, Americanness, and postraciality. The novels in my study have in common protagonists who are writers in the post-Civil Rights Era. These *fictional* writers are useful because they resemble their authors as the citizens in the U.S. who were specifically groomed for revising the race story. Because these imagined writers are creating narratives in texts, they focus the reader on the process of writing and show how narratives make race. And, because they exhibit the unique position that the post-Civil Rights black middle class occupies in the U.S., the protagonists featured in my study show how this kind of contemporary black expression provides both counter-narratives and dominant narratives of race.

In Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* (1988), for example, a postmodern novelist resists telling a traditional race story. Instead, he ultimately deconstructs black, masculine, and class identities through his flirtation with writing racial realism because it "sells." Similarly, in Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2002), an experimental novelist finds literary success only by constructing a "black" alter ego and writing racial realism—in this instance, a satirical version of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Sapphire's *Push* (1996). In Danzy Senna's *Symptomatic* (2004), a writer trades journalism for fiction because she fails to narrate how her shifting contemporary biracial identity has moved past the traditional trope of the tragic mulatto. And, in Andrea Lee's *Lost Hearts in Italy* (2006), a travel writer navigates her position both at the center and on

the periphery of empire as she reenacts the historic cultural exchange between Africa, Europe, and the Americas and narrates changing black, feminine, class, and national identities.

The imagined writers in each of these novels narrate indefinite race identities because their class privilege in the post-Civil Rights Era has positioned them to some extent within the mainstream. They are not compelled to pass to avoid the constraints of Jim Crow culture. They are not pressured to leave home to find resources or to survive. Nevertheless, these imagined writers are all alienated from family and traditional black communities. And this alienation is significant given that *de facto* segregation in education, neighborhoods, religious observance, and even political affiliations continues to characterize life in the U.S. for most blacks, despite the end of *de jure* segregation. These fictional writers are positioned outside of traditional black communities and therefore narrate defiant perspectives on what constitutes “blackness” in ways that call attention to the changing narrative of race (and the unchanged status of too many black Americans).

Ongoing changes in legal policies and social practices in the U.S. indicate that revising the race narrative is nothing new. Today, this revision is most evident in conversations found in popular discourse that focus now on getting past race, rather than on not seeing it. In other words, the U.S. has replaced the color-blind narrative with a narrative of postrace. My project looks at the concept of postrace as the latest iteration of the race story in literary texts and cultural production. But, in thinking about postrace, I rely on Ramon Saldivar’s assertion that the prefix “post” operates in the term “postrace” the same way that it does in the term “postcolonial.” “Postrace”

does not refer to a chronological positioning beyond race. Instead, the postrace aesthetic examines race from a twenty-first-century perspective as a variable and still determining, product of the system of domination and subordination that we associate with imperialism. Located within the mainstream, the fictional writers featured in my study participate in dominant narratives about moving beyond race. But, they cannot get past it.

The novel is ideal for exploring race as a consequence of imperialism in a post-Civil Rights Era because this form allows space to imagine new worlds that can defy borders and bend time. The protagonists of the novels considered in this study resemble their post-Civil Rights middle-class authors; but, they also gesture back to historic understandings of race. I argue that because contemporary fictional depictions of the black middle class seem always oriented toward political histories, these figures are vital to examining race. These fictional depictions inform what it means to be postrace. By invoking the idea of postrace and the black middle class, I do not argue that race is passé. Nor do I intend to advocate for an end to race consciousness. Rather, I acknowledge that the narrative of race has always been under revision in U.S. discourse. Postrace consciousness highlights this revision and examines race in light of constant change. The black middle-class depictions analyzed in this study exhibit this postrace consciousness.

Despite the acclaim given to controversial films like *Precious* (2009) and *The Help* (2011), the term “postrace” has dominated popular racial discourse in recent years. In the media, the term points to the desire to shift the narrative of the political history of race. After watching the 2010 State of the Union address, political pundit

Chris Matthews infamously asserted that Barack Obama “is postracial by all appearances [because] I forgot he was black tonight for one hour.”¹ The media, usually more careful not to imply any type of color-blindness, began using the term “postrace” in relation to the political career of the 44th president of the U.S. And the breadth of this usage led author Colson Whitehead to facetiously declare on November 3, 2009, “One year ago today, we officially became a postracial society.” Whitehead, who used this occasion to announce his interest in the position of “secretary of postracial affairs,” makes his point about the U.S.’s obsession with the notion of postraciality based on the media’s interest in the term “postrace” to support stories about Obama’s election in relation to racial trends.

In January of 2008, NPR’s senior news analyst Daniel Schorr identified “post-racial” as “the latest buzz word in the political lexicon,” relying, in part, on stories from the *Economist* and the *New Yorker*. According to Schorr, “The post-racial era, as embodied by Obama, is the era where civil rights veterans of the past century are consigned to history and Americans begin to make race-free judgments on who should lead them.” In August 2008, the *New York Times Magazine* featured the article, “Is Obama the End of Black Politics?” And, in November of 2008, Michael Eric Dyson countered in the *Los Angeles Times* that contrary to popular sentiment, an Obama presidency “does not, nor should it, herald a post-racial future. But it may help usher in a *post-racist* future” (emphasis in the original).

In academic literary circles, the term “postrace” often signals calls for, or perceptions of, a waning race consciousness. Part of the academy’s narration of

¹ Matthews made this statement on January 27, 2010, during MSNBC’s coverage of Barack Obama’s State of the Union address.

postrace involves an imagined future cosmopolitanism in which race is dropped as a political theme. This narration is based on the premise that racialized political discourse has outgrown its usefulness. For example, Paul Gilroy argues for what he acknowledges is a rather utopian vision of the end of race-thinking as the only way to end the problem of race. Moreover, Walter Benn Michaels argues that the U.S.'s focus on social identities like race has only served to increase the gap between rich and poor. Arguments like Gilroy's and Michaels' advocate for a shift in political thinking from race (and gender and sexual orientation) to class. Another postrace narrative in the academy involves the analyses of millennial biracial or multiracial literature. For instance, Michele Elam argues that "narratives of racial passing...have risen [in millennial literature] seemingly from the dead not to bear witness to past issues but to testify in some of the fiercest debates about the viability of race in this 'beyond race' era." For the academy, postrace analyses typically involve identifying race as a shifting and limiting narrative.

The postrace concept is a key component of a national narrative of progress in a twenty-first century United States. This narrative rests on the defeat of Jim Crow culture, realized on a judicial level through the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, the sixties Civil Rights Acts, and the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* decision. While race mixing was always part of the national experience, U.S. Civil Rights laws forced the legal endorsement of this activity. The Civil Rights laws that ended *de jure* segregation again shifted our thinking about the ever-evolving story of race. After the federal government sanctioned interracial marriage through *Loving*, biracial and "multiracial" identities became separate identity forms in the late twentieth century.

In other words, a biracial person of black and white descent no longer had to identify as either “black” or “white.” Moreover, multiracial identity upset the dated black-white binary in national discourse because it called attention to the diverse identity groups involved in U.S. racial discourse.² Multiracial representations heightened awareness of the always multiracial population. And, this re-imagining of race through legal precedents that forced desegregation of public space appears to have paved the way for contemporary postrace discourse.

Black Is the New Universal: From Protest to Postrace

I link postrace consciousness to October 1949 with the publication of James Baldwin’s essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in the mainstream journal *Partisan Review*. In this essay, Baldwin presented Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) as two sides of the same coin of social protest.³ At the time of Baldwin’s critique, Wright was the most influential figure in black American writing, and his “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) had indicted black writers as an educated class fixated on “begging . . . white America” (1403) to accept black humanity. Demanding that black writers “do no less than create values by which [their] race is to struggle, live and die,” (1407) Wright advocated the production of social realism, immersed in and evolving from black folklore, that “will embrace all those social, political, and economic forms under

² Consider, for example, the 1922 *Takao Ozawa v. United States* and the 1923 *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* Supreme Court cases. Ozawa and Thind, U.S. residents of Japanese and Indian descent, respectively, attempted to gain citizenship by proving their whiteness because the Fourteenth Amendment defined U.S. citizenship strictly in terms of white and black status. Both litigants failed to meet the Supreme Court’s shifting definition of whiteness. The Court denied Ozawa, despite his skin color, because his Japanese heritage meant he was not Caucasian. The Court denied Thind, despite his Caucasian status, because his skin color was not white.

³ This comparison was particularly biting, given that Wright’s short story collection *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) is an implicit response to Stowe’s handling of race.

which the life of [the Negro] people is manifest” (1409). In effect, he called for a change in the race story. We see this blueprint in Wright’s *Native Son*, a novel that depicts antisocial protagonist Bigger Thomas as the result of systemic race and class inequity.

Baldwin wanted another iteration of the race story. For Baldwin, Bigger Thomas represented the pathological foil to Stowe’s Uncle Tom because he felt Wright’s portrayal of Bigger’s violence and hatred denied the reader a sense of the protagonist’s humanity. While there was a lack of consensus regarding Wright’s novel, most black writers and critics of the period echoed Baldwin’s call to move away from social protest. This move is most apparent in the 1950 *Phylon*⁴ conference. The editors of *Phylon*, a journal published by Clark Atlanta University to examine issues of race and culture, dedicated the Fourth Quarter Edition to locating and defining the black community. Asserting that producers of the culture’s literature were among those most capable of assessing it, the editors invited major voices within the black literary community, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling A. Brown, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and J. Saunders Redding⁵ to consider a series of rather leading questions:

⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois founded and edited *Phylon* from 1940 – 1944, while at Clark Atlanta University. In his 1940 autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, Du Bois refers to the journal as “a university review of race and culture” (324). Leading scholars, black and white, writing about race relations, domestically and globally, contributed to *Phylon*.

⁵ According to the Preface of the 1950 Fourth Quarter Edition of *Phylon*, the responses were assembled under the general subject: “The Negro in Literature: The Current Scene.” The edition includes the following contributors: Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling A. Brown, G. Lewis Chandler, Nick Aaron Ford, Hugh M. Gloster, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, Blyden Jackson, Ulysses Lee, Alain Locke, Charles H. Nichols, Jr., L. D. Reddick, J. Saunders Redding, Ira De A. Reid, George S. Schuyler, William Gardner Smith, and Margaret Walker.

What are the promising and unpromising aspects of the Negro's present position in American literature? Are there any aspects of the life of the Negro in America which seem *deserving of franker, or deeper, or more objective treatment*? Does current literature by and about Negroes seem *more or less propagandistic than before*? Would you agree with those who feel that the Negro writer, the Negro as subject, and the Negro critic and scholar are *moving toward an "unlabeled" future* in which they will be measured without regard to racial origin and conditioning? (Emphasis added 296)

Implicit in the *Phylon* editor's questions was a critical stance toward the "propagandistic" nature of black literature of the past. And this stance suggests a desire to discard racial realism as social protest. Doing so would presumably produce literature that would move black authors into the American mainstream. Doing so would also change the race story. The editors asked the respondents to determine a way of producing a body of black American literature that was not essentially "black," but rather "universal."

I rely here on the nebulous term "universal" because several of the *Phylon* respondents used, or hinted at, this term. I contend that by "universal," these writers really meant "postrace." The term "universal" operates in midcentury discourse as way of accessing the so-called "human condition." The black writers involved in this discussion believed that the lens of race could focus light on what it means to be human, as if racial matter could somehow be bracketed out. *Phylon* respondent

Charles H. Nichols, Jr., for example, argued in his assessment of black writing in the forties that

the Negro writer is turning more and more to broader themes. Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote of Richard Wright “The author of this book, as has no other American writer, wrestles with utter sincerity with the Dostoievski [sic] subject—a human soul in hell because it is sick with a deadly spiritual sickness.” *This is a universal theme of the greatest possible significance of our time.* It is, in a sense, the theme of Willard Motley’s *Knock on Any Door* and Saunders Redding’s *Stranger and Alone*. It is to be found in Paul Camus and John Hersey and other authors all over the modern world, plagued as we all are by fear, hate, insecurity and the threat of war. (379, emphasis added)

Nichols mentions fellow respondent Saunders Redding’s novel as exemplifying this “universal” theme, like Wright’s novel, that ultimately transcended race issues. According to Nichols, writers from various ethnic and national backgrounds were addressing this theme.

Saunders Redding’s response to *Phylon*, “The Negro Writer—Shadow and Substance,” echoed Nichols. Redding goes farther by asserting that blacks could exhibit a newfound egalitarian status through self-depiction in literature using “universal” themes. Redding argued that the allied forces victory in WWII combined with Roosevelt’s New Deal would result in a new freedom that positioned a black person as being in “no fundamental way different and particular. He could begin to explain himself and his motives and his character in terms of conditioning forces

common to all humanity” (373).⁶ According to Redding, the black race-experience contained “material, no longer artificially bounded by fear and shame, [which] is *full of lessons and of truth for the world*” (373, emphasis added). For Redding, the release of the “shadow” of race would reveal a Black “substance”—a universal interiority. In this kind of race story, the depiction of interiority through the particular black experience would allow readers to access “universal” conditions of the human experience that transcended race. This transcendence was the way to achieve the “unlabeled future” proposed by *Phylon*’s editors. In effect, this transcendence would operate as a postrace moment. And, this transcendence is significant. This midcentury postrace concept, seen as a “universal” and “unlabeled future,” was not about letting go of race. These authors still depicted black characters living an experience that the reader could imagine as black. But this form of postrace consciousness used an imagined race experience to illustrate something about life that they hoped a reader, regardless of race, could relate to. Moreover, I see a similar construct of the “universal” in millennial, or twenty-first century, literature. Understanding what postrace looked like in midcentury literature will shed light on what postrace means in millennial literature.

As indicated by Nichols’ response, some critics believed that Wright illustrated this “universal,” or really postrace, consciousness in *Native Son*. Redding fell into this camp. In “American Negro Literature” Redding embraces Bigger as an “honest creation” that depicts the effects of prejudice “upon the *human* personality”

⁶ In some way, this response shows Redding’s hope for the end of assertions of racial superiority that developed during the nineteenth century, such as those theorized by Joseph Arthur Gobineau in his *Essay on the Equality of Human Races* (1853-1855) that the Nazi Party as well as other white supremacists came to embrace.

(115, emphasis added). Basically, Redding upholds Wright's depiction of the stigmatized black psyche as the ideal "universal" portrait called for in response to *Phylon*. Redding notes,

[Wright] is a new kind of writer in the ranks of Negroes. He has extricated himself from the dilemma of writing exclusively for a Negro audience and limiting himself to a glorified and race-proud picture of Negro life, and of writing exclusively for a white audience and being trapped in the old stereotypes and fixed opinions that are bulwarks against honest creation. ("American" 116)

Redding maintained that *Native Son* is a "universal experience" because the novel reflects the effects of discrimination on the human psyche. To Redding, who explored the effects of racism on a biracial middle-class educator at the start of the Civil Rights Movement in *Stranger and Alone* (1950), these effects produced feelings of alienation and self-hatred.⁷ This reading implies that Wright's story of Bigger's violent response to institutionalized racism and systemic poverty represents a potentially *human*, rather than an exclusively black, response.

Redding's reading of *Native Son* illustrates how we might access a postrace consciousness, or a "universal" human condition, through racial themes. Baldwin would disagree with Redding's assessment of Wright's novel. Protest novels fail, according to Baldwin, because they reduce protagonists to categories that they cannot transcend. But, Redding's reading of Wright represents the kind of "universal"

⁷ In Redding's *Stranger and Alone*, protagonist Shelton Howden's feelings of isolation and self-loathing lead him to betray Southern grassroots civil rights efforts to white municipal officials. While lacking the criminal tendencies of Bigger Thomas, Shelton Howden also could not connect to family and struck out against society.

depiction that would come to define modernists like Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, who fashioned their literary personas in opposition to Richard Wright. Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) depict protagonists dealing with feelings of alienation from family and community, but these characters escape the traps set for Bigger. And I suggest that Baldwin and Ellison enjoyed a kind of postrace status because of these race stories. They were listed among the great *American* authors of the period. Their fictional portrayals of the alienated black individuals transcended race in the minds of some mainstream critics.

Ellison and Baldwin, both affiliated with the New York Intellectuals who positioned themselves against themes of social protest, were sometimes listed without reference to race in midcentury critical discussions about the next great American writer. In "We're on the Road" written for the *New York Times*, William Barrett, who notes the influences of the Cold War and the lack of roots found in an increasingly mobile U.S., states, "There has been an abundance of talent in this period: J. D. Salinger, Saul Bellow, James Jones, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Mary McCarthy, Jean Stafford, Louis Auchincloss, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin; in the theatre Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller." In another article for the *Times* in which Malcolm Cowley asks six critics to state who is poised to replace Hemingway and Faulkner, W. M. Frollock notes Ellison but laments his lack of production and Alfred Kazin includes Ellison and Baldwin on the list of authors he has enjoyed. All of the critics were reluctant to offer definitive Hemingway and Faulkner heirs, but no other black writers were considered as potential descendents. That Baldwin and Ellison became part of the mainstream discussion of American, really U.S., writing at

this time is remarkable. Baldwin and Ellison were the only black writers who came close to transgressing a literary color line at midcentury. They did not cross it, but they achieved proximity. And they did so through their writings about race. No one is meant to forget that Baldwin's John Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or Ralph Ellison's unnamed protagonist in *Invisible Man* are black.

This midcentury moment in literary history shows the interconnectedness of literary and political discourse. The literary call for integration overlapped with legal efforts to desegregate schools and secure voting rights. These midcentury progenitors of the postrace narrative were looking to end segregation and were aiming to use literary expression to achieve this end. The origin of the postrace narrative therefore intersects with the national narrative of racial progress achieved through U.S. Civil Rights legislation. Moreover, these concurrent narratives are crucial to understanding millennial postrace consciousness and race writing. I see the inheritor of these narratives as the middle-class post-Civil Rights artistic expression known as the New Black Aesthetic (NBA). We can clarify the contemporary postrace narrative and provide a more useful way of examining race in the twenty-first century by mapping this connection.

Black Is the New Postrace: The New Black Aesthetic

The NBA is a U.S. black arts movement that began in the eighties when blackness went mainstream. Hip Hop culture emerged from the underground to shape global perceptions of American music, idiom, and fashion. Michael Jackson and Prince enthralled with moonwalks and purple rain. Vanessa Williams reigned as Miss America before having to cede to fellow African American, Suzette Charles.

Eddie Murphy captivated at the box office. The *Cosby Show* dominated network ratings. And, Jean Michel Basquiat ignited the contemporary art world. In 1989, twenty-seven-year old Stanford graduate, Trey Ellis, published an essay on late twentieth-century black artists that the academy and media would invoke over the next twenty years to examine blackness in the U.S. during the post-Civil Rights Era.⁸ At the time, Ellis enjoyed “new author” status, having just published his first novel, *Platitudes* (1988). The *New York Magazine* approached Ellis for a contribution because they were looking for something “hip,” “young,” and “cutting edge” (Ashe xii). Armed with a large advance and a paper he had written as an undergrad, Ellis set out to define what the *New York Magazine* was looking for—black artists emerging at the end of the twentieth century. The result was “The New Black Aesthetic,” a flawed but highly influential treatment of an artistic movement that Ellis claimed espoused the Black Nationalism of an “alienated” middle class of “cultural mulattoes” who flout genres and cross boundaries on the whims of their diverse muses. The essay was flawed, but the concept had promise.

Ellis’s cultural mulatto concept of black hybrid identity coincided with the millennial multicultural and multiracial movement. In 1992, Maria P. Root published the seminal anthology, *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992).⁹ In 1993, *Time* published a special issue on multiculturalism in the U.S. with a cover that featured a

⁸ Trey Ellis, a regular contributor to the *Huffington Post*, posted entries about the New Black Aesthetic on 2008 and again on September 26, 2011. The first post, in response to Barack Obama’s candidacy for president, defined Obama as a “cultural mulatto” and NBA figure. The second post reprinted the essay, “The New Black Aesthetic,” at the request of fans in response to the publication of Toure’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?*

⁹ According to David Brunsma in “Mixed Messages: Doing Race in the Color-Blind Era,” Root’s collection “was the first serious volume devoted to assessing the state of our understanding of mixed-race people in the United States” (1).

cyber-generated, multiethnic new “face of America.”¹⁰ The issue included articles on topics such as globalism, immigration and undocumented workers, Wasp identity, multiethnic society and jury composition, interracial marriage and childrearing, ethnic consumerism and marketing, ethnic Americans in the arts, Asian American identity and “exemplary immigrant” status, religious diversity in the U.S., and multiculturalism and political correctness. According to the managing editor, the cover picture was generated “to dramatize the impact of interethnic marriage” that he claimed “increased dramatically in the U.S. during the latest wave of immigration.” Author Danzy Senna satirically dubbed the burgeoning nineties mixed-race movement as the “Mulatto Millennium” in an essay first published in Claudine C. O’Hearn’s *Half + Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural* (1998). And the 2000 Census firmly set the new race narrative in the U.S. by offering residents the chance to “Mark one or more boxes.”¹¹

The multiracial movement and Ellis’s “new” concept of blackness exhibit the influence of Critical Race Theorists, like Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who remind us that because most scientists now invalidate the notion that we can classify human beings into biological subsets, we must view race as a changing social

¹⁰ See *Time* (18 Nov 1993). Using photos of models to produce the final image, the picture named “Eve” contained a final, computer-generated racial composite of “15% Anglo-Saxon, 17.5% Middle Eastern, 17.5% African, 7.5% Asian, 35% Southern European and 7.5% Hispanic.” While “Eve” generated some public interest, the issue has been largely criticized for failing to acknowledge the U.S.’s history of racial and ethnic injustice while presenting a facile nod to multiculturalism. See, for example, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24:2 (Winter 1998).

¹¹ Root’s anthology and the Special Issue of *Time* were precipitated by a perceived increase in the multiracial population in the U.S. as a result of immigration and *Loving*, and societal institutions from academia to Wall Street took notice. According to Kimberly McClain Da Costa, in the 1990s several companies (e.g., Levi Strauss, IKEA, Tylenol, Nike, Verizon, and GE) began to incorporate multiracial images into advertising campaigns in order to brand themselves as “hip” and appeal to young consumers as well as “a broad, ethnically nonspecific audience” (184). See “Selling Mixedness: Marketing with Multiracial Identities” in David L. Brunson’s *Mixed Messages: Multiracial Identities in the “Color-Blind” Era* (2006).

construct. We have come to understand how legal precedents, like the variations of Alabama's and Arkansas's "One-Drop" Rule, the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, and the 1922 *Ozawa v. United States* decision, as well as social practices, like the segregationist policies of Jim Crow Culture, have historically defined race in the U.S. For literary studies, this understanding has informed the shift to the NBA's participation in the multicultural politics of the late twentieth century.

Critics and writers frequently rely on Ellis's concept of the NBA to describe African American literary expression published after both *Brown* and the Black Arts Movement of the sixties and seventies.¹² NBA authors therefore grew up in a legally desegregated U.S.¹³ Ellis describes the NBA as the artistic movement of the civil rights generation's college-educated descendants. Relying on anachronistic language, Ellis sets up an unfortunate binary by asserting that school desegregation allowed the NBA's "cultural mulattos" to move between what he describes as the "black" and "white" worlds. Ellis claims that NBA artists can easily operate in the mainstream while rejecting stereotypes and expectations from both whites and blacks. According to Ellis, an important marker of the NBA is its rejection of stereotypes and expectation; multiple cultural influences on the "cultural mulatto" defy assertions of authentic blackness, like the major doctrine of the Black Arts Movement.

Ellis's "new" concept of blackness echoes the midcentury "universal" discourse that I identify as the origin of postrace imagining. "The New Black

¹² This period is also referred to as the Post-Soul Aesthetic. See, for example, Mark Anthony Neal's *Soul Babies* (2002) and Nelson George's *Post-Soul Nation* (2004).

¹³ In his discussion of the tradition of African American literature, Kenneth Warren identifies works by Trey Ellis, Paul Beatty, Andrea Lee, Carl Phillips, Danzy Senna, Michael Thomas, and Colson Whitehead as indicative of the NBA. Madhu Dubey includes Rita Dove, Gerald Early, Nelson George, Lisa Jones, and Darryl Pinckney among others. And I include work by Percival Everett in addition to these listings.

Aesthetic” begins with a quote from Baldwin’s *The Price of the Ticket*: “While the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness...And this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, *has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation*” (emphasis added). In the essay, NBA musician Vernon Reid again relies on the term “universal.” As Reid explains, the NBA achieves this universal through introspection. This introspection, particularly in literature and film, typically occurs through the lens of race in relation to other identity forms, like gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and class. So this “new” story about blackness, an NBA move toward the “universal,” actually takes us back to what I see as a past where postrace was also a goal couched in terms of the “universal.”

Some scholars, Martin J. Favor for example, note Ellis’s rejection of the idea of black authenticity and find promise in his implicit suggestion that NBA artists control shifting and ambiguous identities that allow for a simultaneous “insider” and “outsider” status.¹⁴ Several critics, however, take issue with Ellis’s apparent focus on individual, middle class, and masculine issues rather than on community concerns and gender and economic disparities.¹⁵ Ellis’s essay clumsily ignores gender and

¹⁴ J. Martin Favor, for example, argues in *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (1999) that the shifting racial identities, or “reimagined communities,” as described by Ellis hold promise as a tool for subverting racism in their ability to “reform” social institutions (151).

¹⁵ In *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* (1997), Todd Boyd echoes George’s critique of the Post-Soul Generation by asserting that the “bourgeois underpinnings” of the NBA achieves progress on the individual level, but fails in terms of group elevation (17). Madhu Dubey and Adolph Reed both note how Ellis acknowledges the elite nature of this middleclass assertion of so-called cultural pluralism while he ignores the economic and political significance of this elitism. Contrasting the NBA with what she identifies as a “southern folk aesthetic” exhibited by texts like Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, Dubey argues in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*

glances at class. Yet, the academy continues to use Ellis's essay to inform discussions of late twentieth and early twenty-first century African American literature.

Black Is the Future: The Reproductive Futurism of the African American Literary Tradition

Critics and historians have shaped the canon of black literature as a series of temporal movements, from slave narratives to Reconstruction literature, the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights Era, and the Black Arts Movement to post-Civil Rights literature. This fashioning suggests the evolution of black expression, and implicitly blackness itself. While the major themes of African American literature have shifted from demonstrating literacy to fighting Jim Crow to cultivating Black Nationalism to questioning this Nationalism, the shapers of the black literary tradition have always embraced the achievement of social justice as one of the canon's primary narratives. In fact, academics, politicians, and artists have made the African American literary tradition the power tool of identity politics, a vehicle of racial representation and social protest designed to help overcome economic disparity and achieve full citizenship rights.

But, even in acknowledging twentieth-century Civil Rights achievements, full social equality remains elusive. The African American literary tradition represents a narrative of progress that is always in search of a better future. I understand this narrative of progress as promoting what theorist Lee Edelman describes as a

(2003) that Ellis's focus on the NBA's cultural hybridity belies the unequal distribution of power in the U.S. (18). In *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (1997), Reed compellingly questions Ellis's characterization of the NBA as a "leftist-Neo-Nationalist" movement that simultaneously rejects assertions of authentic blackness as contradictory (166).

“reproductive futurism” in which identity is made through the repetition of the heteronormative narrative of producing a future ideal in the figure of the child. In African American literary studies, this reproductive futurism appears in the promise of the ascent or birth of an, as yet, unformed artist that Robert Stepto sees in the dormant protagonist in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. In African American cultural studies, this futurism lies in the impetus toward Martin Luther King, Jr.’s mountain-top vision of equality and integration that is only finally realized by imagined future children. The Civil Rights generation gave birth to the NBA writers featured in this study and marched on Washington with King at the same time. As the inheritors of a legally desegregated U.S. who maintain the class privilege that allows access to elite education and resources, the NBA would represent the latest iteration of the narrative of progress.

The academy currently lacks however a major study on NBA fiction—a lack this study hopes to address. In thinking about the African American literary canon, scholars like Kenneth Warren have recently questioned the canonical status of NBA fiction because NBA writers center on the dilemmas of post-Civil Rights black middle-class *individuals*, rather than on the community as a whole. Set after the Civil Rights Movement, NBA fiction appears not to deal with the social inequities that have plagued blacks in the U.S., like Jim Crow culture. Focused on alienated individuals, NBA fiction appears to ignore the communal concerns that have defined the black American literary tradition. NBA fiction appears to have moved past the traditional concerns of the black literary canon. My readings show, however, that NBA writers echo their midcentury posttrace predecessors in presenting protagonists

that are alienated from family and traditional black communities. The NBA in fact represents a return to the canon. Like their predecessors, NBA writers change the race story. And NBA middle-class fiction is a vital and expansive aspect of African American literary studies and racial discourse.

The black middle-class fiction of my study shows the evolution of the African American literary tradition in a so-called postrace era. I argue that NBA fiction characterizes the post-Civil Rights black middle class as intersectional—not moving past race, but rather inexorably engaging and confronting race as well as other forms of social identity. The NBA’s postrace protagonist interlinks past and present constructs of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation. While the term “postrace” is used inconsistently, the concept often implies a narrative of progress and the achievement of power—a class arrival and an advance beyond racial constraints. This narrative of progress hinges on the achievement of civil rights and the middle-class status that is afforded as a result of these rights. The NBA narrative, however, questions this middle-class status as a marker of progress and the realization of social justice. The black middle-class figure recalls the past, maps indefinite lines of genealogical positions that imagine stable constructs of identity, and thereby subverts our understanding of race, other forms of social identity, and the narrative of progress in a seemingly postrace moment. Instead of moving beyond race, the intersectional black middle-class figure questions the ways that current discourse invokes the term “postrace.”

Scholars suggest that the NBA’s focus on the middle-class individual ignores the communal concerns indicative of African American literature. I contend, however,

that NBA fictional depictions of the black middle class not only examine communal issues, but also provide a clearer understanding of the implications of race in the twenty-first century. In effect, NBA fiction imagines new worlds by collapsing old and new. I argue that NBA fiction conflates race with class, gender, sexual orientation, and/or nationality in ways that write the seemingly disconnected individual experience into the African American literary tradition through unexpected and incongruent returns to the past.

NBA fictional representations undermine the position of the black middle class through figurative returns to the past in what I call “postrace moments.” At the heart of these postrace moments are “temporal drags,”¹⁶ or moments in the narrative that connect contemporary protagonists to collective memories and political histories of race. Black middle-class protagonists in NBA fiction occupy an interstitial social position—a transient and vague in-between position in which they are associated with past definitions of race or other forms of social identity. It turns out that these protagonists are unable to fully access the imagined societal benefits of progress. Unable to secure sure footing in a legally desegregated U.S., the middle-class figure in NBA fiction demonstrates a postmodern blackness that is narrated always in relation to the narratives of class, gender, sexual orientation and nation. This engagement of multiple narratives in NBA fiction undermines the insufficient “black” and “white” binary that limits Ellis’s essay. And, this engagement suggests a better way of defining the postrace narrative.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Freeman theorizes that “temporal drags” can connect performative post-identities to the political histories—the identity politics—that they supposedly abandon (729).

In focusing on NBA fiction, I do not intend to imply that middle-class depictions are new to the black literary tradition. What separates the NBA middle class from earlier depictions is the post-Civil Rights status that allows for the narration of race during a period of relatively free travel across state, national, and racial borders. This status is compelling because it calls our attention to NBA postrace moments or the returns to the past that disrupt the narrative of racial progress that has traditionally characterized the African American literary tradition. As an artistic movement defined by variability and looking back to the past, the New Black Aesthetic reminds us that we are still revising the narrative of race. The contemporary postrace narrative is yet another iteration of the race story. And this iteration narrates brave new worlds that shape the present and retell the past.

Chapter Descriptions

A discussion of post-Civil Rights middle-class fiction rightfully starts at the onset of the NBA and multicultural movements in the U.S. I therefore begin with Trey Ellis's first novel, *Platitudes* (1988). Ellis published *Platitudes* only one year before he published the essay, "The New Black Aesthetic," but scholars have largely ignored the novel.¹⁷ The academy's neglect likely occurs for two reasons. The first is that Ellis's novel is overshadowed by the prominence of his essay, and the novel appears simply to repeat the themes of the essay. The second is that *Platitudes* is overshadowed by Ishmael Reed's controversial novel, *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). The plot of Ellis's novel closely resembles Reed's novel, and Ellis includes Reed in "The New Black Aesthetic" as one of the major influences on NBA artists. I note

¹⁷ Aside from the "Foreword" to *Platitudes* written by Bertram Ashe, most scholars focus on Ellis's essay and offer only cursory discussions of the novel.

these similarities, but I chart the significant differences found in Ellis's novel, his essay, and Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing*.

My first chapter, "Have you never read Baldwin?": The Cultural Mulatto in Trey Ellis's *Platitudes*, therefore examines the origins of the NBA through the narrative fiction of Ellis's first novel. The form of the novel allows Ellis to explore race, gender, and class in ways that show the limitations of his essay and Reed's novel. *Platitudes* features a protagonist, a black man who is an NBA novelist attempting to narrate unconventional black middle class male and black working class female experiences. These narratives are disrupted and shaped by a rather conventional device—the antagonist who is a black woman novelist that offers a competing narrative in the genres of racial realism and social protest. I focus on the ironies found in the antagonist's essential question regarding the protagonist's familiarity with James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) to show how and where the protagonist's, as well as Ellis's, novel fits into the African American literary tradition. Specifically, the protagonist's impotence that appears to defy the expected protocols of black masculinity echoes the ineffability that characterizes Baldwin's protagonist, John Grimes. The connection that Ellis's novel draws between post-Civil Rights and midcentury expression, as well as NBA fiction and social realism, represents the postrace moments of return to the past that characterizes NBA fiction.

Ellis's novel begins to complicate the restrictive race and class binaries that he establishes in his essay by depicting post-Civil Rights expression through competing narratives and gestures to the past. The focus of my second chapter, Percival

Everett's *Erasure* (2002), further undermines the binaries established in Ellis's essay. In many ways, Everett's *Erasure* echoes Ellis's *Platitudes*. *Erasure* also features a black male protagonist who is an NBA novelist that resists expressions of racial realism. But, Everett's protagonist is endlessly caught in multiple, layered narratives about race, class, gender, history, and art. Some of these narratives are produced by another black woman novelist in *Erasure*, but the protagonist becomes his own foil and offers additional narratives. Moreover, allusions to other texts and even Everett himself produce more narratives for the protagonist, and the reader, to negotiate. *Erasure* collapses these narratives to the extent that they are impossible to distinguish.

Chapter Two, "No boundaries but walls everywhere": Framing the Disappearing Author and Subject in Percival Everett's *Erasure*, examines the limited ways that we connect authorship to social identities, like race and class. Among the many narratives in which the protagonist is caught is the Jim Crow-era discourse about blackness and racial representation that surrounds Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The protagonist's participation in this discourse is signified through his crafting of an alter ego that allows him to write dueling narratives. And the protagonist's assertion at the climax of *Erasure* that his supposed dual identity amounts to a form of castration becomes the novel's postrace moment. The tension between conventional racial protocols or societal demands and individual desire results in the protagonist's "disintegrat[ion]" that he perceives leaves "two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere." But, the protagonist's participation in multiple narratives, from his alter ego's to his own,

Wright's to Ellison's, and Everett's to the various other authors mentioned in the novel, questions the simplicity of this perceived duality.

Platitudes and *Erasure* conflate narratives of race, gender, and class in ways that collapse the post-Civil Rights middle-class male protagonists into other characters and narratives, even figures and narratives from other eras. In Chapter Three, "Between truth and fiction": Race and the Uncanny in Danzy Senna's *Symptomatic* and *Caucasia*, I turn to millennial multiracial expression and examine the NBA from the perspective of a biracial female protagonist. The protagonist in Senna's second novel, *Symptomatic* (2004), is a writer, like Ellis's and Everett's protagonists. In Senna's novel, the narrative that counters the protagonist's narrative is produced by a mirror-image foil—a deranged woman who is also of unclear racial descent. This foil resents her biracial status and becomes obsessed with the protagonist. Unable to narrate an identity that is separate from the discomfiting intimacy of her antagonist, the protagonist insists she has "given up on nonfiction" to "study the art of lying" so that she can "'inhabit the space between truth and fiction' and 'climb [...] into that abyss where nothing is certain.'"

Chapter Three examines Senna's depiction of biracial identity as a marker of the mutability of race that conflates the narratives of race, gender, and class in ways that recall Ellis and Everett. But, in exploring the homoerotic intimacy between the protagonist and antagonist, Senna's novel also questions fixed understandings of sexual orientation. In looking at *Symptomatic* as a revision of Senna's first novel, *Caucasia* (1998), I identify the protagonist's fears of paralysis and disappearance, as well as her inability to escape the trope of the tragic mulatto, as the NBA postrace

moment of return. This return is derived from the protagonist's negotiation of changing "black" and "white" identities and attempts at self-definition in relation to doubles and other uncanny markers that echo the protagonist's struggle in J. Saunders Redding's novel, *Stranger and Alone* (1950).

My fourth chapter continues to examine the NBA from a feminine perspective by focusing on Andrea Lee's *Lost Hearts in Italy* (2006). And, this study ends with Lee because her novel collapses black and white, male and female, foreign and familiar, and past and present. Lee's novel is a revision of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* that examines a black female travel writer's transnational position both within and at the outskirts of empire. In Lee's revision, the post-Civil Rights middle-class black female is at times aligned with state power and thereby difficult to distinguish from the wealthy white men with whom she associates. Her mixed-race appearance coupled with her international travel however creates suspicion in a post 9/11 U.S. and she is detained by state power, represented by security at Logan International Airport.

Chapter Four, *Brave New World: the New Black Aesthetic in the Fiction of Andrea Lee*, presents an exploration of race, gender, and class through reenactments of the cultural interactions between Africa, Europe, and the Americas that force Lee's protagonist, like Senna's, to struggle with the uncanny. Like the other novels considered in this study, Lee's novel conflates race, gender, and class. Lee also questions fixed understandings of national identity. Explicitly, Lee's protagonist experiences the uncanny as simultaneous feelings of familiarity and foreignness while living both abroad and in the U.S. For Lee's protagonist, these feelings refuse easy

distinctions between self and other. The protagonist's inability to escape history and liminal status produces the postrace moment of return in *Lost Hearts*, as well as in Lee's first novel *Sarah Phillips* (1984) and collection of short stories, *Interesting Women* (2002). I critically consider the protagonist's feelings of being forever caught between current of past narratives of race, gender, class, and nation as the postrace moment in *Lost Hearts* that is echoed in Lee's earlier work.

In offering readings of post-Civil Rights black middle-class fiction, I provide a sustained and comprehensive examination of the NBA that is currently missing in American literary discourse. My conclusion examines the ways that the NBA's iteration of the race narrative through postrace moments of returns to past ideas of race informs current narratives of racial progress. In narrating racialized identity in relation to multifaceted (multiracial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, and/or national) social identities, NBA fiction presents race as a story that must be considered in tandem with history. The result is a simultaneous writing and erasing of the importance of race—signified by returns to past ideas of race—that defines the postrace aesthetic. Further, this postrace aesthetic helps us to identify a resistance against fixed ideas of racialized identity that reveal both the value and limitations of our current system of categorizing American literature. I imagine alternative pairings of texts that move beyond the current classification of African American literature as simple temporal movements (e.g., the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement). I understand the value of examining the tradition historically, but I anticipate the possibilities of developing ahistoric pairings, like a Harlem Renaissance and an NBA novel. I also anticipate how putting an NBA text in conversation with texts outside

the African American literary tradition can inform our understanding of postcolonial and transnational identities. Ultimately, I show how the NBA, through returns to past constructs and other common threads found in the fiction of Ellis, Everett, Senna, and Lee revises our understanding of postrace politics.

Chapter One: ‘Have you never read Baldwin?’: the New Black Aesthetic of Trey Ellis’s *Platitudes*

Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who often can get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing group of cultural mulattoes that fuels the NBA. We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. The culturally mulatto Cosby girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother....When Obama was growing up in the Seventies black and white America, like hostile divorcing parents, still made mixed kids chose sides. He chose Black and I say welcome. Trey Ellis, “Obama: Cultural Mulatto”

What one would not like to see again is the consolidation of peoples on the basis of color. But as long as we in the West place on color the value that we do, we make it impossible for the great unwashed to consolidate themselves according to any other principle. Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality....For the sake of one’s children, in order to minimize the bill that *they* must pay, one must be careful not to take refuge in any delusion—and the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion.

James Baldwin, “Down at the Cross”

“Out of this ferment will emerge something new. It reminds me of early bebop. Maybe this will spill into politics.” Ishmael Reed (qtd. in Ellis “NBA”)

In the late eighties, the *New York Magazine* asked new author Trey Ellis for a “hip,” “young,” and “cutting edge” contribution (Ashe xii). Black culture was trendy. As a young black writer, Ellis likely seemed primed to fulfill the magazine’s request. Ellis already had a paper that he had written his junior year for an African American survey course at Stanford (“NBA Revisited”). Expanding on this foundation, Ellis interviewed an eclectic group of artists, including filmmakers Spike Lee and Robert Townsend, alternative rock bands Fishbone and Living Colour, and writers Lisa Jones

and Terry McMillan. In the resulting essay, “The New Black Aesthetic,” Ellis attempts to define post-Civil Right’s black artistic expression. According to Ellis, despite their varying interests, New Black Aesthetic or NBA artists are willing to criticize publically black culture, particularly cultural expressions of authenticity and social protest. As the second generation college-educated offspring of the Civil Rights Movement, NBA artists are middle class. Moreover, NBA artists sample various genres and cross traditional boundaries based on their interests. Coining an awkward term, Ellis characterizes NBA artists as “cultural mulattos.” Thanks to desegregation, these artists operate in what Ellis refers to as the “black” and “white” worlds. Despite this bicultural characterization, Ellis insists in his essay that the NBA is a new form of Black Nationalism.

The New York Magazine rejected Ellis’s article. *Callaloo* then published “The New Black Aesthetic” in its winter 1989 edition, and the academy took notice. Two responses accompanied Ellis’s essay. Tera Hunter questions how a movement that Ellis attributes to “cultural mulattos” who are “second generation college-educated youth” can claim a foundation in black culture. Hunter is also troubled that Ellis ascribes “race man” status to artists like Spike Lee and the members of hip hop group Public Enemy whose works often contain derogatory depictions of black women. Eric Lott describes the NBA as “one of the only postmodernisms with a conscience” (245). Lott also echoes Hunter in his concern about gender issues. Moreover, Lott notes an “evasion of politics” (245) that fails to address the relationship between the black middle class and black mass culture.

I agree that the essay is flawed. Most critics echo Hunter and Lott, but the academy still relies on Ellis's essay to discuss African American literature by post-Civil Rights authors. Additionally, the NBA concept informs contemporary popular discourse about race. As noted in the first epigraph to this chapter, Ellis relies on the NBA concept to describe the racial identity of then presidential candidate Barack Obama nearly twenty years after the essay's initial publication ("Obama"). Additionally, Ellis claims that the publication of Toure's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness* (2011) prompted several requests for the essay ("NBA Revisited"). Ellis therefore published a full version of "The New Black Aesthetic" on the *Huffington Post* where he serves as a regular blogger. The NBA concept, as defined in Ellis's controversial but influential essay, continues to factor in discussions about race in the twenty-first century.

Given that Ellis is the author of the most influential treatment of black expression after the Civil Rights Era, an investigation into contemporary African American literature and racial discourse rightfully begins with his work. Ellis's first novel, *Platitudes* (1988), was conceived around the same time as "The New Black Aesthetic" and addresses the problems of the essay. In doing so, the novel helps us better understand the NBA and postrace consciousness. Unlike Ellis's essay, *Platitudes* clarifies contemporary constructs of race, gender, and class, and addresses the political implications of these constructs. Moreover, an analysis of how Ellis's novel echoes and, at times, challenges earlier works helps us to situate the NBA within the African American literary tradition in ways that question the efficacy of

categorizing and defining this tradition primarily in terms of chronological movements and teleology.

This study attempts a genealogical displacement of the NBA in light of its interrogation of the narrative of progress and authorial control that lies at the foundation of African American cultural studies. The narrative of progress characterizes the African American literary tradition in terms of social protest and temporality. The African American canon has been fashioned in terms of temporal movements—slave narratives, antebellum literature, Reconstruction literature, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and perhaps now the NBA. These teleological movements are meant to indicate the evolution of black expression, and implicitly blackness itself.

This evolution involves achieving social justice and full rights of citizenship for future generations. I see the tradition's most sacred texts relying on images of reproduction. For example, in "The Afterthought" to *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois hopes that his ideas will "*fall not still-born into the world wilderness*" (278, emphasis added). And, as Robert Stepto¹⁸ argues about *Invisible Man*, "Once [Ralph] Ellison's questing narrator becomes a hibernating narrator and finally comprehends [that the artist must move beyond old forms], he may truly say, 'Light confirms my reality, *gives birth to my form*'" (194, emphasis added). Only in time and in enlightened relation to the past will a new artist—one that can overcome the social constraints that plague Ellison's protagonist—come into being.

¹⁸ In *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, Stepto frames the narrative tradition in terms of a genealogical "call" and "response" between narratives of ascendance, immersion, hibernation, or a combination thereof.

Viewed in this way, we can see how the tradition has been founded on what Lee Edelman describes as a “reproductive futurism.”¹⁹ In this form of futurism, identity is made through the reiteration of the heteronormative narrative of producing an ideal in the figure of the child—a child that one day will be free of racial constraints. In the African American literary tradition, this reproductive futurism appears in a figure like Ellison’s hibernating protagonist, who embodies the promised birth of an unformed artist. In African American studies, this futurism lies in the impetus toward Martin Luther King’s mountain-top vision of children enjoying an equality secured in the U.S. for future generations.

Yet, much of NBA literature, sometimes through parody and always through narrative ruptures, appears to collapse the teleology of the tradition. In his essay, Ellis fashions the NBA as critical of earlier black expressions of social protest. However, this study shows that *Platitudes*—presumably a model for the art he attempts to define in the essay—appears to deliberately carry the trace of earlier works. This trace questions our reliance on established chronological movements to define the black American literary tradition. Therefore, this study shows how the NBA refuses to sit comfortably in its current position at the end of African American literary movements. Instead, as illustrated by *Platitudes* and the other texts considered in this study, the NBA returns to past ideas of blackness by destabilizing current ideas of race, gender, and class.

I argue that *Platitudes*, like the other novels considered in this study, conflates race, gender, and class in ways that undermine the position of the post-Civil Rights black middle-class protagonist. This weakened position occurs through “temporal

¹⁹ See Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

drags”²⁰ or unexpected and incongruent narrative returns to the past. I refer to these time drags as postrace moments because they connect the contemporary protagonist to political histories and ideas about race. By using this term, I do not intend to suggest that Ellis’s protagonist moves past race. Instead, through postrace moments, this NBA figure inexorably engages and confronts various narratives of race, gender, and class. This engagement actually characterizes the postrace aesthetic.²¹ *Platitudes* connects past and present ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and class, to show the variability of these identity forms. Therefore, Ellis’s novel undermines the insufficient “black” and “white” binary that limits his essay.

Platitudes is a satirical examination of blackness circa the Reagan Era and the “platitudes” of past or dated ideas of an essential black identity. The novel, like Percival Everett’s *Erasure* discussed in Chapter Three, is considered postmodern²² in part because it combines several forms, including multiple narratives; epistolary; pastiche; photographs; lists; diner menus; and even a fictionalized excerpt from the PSAT. Told through a series of combative exchanges (letters and chapters of a hybrid version of *Platitudes-in-progress*) between a black experimental writer, Dewayne Wellington, and a black feminist writer of the protest tradition, Isshee

²⁰ Elizabeth Freeman theorizes that “temporal drags” can connect performative post-identities to the political histories—the identity politics—that they supposedly abandon (729).

²¹ In examining postrace in this manner, I echo Ramon Saldívar who argues that the prefix “post” in the term “postrace” operates in the same manner as it does in the term “postcolonial.” “Postrace” does not refer to a chronological positioning beyond race. Instead, the postrace aesthetic examines race from a twenty-first-century perspective as a variable, and still relevant, product of imperialism. See Saldívar’s “Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction,” *American Literary History*, 23.3 (Fall 2011).

²² Ellis’s novel provides a critical look at the African American literary tradition. In terms of content, the novel resembles Linda Hutcheon’s definition of the postmodern text that, through parody, “signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from continuity and difference” (89).

Ayam, the developing relationship between these “cultural mulattos” is the novel’s plot. That relationship is mirrored by their dueling depictions of their novel’s protagonist and antagonist, Earle Tyne and Dorothy Lamont.

The tension between Wellington and Ayam, characters who represent competing expressions of black identity, is the central conflict of the novel. Dewayne Wellington begins *Platitudes* with a depiction of Earle as an apolitical black adolescent from Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Wellington soon stops this narrative and moves to a story about Dorothy, whom he depicts as a partying Manhattan Catholic school girl from Harlem, “because black women *sell*” (10, original emphasis). This change in narrative inspires Isshee Ayam to assert: “we women of color do not need your atavistic brand of representation” (15); “Your stand on negritude . . . continues to befuddle me” (110); and “Are you so blindly enthralled with that postmodernist, semiological sophism (that incidentally *nobody* believes in anymore) that the words ‘narrative’ and ‘continuity’ mean nothing to you?²³ Have you never read Baldwin?” (79, original emphasis). “Liberat[ing]” the women from Dewayne’s “sweaty and pitiful grasp” (15), Ayam “drag[s]” the narrative “back to its roots in Afro-American glory-stories” (19). The new setting, controlled by Ayam, is early-twentieth century Georgia where, unable to control the social conditions that ravage his family, Earle finds support in Dorothy and her mother.

By questioning Wellington’s familiarity with James Baldwin, Ayam suggests that Wellington’s work positions him outside of the African American literary

²³ The character Isshee Ayam implicitly characterizes the tradition too simplistically. Farah Griffin rightly observes that fiction written by women that emerged in the 70s possesses “striking, complicated, nonlinear narratives” in addition to other characteristics. See “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” *Journal of Black Studies* 35:2 (Nov 2004).

tradition that typically embraces narratives of social realism as exemplary depictions of the race struggle. Baldwin denounces assertions of white superiority as a delusion in his 1960 book of essays, *The Fire Next Time*. Yet, Baldwin also indicts the protest tradition in his 1949 essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” In fact, Baldwin’s early work focuses on an exploration of the psyche through an identity experience, like race and sexuality. Baldwin and his contemporaries attempted this exploration of a particular experience with the intent to reveal universal aspects of the psyche. I read this exploration as the origins of postrace consciousness. Read this way, Baldwin’s work prefigures Wellington’s.

Ellis relies on Baldwin to help define the “universal” aspects of the NBA and to interrogate expressions of social protest. Ellis opens his essay, “The New Black Aesthetic,” with a quotation from Baldwin:²⁴ “And this tale [of suffering], according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, *has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation*” (Rpt. in “NBA” 185, emphasis added). In positing that “this tale” exists everywhere, Baldwin and Ellis promote a kind of universalism that I read as a postrace consciousness. But, this universalism does not get us past race. Instead, Ellis and Baldwin, like other black Civil Rights era writers,²⁵ suggest that a race experience could depict universal elements of the human condition. But, according to these writers, this “universal” is not achieved through social protest. Wellington’s novel, much like Ellis’s and Baldwin’s first novels,

²⁴ Ellis cites *The Price of the Ticket*, but the quote comes from the short story “Sonny’s Blues” (1957) that appears in the collection *Going to Meet the Man* (1965).

²⁵ In the Introduction to this study, I argue that the Civil Rights-era black literary community’s call to abandon social protest in favor of “universal” themes examined through the lens of race is an early form of postrace consciousness.

opposes the racial protocols of African American literature that, as described by Claudia Tate, meet the expectations of readers—both black and nonblack—to depict the black experience as a protest against racism and a demand for social justice. In breaching readers’ expectations of “black” literature, writers like Ellis and Baldwin interrupt the narrative of progress that characterizes the African American literary tradition.

As Isshee Ayam suggests, Dewayne Wellington, and therefore *Platitudes* itself, deliberately disrupts our understanding of “narrative” and “continuity.” The novel achieves this disruption by demanding that we confront black expression through various forms (i.e., narrative, direct address, lists, photos, etc.) and opposing perspectives (Wellington v. Ayam, as well as Earle v. Dorothy in Wellington’s and Ayam’s competing texts). In this way, Ellis’s *Platitudes* resembles James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) that, as it charts the maturation of a 14-year-old male in 1935 Harlem, depicts characters who must grapple with various forms of identity (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, and religion) that they cannot reconcile (even under the strict stewardship of the Pentecostal Church).²⁶

A brief detour through Baldwin’s first novel here reminds us of the deep-rootedness of the depiction of race in conflict with other forms of social identity in the African American literary tradition. This detour also helps us to position Ellis and other NBA writers within the tradition. At the end of *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, after protagonist John Grimes has been “saved” in the Pentecostal Church, the

²⁶ For a compelling treatment on how Baldwin presents identity as multilayered and unfixed through various characters in the novel, see Vivian M. May’s “Ambivalent Narratives, Fragmented Selves: Performative Identities and the Mutability of Roles in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It On the Mountain*” in *New Essays on Go Tell It On the Mountain*, edited by Trudier Harris.

narrator tells us that “John, staring at Elisha, struggled to tell him something more—*struggled to say*—all that *could never be said*” (220, my emphasis). John’s unexpressed attraction to Elisha, the pastor’s nephew who is himself a preacher, is in part John’s “sin” that the narrator explains at the beginning of the novel:

He had sinned. In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, *he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak.* (18-19, Emphasis added)

Baldwin refuses to resolve the narrative by insisting that John, despite being “saved,” still must grapple with the ineffable—a sexual identity that is incompatible with his other markers of identity, i.e., familial, racial, and religious.

A careful reading of Baldwin’s and Ellis’s first novels reveals the significance of Isshee Ayam’s misreading of Baldwin. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin refuses continuity (and therefore a fixed identity) through irresolution and negation. The narrator’s assertion, after John insists that he is saved, that Harlem is forever changed, “exhausted, cleansed, and new” (215) is immediately negated:

Yet the houses were there, as they had been; the windows, like a thousand, blinded eyes, stared outward at the morning—at the morning that was the same for them as the mornings of John’s innocence, and the mornings before his birth. The water ran in the gutters with a

small, discontented sound; on the water traveled paper...the leavings of a dog, the vomit of a drunken man, the dead sperm, trapped in rubber, of one abandoned to this lust....[John] would weep again, his heart insisted, for now his weeping had begun; he would rage again, said the shifting air, for the lions of rage had been unloosed; he would be in darkness again, in fire again, now that he had seen the fire and the darkness. (216)

Life in Harlem might seem the same, but the narrative negates John's forward movement and thereby interrupts the flow of the plot. This lack of narrative continuity makes "salvation" and "sin" matters of perspective that are as equivocal as the streets of Harlem and John's embrace of the Church over his sexuality. Baldwin suggests through John's struggle to voice the ineffable—that institutions like the Church might construct identity, but individuals are not defined by these constructions. Ellis engages this debate in *Platitudes* through dueling perspectives of culturally ambiguous characters, which raises compelling questions about why this narrative returns at the end of the twentieth century.

In the pages that follow, I analyze the ways that Ellis' novel engages longstanding debates regarding racial protocols specifically within the African American literary tradition and more broadly in U.S. racial discourse through along two axes: a) gender and b) class.²⁷ This kind of examination of the novel demonstrates how the figure of the cultural mulatto both participates in and

²⁷ As mentioned above, the academy's primary criticism of Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic" is that the essay defines post-civil rights black expression in decidedly masculine and middle-class terms.

challenges neoliberal,²⁸ hegemonic discourse with reference to the NBA, its response to the Black Arts Movement (BAM), and its depiction of social identity as performative. This analysis suggests that we can best recognize this engagement of the neoliberal position by critically attending to the sociohistoric conditions toward which the novel gestures and in which it was written and published.

Ellis explores the central conflict in the novel between men and women, and NBA expression and the tradition of social protest, specifically in relation to gender and class. This exploration is signified by Dewayne Wellington's attempt to overcome his impotence and seduce Ayam at the novel's end. Ellis fashions Wellington's impotence in terms of the identity politics that are reminiscent of critical race theorist Howard Winant's assertion that

From the 1960s to the present, then, not only black people, but the nation at large, have been riven by a throughgoing and deep-seated struggle: the antagonistic coexistence, the contradiction, of the two great forces of white supremacy on the one hand, and of the movement for racial and indeed broader social justice on the other. It is this convulsion, this contradiction, that constitutes racial dualism at century's end. (97)

As members of the black post-Civil Rights middle class, Dewayne Wellington and Isshee Ayam would stand on the frontlines of a Gramscian war of position "in which

²⁸ The economic policies of "Neoliberalism" (as opposed to "liberalism") draw upon the tenets of Classical Liberalism, i.e., free market and minimal government. During the latter half of the twentieth century, the neoliberal agenda has involved the promotion of free enterprise, deregulation, privatization, and the reduction of public spending on social and community programs while advocating "personal responsibility." See Lisa Duggan's *The Twilight of Equality?* (2003), discussed below. See also David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005).

subordinated groups have attained some foothold, some rights, within civil society; thus, they have the leverage, the ability to press some claims on their rulers and on the state” (Winant 93). Wellington and Ayam were groomed for undermining the U.S.’s racial chauvinism and thereby advancing the narrative of progress.

This counter-hegemonic position is potentially represented by the NBA through Ellis’s (perhaps overly simplistic) assertion that the cultural mulatto easily moves between racial and national identifications or “black” and “white” worlds. Winant specifically defines black racial dualism in terms of class and gender. First, he identifies the differing experiences of the black middle and working classes. These differences were made even more apparent after the end of *de jure* segregation and further solidified by Reagan’s assault on the welfare system. Second, Winant argues that these differences have resulted in an increasing divide between black male and black female experiences (100). In *Platitudes*, Ellis uses these markers of a stratified black identity, gender and class, to destabilize and expand his concept of the “cultural mulatto.”

Critics note how Ellis uses alternating depictions of blackness in *Platitudes* that can be constructed and reconstructed with a trip uptown to Harlem or downtown to Manhattan or on the whim of an author, and implicitly any individual. An attraction to Isshee Ayam (a name that nods satirically to 1980s black feminism) causes Dewayne Wellington to “blacken” Earle’s identity in terms of assumed reader expectations. He places Earle in Harlem to participate in a voter registration campaign to support a black mayoral candidate. He also has Earle’s mother quit her public relations job with a South African airline “to start working for black folks

instead of against them” (124) and leave her Jewish boyfriend for a black police captain. Ellis conflates these changes in racialized identity with the gender and class politics that Winant argues defies notions of a unified black community. Moreover, Ellis’s conflation of these identity forms exhibits a postrace moment. To get the girl, Wellington must connect contemporary and political histories of race. But these connections serve to undermine stable constructs of blackness.

Multiple plot changes and narrative disruptions illustrate how gender and class politics inform race in the novel. Wellington, for example, secures a date with Ayam after months of correspondence, collaboration on the novel, and a missed opportunity at a conference for black writers when Ayam stands up Wellington in favor of his archrival, Richard Johnson. Ayam’s initial rejection leaves Wellington especially embittered because Johnson is a commercially successful black professor who promotes literature, like Ayam’s, that adheres to racial protocols of depicting a reader-expected “black” experience. In fact, Ayam’s decision to meet Johnson inspires Wellington to delete her influence in his version of the novel, symbolized by Dorothy’s betrayal of Earle with a white male model who Wellington has named “Richard Johnson.” In effect, Wellington appears to “whiten” Earle by attempting to elide Ayam’s influence from the narrative, returning Earle to his apolitical life and pursuit of white girls on the Upper West Side. In *Platitudes*, Ellis fashions identity itself as an ever-changing narrative that is written and erased to conform to environment and association.

Ellis further explores the malleable nature of social identity through the device of the palimpsest, in which he writes the gender play between Wellington and Ayam

over the trace of an elided treatment of race. When Wellington and Ayam finally meet, Ayam insists upon paying for their outing, from the cab ride through dinner, with her expense account: “Nonsense! she says. I shall pay—or rather, Barnard College. She passes the black cab driver \$5 for the \$2.50 clicked on the meter. Outside the cab she explains that she always tries to redistribute the wealth when someone else is paying” (179). This generosity occurs after Wellington reminds Ayam and the reader that he must attribute his affluence to another woman, particularly as Ayam notes

I was under the impression that cabs do not stop for we Afro-Americans uptown.

They don't *going* uptown, into Harlem. But we're going downtown to the Upper West Side. Where de rich folks live at.

But you live there too.

Courtesy of my ex-wife.

Ah yes, I remember. (179)

During dinner, we are again reminded of Wellington's dependence on an ex-wife who also “redistribute[s] the wealth.” Ayam reluctantly reveals that she is reviewing Johnson's latest book for the *Times* and “toying with the idea of writing the screenplay for her bestselling novel, *My Big Ol' Feets Gon' Stomp Dat Evil Down*” (180). Wellington responds that he hopes to capitalize on the project that she helped to create, explaining

Actually, I would like to sell *Platitudes* to Hollywood and, with the money, build a cottage in a secluded section of Martha's Vineyard,

where I have some property. My goal is no longer to have to depend upon alimony for my subsistence.

Ah ha, so you should be grateful to we feminist. Before the Women's Rights movement, no man would *ever* have received alimony from his wife. (180)

Ellis leaves Ayam and the reader to wonder if the property on Martha's Vineyard is yet another benefit from the divorce. As Ayam makes clear, Wellington's situation challenges traditional U.S. ideas of masculine and feminine identity. "Mr. Wellington," however, is a regular at the restaurant and the host and wait staff support him in playing a traditionally masculine role. Wellington instructs the waiter, "Your dessert menu for the lady, please. Isshee watches Dewayne a bit after the word *lady*. But I will have your Black Forest Cake and a cappuccino" (180, original emphasis). After the couple finishes and the waiter asks, "Will that be all? Dewayne says, Yes, thank you. Isshee again pays the bill" (181). Wellington performs a traditional form of masculinity by ordering for Ayam and directing the wait staff, but the power that Ayam exhibits by paying for the meal calls the reader's attention to Wellington's performance.

Ellis's contrast of notions of traditional and contemporary constructs of gender roles—the black masculine in the figure of Dewayne Wellington—asks us to consider Wellington's dependence upon women as the cause of his inability to become physically aroused later when he invites Ayam home to see his "den" and where he does his "writing." Wellington, in this moment, is unable to perform the masculine identity that allows for reproduction. The impetus toward an expected

outcome in the normative time of the novel is stopped as Wellington suggests instead that Ayam “take a nap or something” (182). In effect, Ellis’s queering²⁹ of Wellington and Ayam, through their embrace of gender roles that operate outside of heteronormativity, leave both characters inert and, therefore, no longer moving toward an anticipated outcome. It is only after Wellington returns to their novel to reunite Earle and Dorothy that the reader is shown a glimpse of a promised “future.” Subsequent to Wellington writing a scene in which Dorothy explains her actions and declares her love to Earle, the narrator states, “Now that it presses the underside of his desk, he [Dewayne] will go wake Isshee” (183).

Wellington’s attempt to control the narrative allows him to reclaim, perhaps temporarily, a traditionally masculine identity and reinstall heteronormative time. Bertram Ashe argues that “The final section of the novel... contain[s], perhaps a bit too neatly, the reconciliation of Isshee and Dewayne, of Earle and Dorothy, and, by extension, of black feminist fiction writers and their black male postmodern novelist counterparts” (ix). The conflict to which Ashe alludes surrounds the objections of postmodern writers like Ishmael Reed and Darryl Pinkney to the portrayals of domestic violence committed by black male characters in some of the well-received fiction of writers like Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker.³⁰ I argue, however, that the neatness of this final section points away from reconciliation and

²⁹ In employing the term “queer” here I follow in the vein of Edelman and Judith Butler who define “queerness” as that which figures outside of hegemonic “norms” (i.e., the masculinist/ heteronormative construct). See for example Edelman’s *No Future* or Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1989).

³⁰ See for example Reginald Martin’s interview “A Conversation with Ishmael Reed” (1-3 Jul 1983) in which Reed comments on Alice Walker and “a few of these black feminist writers who are playing this ‘hate black male’ angle.” See also Darryl Pinkney’s negative review of *The Color Purple* in “Black Victims, Black Villains” from the *New York Review of Books* (19 Jan 1987).

toward a continuation of the identity play in the text in which the “cultural mulatto” navigates between worlds or constructions of identity.

The narrative ends only with Wellington’s desire (to wake Ayam). By keeping us focused on the malleability of identity Ellis, denies reconciliation. This denial thereby privileges the NBA expression of the tension between reconstructions of gender and class identities. While the women in the novel appear to enjoy contemporary ideas of empowered feminine identity (i.e., wealth, professional success, and/or sexual freedom), Wellington and, by default, his protagonist Earle appear to maintain some form of traditional masculine identity only by attempting to control the narrative (in this case empowered femininity) rather than their own bodies. Earle reacts to Dorothy by trading his political, Harlem narrative for his former apolitical, Upper West Side narrative. Wellington gains masculine power by rewriting Earle and Dorothy’s narrative. However, the reader never witnesses Wellington’s realization of this power. Ellis leaves the reader only understanding that identity is formed and changed in response to the narrative. And the tension between our expectations of the black experience and various lived experiences registers a variable conflation of race, class, and gender that is indicative of the “cultural mulatto.” As exhibited by Wellington’s interaction with Ayam, the desire to control the narrative is the tool that shapes identity.

Ellis’s examination of black expression through gender conflict suggests that we can view *Platitudes* as a revision of Ishmael Reed’s controversial novel, *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). Published two years before *Platitudes*, Reed’s novel satirizes feminism, racism, and ethnic identity through his fictional playwright Ian Ball’s

whose efforts to be removed from “The Sex List” and enjoy literary success by writing his own version of *Reckless Eyeballing*, function much like Dewayne Wellington’s efforts in *Platitudes*. In Ball’s play, time and identity are collapsed as the corpse of Ham Hill, a black teenager who was lynched for looking at a white woman, is exhumed and tried for “eye-rape[...]” (104) because his accuser claims that he is just as guilty as her husband and the other white men who murdered him.³¹ Ellis also echoes Reed’s position on identity as Ian Ball succeeds in *Reckless Eyeballing* largely by alternately pandering to and rejecting various interest groups (i.e., white feminists, black male writers, New York Jews), particularly black feminists represented by his foil, Tremonisha Smarts who is arguably based on Alice Walker.³²

In “The New Black Aesthetic” Ellis relies on Reed, as he does Baldwin, to define the NBA, listing him as one of the “avant-garde” forerunners of the movement from the mid-seventies who “were a minority of the back-arts community, branded either counterrevolutionary, too artsy or just not good propagandists...[but nevertheless] expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness, showing us as the intricate, uncategorizeable [*sic*] folks we had known ourselves to be” (191-92).³³ Reed echoes Baldwin. All of the black male writers, except for Ian Ball, are unable to move forward in *Reckless Eyeballing*, specifically because of tension between

³¹ Reed recalls Emmet Till through the figure of Ham Hill.

³² See, for example, Andrew Strombeck’s “The Conspiracy of Masculinity in Ishmael Reed” in *African American Review* Vol. 40, 2006. See also Gregory Jay’s “Recent Fictions in Theory: A Reading of Jay Clayton’s ‘Pleasures of Babel’” in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 27, 1995.

³³ Ellis also includes novelists Clarence Major, Toni Morrison, and John Edgar Wideman as well as funk musician George Clinton, conceptual artist David Hammons, and comedian Richard Pryor in the NBA vanguard.

gender, racial, ethnic and class identities. Further, Reed's characters, particularly Ball, suffer from a debilitating "two-headedness" that, in addition to referencing W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, forces individuals to grapple with irreconcilably contradictory beliefs.³⁴ Ellis gestures to Reed in *Platitudes*, explicitly in reference to the gender conflict that became one of the markers of the African American literary tradition in the 1980s.

In pointing to Reed, Ellis asks the reader to examine "what ideological consequences derive from continuity and difference" (Hutcheon 89). Ellis's postmodern construction of identity as a variable conflation—a hybrid in constant flux—might appear to defy notions of reconciliation of this gender conflict. But, an exploration of how gender (and later gender and class in tandem) operates in *Platitudes* shows that Ellis's novel deliberately interrogates the notion of perceived differences within the construct of the black community. In interrogating our understanding of these differences, Ellis overwrites Reed and presents the black community as a constantly shifting construct. Moreover, Ellis's revision of Reed's novel advances the discourse of identity politics.

The Politics of Gender

The central conflict in *Platitudes* illustrates the discourse surrounding gender in African American literature that became particularly prevalent in the 1980s. As Winant has noted, gendered political identifications have denied efforts to define an undivided black community. Constructions of gender and race have long been addressed in African American literature, from Martin R. Delany's masculine ideal in

³⁴ See Daniel Punday's "Ishmael Reed's Rhetorical Turn: Uses of 'Signifying' in Reckless Eyeballing," *College English* 54:4 (Apr 92), pp. 446-61, for an effective discussion of how "two-headedness" operates in Reed's novel.

Blake or the Huts of America (serialized between 1861 and 1862) to Zora Neale Hurston's feminine independence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. However, the nationalist focus of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), that privileged racialized identity over gender, fostered the emergence of women writers and the examination of the construct of gender and power in African American literature and the black American community at large. For all of the positive effects of BAM, including reconnecting "high" art to the masses and helping to establish ethnic studies, the movement's embrace of a masculine, heterosexual identity engendered strong opposition from writers like bell hooks, Gayl Jones, Cherrie Moraga, Barbara Smith, and Alice Walker.³⁵ The commercial success and feminist embrace of novels like Jones' *Corregidora* and Walker's *The Color Purple*, works that depict domestic violence and abuse inflicted upon black women by black men, has led some critics to accuse these writers of betraying the black community through the subtle promotion of racism that reinforces stereotypes of black men.

In some ways the tension between the novelists in *Platitudes* resembles the response to Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) as well as other controversies in the literary and political arenas in the late twentieth century. In an interview conducted

³⁵ In *The Black Arts Movement* (2005), James Smethurst attributes the emergence of black women writers during the 1980s as a specific response to counter "what they saw as the sexism and homophobia of 1960s and 1970s nationalisms" (2). Cherrie Moraga states in the "Foreword" to the second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) that the collection of writings by women of color was conceived in order to address heterosexism as well as sexism. In *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) bell hooks argues that black nationalist discourse focuses on black men while feminist discourse focuses on white women. Alice Walker explores the often conflicting roles of cultural and feminist identity by arguing for a "feminist of color" or a "Womanist" perspective in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983).

by Reginald Martin three years before the publication of *Reckless Eyeballing*,³⁶ Reed, insists that

these black feminists have very cleverly played to the . . . I think this has something to do with the economic situation in the country also; black males have always been the scapegoats. I'm sure that you could go back and make a graph showing that all the killings of black males increased in times of economic difficulty. As a matter of fact, a black man was lynched last year. He was killed first, then hanged from a tree. And so I think that some black feminists are taking advantage of this, so I call these black feminists, people like Alice Walker, the kind of novels they write, I call them "neoconfederate" novelists, the kind of writing that Thomas Dixon wrote in "The Clansman." This kind of plantation literature, they're just reviving these notions, whipping up hysteria, and they're supported by people like Gloria Steinem—Susan Brown Miller [sic] was a judge on the committee which gave Alice Walker the American Book Award, and this was her reward for being the intellectual midwife of Susan Brown Miller's [sic] terrible and really fallacious ideas about black men. (Ellipses in original)

Reed's concept of "neoconfederate" literature with which he characterizes the work of black feminists as a threat to the black community because of what he considered a

³⁶ According to Martin, the interview was conducted July 1-7, 1983, in Emeryville, CA, just outside of San Francisco.

deliberate attack on black men reaffirms the “Black Woman as Traitor”³⁷ trope as defined by Nikol Alexander-Floyd that is easily recognized in the political climate of the 1980s and 1990s.³⁸

The “Black Woman as Traitor” trope enjoyed several manifestations within U.S. political discourse. One manifestation involves the Reagan-era construction of “the welfare queen,” a double-sided disparagement of black women as a detriment to both the nation and the black community due to a supposed reliance on state support (i.e., welfare and affirmative action) that in turn refused black men a position of perceived masculine leadership in the family (Alexander-Floyd 122-23). Another manifestation stems from political scandals involving figures like Marion Barry, Mel Reynolds, and Clarence Thomas³⁹ in which black women, through accusations of misconduct, were viewed as a (willing) tool through which the state could attack, even entrap, black men and thereby damage the black community. Several black journalists, public figures, and community members maintained support for Barry and Reynolds specifically by aligning their black female accusers with the state (132-140). In the case of the Thomas-Hill hearings, Clarence Thomas’s approval ratings in the black community rose from 54% to nearly 80% after he condemned the hearings

³⁷ In “‘A Threat from Within’: The Black Woman as Traitor in African American Thought and Politics,” Alexander-Floyd also refers to this as “The Trope of the Black Malinche” in reference to the figure of Malinche (or Malintzin) in Mexican history and mythology who is accused of assisting Spanish colonization because she served as an interpreter for Cortes.

³⁸ Alexander-Floyd discusses responses to Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow was enuf* and Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* that echo Reed’s critique of Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

³⁹ Alexander-Floyd examines black media and public responses to the convictions of Barry, former mayor of Washington, DC, on drug charges in 1990 and Reynolds, former Illinois congressman, for sexual misconduct in 1995. In both cases, the women (Rasheeda Moore and Beverly Heard) who testified on behalf of the state prosecutors were depicted as traitorous, self-serving, and/or mentally unstable.

as a “high-tech lynching” (Crenshaw 417). As Kimberle Crenshaw argues, Thomas could effectively employ the trope of lynching specifically because this image is a resounding marker of racial injustice in the black community; whereas Anita Hill, due to the historic depiction of black women as promiscuous and insatiable,⁴⁰ did not fit the narrative of sexual victim in the U.S. Instead, critics depicted Hill as a race traitor—either airing dirty laundry that should not be exposed or “acting white” while failing to understand the “sexual repartee” that existed between black men and women (421-22). As suggested by Reed’s inflammatory “neoconfederate” concept, nationalist unity privileges the masculinist perspective.⁴¹

The “Black Woman as Traitor” trope appears in *Platitudes*. Contextualizing the conflict between Wellington and Ayam—and therefore Earle and Dorothy—allows us to see how Ellis uses this trope to articulate the intersection of gender and race. For example, even when the characters of this text appear to focus on gender, they cannot escape a racialized identity. Isshee Ayam, specifically in her role as *black* feminist, emasculates Dewayne Wellington. His recourse is to control the narrative and write Ayam’s initial preference for black professor Richard Johnson through Dorothy’s betrayal of Earle. Wellington slips the narrative into a new text called “The Cub Detective Series Presents: The Case of the Flexible Dancer.”

⁴⁰ Crenshaw notes several examples of how this image of black women was very much in play in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the court system. While one judge advised jurors that they could not assume that a black woman, unlike a white woman, was chaste, another suggested that jurors would have to “redefine rape” when considering accusations of sexual assault in the black community (413).

⁴¹ In a blog entitled “Brown v. Monkey” on *The Huffington Post* (23 Feb 2009), political consultant and commentator Jehmu Greene questions the black activist, journalistic, and artistic communities’ furor over *The New York Post*’s controversial political cartoon that compares a deranged and violent chimpanzee to the author of the stimulus package (most likely President Obama) amid the remarkably measured response to R&B singer Chris Brown’s alleged domestic assault against fellow R&B artist Rihanna.

Wellington then asks the reader if Dorothy likes Earle as “more than just a friend?” before upending the text and literally forcing the reader to invert the book to read the answer—Earle walks in on Dorothy in a demeaning sexual position with *white* model “Richard Johnson” (159).

Wellington’s decision to make Dorothy’s “Richard” white is a tongue-in-cheek nod to Richard Wright’s “Long Black Song.”⁴² In this story, Wright explores the costs of white oppression through a husband’s violent response to his wife’s infidelity with a white man.⁴³ This response represents the husband’s momentary sense of masculinity before he is killed by a white mob. Earle’s response to Dorothy’s performance or “flexible dancing,” while not as epic, is the stereotype of black masculine betrayal. Earle gains the confidence to actually have sex with the white girls about whom he only fantasized before Dorothy. In rewriting the narrative, Wellington heightens the issue of gender by likening Ayam’s sexual freedom to the ultimate betrayal in which the black man is endangered specifically through the black woman’s complicit relationship with hegemony. Therefore, the “Black Woman as Traitor” trope underlies Wellington’s respective narratives. But, as revealed in the following analysis of how gender is inextricably connected to fluctuating constructs of class and blackness in the novel, Ellis’s text ultimately overwrites this trope.

The Politics of Class

The central conflict in *Platitudes* between Dewayne Wellington and Isshee Ayam, and concurrently between Earle Tyne and Dorothy Lamont, exemplifies the

⁴² This story appears in Wright’s collection of short stories entitled *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938).

⁴³ While some scholars classify the intercourse between Sara, the wife, and the white salesman as consensual, others question this reading given the social conditions during which the story is set. The story’s narration is ambiguous.

gender politics of the post-civil rights era. Ellis also constructs this conflict in relation to the growing class divide in the 1980s that Howard Winant argues contributes to a racial dualism that confounds efforts to depict a unified black community. This class divide is of particular interest to this study as it points again to the teleological, and therefore temporal, nature of African American studies, or the narrative of progress that underlies the tradition—class is structured in terms of aspiration and achievement. An analysis of how Ellis collapses this class divide in *Platitudes* allows us to see how the novel, rather than the essay, is the form in which Ellis better articulates the nature of the NBA.

In juxtaposing Harlem and the Upper West Side in the novel, scholars have argued that “Ellis creates two black worlds, uptown and downtown, even if only the former would be recognized, in the eyes of mainstream America, as traditionally black” (xxi).⁴⁴ And conservative social critics⁴⁵ have subtly relied upon a contrast of these so-called separate worlds to convey their belief in an increasingly colorblind American society that could eradicate poverty through the embrace of personal responsibility. Earle’s life appears to echo that of the Huxtables’ on NBC’s popular

⁴⁴ As suggested by this study, the notion of two “black” worlds is an unreliable construction. In *The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City*, Roger Sanjek explains polling in 1987 revealed that 46 percent of blacks who lived in New York City experienced perceived racial slurs or insults. This experience was not limited to the working class: “A college professor was regarded with panic by white residents of his apartment building and shadowed by security guards while shopping; a schoolteacher and part-time investor was denied a co-op apartment when the board refused to believe that her \$250,000 in assets had been accumulated lawfully; a six-foot, four inch publishing executive who was clean shaven was frisked by police in their search for ‘a five-foot, ten-inch black male with a moustache’” (151).

⁴⁵ Shelby Steele and John McWhorter are two examples. See Steele’s *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (1991) and *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (1999). See also McWhorter’s *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (2000) and *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America* (2006).

The Cosby Show (1984-1992)⁴⁶ that some social critics suggest paved Obama's way to the White House⁴⁷—a depiction of upper-middle-class black experience that questions prevailing notions of the “traditional” black experience. Yet, ever since Alain Locke described Harlem as “a race capital” in “The New Negro,” the “uptown” section of Manhattan has been imagined as the center of black life. Further, the steady economic decline of Harlem as a result of the Depression that ended the New Negro Movement (or Harlem Renaissance) potentially meets perceived reader expectations of associating blackness with urban poverty. But, if Ellis creates two worlds in *Platitudes*, he refuses to delimit them.

Ellis's neat juxtaposition of the Upper West Side and Harlem in his first novel appears to challenge perceived reader expectations of the “black” experience. At stake are the content of “black” literature and the depiction of a “black community” by a class of writers who inherited some financial security in tandem with the benefits of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision and the sixties Civil Rights acts that made racial discrimination in public places illegal. Again, a detour through Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, specifically his move away from social protest through an elision of the economic conditions that plagued the novel's setting, helps us to situate the NBA

⁴⁶ While the depicted lifestyles are similar in terms of class, *The Cosby Show* was set in Brooklyn Heights and not the Upper West Side.

⁴⁷ Cosby and Alvin F. Poussaint (Cosby's business partner and show consultant) have both suggested that a significant number of voters came of age under the influence of the show. See the *NYT*, “Before Obama, There Was Bill Cosby,” (8 Nov 2008). In an interview on Fox News on the 2008 presidential election night, republican strategist Karl Rove argued in response to Obama's victory, “We've had an African-American first family for many years in different forms. When *The Cosby Show* was on, that was America's family. It wasn't a black family. It was America's family.”

politically.⁴⁸ We see this shift away from an explicit economic critique in a comparison of Baldwin's and Ellis's initial depictions of Harlem in their respective first novels.

Baldwin's protagonist, for example, represents the quintessential modern figure—a psychologically complex depiction of the human psyche that Baldwin embraced over the sentimental or sociological realism found in characters from the protest tradition like Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Bigger in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Specifically, Baldwin argues at the end of "Everybody's Protest Novel" that "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (18). In effect, Baldwin argues that the protest tradition relegates blacks to the category of race. And, Baldwin asserts that this relegation serves only to ignore a black

⁴⁸ In the Introduction to this study, I show how midcentury black writers moved away from the tradition of protest and toward "universal" portrayals of the human psyche. This political shift is most explicit in Baldwin's essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel" and the 1950 *Phylon* conference of major black writers. I see this moment as the beginnings of postrace consciousness. This move away from the protest tradition's racial realism or the explicitly critical examination of economic and social conditions and toward an exploration of the psyche or the historically transcendent "universalism" reflects the influence of New York intellectuals, like Lionel Trilling and Arthur Schlesinger. Baldwin and Ralph Ellison were closely associated with the New York Intellectuals. In *Renewing the Left*, Harvey Teres explains that *Partisan Review*, *New Leader*, and *Commentary*, three publications within the New York Jewish intellectual scene, were the first to showcase Baldwin's earliest work (213). Teres argues that the relationship cooled as Baldwin started to demonstrate a more favorable position towards racialized social protest (224-227). In *Native Sons*, Sol Stein, a former student of Trilling's, says that he and longtime friend "Jimmy" attended Trillings' alma mater, DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx (3-4). In *American Fiction in the Cold War*, Thomas Schaub argues that the New York Intellectuals, many of whom were Jewish, lost their faith in communist-fueled progressive politics after The Great Purge in 1936 – 1938 and the Soviet-German Nonaggression Pact of 1939. Perceiving Stalin's aggression as a betrayal and the masses' acquiescence as weakness, the New York Intellectuals fashioned a "new" left politically located at the "Vital Center" and viewed totalitarianism and communism as equally destructive. "New Liberals" moved away from economic and social criticism and embraced psychological explorations that revealed the dark nature of the individual. See also Geraldine Murphy's "Subversive Anti-Stalinism: Race and Sexuality in the Early Essays of James Baldwin," *ELH* 63:4, Winter (1996), pp. 1029-30.

subjectivity that would allow for the telling of the “universal”—a human story that can transcend time, place, and race. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* therefore focuses on an exploration of the protagonist’s psyche as the narrator tells us that “The darkness of [John’s] sin was in the hardheartedness with which he resisted God’s power; in the scorn that was often his while he listened to the crying, breaking voices, and watched the black skin glisten while they lifted up their arms and fell on their faces before the Lord. For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father’s fathers. He would have another life” (17). Baldwin’s first novel is therefore indicative of the modernist move toward an examination of interiority. The reader is asked to relate to John Grimes not necessarily because of his historic placement in a black family in 1930s Harlem, but more specifically due to his human desire to move beyond the limitations of his legacy.

Most telling is the fact that Baldwin sets the novel in Harlem on protagonist John Grimes’ birthday, a Saturday in March, in 1935. This timing is significant. It recalls the Harlem race riot that occurred at the same time (March 19, 1935) and that has come to signify the poverty and racism that led to the end of the Harlem Renaissance.⁴⁹ But, the narrative never refers to this riot. This omission is particularly odd given that fourteen-year-old John could have easily been sixteen-year-old Lino Rivera, the Harlem teenager whose arrest and mistreatment for shoplifting by white store employees and police triggered a social protest of rumored brutality that erupted into mass violence. Therefore, Baldwin’s decision to set the novel at this significant time and ignore the riot seems deliberate. The novel opens

⁴⁹ Baldwin of course writes quite explicitly about race riots in his essays. In “Notes of a Native Son,” for example, Baldwin contrasts his birthday celebration with his father’s funeral and the eruption of the (Aug.) 1943 riot that began at the Hotel Braddock.

not with a focus on the deplorable social conditions of Harlem in 1935, but instead on John's silent recollection of his life in relation to the history of his family, the Pentecostal Church, and Harlem.

Ellis's treatment of Harlem, specifically through the figure of Dorothy, echoes Baldwin's. In Dewayne Wellington's version of *Platitudes*, Dorothy Lamont is the daughter of a single parent from Harlem who manages to send Dorothy to Saint Rita's School for Girl's and her oldest daughter, Shawniqua, to Yale. On the subway, because "those damn cabs won't go uptown for shit" (105), after a night of partying with her wealthy classmates Dorothy thinks

Girl, now take off your slippers, Cinderella night is over....Yeah, this class shit is crazy, but after college and biz school I won't have to worry about that no more 'cause it'll be Morgan Stanley investment banking and Fifty Grand a Year City, yeah buddy. No more crashing on Julie's or Olivia's floor like a slave 'cause you absolutely cannot train it past one. Yeah, I'll have me a dee-luxe apartment in de skyaaaay. I'll out-booj even Sheena only hip not just snooty, rich and black...I hope Mom'll let me off work tomorrow, what a drag. Still it's kinda cool after these wealthy preps start talking about their dad the TeeVee producer or world-famous microsurgeon, for them to say, What does your father do—or mother, don't think I'm sexist, and they laugh and you say, My mother runs a diner in Harlem and my father's in Texas somewhere. And just once I want some Graham or Brett or

Ethan to say, You're joking, but they never do 'cause they think I'll rip their dick out. (105-06, original emphasis)

Dorothy will not be like her mother or her mother's mothers. She will have another life that she believes, in contrast to Sapphire's Precious Jones in *Push* (1996), will not require state intervention. It is easy to imagine that the reader, and even "Graham or Brett or Ethan," can relate to the desire to escape the fate of a parent.

By focusing on interiority and providing the reader access into Dorothy's psyche, Wellington demonstrates again that he has indeed read Baldwin. Dorothy's complaints about objectionable social conditions—the oblique reference to cab drivers' racialized refusal to go to Harlem that Ayam also mentions, as well as an expressed concern about hiding her jewelry—are overshadowed by her "bootstraps" aspiration to become (in time) an investment banker that is supported by her tough stance in opposition to the "Grahams" and "Ethans" she encounters through her school associations. Dorothy has to take the subway and work a part-time job, but Wellington provides a rather oblique look at the poverty, violence, and drugs that had come to characterize the center of black life in the 1980s.

The reader, however, cannot rely on one narrative in *Platitudes* and we must therefore turn to Dorothy's foil Earle to understand that Dewayne Wellington intends to give us only a cursory look at Harlem. Wellington appears to "blacken" Earle through Ayam's influence by placing him in Harlem, but Earle's foray into black culture is decidedly superficial. Due to Ayam's desire to have Earle depict a black experience, Wellington briefly sends Earle to Harlem to register voters for the

campaign that is determined to elect the city's first black mayor.⁵⁰ Further, Earle, like the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), encounters portraits of famous black political figures and artists⁵¹ at Harlem's democratic headquarters. Earle also hears about the current mayor's failed promise to address Harlem's housing crisis from an elderly caretaker. The narrator however signifies to the reader that Earle cannot apply this knowledge in any significant way through the club's list of revered figures: the names "Amiri Baraka" and "LeRoi Jones," for example, appear separately without explanation.⁵² And, Wellington quickly pulls Earle out of Harlem when he becomes angry with Ayam, in effect refusing Earle time to learn about and encounter the societal issues that affected Harlemites and other blacks in the 1980s.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Platitudes* was published a year before David Norman Dinkins defeated incumbent Ed Koch to receive the democratic nomination for mayor of New York City. Narrowly defeating the republican nominee, Rudy Guiliani, in the general election, Dinkins became the first African-American mayor of NYC in 1990.

⁵¹ The narrator states The Jean Toomer Democratic Club displayed the following: "Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, Soujourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Stokely Carmichael, Amiri Baraka, Angela Davis, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, John Carlos, Marcus Garvey, Sekou Toure, Jomo Kenyatta, Patrice Lumumba, Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Paul Robeson, Jean Toomer, Jesse Jackson, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Johnson, LeRoi Jones, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Stevie Wonder, the Jacksons, and every major jazz artist ever" (131).

⁵² See note 51.

⁵³ As has been well documented, policies enacted by the Reagan administration affected the black community in particular. The deregulation of the Savings and Loans, tax cuts (i.e., capital gains, inheritance, top personal income, and corporate), new tax credits, and developing technology (e.g., personal computers, cellular phones, voicemail and email) allowed corporations to cutback the workforce and move to cost effective locations outside of New York's financial district. According to Roger Sanjek, "Those who fell most behind were workers with less than a high school education and African Americans. Black workers had moved steadily toward wage parity with whites in the 1970s, but during the 1980s they lost ground" (128). As the middle class left Harlem, the "center of black life" became a concentration of poverty. Moreover, Harlem was affected by the drugs, crime, and AIDS that plagued New York City as well as other parts of the U.S. Mayor Ed Koch called U.S. mayors to convene over the crack "epidemic" in 1986, citing increasing drug arrests and murder rates. In 1987, then Mayor Dianne Feinstein formed a task force to address the growing crack problem in San Francisco. A 1987 article in *U.S. News & World Report* states that "Blacks and Hispanics [were] twice as likely as whites to contract AIDS" (George 159). See also Nelson George's *Post-Soul Nation*.

Wellington's narrative further suggests Earle's superficial investment in Harlem as a black cultural center through his reading interests. While at the democratic club in Harlem, Earle really only shows interest in Ayam's *bildungsroman* about the sexual awakening of a small-town Mississippi girl in 1938 that he borrows from the club's bookshelf. Significantly, Earle's note of Ayam's truncated biography on the back cover of her novel allows Wellington to contrast Ayam to her heroine—a comparison designed to suggest that middle-class Ayam, who attended Spelman College and began graduate studies in English at Yale, authors a working class black experience that she does not know.⁵⁴ Wellington therefore places Earle in Harlem only to show interest in a writer whose background, despite their supposed ideological opposition, echoes Wellington's.

The narrative suggests that despite their differing writing styles, Wellington and Ayam are quite similar. Ayam, for example, admits to relaxing toward Wellington's position on race when she insists, after reading his bio, that they have something in common because he “left Stanford to become a field coordinator for SNCC in Maybeline” and was “stationed in Benin with the Peace Corps” (149-50). Wellington thereby uses Earle's sojourn in Harlem to question, rather than reinforce, notions of black identity. The reader cannot even trust that Wellington and Ayam represent opposing positions.

Ellis's questions about class and authenticity in *Platitudes* again point to Ishmael Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing*. Tremonisha Smarts eventually admits

⁵⁴ The implicit criticism of Ayam recalls the controversy surrounding Sapphire, who based *Push* (1996) on her observations as a teacher living in Harlem. Chapter Two of this study, on Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001), deals explicitly with this controversy.

Though the critics and white feminists fell for it, I knew that those working class characters that I tried to write about and their proletarian voices I attempted to mime were phony. All of us who grew up in the middle class want to romanticize people who are worse off than we are....It won't take long before some of these teenage mothers will begin writing about places like Bed-Stuy themselves, and then all of us debutantes will have to write about ourselves, will have to write about our backgrounds instead of playing tour guides to the exotics. (131)

Given Reed's underlying criticism of writers, presumably like Alice Walker, who choose to narrate a class experience that might not resemble their own, Ellis's exaltation of the middle class in "The New Black Aesthetic" is not surprising. Asserting "Like most artistic booms, the NBA is a post-bourgeois movement driven by a second generation of middle class" (192), Ellis insists that this movement is black specifically because "[t]he culturally mulatto Cosby girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother" (189). Praising the entrepreneurial spirit of artists like Robert Townsend, who famously funded his first film on his credit cards, Ellis suggests that the "cultural mulattos" who fuel the NBA are distinguished by their refusal to accept racism as an excuse even as they acknowledge its existence (197).

Yet, like *The Cosby Show*, Ellis's attempt to recode blackness has drawn strong criticism. Adolph Reed argues, for example, that "when Ellis reaches toward specificity [in "The New Black Aesthetic"] in his comments on the political exigencies of the moment, his reflex is not to indict inequality and social injustice; instead he invokes a cheap, empty gesture and the need for behavioral purification"

(167). As constructed in his essay, Ellis's concept appears to embrace the "color-blind," "bootstrap," and "personal responsibility" rhetoric of neoliberalism.

Ellis's handling of class in his essay is problematic. But, he presents an ambiguous depiction of the class divide in *Platitudes*. And, this depiction moves beyond the platitudes of the essay and the criticism found in Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing*. An examination of how Dewayne Wellington attempts to embrace NBA predecessor Ishmael Reed's admonishment to the middle class demonstrates how class operates differently in Ellis's novel. Wellington indicates that he will attempt to guide us through the exotic in two ways—first through Earle's experience and then through Dorothy's. In response to Ayam "dragging [his] meager tale back to its roots in Afro-American glory stories" (19), Wellington provides Ayam with a list of Earle's so called "favorite things"—a hodgepodge of items that ends with "a double helping of chicken livers and gravy and grits and rolls, thank you" (20) or the "BISCUITS AND VISCERA, WET AND FAT" (21) that he finds in Dorothy's mother's Harlem restaurant.⁵⁵

Harlem is unfamiliar to Earle and he must orient himself to the location. Earle's first exposure to Harlem has him telling himself to "...just look mean so they won't know you're not from uptown" (23) before acknowledging "...they spotted you a half hour ago" (23-4). Providing the reader with local flavor, we can sum up Earle's experience by his thoughts

Hmmm ain't bad some soul food up in Soultown then I'll watch

SOOOOOOOOULTRAAAAAAAAAIN brought to you by the Johnson

⁵⁵ Dorothy states that her mother, Darcelle, "runs" a diner; but the name of the restaurant, "Chez Darcelle," suggests ownership.

Company, makers of Ultrasheen, Afrosheen, and Ultrasheen cosmetics and here's your host DDAAAAHN Cornelius clapclapclap. Eat, but first look around, nobody watching, good, act like everything's A-OhKay and spear the turd and swirl it in the diarrhea then scoop up some maggots and eat two three four delicious and repeat and the rolls? Rat brains? Pterodactyl turds? No, larvae cakes, a delicacy they are considered in some cultures, three four. (24)

Earle's jaunt uptown is tantamount to mainstream Americans watching *Soul Train* on a Saturday morning. Further, Darcelle's biscuits and viscera are not Earle's "favorites." In establishing Harlem as foreign to Earle, Wellington tries to drag his narrative away from Ayam by showing that Earle is not at home in a "black" community. However, Wellington's initial break in the narrative to appeal for help suggests that he can continue narrating Earle's story only in response to Ayam.

Wellington also attempts to play tour guide through Dorothy's story, but, as mentioned above, he refuses to separate her story from Earle's. For example, although Dorothy is from Harlem, we first meet her on the Upper West Side (West Ninetieth Street) as she emerges from St. Rita's School for Girls in her Catholic School uniform and with her copy of *Barron's Guide to the PSAT* in hand. More important, Wellington admits, after introducing the reader to Dorothy's life in Harlem, that "This story's just as forced....as you can see, both story lines—Earle's and Dorothy's—have their problems" (14). In fact, Wellington admits that he wanted to write about his ex-wife's "bourgeois, materialistic" nieces and nephews, arguing "that whole family is worth at least a thousand-page historical novel. Summers on

the Vineyard, liposuction, tennis, analysis, golf, BMWs, and the Bahamas” (14) but that story is “blocked” as well.

The problem is that these stories are blocked because they do not signify anything beyond the stereotype of exoticism. Wellington’s need to freelance as a proofreader to pay bills reminds him that “Joyce worked in a Trieste bank, Faulkner was the postmaster at Ol’ Miss, and Ellison shined shoes” (15). Wellington therefore embraces “degrading” freelance work to avoid simply narrating stereotypical class experience. Whether upper, middle, or working class, this type of narration is tantamount to playing tour guide. Wellington strives to avoid simply categorizing or, to borrow William Faulkner’s sentiment in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, merely providing “the record of man.” Earle’s, Dorothy’s, and the ex-Mrs. Wellington’s stories will not allow Wellington to define himself as a writer who—like Joyce, Faulkner, and Ellison—constructs narrative in terms of the universal or “the problems of the heart in conflict with itself” (Faulkner). Again, Dewayne Wellington has most certainly read Baldwin.

In privileging the artistic universal, the definitive story for Wellington becomes only the act of narration itself as he struggles to reconcile perceived disparate class (or gender, as discussed above) identities. Like Baldwin’s John, Wellington struggles to narrate the ineffable—a struggle to transcend the constraints of legacy, time, and place. Like Ellison’s narrator in *Invisible Man*, we come to know Dewayne Wellington through negation—he is not any of the “forced” narratives. Further, Wellington’s neat reconciliation of Earle and Dorothy after Ayam approves of his work and acknowledges how her rejection has hurt him suggests that various

narratives of *Platitudes* remain “forced” from beginning to end. Ellis questions our understanding of identity by refusing to validate any of the narratives as distinct.⁵⁶

Again, while playing on Reed’s critique of writers who depict the working class, Ellis overwrites Reed’s narrative by complicating the notion of fixed class identifications.

Ellis’s handling of class in *Platitudes* is of particular interest in light of the criticism of Ellis’s gloss of class in his essay. A telling example in the essay is Ellis’s mention of Edmund Perry, the seventeen-year-old black Phillips Exeter graduate from Harlem who was shot and killed by an undercover police officer in 1985.⁵⁷ After asserting in the essay that the black middle and working classes are “equally” black, Ellis points to Perry’s liminal status as the cause of his death: “Perry might have been shot by that white police officer because the old world, both black and white, was too narrow to embrace a black prep form Harlem” (189).⁵⁸ Ellis further notes that Perry

⁵⁶ My analysis diverges here from scholars who argue Ayam’s subsequent guidance allows Wellington to develop as a writer through the integration of his postmodern questioning of and her modernist adherence to race protocols. See Bertram Ashe’s “Foreword” to the 2003 edition of *Platitudes*. See also Chapter Five, “Defil[ing] the Temple of Black Literature,” of Anita Welboun’s dissertation, *Healing the Wounds: the Power of Art in Twentieth-Century African American Novels* (Vanderbilt University, May 1997). In my view, the union between Ayam and Wellington is not sustained due to Wellington’s manipulation of the narrative.

⁵⁷ Lee Van Houten, a white NYC police officer on plainclothes duty, shot and killed Perry on June 13, 1985. Perry, who was from Harlem, had graduated with honors from Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire just before he was shot. He had been admitted to and planned to attend Stanford University. Van Houten claimed that he fired on Perry and his brother Jonah, a sophomore at Cornell University, after they attacked him from behind, knocking Van Houten down and beating and kicking him, in an apparent attempted robbery. The Perry family hired a retired medical examiner who found that the shooting was racially motivated; however, a grand jury determined that Van Houten acted in self-defense. Jonah Perry was indicted for robbery and later acquitted. In 1989, the NYPD paid the Perry family \$75,000 to settle a \$145 million wrongful-death suit. Charges that the NYPD demonstrated a history of committing illegal violent acts against minorities fueled this case. See Jeffrey Ross’s *Making News of Police Violence: A Comparative Study of Toronto and New York City*. In *Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry*, investigative reporter Robert Sam Anson, whose son attended Exeter with Perry, argues somewhat convincingly that despite standing out at both Exeter and in Harlem, Perry had trouble reconciling his school and home life.

⁵⁸ My focus is on Perry, but this shooting was part of a series of events in New York City that were linked to the racial tension that characterized the period in which Ellis published “The New Black

was killed during the age of Cosby and the rise of black artists and entrepreneurs (e.g., Russell Simmons, Prince, Eddie Murphy, and Spike Lee). Ellis's essay therefore avoids an explicit critique of societal conditions.

The Conflation of Identity and Postrace Consciousness

Ellis's gloss of Edmund Perry—the light use of his death as a balancing act between old and new, black and white, middle class and working class—is the primary problem of “The New Black Aesthetic.” I argue that Ellis's handling of the idea of Perry in *Platitudes* questions the efficacy of the distinctions made in the essay. In other words, Ellis's art trumps his essay in conveying the NBA's position on race, class, and gender. Admittedly, Perry is not expressly mentioned in the novel.

Additionally, Ellis states he based the character of Dorothy on his cousin and her

Aesthetic” and *Platitudes*. A few months before *The Cosby Show* debuted in September, Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign fueled tensions between the black and Jewish communities when a black *Washington Post* staffer reported that Jackson (off the record) referred to New York as “Hymietown.” Also in 1984, white Bernhard Goetz shot four black teenagers in the New York subway because he maintained their demeanor indicated an intention to mug him. A group of white teenagers beat three black men—killing one by chasing him into an oncoming car—for entering their Howard Beach neighborhood in 1986. A black teenage girl, Tawana Brawley who was supported by Al Sharpton and other community leaders, stated in 1987 that she was brutally raped by six white men; however a grand jury declared her story a fabrication. In 1989, a man who was part of a white mob shot and killed a black teenager, 16-year-old Yusef Hawkins, for being in Bensonhurst. In 1991, the involvement of a Jewish leader's motorcade in the death of a seven-year-old black Guyanese boy sparked the Crown Heights outbreak. Moreover, charges of police brutality against a largely white police force exacerbated racial tensions. According to Roger Sanjek, “The deaths at police hands of black New Yorkers Michael Stewart in 1983 and Eleanor Bumpers in 1984 were deemed ‘police brutality’ by African American spokespersons. Their suspicions were vindicated when the chief medical examiner, Elliot Gross, resigned in 1985 following accusations by colleagues that his autopsies were biased to exonerate police misconduct. Instances of police violence against black citizens continued to occur” (146). Racial tensions, of course, were not limited to New York City. The same year that *Platitudes* was published, for example, the GOP ran the infamous Willie Horton political ad that helped George H. Bush defeat democrat Michael Dukakis in the 1988 presidential election. Additionally, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) conducted “sweeps” in South Central, arresting blacks and Latinos who simply appeared to be gang members. In 1991, a private citizen videotaped LAPD officers brutally beating Rodney King. The Simi Valley jury's acquittal of the officers who were charged in the beating incited a protest that led to the 1992 LA Riots.

cohort, who attended a private high school in New York.⁵⁹ There is no reason to doubt Ellis's claim. But, the character Dorothy recalls Edmund Perry. As discussed above, Dorothy is a working class girl from Harlem who, like Perry, attends a prep school on scholarship. Additionally, Dorothy, like Perry, is following the example of an older sibling who is already entrenched in the Ivy League (Yale and Cornell respectively). Therefore, we might imagine the figure of Edmund Perry in the character of Dorothy. Doing so reinforces Ellis's refusal to distinguish identity, as seen in Wellington's conflation of various narratives. This imagining also allows us to expand Ellis's definition of the "cultural mulatto" and, concurrently, the construction of the NBA beyond dated and simplistic binaries.

The comparison between Dorothy and Edmund Perry is important because, in the essay, Ellis defines the NBA as a middle-class movement. Yet, as Bertram Ashe observes, "Ellis's portrayal of Dorothy, in particular, demonstrates the way cultural mulattos reside at all socioeconomic levels of the black community. The plot ironically moves Earle *up* from the Upper West Side to spend time in Harlem, and Dorothy *down* from Harlem to frolic in lower Manhattan" (xvii Ashe's emphasis). The NBA is an artistic expression in which the middle class is not easily distinguished from other classes. If the comparison between the figure of Edmund Perry and the character of Dorothy allows us to imagine Perry as a cultural mulatto, we might question Ellis's assertions about easy navigations between "worlds." We might also interrogate the easy dichotomy between "old" and "new," "black" and "white," or "Cosby girls" and "teenage welfare mothers" that Ellis clumsily uses in

⁵⁹ See Ashe's discussion of Ellis's assertions in *Swing Low: Black Men Writing* (Ed. Rebecca Carroll 1995) in his "Foreword" to the 2003 edition of *Platitudes* on p. xvii.

his essay to explain the arrested development that is symbolized by an historical figure like Perry. Wellington's depiction of Dorothy as a working class foil to a middle-class Earle nods to the class discrepancies that have questioned assertions of a unitary racialized community. By putting a feminine face on Edmund Perry, Ellis signifies the novel's conflation of race, gender, and class. This conflation queers heteronormative constructs of social identity.⁶⁰

An examination of neoliberalism and the inertia of progressive politics during the latter half of the twentieth century will shed light on the political implications of the NBA, particularly as these implications are advanced in the form of fiction. In *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* Lisa Duggan argues that the neoliberal project of separating economics and class politics from identity and cultural politics "seriously disables political analysis activism" (xxi). Duggan argues that neoliberalism manifested in the U.S. in five phases, beginning with the dismantling of the Popular Front and New Deal social programs of the 1930s at the onset of the Cold War. The second phase involved the attack of social movements, for example, the Civil Rights, Black Arts, Feminist, Gay and Lesbian, and 1960s and 1970s Counter-culture Movements, which divert money to social issues. Duggan identifies the third phase as a unified business movement in which small and big business worked in tandem to secure resources threatened by global competition and social movements. The "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s comprised the fourth phase during which the religious right and "race nationalists" united against public institutions like universities and social programs to promote national values. The fifth phase involved the development of

⁶⁰ I am indebted to Kandice Chuh for this observation.

“‘multicultural,’ neoliberal ‘equality’ politics—a stripped down, nonredistributive form of ‘equality’ designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century, and compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources” (xii).

In my comparison of Ellis’s and Baldwin’s first novels, I trace the origins of Ellis’s NBA to the midcentury move away from racial realism and toward a form of postrace universalism. This move signified the Cold War Era’s abandonment of the Popular Front and other leftist movements that criticized unequal material conditions.⁶¹ The origins of the NBA are therefore connected to the first phase of neoliberalism in the U.S. Additionally, the NBA operates in tandem with the remaining phases that Duggan outlines. The NBA, as defined in Ellis’s essay, satirizes the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements. The essay focuses on business and the entrepreneurial nature and commercial success of individual artists (i.e., the “cultural mulatto”). The “culture mulatto” of the essay appears to operate in the liminal space of the culture wars. Ultimately, the essay’s emphasis on hybridity and lack of attention to class and inequality (e.g., the awkward handling of Edmund Perry and police brutality) resembles the benign multiculturalism of neoliberal equality politics.

If we rely on the essay, the NBA appears to represent the very paralysis that Duggan argues is the effect of the neoliberal political strategy that depends on controlling identity and cultural politics, of which race, class, gender, and sexuality are integral parts (xii). As Duggan asserts, neoliberalism thrives when economics and class appear separate from identity politics. And, this argument indicates the point of

⁶¹ The New York Intellectuals who promoted the form of universalism embraced by many midcentury black writers were disillusioned by the left and therefore abandoned the tenets of leftist movements like the Popular Front.

separation for neoliberal politics and Ellis's construct of the NBA as it functions as an artistic expression. Despite the compelling critique of "The New Black Aesthetic" for its focus on masculine and middle-class expression, the NBA concept as it operates in *Platitudes* refuses to separate economics from race and gender political identities. Ellis's conflation of social identity is a postrace expression that signifies a defiance of neoliberal discourse. This expression of postrace does not get past race. Instead, postrace consciousness revisits earlier expressions of blackness. Moreover, post race consciousness considers race as a changeable narrative that is always crafted in relation to narratives of other identity forms.

Ellis's conflation of identity echoes Judith Butler's assertion that social identity is performative because it is a product of the repetition of daily activities that have been shaped by perceived society norms. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler "investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (xxix). Butler's aim is to expose the masculinist / heteronormative power structure as the shaper of so-called social identity. Given that identity is always involved in the repetition of what already exists, the danger of identity politics, according to Butler, is the repetition of the binary that has been established by the power structure. I see this danger in the implied hierarchy established in Ellis's essay through the ineffective construct of the "white" and "black" worlds of the "cultural mulatto." Butler provocatively wonders about the "political possibilities...of a radical critique of the categories of identity" (xxix). This critique involves the interrogation of the notion that social identity is fixed through an

embrace of liminal forms (i.e., homosexual, bisexual, hermaphroditic, transgender) that counter the masculinist/heteronormative narrative. Through the form of the novel, I argue that Ellis's NBA concept provides the "radical critique" for which Butler calls.

The political implication of the Ellis's radical critique of identity is a concomitant interrogation of the current construct of African American literary studies and, implicitly, identity politics. By interrogating identity through the depiction of characters that vacillate between performance (of malleable, layered, and often liminal identities) and inertia, Ellis appears to violate the teleology of African American literature. In effect, Wellington and Ayam's troubled dance, despite their attempts at flexibility, appears to defy the "reproductive futurism" of African American political discourse. In conflating the present and the past by writing over midcentury (like Baldwin's) and contemporary (like Reed's) narratives through the device of the palimpsest, Ellis interrupts the forward movement of the narrative of progress that underlies the African American literary tradition. In doing so, Ellis echoes Lee Edelman's assertion that "queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place [of the social order's death drive or abjection expressed in stigma], accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure" (3). In embracing the queer, one refuses to participate in "reproductive futurism" or the constant reproduction of hegemonic forms of identity. In essence, queering identity is a questioning of the identity politics that, as Butler warns, risks

repeating the fixed and hierarchical (always in favor of masculine and heterosexual “norms”) that they aim to overcome.

My critical engagement with Ellis’s novel allows an understanding of how multiple constructs of time and narrative can serve to interrogate perceptions that race, gender, and class are fixed. This interrogation shows how NBA fiction can depict blackness as a “universal” condition and thus attempts to remove it from constructs of hierarchy. In this model, race, gender and class cannot exist as foils and therefore need not escape nor await “old” and “new.” In presenting blackness in this way, Ellis’s NBA operates as a race aesthetic that is postrace. Chapter Two turns to Percival Everett’s *Erasure* (2001), a novel that echoes Ellis’s *Platitudes* because the protagonist resembles Dewayne Wellington. *Erasure* depicts the narration of race, gender, and class through literary production. Like *Platitudes*, *Erasure* refuses to allow the post-Civil Rights protagonist to sit comfortably as an advanced incarnation of blackness in the African American narrative of progress. Instead, the protagonist of *Erasure* must negotiate multiple and layered narratives of past and present forms of social identity.

Chapter Two: ‘No boundaries but walls everywhere’: Framing the Disappearing Author and Subject in Percival Everett’s *Erasure*

Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind. Thus, the essential basis of this writing is not the exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of a subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?”

And if you want to play my therapist for a bit, I've always felt alienation....That's one of the things that's culturally African-American in my work; it's the experience of people who've always been outside the center....I take that back, that's just American. Percival Everett (qtd. in Ehrenreich)

In a 2002 interview conducted during a rare book tour for his most-known novel, *Erasure* (2001), the *LA Weekly* reports that Percival Everett began two Los Angeles-area book readings by insisting that he was “really sick of [*Erasure*]” (qtd. in Ehrenreich). Everett’s complaint stemmed from the attention that *Erasure* garners for what he calls, “The race stuff” and his boredom with bandwagon readers who embrace what they perceive as his stance on race expressed in the novel. Asked by the interviewer what he would like for readers to focus on, Everett reinforces the metatext of the novel’s title: “I don't really want to be present. That's the only problem I have with the book — the character resembles me so much that it's harder for readers to divorce me from the work, and my mission has always been to disappear” (*ibid.*). In fact, in describing to the interviewer the numerous animals that share his ranch in California, Everett insists in the same interview that a crow named

Jim—who has since disappeared—actually “wrote *Erasure*” from his perch on Everett’s shoulder.⁶²

Everett’s complaint about “The race stuff” is really a complaint about how the novel has been framed. The novel’s protagonist appears to have a clear position on race and readers do not challenge this position largely because the protagonist looks a lot like Everett. Everett’s complaint is important because it reminds us that novels are not simply imitations of life—an especially compelling point when we think about African American literature and racial representation. Readers often frame African American texts in terms of authenticity and reality. This notion of reality generally takes the form of a narrative of resistance against racism, like the now proscribed system of segregation in the U.S. known as Jim Crow culture. But, this notion can also take the form of a narrative of progress beyond racial constraints—a narrative that the protagonist of *Erasure* would like to embrace. Everett would like to escape both of these narratives. Everett’s complaint about “The race stuff” coupled with his desire to disappear point to ways that we can reframe *Erasure*. My reframing addresses the parallel concerns of what it means for an African American text to be post-race in relation to Jim Crow, and postmodern as the product of a disappearing author.

Despite his desire for Jim the crow’s disappearance, Percival Everett has published over 20 books, ranging from novels to collections of short stories and poetry. He also paints abstract art, some of which is featured in a Special Section on Everett in the winter 2005 edition of *Callaloo*, a journal for which Everett serves as

⁶² Rone Shaver’s interview of Percival Everett features a photo of Everett, supplied by the author, with a crow perched on his shoulder. See “Percival Everett,” *BOMB* 88 (Summer 2004).

fiction editor. Fittingly, *Erasure*, considers both writing and visual art. While known for experimenting with different forms,⁶³ Everett is not known for embracing the social realism employed by Jim Crow-era writers (Richard Wright, etc.) in their efforts to use fiction to depict and combat social inequities. The concept of race is usually present in Everett's work, though racial issues are not always central to his work.⁶⁴ Equally present is the theme of alienation from family, community, and the mainstream referenced by Everett in the second epigraph to this chapter that is taken from the same interview in which Everett cedes his position as author to Jim Crow. Everett's play in this moment illustrates the kind of game we might expect from his narratives. Everett expresses an initial position that a state of alienation from the center is "culturally African-American," and then strikes the statement with a new assertion to erase the particularity of race from his initial position. This game, a strategic use of a figurative strikethrough, reminds us of the title of *Erasure* that contains a strikethrough. There is an attempt to replace the title of Everett's novel with the title of the text's novel-within-a-novel, but the title, *Erasure*, remains evident. Everett's game calls our attention to the multiple narratives contained in this novel about post-Civil Rights African American, or perhaps simply American, alienation that was written by a crow named Jim.

⁶³ Critics and reviewers note the diversity of Everett's body of work, a point he acknowledges even though he rejects labels like "postmodern" and claims that "every novel is experimental" (qtd. in Shaver).

⁶⁴ Everett's first novel, *Suder* (1983), nods to African American folklore by featuring a broken baseball player who teaches himself how to fly, and his other fiction at times includes a revelation about race. The protagonist of Everett's *Glyph*, another story-within-a-story narrated by baby with an IQ of about 500... Further, Everett does not always include black characters. The short story "Age Would Be that Does," first published in *Callaloo* 13.4 (Autumn 1990) and later included in the collection... is set in New Mexico and features characters Rosendo and Mauricio. Skin color and racial identity are not addressed explicitly in this story.

Erasure explores the alienated state of Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, an African American novelist who is set in the present post-Civil Rights era but caught in the past narrative of overcoming Jim Crow. In other words, *Erasure* depicts a member of the post-Civil Rights black middle-class who cannot move beyond racial constraints in a time that is increasingly described as postrace.⁶⁵ The novel is set sometime between late 1996 and 2000.⁶⁶ Monk, like Everett, enjoys the benefits of living in a legally desegregated U.S. Like Everett, Monk stems from a line of physicians, a line that provided access to an integrated and elite education. This status allows Monk to teach at a major university, travel freely, and, for the most part, write novels on themes that do not focus on race. Monk dislikes novels of urban realism and social protest based on race, like the wildly popular *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, by Oberlin graduate Juanita Mae Jenkins—a novel and character in *Erasure* that serve as Everett’s parody of Sapphire’s success with *Push* (1996). In a caricature of the fanfare surrounding *Push* and Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club,⁶⁷ Monk mocks the media

⁶⁵ Several media sources, like NPR, link Barack Obama’s successful 2008 presidential candidacy to the start of the postrace era. Academic sources, however, have relied on the term to discuss texts, like Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998), that focus on unclear racial identities and that were published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. See, for example, Michelle Elam’s “Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Phillip Roth, and Colson Whitehead,” *African American Review* 41.4 (2007).

⁶⁶ *Erasure* offers a parody of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986 through 2011) and more specifically Oprah’s Book Club that launched on September 17, 1996.

⁶⁷ Everett is open about his contempt for Oprah’s Book Club. When asked in an interview by Rone Shaver about Winfrey’s foray into the literary field, Everett states, “Oprah should stay the fuck out of literature and stop pretending she knows anything about it, in the same way that people should stop giving any credence to book reviews on Amazon.com” (49). While authors like Isabelle Allende, Edwidge Danticant, Wally Lamb, Toni Morrison, and Elie Wiesel accepted invites to participate in the Book Club, some authors expressed reluctance. Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001) was a 2001 Book Club selection, but Winfrey pulled the author’s segment from her show after Franzen expressed concern in interviews about how his book would be perceived through the lens of the Oprah brand and a book club with a large female readership. Franzen apologized and acknowledged Winfrey’s support at the National Book Award Ceremony. See NPR’s *Fresh Air* (15 Oct 2001). See also *NYT*’s “Winfrey Rescinds Offer to Author for Guest Appearance” (24 Oct 2001). Winfrey selected Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010) as one of her last Book Club picks.

frenzy that surrounds Jenkins' work. While Monk would like to move beyond race, his problem is that very few people read his novels. The publishing industry and perhaps the reading public cannot evolve beyond connecting an author's race to the content of his or her work. When a family crisis requires access to cash, Monk raises capital by taking on the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh and crafting a novel of urban realism, *My Pafology*.⁶⁸ In the novel nineteen-year-old, South Central, Los Angeles resident Van Go Jenkins, a Bigger Thomas figure and implicit child of the author of *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, ignores his four children by four different mothers as he gives free rein to his impulses. Van Go in fact signifies a violent, hyper-sexualized, procreative drive authored by Monk's alter-ego "Stagg," who possesses the "black" energy that Monk appears to lack. As *My Pafology* gains critical and media attention, including talk show Book Club-status, an appalled Monk/Stagg renames the text, emphasizing the text's absurd impetus by shifting the title from *My Pafology* to *Fuck*. In doing so, Monk does nothing to erase race, but he further elides our sense of the author. At *Erasure's* end, the National Book Association, of which Monk is a member, deems *Fuck* "the truest novel" and "the real thing," an honor that forces Monk to receive "*The Book Award*" (249 emphasis in original) as Stagg. Caught in media lights, Monk folds into Stagg as he equates his dual identity to a self-castration; and the author disappears somewhere in the game of the plot—the intersecting narratives or lines that connect Everett, the various protagonists of *Erasure* (Monk/Stagg/Van Go), and the countless intertextual references.

⁶⁸ This textual detail is based on the large advances earned by certain writers at the time. Sapphire received a \$500,000, two-book contract for *Push* based on an incomplete manuscript. See Jeff Giles and Ray Sawhill's "Beginner's Pluck," *Newsweek* 127.3 (3 Jun 1996). See also Darryl Lorenzo Wellington's "Looking for Precious," *Crisis* 117.1 (winter 2010).

If we take Everett's joke as an insinuation that Jim Crow produced *Erasure*, we might set the novel within a modernist frame in which the text could function as political advocacy. But, the novel's form appears to challenge this characterization. Critics frequently define *Erasure*, like Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* (1988) discussed in the previous chapter, as postmodern because the novel contains several metanarrative devices. One device is the novel written by Monk as Stagg that echoes *Push* and also echoes Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Other devices include a game show transcript that gestures to portions of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952); Monk's CV and conference paper that parodies Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (1970); letters; story ideas; and dialogues between figures in art, literature, philosophy, science, and film. Additionally, there are numerous references to literature, theory, and music, to include Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Rudyard Kipling's "Gunga Din" (1892), Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?," Ry Cooder's "How Can You Keep on Moving," and the Delmore Brother's "Brown's Ferry Blues." *Erasure* is comprised of several narratives of various forms, genres, and traditions. And all of these narratives come into play.

As a postmodern text, *Erasure* refuses a single voice to engage these narratives—a refusal that appears to defy the project of racial representation that scholars argue characterizes African American literature. The protagonist that resembles Everett—the voice that refuses Everett's divorce from the work—competes with multiple voices to advance the narrative. And these metanarrative devices (the

intertextuality and multiplicity of voices) construct the narrative of *Erasure*.⁶⁹ As Monk notes about James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, "the most important feature of the book is the way it actually conforms to conventional narrative. The way it layers, using such devices as metaphor and symbol. What's different is that each sentence, each word calls attention to the devices. So, the work really reaffirms what it seems to expose. It is the thing it is, perhaps twice, and depends on the currency of conventional narrative for its experimental validity" (209-210).

The seemingly disparate parts of *Erasure*, including the aspects that appear separate from Monk's narration, all contribute to Monk's story. But, this layered narrative is fluid and changing, and therefore demands that the reader question assertions of an authentic dominant narrative, even when these assertions are made about Monk's (and really the author's) black identity that appears to operate against the grain of stereotypes. When Everett complains about "The race stuff," he is expressing frustration over the lack of disagreement with the alleged stance on race presented in the novel. Moreover, the novel nods to Roland Barthes's assertion that textual plurality refuses the privileging of a single interpretation. These positions suggest that the reader must question any definitive readings of *Erasure*. The novel's epigraph, taken from Mark Twain's travelogue *Following the Equator* that mixes non-fiction and fiction, reinforces the notion that we question any "truth" found in

⁶⁹ In her discussion of *Erasure* that was included in a Special Section on Percival Everett in *Callaloo* 28.2 (Spring 2005), Russett provides an overview that details the diversity of Everett's body of work through 2005. Russett argues that the variety that characterizes Everett's work serves to defy "textual 'identity'" (364). See "Race under 'Erasure' for Percival Everett, 'a Piece of Fiction.'"

Erasure.⁷⁰ Therefore *Erasure* participates in various discourse communities without attempting to validate any of these communities in particular.

A concern explored in *Erasure* is the literary world's focus on questions about authenticity and racial representation, particularly regarding texts with authors who are identified in terms of race. The reception of *Erasure* has predictably centered on these very questions. The *New York Times Book Review* states, for example, that the novel "craftily addresses the highly charged issue of being 'black enough' in America" and notes that Monk "is appalled that [*We's Lives in Da Ghetto's*] young, middle-class, Oberlin-educated author based her book's *so-called authentic urban experience* on a couple of days spent visiting relatives in Harlem" (Berman, my emphasis). Ana Maria Sanchez-Arce relies on Everett's satire to define the discourse of "authenticism," or the ways in which authors and their works are commodified as relics that serve to provide insight into cultural origins. Indicting expressions of identity politics as well as mainstream discourse regarding the exotic, Sanchez-Arce argues that "Authenticists on the right and the left prefer...to hold on to the illusion that fiction is reality and that identity is an intrinsic characteristic of the self that can only be expressed in an oppositional way" (104). We see *Erasure* gesture to this tension through its engagement of the model text for Jenkins' *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, Sapphire's *Push*.

Like Jenkins' acclaim in *Erasure*, Sapphire's success with *Push* is based on the supposed reality of her portrait of Claricee "Precious" Jones, a teenager living in

⁷⁰ The epigraph reads, "I could never tell a lie that anybody would doubt, nor a truth that anybody would believe." Following the *Equator* (1897) is an account of Twain's 1895 speaking tour of the British Empire and includes critiques of imperialism. The narrative is comprised of fictional stories as well as non-fiction accountings.

Harlem who at the start of the novel is illiterate and giving birth to her second child by her father. This realism is achieved through the use of eye dialect and an unrelentingly grim plot. A victim of repeated abuse by both parents, Precious receives some inspiration and stability from an alternative school teacher and learning to read African American literature, particularly Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. She also learns however that her father has given her HIV, and in the sequel to *Push*, *The Kid* (2011), Precious has died before she can raise her children. Precious is therefore a fixed figure that cannot breach the form of identity, a poor urban black female, in which she is set. And, this fixity focuses the reader on this depiction of absolute black pathology.

In contrast to *Erasure*, the narrative of *Push* focuses the reader on a notion of authentic racial representation. Skeptical critics thought Precious' story might be an exaggeration while others wanted a more uplifting plot. In response, Sapphire reinforced the reality of the narrative, stating "I put those people in the same category as people who say that the Holocaust didn't happen, or that Rodney King participated in his own beating. I lived in one building in Harlem for over 10 years, so I saw a generation of children grow up. This novel isn't conjecture, or some studies I read. This is life as I observed it. You know what I mean?" (qtd. in Giles). The narrative of *Erasure* ironically reinscribes Sapphire's focus on authenticity—a review of Jenkins' text states, "One can actually hear the voices of [Jenkins'] people [in the text] as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America" (46 original emphasis). And Monk's objection to this belief is evident as he conflates Jenkins' work, and therefore Sapphire's, with Richard Wright's and Alice Walker's

and compares these examples of social realism to minstrelsy just before he drafts *My Pafology* and assumes the persona of Stagg R. Leigh. Monk notes,

I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting dint, ax, fo, screet and fahvre! and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that and I imagined myself sitting on a park bench counting the knives in my switchblade collection and a man came up to me and he asked me what I was doing and my mouth opened and I couldn't help what came out, 'Why fo you be axin?' (70).

Monk's imagining borrows the same phonetic spellings found in *Push* and becomes the impetus for *My Pathology*, as Stagg's novel in entirety immediately follows this incident and disrupts Monk's narrative.

Through Monk's ire, *Erasure*, a novel that challenges notions of the "truth" and absolutes in textual representations of life, critiques the fixity of social realism. The focus, however, on differences between characters like Monk and *Push*'s Precious or "My Pafology's" Van Go Jenkins—or representations of the contemporary black middle class and a "traditional" black experience—has led some readers to see a privileging of middleclass identity in the text that equates "authenticity" with the middle-class experience of the author. *Black Issues* observes, "In *Erasure*, we see a radical departure from the 'traditional' black family. Led by a

nonbeliever—an atheist father—you won't find fried chicken, macaroni and cheese or Sunday churchgoing in this household. The Ellison family feasts on oysters, and intellectualism takes priority over religion” (Lindsay, my emphasis). Bernard Bell notes for *African American Review* that “Similar to *the erasure of Monk’s authentic identity* at the end of the novel, the parody [My Pafology] ends with Van Go’s capture in the glaring TV lights of the evening news as he gloats: “Hey, Mama...Hey, Baby Girl. Look at me. I on TV”” (my emphasis). Additionally, Charlene Davis argues that Everett challenges assertions of authentic blackness through his depiction of Monk, who Davis suggests is “*authentically himself* regardless of whether others see that self as authentically black” (29, my emphasis). According to Davis, “Both Everett and his forerunner, [Ralph] Ellison as revealed by their narrators, deal with issues of performance and authenticity and conclude that the only worthy act is to show allegiance to individual identity regardless of race” (39). On the surface, these readings appear to mirror the narrative—Monk complains about stereotypes and invents Stagg to thumb his nose at the publishing industry and literary field’s embrace of narratives that resemble *Push*. Yet, these readings also reflect “The race stuff” attached to *Erasure* that Everett complains about. We must question any reading that aligns authenticity with the position of the author, particularly in light of the dialogues in the narrative that appear to exist outside of Monk’s story.

In the rest of this chapter, I would like to reframe the reading of *Erasure* with two ends in mind. First, I place Everett’s novel in conversation with the New Black Aesthetic (NBA), a contemporary literary movement produced by the black American middle class. This placement will drive my analysis of *Erasure’s* multi-voiced

intertextuality, a layering of multiple narratives that alters our understanding of author and transgresses perceived binaries. Second, I examine how as an NBA text, *Erasure* forces returns to the past, and thereby folds temporal socio-political histories into the text. These NBA returns to the past contest narratives of black authenticity, including narratives of progress that locate authenticity within the black middle class. My reframed reading of *Erasure* shows how an African American literary text—a tool of racialized identity politics—can actually exhibit a postrace aesthetic.

Framing the New Black Aesthetic

In contrast to texts like *Push*, *Erasure* focuses on the black experience of a Harvard-educated novelist in the post-Civil Rights era. Some critics read this contemporary middle-class focus, in comparison to urban realism or a transparent class critique, as a narrative of racial progress. If this reading is accurate, how are we to understand Everett's curious assertion about the novel's author and Jim Crow? I contend that Everett's anachronistic gesture to Jim Crow demonstrates the kind of return to the past found in contemporary, middle-class African American literature. And, this kind of return questions assertions that the post-Civil Rights black middle class has moved beyond racial concerns. In focusing on a contemporary black middle-class figure struggling with the issue of race, *Erasure* echoes other literary expression published after both the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the Black Arts Movement of the sixties and seventies that scholars have come to refer to as the New Black Aesthetic (NBA).⁷¹

⁷¹ This period is also referred to as the Post-Soul Aesthetic. See, for example, Mark Anthony Neal's *Soul Babies* (2002) and Nelson George's *Post-Soul Nation* (2004).

Author Trey Ellis developed the NBA concept in an essay entitled “The New Black Aesthetic” (1989) in which he attempts to describe black art that was emerging at the end of the Twentieth Century. According to Ellis, NBA artists are willing to satirize the Black Arts Movement and are willing to criticize, publicly, black culture. NBA artists are also transcultural, like Everett, sampling various genres and transgressing traditional boundaries based on their interests. Echoing Everett’s allusion to Jim Crow, Ellis relied on a dated and controversial term, “cultural mulattos,” to define the artists who authored this artistic movement. According to Ellis, these artists were the civil rights generation’s college-educated descendants who, because of school desegregation, could move between what he saw as the “black” and “white” worlds.⁷²

To define the NBA in his essay, Ellis relies on a dated definition of race and a reductive binary. Moreover, his essay focuses heavily on male artists, some of whom offer alarming depictions of women. Several critics take issue with Ellis’s apparent focus on individual, middle-class, and masculine issues rather than on community concerns and gender and economic disparities.⁷³ These critiques echo my position

⁷² Ellis asserts that NBA artists are a second generation of college graduates who, like the protagonists in the texts examined in this study, strayed from their parents practical occupations (i.e., doctors, lawyers, and educators) to pursue the arts. The difference between Ellis’s concept of the New Black Aesthetic and another period in the African American literary tradition, like the Harlem Renaissance, lies in the class privilege and rights enjoyed by NBA artist who grew up with full access to the American mainstream because of federal legislative support gained from the *Brown* decision and the Civil Rights Acts. Unlike fictional representations from the Harlem Renaissance, a period also focused on aesthetics and the function of art, the protagonists of NBA fiction, like the protagonist of *Erasure*, would be the inheritors of the Civil Rights Act and the descendants of a generation that had integrated the professional class and elite post-secondary institutions.

⁷³ In *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* (1997), Todd Boyd echoes George’s critique of the Post-Soul Generation by asserting that the “bourgeois underpinnings” of the NBA achieves progress on the individual level, but fails in terms of group elevation (17). Madhu Dubey and Adolph Reed both note how Ellis acknowledges the elite nature of this middleclass assertion of so-called cultural pluralism while he ignores the economic and political significance of this

that Ellis's essay fails to address the relationship between the black middle class and black mass culture as well as gender politics.⁷⁴ But, the artistic movement he tries to describe what I consider a weak formulation indicates an embrace of and a fluctuation between multiple cultural influences that defy assertions of authentic blackness. Some scholars note Ellis's rejection of the idea of black authenticity—a rejection found in Everett's novel—and find promise in his implicit suggestion that NBA artists control shifting and ambiguous identities that foster a simultaneous “insider” and “outsider” status.⁷⁵ While Ellis's essay barely considers this shifting status, the fiction produced by the NBA provides the ideal form to explore the implications of this fluctuation.

The NBA essay by Ellis assigns an “insider” and “outsider” status to middle-class artists without fully delineating how these artists negotiate this status. My analysis of NBA *fiction* shows that this fluctuating status collapses perceived binaries and differences. This collapse defies the benign multiculturalism of neoliberal equality politics—a political strategy that refuses to separate the issues of class, race,

elitism. Contrasting the NBA with what she identifies as a “southern folk aesthetic” exhibited by texts like Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Dubey argues in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (2003) that Ellis's focus on the NBA's cultural hybridity belies the unequal distribution of power in the U.S. (18). In *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (1997), Reed compellingly questions Ellis's characterization of the NBA as a “leftist-Neo-Nationalist” movement that simultaneously rejects assertions of authentic blackness as contradictory (166).

⁷⁴ See Eric Lott's response to Ellis in the same winter (1989) issue in which *Callaloo* published “The New Black Aesthetic.”

⁷⁵ J. Martin Favor, for example, argues in *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (1999) that the shifting racial identities, or “reimagined communities,” as described by Ellis hold promise as a tool for subverting racism in their ability to “reform” social institutions (151).

gender, and sexuality.⁷⁶ In the case of Everett's *Erasure*, this collapse addresses the relationship between black middle class and mass culture. Scholars suggest that the NBA's focus on the middle-class individual ignores the communal concerns that the African American literary canon has been shaped to address. However, I read the NBA's fictional portrayal of the black middle class as not only examining communal issues, but doing so in ways that clarify the implications of race in the twenty-first century.

I argue that NBA fictional representations undermine the position of the black middle class through what I call the postrace moment. In NBA fiction, postrace moments appear as "temporal drags,"⁷⁷ or moments in the narrative that connect contemporary protagonists to political histories and collective memories of race. Unable to gain a secure position in a legally desegregated U.S., the middle-class figure in NBA fiction does not move past race, but rather inexorably engages and confronts various narratives of race, gender, and class. NBA fiction therefore undermines the insufficient "black" and "white" binary that limits Ellis's essay. In this way, the depiction of identity through the black middle class actually characterizes the postrace aesthetic. In examining postrace in this manner, I echo Ramon Saldívar who argues that the prefix "post" in the term "postrace" operates in the same manner as it does in the term "postcolonial." "Postrace" therefore does not refer to a chronological positioning beyond race. Instead, the postrace aesthetic

⁷⁶ See discussion in Chapter 1 on the ways that Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* refuses to treat social identity (i.e., race, class, gender, and nationality) separately. See also Lisa Duggan's *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Freeman theorizes that "temporal drags" can connect performative post-identities to the political histories—the identity politics—that they supposedly abandon (729).

examines race from a twenty-first-century perspective. *Erasure*, for example, depicts a kind of arrival—a black middle-class experience with the accompanying power tools of education and resources. But, Everett questions this arrival through his gesture to Jim Crow.

Because *Erasure* explores the alienation experienced by the protagonist through the lens of race, I identify this novel as an NBA text. Like Ellis's *Platitudes*, Everett's *Erasure* provides a critical look at African American literary production. Like *Platitudes*, the form and content of *Erasure* resemble Linda Hutcheon's definition of the postmodern text that, through parody, "signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from continuity and difference" (89). Both novels present black American middle-class protagonists in the post-Civil Rights era who are themselves novelists at odds with their professional and personal lives as they struggle with artistic integrity and the depiction of race. These concerns are of importance to this study because writing is frequently linked to the constructs of subjectivity and social identity. Moreover, as my analysis of *Erasure* will make clear, NBA fiction treats race, gender, nationality, and class as fluid and overlapping narratives. The link between writing and how an individual experience comes to define a communal identity is a vital aspect of the identity politics for which the tradition of African American literature has served as a power tool.

Historians and critics have connected the African American literary canon to labor issues and securing citizenship. In the same year that *Erasure* was published, Bill Mullen insisted, "African-American experience and literature are primarily of

and about the working class.” Recently, Kenneth Warren defined the tradition as a past response to a Jim Crow system that legally linked blackness with labor and limited black participation within the U.S.’s body politic. Readers have come to expect African American literature to depict a black experience that is focused on securing labor and citizenship rights. As a post-Civil Rights writer, the protagonist of *Erasure*, Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, would grapple with questions about racial representation and class in trying to sell books, as well as the feelings of isolation that these questions produce. And in *Erasure*, these racialized themes gesture to dominant questions about the function of art and authorship.

Monk is the subject of a novel about the relationship between an author’s identity and the content of his work. And both Everett’s and Monk’s black identities, as well as the criticism they receive about the content of their work that appear not to reflect these identities, serve to focus the reader on race. In an NBA move, Monk’s status as a writer alienates him from his family of doctors. But, Monk’s identity as a writer becomes his means for gaining capital to deal with family concerns. Like other NBA protagonist, Monk faces a predicament that demonstrates the fragile state of his class identity. Despite the family’s middle-class status and summer home near the Douglass House on the shore of Highland Beach, MD, Monk needs resources to address his mother’s Alzheimer’s disease. As an NBA text, *Erasure* questions the protagonist’s status. Monk’s class identity is in flux and his need for cash and stability is apparent, much like fellow fiction writer Dewayne Wellington in Ellis’s *Platitudes*. Monk’s mother’s inability to recall her life is just one sign of Monk’s increasingly unstable family construct. His father has committed suicide after

creating another family with his white lover. His brother, a plastic surgeon whose debt exceeds his income, has lost his wife and children after he acknowledges and can finally embrace his homosexuality. And, his divorced sister has been murdered by a Pro-Life extremist in protest of her performing abortions in her clinic. The narrative steadily erases Monk's perception of his stable middle-class family, and thereby puts into question this aspect of his identity. As indicative of other NBA texts, the protagonist cannot return to or rely upon family roots.

Framing the Artist, or How the Author Disappears

At the opening of the novel, Monk is very clearly constructed to resemble an NBA figure. He is a professor of English at a major Los Angeles area university who has trouble finding an audience for his "retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists" (*Erasure* 4).⁷⁸ The problem is that due to our system of categorizing texts, Monk's black identity restricts his books to the "African American" section—a color line that Monk believes few people interested in the themes he shares with Everett, like classical Greek tragedy and mid-twentieth-century French theory, think to trespass. Monk is a Harvard graduate from the D.C. suburbs whose grandfather, father, brother, and sister were doctors; and Monk and his novels are frequently labeled "not *black* enough" (4, emphasis in original).

Monk resembles an NBA artist. On the surface, Monk also looks a lot like the author who claims he wants to disappear. Everett holds the rank of Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California (USC). And, Everett has published three retellings of Greek myths: *Zulus* (1990), *For Her Dark Skin* (1990),

⁷⁸ In the novel, Monk has just been promoted to full professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

and *Frenzy* (1997). While Everett grew up in South Carolina, not D.C., his background echoes Monk's. Writing fiction that generally focuses on the professional class, Everett scoffs at criticism that his lack of focus on the rural South or the inner-city means that the black experience is absent from his work (Shaver 49). Explaining that his grandfather, father, and uncles were doctors and his sister is a doctor, and noting that he spends time with ranchers, hydrologists, and veterinarians, Everett insists, "I'm black, and that's my experience" (49). In crafting Monk, Everett cultivates enough resemblance between himself and the protagonist that it is no surprise that readers might focus on the author's identity to assign meaning to the text.

Everett's expressed desire to step away from a position of authority over the text, as well as the novel's title and multilayered allusions to debates on the nature of author between Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, suggest that the nature of the novel, writing, authorship, and the political implications of art underlie the narrative. The narrative of *Erasure* in fact opens with Monk's assertion that we are reading his journal, an assertion that indicates access to his private thoughts. Monk therefore initially defines the rhetorical situation as an intimate revelation; but he undermines this display of interiority by declaring in the fourth sentence of the novel that he is a writer of fiction immediately after providing his name to the reader (3). Therefore, in a gesture that points us to Twain's version of the "truth" in his travel narrative that merges "nonfiction" and "fiction," Monk negates the assumption of intimate revelation that a journal might provide.

This negation suggests that Monk's accounting of his life is potentially as much a fiction as Van Go's, the protagonist in *My Pafology* or the novel within *Erasure* that is attributed to Monk's alter ego, Stagg R. Lee. In fact, by the end of *Erasure*, Monk has trouble distinguishing himself from Van Go and any slippage of meaning inferred by the name of "Stagg's" protagonist. In a lucid dream Monk experiences pain and bleeds from gut when Nazi soldiers lance Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. The narrative therefore obscures the lines between author and the characters that he creates. And this blurring of the lines expands the text by gesturing to multiple narratives. We are in Monk's story that merges with Van Go's, but the protagonist of *My Pafology* slips into the Dutch post-Impressionist painter through his name. Further, this slippage engages the narratives that surround not only Vincent Van Gogh, but also the various meanings assigned to his most famous painting, the twentieth-century painters influenced by his work, and the persecution of these artists and confiscation of art during the Second World War. In *Erasure*, various narratives converge.

The folding of author and character in *Erasure* exceeds and thereby expands the narrative. Again, Everett might claim a desire to disappear from the authorial position, but the reader can see Everett in Monk, as we see Monk in Van Go, in ways that surpass even biographical details. Both authors have produced the same text. Near the beginning of the narrative, Monk tells his sister, "I'm working on a novel, I guess you'd call it a novel, which treats this critical text by Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, exactly as it treats its so-called subject text which is Balzac's *Sarrasine*" (8). And, Monk's assertion that his new project is "a novel" is curious. Barthes' *S/Z* would be

classified typically as nonfiction—a structuralist analysis of Honore de Balzac’s 1830 novel about mistaken identity that demonstrates textual plurality and identifies the reader as a producer of textual meaning. A few pages later the text presents Monk’s full paper for the Nouveau Roman Society conference: “F/V: PLACING THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL,” subtitled, “F/V: a novel excerpt.” In this way, Monk equivocally defines his conference paper—a literary analysis like Barthes’ *S/Z*—as fiction. This definition serves two purposes. First, Monk’s labeling of literary analysis as “fiction” questions its “truth.” This is not to say that Monk reads *S/Z* as false or wrong. Rather, Monk playfully views *S/Z*, like *Sarrasine* or any other novel, as subject to various interpretations or “truths.” Second, Monk’s labeling of his literary analysis as “fiction” challenges the reader’s ability to separate the protagonist from the author.

Again, we see how Monk’s and Everett’s identities collide. Before Monk, Everett published a version of this “fiction,” “F/V,” using the same title in the winter 1999 edition of *Callaloo*. Everett, perhaps presciently, prefaces the beginning of the *Callaloo* version by defining the work as an “excerpt from a work which I offer as a piece of fiction” that might also be viewed “as parody of its *subject text*” (18, original emphasis). Following the opening “fiction” is a “complaint/ proposal for understanding what we so loosely call the *experimental* novel...and a modest suggestion for the *new new* novel’s direction” (18, original emphasis). In this way, Everett’s experiment with author and form takes the narrative of *Erasure* beyond the 294 pages enclosed between the cover of the book. The collapse between Monk and Everett, much like the folding of Monk into Van Go, further complicates the

narrative. Given the multiple narratives found within *Erasure*, this collapse makes determining to whom the story belongs rather difficult. Further, this collapse between a middle-class author and protagonist seems to support the narrative of racial representation that locates authentic race experience within the black middle class. This narrative is “The race stuff” about which Everett complains.

Reframing the Narratives, from Race to Art

Everett’s forced comparison between the protagonist and self complicates our understanding of author and narrative. If *Erasure* is Monk’s story about the literary world and “The race stuff,” the author’s narrative coincides with it. Further, several narratives disrupt Monk’s story, many of them revolving around the political implications of art. *Erasure* features brief, intermittent fictional dialogues between artists, writers, theorists, and political leaders⁷⁹ that, like Everett’s narrative, inform Monk’s story. The first one, between German sculptor Ernst Barlach and German-Swiss painter Paul Klee, appears right after a group from the Nouveau Roman Society confronts Monk about his paper, “F/V,” and his mockery of the seriousness that surrounds theory and experimental fiction. During the confrontation one of Nouveau Roman writers declares, “I have unsettled [readers’] historical, cultural and psychological assumptions by disrupting their comfortable relationship between worlds and things....But even as my art dies, I create it without trying” (44). Monk’s absurd response that the writer “need[s] to get laid” (44) echoes the spirit of both his

⁷⁹ The dialogues between historical figures in *Erasure* appear in the following order: Ernst Barlach and Paul Klee; Adolph Hitler and Dietrich Eckart; Paul Klee and Kathe Kollwitz; Ernst Kirchner and Max Klinger; Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell; James Joyce and Oscar Wilde; Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida; D. W. Griffith and Richard Wright; Jackson Pollock and Henry Moore; Mark Rothko and Alain Resnais; Willem De Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg; and Tarski and Rudolph Carnap. At times, conversations between Monk and his agent and Stagg and his editor appear in the same format as these dialogues.

and Everett's versions "F/V." Both Monk and Everett write experimental fiction and participate in this discourse community with tongues in cheeks. When asked if he was formulating a theoretical position, particularly in light of *Erasure's* resistance to a position like Gayatri Spivak's strategic essentialism, Everett responds

If anybody thinks they're actually going to delineate the necessary and sufficient conditions for any literary work of art, then they're greatly mistaken and would probably be better served picking up some other line of work, like computer maintenance. But if you're out to play with ideas and have some fun with them, and admit that that's what you're doing, and don't tell the regents at a university that . . . It's important to watch how ideas work and how they can be manipulated. That's probably the most important question to me in the world: What can you do with thinking? But to take it seriously, I mean, that's why the French, Derrida and Barthes, are so much fun. The fucking Americans get so earnest about this stuff that it stops being fun. (Qtd. in Shavers)

Everett, and his sometimes textual twin Monk, do not position themselves against experimental fiction and theory. Again, they resist absolutes. The game is found in mapping the ideas rather than positing definitive readings.

It might seem odd that the text follows the confrontation between the Nouveau Roman writers and a not-so-earnest Monk with the conversation between Barlach and Klee, set in 1933. The two situations seem unrelated, but they illustrate how *Erasure* comes into being through disparate narratives. These artists echo Monk in that their experimental works were politicized and assessed according to the artists'

backgrounds. Both Klee and Barlach were among the artists featured in the infamous 1937 *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) Exhibit during which the Nazi regime denigrated modern art as “un-German” or “Jewish Bolshevist” and therefore positioned modern artists against the state. The dialogue in *Erasure* depicts Klee complaining to Barlach that the SS newspaper, *Das Schwarze Korps* (*The Black Corps*), has condemned them (44). Barlach’s absurd response, the assertion that the state is “correct” (44, original emphasis) accompanied by laughter, echoes Monk’s facetious comment to the Nouveau Roman writer. This conversation is followed by a dialogue between Hitler and Dietrich Eckhart⁸⁰ that hints at the plan to manipulate cultural production, linking art to “race,” associating art with nationalism, and blaming Germany’s loss of World War I on the Jews.

A later dialogue features D. W. Griffith, director of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), declaring to Richard Wright, “*I like your book*” (218, original emphasis). While the mention of Wright in this context is disconcerting, the text does not completely reduce *Native Son* to the other side of the coin on which we find *Birth of a Nation*. Wright echoes Barlach and Monk with his absurd response to Griffith: “*Thank you*” (218, original emphasis). *Erasure* disrupts Monk’s story about artistic integrity with other narratives regarding the politicization of art. In doing so, *Erasure* collapses disparate voices and narratives into one. In the only exchange between two writers, Oscar Wilde tells James Joyce that he is “*afraid for the voice*” because of “*the way writing is moving*” (211, original emphasis). Concerned about postmodern expression Wilde worries that we might lose the story. But an unconcerned Joyce asks, “*What is*

⁸⁰ The historical figure’s last name is spelled “Eckart,” but in *Erasure* the name appears as “Eckhart.” Dietrich Eckart was one of the founding members of the Nazi Party who recognized Hitler as messianic figure that would redeem Germany after its loss of World War I.

story anyway? Just a way to announce the last page” (211, original emphasis).

Erasure is a multi-voiced narrative that draws on various discourses to expand the text beyond the last page of the novel. But, the story is not lost. We just have multiple ways of looking at it. For the purposes of this study, all of these voices speak to and are also informed by “The race stuff” that Monk must negotiate.

Framing Postrace with Walls from the Past

To understand Everett’s complaint about “The race stuff” and how the narrative refuses the privileging of one stable representation of blackness over another, we must turn to the end of *Erasure* and the postrace moment that I contend appears in NBA fiction. In this text, the postrace moment is a reminder of Jim Crow, a moment that impedes Monk’s participation in any kind of narrative of progress. Again, the narrative makes distinguishing between Monk and Van Go Jenkins, as well as Monk and Everett and other figures, rather difficult. From the onset of the narrative, Monk’s sense of his middle-class family has been effectively destabilized—nothing of the family remains as it appeared initially, even down to Monk’s murdered black sister having been replaced by an equally distant “white” half sister. Monk’s negotiation of the publishing industry as his class identity is negated culminates in a temporal drag where Monk is caught in a moment that defies the contemporary setting. This moment depicts Monk’s decision to publish *My Pafology* and cultivate the persona of Stagg R. Leigh as a formulaic self-sabotage that recalls for the reader both W. E. B. Du Bois’s double consciousness and the castrations committed by lynching culture. Monk explains:

So, I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfiguring myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere. I had caught myself standing naked in front of the mirror and discovered that I had nothing to hide and that lack was exactly what forced me to turn away. Somehow I had whacked off my own

willy
stick
dick
doink
rod
pecker
poker
member
prick
putz
schmuck
tallywhacker
johnson
thing
little friend

and now had to pay the price. I had to rescue myself, find myself and that meant, it was ever so clear for a very brief moment, losing myself.

(285-86)

In one way, Monk's reference to double consciousness and lynching collapses political histories and thereby questions the privilege Monk supposedly enjoys in possessing a middle-class identity after desegregation and the legal rights to equity gained from the Civil Rights Movement. Everett's jest in ceding authorship of *Erasure* to a crow named Jim gestures to this reading. In essence, our postrace figure is caught in Jim Crow discourse.

Yet, Monk's list of terms that carry varied significations also reminds us of the slippage of meaning found in *Erasure* as it engages various narratives. And, this scene also gestures to the narratives that stem from Barthes' *S/Z*, the text that Monk and Everett parody in "F/V." Barthes' examination of how different codes of meaning function relies on an analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine* in which the title character, a Parisian sculptor, falls in love with La Zambinella, an Italian opera singer. Again, this narrative might seem unrelated to Monk's story, but *Sarrasine* is another story about the slippage of identity. Sarrasine believes La Zambinella is a woman, but the singer's gender identity shifts during the narrative. Sarrasine is stabbed when he threatens Zambinella upon discovering his mistake about his love's gender. In his analysis of Balzac's novella in *S/Z*, Barthes identifies Zambinella as a castrato. Monk, slipping between varying identifications, echoes both Sarrasine and Zambinella as he accepts the Book Award for a changing narrative with a title that has been reduced to the absurd. Whether we associate Monk's figurative self-castration with Barthes' essay set at the crossroads of structuralism and post-structuralism, or Jim Crow culture, or another historical moment altogether, the end of *Erasure* leaves Monk embedded in the narrative discourses of the past.

An inability to move forward plagues Monk throughout the narrative that leads to this end. When Monk returns to his family home at the beginning of the novel, he notices how the family photos have locked the family in stasis in that they have remained the same in the pictures for fifteen years. But this stability is an illusion because these photos have a Hollywood quality. Monk notes that in the pictures his dead father is still a heroic soldier of the Korean War, his aging and

addled mother resembles Dorothy Dandridge, and he and his siblings whom he distantly refers to as “the children” appear “sweeter and cleaner” than they “ever were” (10). As the family photos suggest, the Ellison household seems caught in the past—a wall calendar reflects the right month, but the previous year (37). When the police notify Monk’s mother of sister’s murder, Mrs. Ellison unfastens and then refastens her watchband before announcing that it is time for her nap (54). Moreover, when time does appear to advance Monk cannot keep up. Faced with having to take care of his mother and the family housekeeper after his sister’s murder, Monk states, “Time seemed anything but mine, as if I were sleeping, walking and eating with a stopwatch!” (58) And even outside of the Ellison household and the construct of the middle class ideal, time does not want to move—Monk, for example, likens learning of Juanita Mae Jenkins’ book and movie deals to encountering Jim Crow memorabilia at an antique mall (34-35). Monk is powerless to escape the constructs of the past, whether these constructs are illusions of a middle class ideal or artifacts of a Jim Crow system the middle class advantage was meant to defeat.

Monk’s lack of forward progression is also apparent in his attempts at production. Monk is named after Thelonious Monk (1917-1982), the jazz pianist and composer known for his impromptu breaks during performances, when he would at times stand and even dance as the other members of his quartet continued to play. *Erasure’s* Monk gestures to his namesake in that his attempts at dissemination are disrupted—his books do not sell. Similarly, his ability to procreate is in question because he has trouble with sexual intercourse. Near the beginning of the novel Monk is trying to avoid the pursuit of fellow writer, Linda Mallory, whom he admits

he slept with three times, though only two of those times resulted in intercourse (14). Monk later begins an awkward flirtation with Marilyn Tilman, a neighbor at the beach house who read and liked *Second Failure*, likely Monk's only "realist novel" and only novel with which he enjoyed "moderate success" (14). This flirtation is arrested, however, when Monk feels betrayed by Marilyn in two ways. Marilyn confesses to having sex with her supposed ex-boyfriend the night Monk attempts intercourse with her. Moreover, while attempting intimacy, Monk states, "I stopped moving" (212) after seeing a copy of *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* on Marilyn's nightstand reminds him of his desire to "retreat" because he feels he has sold out like Jenkins (247). As "Monk," the protagonist of *Erasure* is characterized by a series of arrested movements.

Monk attempts, and ultimately fails, to escape this stagnation through the creation of his hyper-sexualized alter-ego, Stagg R. Lee. While Monk is inert before Chapter 14, he gains some procreative energy as a result of impersonating Stagg. The title page of *Fuck* appears directly before Chapter 14 and thereby serves as the title page for the end of the narrative—a move that echoes the break in *Erasure* between Chapters 6 and 7 signified first by the title page of *My Pafology* and then Stagg's novella. This second shift in the narrative occurs after Monk, taking on the persona of Stagg for the first time, insists on changing the title of *My Pafology* to *Fuck* and decides to meet with the producer offering three million dollars for the movie rights. The opening paragraph of this chapter ends with a simultaneous reference to intercourse and the song playing on the jukebox in Chapter 23 of *Invisible Man*: "Jelly, Jelly / Jelly / All night long" (238). As "Stagg," Monk crafts a book about

black sexuality that sells; however, this accomplishment disrupts his sexual performance. Monk is incapable of experiencing intimacy with Marilyn, as evidenced by his reaction to seeing Jenkins's book on her nightstand. Also as "Stagg," Monk receives but rejects the attention of white women. When Linda Mallory calls again in Chapter 15, Monk rationalizes agreeing to meet her by noting, "I realized that my life was in need of a gratuitous sex scene" (255). Far from "gratuitous," however, this scene reinforces Monk's lack of impetus. Describing Linda as "the postmodern fuck" who needs constant reassurance, Monk tells us their attempt at intimacy leaves him "hard, but far from excited" (257). The scene ends with Linda's insistence that Monk "hold" (258) the remote control as she dictates when he should "Change" the channel (258). Despite Monk's attempt to generate some movement, he does not even enjoy the illusion of control—change occurs without him.

As a result, Monk resembles Van Go Jenkins, the Precious/Bigger Thomas figure from *My Pathology*. *Erasure* ironically unlocks the fixity of this figure through this comparison that similarly complicates Monk's and Van Go's relationships to time. Van Go—supposedly indicative of movement in contrast to the reclusive protagonist—attempts to keep time as a way of gaining the class identity enjoyed by Monk. But, again, we see this class identity as an illusion—a Disney product that reminds us of the Hollywood production of the Ellison family photos. This illusion is most apparent in Van Go's admission that instead of a TV or a stereo, he picked up a Mickey Mouse clock during the 1992 riots:

Niggers was laughin at me left and right, pointin at the clock. They had TV's and stereos, but, shit, I liked the fuckin clock. Made me think of Disneyland. I was there once and all I can remember is that Main Street and me thinkin 'this what it s'posed to be like.' Fuck 'em for laughin at my clock. The shit work. Time just keep movin, them hands keep sweepin and that make me think about work. I work there two weeks and I'm gone have enough for my gun. And then, watch out. Van Go gone be gone and went. (112)

What attracts Van Go to the clock is the aesthetic of Disney's pristine Main Street—a produced allusion to an earlier, small town USA steeped in fantasy. Further, the text makes clear that Van Go associates the signification of the clock that he steals with whiteness. When Dalton's housekeeper suggests, for example, that Van Go get a watch, he argues that he does not need one because “Time is the white man's. Time ain't mine” (114). But, Van Go remains aware of time, noting for example the clock in the home of one of his children's mother (81). In a moment reminiscent of Monk's attention to his mother's calendar and watch, Van Go's need to rush, paired with his anger at seeing that his ex-girlfriend has new furniture, cause him to ejaculate on the couch (81). Later, the narrative reminds the reader of the scene of Van Go's stasis when Monk tries to persuade the Book Award committee against choosing *Fuck* for the top honor. Monk insists, “It's not that it's a bad novel...It's no novel at all. *It's a failed conception, an unformed fetus, seed cast into the sand, a hand without fingers*, a word with no vowels. It is offensive, poorly written, racist and mindless”

(289, my emphasis). Despite its name, the text so admired by the committee is really just an extension of Monk. Therefore, this text is locked in stasis.

The text Monk writes as Stagg is stagnant; but *Erasure*, like the other NBA texts examined in this study, flows into other narratives. In so doing, *Erasure* connects seemingly disparate narratives and disrupts supposed binaries. In other words, *Erasure* collapses the implicit binary found in the misreading of the novel, or “The race stuff” that privileges a middle-class narrative as authentic. Consider the language that Monk uses in his failed attempt to persuade the committee. Monk’s words recall an important debate in African American history between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, a debate worth revisiting because Monk’s middle-class identity is caught in this tension. In some ways, we might see Monk as the result of Du Bois’s argument for the development of the “Talented Tenth,” or the “exceptional” class who would take leadership roles to advance blacks in the U.S. Monk’s assertion that *Fuck* is “a failed conception” shows how he believes a novel of supposed verisimilitude opposes the legacy of Du Bois, who hopes in “The Afterthought” to *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that his unveiling of black interiority will “*fall not still-born into the world wilderness*” (278, emphasis added). Du Bois constructed the Talented Tenth concept in response to Washington’s plan for racial advancement that focused on developing economic niches within current conditions. Washington implored blacks to “cast down your buckets where you are” during his “Atlanta Compromise Address” (1895). Monk’s reference to a useless, fingerless hand echoes the criticism of Washington’s approach of accommodation through his assertion, “In all things social [black and white Americans] can be as separate as the

fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” This criticism of Washington’s approach extends to his Tuskegee Institute that taught trade skills, like construction, brick making, and woodworking, in addition to academic subjects. Yet, Monk—the product of the Talented Tenth—is a woodworker.

The protagonist’s unreliable narrative indicates how *Erasure* participates in the discourse that surrounds Barthes’s claim that the author is “dead” and Foucault’s response that the author is instead a “variable function of discourse” (Foucault 1636). *Erasure* is not about a “dead” author. Monk introduces himself as an author who operates against the grain, though one who is not inclined, like his father who shot himself, to “self-termination” (3). Rather, Monk is a changing entity that we cannot lock into a single textual representation. He is a contemporary black man who oddly “mutters *Egads*” when missing a shot on the basketball court (4). This Harvard-educated author is a woodworker, among other things, who drives a pick-up truck despite his mother’s embarrassment. After this introduction to Monk, the narrative moves to a meditation on cutting wood—and how a saw slices wood smoothly or destroys it depending on whether the saw is positioned along or against the grain. We later learn that “The center of the tree is the heartwood. It does little to feed the tree, but it is the structural support. The sapwood, which feeds everything, is weak and prone to fungi and insect damage. The two look the same. But you want the heartwood. You always want the heartwood” (17). Here the suggestion is that despite the mirrored appearance, the woodworker and more importantly the reader wants the core or the authentic wood.

Only through his role as a woodworker can Monk rationalize his creation of a text that purports to illustrate race reality. In contemplating the nature of art, Monk asserts

Only appearances signify in visual art. At least this is what I am told, that the painter's work is an invention in the boundless space that begins at the edges of his picture. The surface, the paper or the canvas is not the work of art, but where the work lives, a place to keep the picture, the paint, the idea. But a *chair*, a chair is its space, *is* its own canvas, occupies space properly. The canvas occupies spaces and the picture occupies the canvas, while the chair, as a work, fills the space itself. This was what occurred to me regarding *My Pathology*. The novel, so-called, was more a chair than a painting, my having designed it not as a work of art, but as a functional device, its appearance a thing to behold, but more a thing to mark, a warning perhaps, a gravestone certainly. It was by this reasoning that I was able to look at my face in the mirror and to accept the deal my agent presented to me on the phone that evening. (234)

Art, to Monk, who operates as both artist and artisan, surpasses the visible space in (or canvas on) which it "lives." An artist "invents" this space for the viewer to see a work that thrives in "boundless space." Artisan works like a chair and *My Pathology* are defined by their limitations. These markers are "gravestones" to Monk because their functions are set by definition. A chair or *My Pathology* "occupies space properly" because it cannot exceed its form. As Monk notes, "art finds its form and

... is [therefore] never a mere manifestation of life” (39). For Monk, forcing the functionality of a text by making it about racial representation locks the text into form and thereby denies its artistry. Despite his crafting of *My Pathology*, the narrative refuses to lock Monk in place.

Unlike a chair that fits into space, Monk’s alienation leaves him feeling out of place throughout the narrative. We recall that Monk is a writer in a family of doctors. While sitting in a waiting room in his sister’s clinic in Southeast, DC, Monk claims “I felt awkward, out of place, like I had so much of my life, like I didn’t belong” (26). This feeling reminds Monk of attending a party as a teenager where the music was “loud and unfamiliar, the bass thumping....in a part of Annapolis I’d never visited before, but I could see the spire of the capitol building, so I knew about where I was” (27). Noting that his sister’s luxury car is comfortable, but “Still, I felt out of place behind the wheel of the thing—what else is new” (36). Monk states, “I feel generally out of place” at the Book Award ceremony when seated at a table of “important guests”: “the Director of the Board of Boston General Hospital, the CEO of General Mills, a vice president from General Motors and head of marketing from General Electric, all with their spouses” (291, emphasis in original).

So if Monk is out of place and outside of his time at the end of the narrative, where is he? Monk (and Everett) is involved in various narrative histories—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and numerous others. While the text points in several directions, a focus on Ellison moves the narrative into Jim Crow-era discourse about writing, or more specifically, the purpose of writing and what kind of writing constitutes art. Given

the narrative's preoccupation with racial representation, and the intertextual references to Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, *Erasure* participates in the debate involving the political shift away from Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Literature" (1937), or the move from social realism to modernism.

Monk Ellison echoes Ellison and Baldwin, authors who gained recognition by fashioning themselves as artists in opposition to Wright.⁸¹ Monk's *My Pafology* reminds us of Baldwin's assertion in "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) that Wright's Bigger Thomas is the pathological foil to Stowe's Uncle Tom because Wright's portrayal of Bigger's violence and hatred denies the reader a sense of his humanity. While Monk's forefather Ralph Ellison adhered to the tenets of Wright's "Blueprint," he disagreed with Wright's strictly materialist's position. For Ellison, who studied music at Tuskegee, art became the vehicle that could allow blacks to transcend material conditions. According to Lawrence Jackson, "One of signal differences [between Ellison and Wright] was [Ellison's] determination to glance backwards toward the cultural projects of turn-of-the-century blacks like James

⁸¹ Modernists Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, not social realist Richard Wright, were listed among the great *American* authors of the period. Their fictional portrayals of the individual in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Invisible Man* implicitly must have transcended race in the minds of mainstream critics. Ellison and Baldwin, both affiliated with the New York Intellectuals who positioned themselves to the right of the Popular Front after disagreeing with Soviet politics, were often listed without reference to race in midcentury critical discussions about the next great American writer. In "We're on the Road" written for the *NYT*, William Barrett, who notes the influences of the Cold War and the lack of roots found in an increasingly mobile U.S., states, "There has been an abundance of talent in this period: J. D. Salinger, Saul Bellow, James Jones, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Mary McCarthy, Jean Stafford, Louis Auchincloss, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin; in the theatre Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller." In another article for the times in which Malcolm Cowley asks six critics to state who is poised to replace Hemingway and Faulkner, W. M. Frollock notes Ellison but laments his lack of production and Alfred Kazin includes Ellison and Baldwin on the list of authors he has enjoyed. All of the critics were reluctant to offer definitive replacements of Hemingway and Faulkner and no other black writers were mentioned. See Barrett's "We're on the Road: a Critic Discovers America and Sees the Forces that Shape Its Literature," *NYT* (10 May 1959) and Cowley's "Who's to Take the Place of Hemingway and Faulkner?: Who?," *NYT* (7 Oct 1962).

Weldon Johnson and to find an authentic formal structure rooted in black folk forms of expression such as folk tales, blues songs, humor, and signifying rituals” (344). Monk Ellison follows suit in his fashioning of his alter-ego—our “woodworker” who creates *My Pathology*. Stagg R. Leigh recalls the legend of “Stagger Lee,” the trickster figure born from the late nineteenth-century murder of William Lyons by “Stag” Lee Sheldon.

In *Erasure*, Monk drops into the narrative of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* through his alter-ego Stagg, the “author” of *My Pathology*. In fashioning Stagg, Monk Stagg is the figure that Monk plans to send underground like Ellison’s narrator. Further, Stagg’s journey helps us to position an NBA author like the disappearing Everett. As Monk fashions Stagg he tells us, “I would let Mr. Leigh continue his reclusive, just-out-of-the-big-house ways. He would talk to the editor a few more times, then *disappear, like down a hole*” (184, my emphasis). Monk tries to resist the underground, “refusing to sink even lower to the tunnels of the subway” (272). However, a significant shift occurs in the narrative after Monk is attracted to a billboard that reads “**KEEP AMERICA PURE**” (272, emphasis in the original) specifically because of its “spanking newness” (272). This billboard might be new in appearance, but its message reminds us of Jim Crow culture and references the Liberty Paint factory in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. In this way, *Erasure* exhibits the return that I identify with the NBA. The text presents a temporal drag—a moment that brings past histories and narratives into the contemporary story and thereby refuses to allow the postrace era to move beyond race.

This return temporarily disrupts Monk's narration. An omniscient narrator tells us that Stagg leaves room 1369 at his hotel and "takes the subway, the underground" (273) where "He is encased with other black men. Though it is a golden day outside, they cruise below the world to their destinations" (273). The room number, subway and "golden day" of the weather all recall significant moments that lead to or enlighten the protagonist's hibernation in the narrative of *Invisible Man*. And the text continues to drop the reader into Ralph Ellison's narrative, breaking Monk's narration with the repeated admonishment to "Behold the invisible!" (238, 245) and the question "*Ain't you Rine the runner?*" (242, original emphasis). Monk himself wonders if he might "become a Rhinehart" (184) and again echoes *Invisible Man* by stating "I yam what I yam" (184), though he initially thinks his attempt to become Stagg would fail.

In imagining the possibility of the slippage of identity, *Erasure* collapses imagined binaries as it folds itself into various narratives. The end of *Erasure* recalls the slippage of these gender and class binaries and folding of the various narratives. Caught in the NBA postrace moment, Monk cannot escape the narrative histories of the past. These histories are folded into the various narratives that comprise the narrative of *Erasure* by the time Monk accepts Stagg's book award. As various people and moments and lines from novels start to converge, Monk attempts to anchor himself on his mother—a woman experiencing a similar narrative as Alzheimer's ravages her memory and alters her concept of self. In this moment, Monk thinks like his mother. He might articulate himself differently, but in this moment Monk echoes Wright's Bigger Thomas figure, Van Go Jenkins. And when

Stagg asks, “How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” (293), Monk recalls Ellison’s protagonist of *Invisible Man*: “Painful and empty” (293, emphasis in original). Everett’s protagonist could very well attempt to join Ellison’s in hibernation. If he does, he brings Wright’s narrative and many others with him.

Erasure stops the teleological narrative of racial advancement by showing the intersectionality of a middle-class figure like Monk. This figure can undermine binaries and thereby give value to a particular experience in ways that depictions of supposed pathological figures like Precious and Bigger Thomas cannot. In fact, the narrative of *Erasure* presents these figures as the product of the intersectional figures like Monk, and therefore not removed from them. Critics, writers, and historians have constructed the African American literary canon in terms of representation and social reform. According to Kenneth Warren, the black American literary tradition depicts the problems of individuals (writers and/or characters) that apply to a construct of the black community as a whole in its specific struggle against U.S. Jim Crow policies—a definition that Warren uses to question the canonical status of NBA. Yet, if we accept Warren’s definition of African American literature as only a response to Jim Crow culture that ended after the judicial and legal address of “separate but equal” policies in the fifties and sixties (1-2), we would be compelled to position a novel like *Erasure*, that appears to focus on the plight of a black middle-class individual even though Everett presents an anachronistic puzzle by attributing authorship of the text to Jim Crow, outside the field. And, doing so would be a mistake. This project does not intend to lock writers and texts within a specific tradition. But there is a twofold benefit to examining texts like *Erasure* as a part of

the African American literary canon. First, this examination allows us to expand the tradition of African American literature. Second, this study shows how and why an identity construct like the canon thrives in a postrace era. Everett shows us that the importance of the canon is not black writers, but rather black writing. We find value in NBA fiction through the attention it draws to the ways that writers and events narrate race, gender, class, and sexuality, and then connect these stories to histories that continue to inform them.

The first and second chapters of this study analyze the NBA in terms of the narration of race and gender through literary production. In the following chapter, I examine NBA expression through the lenses of biracial identity, the multicultural movement, womanhood, and sexuality as depicted in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and *Symptomatic*.

Chapter Three: ‘Between truth and fiction’: Race and the Uncanny in Andrea Lee’s *Symptomatic* and *Caucasia*

“My father tells me that the further you get away from an experience, the deeper it roots itself inside of you. Don’t fool yourself, baby, he said. Time does not heal and history is not progressive. My mother has other opinions. She says the soul is forged through suffering; every hardship is a lesson in disguise” (Senna, *Symptomatic* 211)

“It is we who must bury the subject in the tomb-like hollow of the signifier, pronouncing at last the words for which we’re condemned should we speak them or not: that we are the advocates of abortion; that the Child as futurity’s emblem must die; that the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past. Our queerness has nothing to offer a Symbolic that lives by denying that nothingness entails. An insistence on the negativity that pierces the fantasy screen of futurity, shattering narrative temporality with irony’s always explosive force. And so what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here. (Lee Edelman, *No Future* 31)

“Then, forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning an operation that, if it were thought out, would involve bringing together the two opposite terms but, on account of that flash, is discharged like thunder. The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.” (Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 8-9)

The previous chapters challenge current characterizations of post-Civil Rights fiction and postrace aesthetics by focusing on artistic expression through portrayals of black middle-class male protagonists. In this chapter, I turn to the work of Danzy Senna to explore again this aesthetic from the perspective of biracial middle-class female protagonists. One of these protagonists is a writer, like Ellis’s and Everett’s protagonists, who has “given up on nonfiction” to “study the art of lying” (*Symptomatic* 211). The benefit of her resignation? The opportunity “‘to inhabit the space between truth and fiction’ and ‘climb[...] into that abyss where nothing is certain’” (*Symptomatic* 211). And, occupying uncertain space between binaries characterizes the condition of the protagonists considered in my study.

Danzy Senna is the author of two novels, *Caucasia* (1998) and *Symptomatic* (2004) that are the focus of this chapter, a memoir, and a collection of short stories. She is also the daughter of two American writers. Her father, from the South, is black and Mexican. Her mother, from Boston, is Irish and English. Her parents married in 1968, the year after the *Loving v. Virginia* decision declared U.S. legal restrictions against interracial marriage unconstitutional, and they were active in the Civil Rights Movement. Her parents also went through a tough divorce. I provide these details because readers of Senna's work will recognize these themes. Asked if her stories are autobiographical, Senna states, "I always start with a spark of something autobiographical and then veer away from what really happened until the characters and the situation go to some dangerous new possibility. I'm much more excited by the story I invent out of the truth than I am in sticking to the facts" (qtd. in Mair). Reading Senna's work therefore requires exploring the "dangerous new possibility" found in her narratives, rather than focusing too narrowly on "the facts" of her interracial family story.

Senna offers a treatment of biracial identity in both *Caucasia* and *Symptomatic*; and, both novels recall the author's interracial family story. *Caucasia*, a *Bildungsroman* set during the Civil Rights Movement in 1970s Boston, depicts the negotiation of identity just after *Loving* through the story of Birdie Lee, the daughter of Deck Lee, a black intellectual, and Sandra Lodge, a WASP radical activist. Birdie, whose "birth certificate still reads, 'Baby Lee,' like the gravestone of some stillborn child" (19) because her parents could not agree on a name, constantly seeks her identity in the reflection of others. She spends the novel engaged in various and

iterative forms of passing according to the demands of her environment. This passing includes mimetic performances of “blackness” while living in Boston and attending an Afrocentric school with her sister, Cole, in Roxbury. This passing also includes performing “whiteness” through the persona of working class Jewish, and later secular, Jesse Goldman in New Hampshire. Determined to leave behind her “white” identity in New Hampshire, Birdie wonders, “if I too would forever be fleeing in the dark, abandoning parts of myself that I no longer wanted, in search of some part that had escaped me. Killing one girl in order to let the other free” (289). Critics agree that *Caucasia* focuses the reader on the performance of race; however, Birdie’s experience and reaction to her father’s lack of interest in her “passing” for white due to his ahistoric assertion that “there’s no such thing as passing...[because] race is a complete illusion” (391) begs that we move the debate beyond the notion of race as performance. Senna appears to attempt this shift in her second novel.

In *Symptomatic* Senna plots the experiences of a mixed-race woman who is nameless to the reader and, in so doing, again narrates the killing of one perceived identity apparently to set the other free. This retelling of an interracial narrative only depicts a short period in the protagonist’s life during which she moves from Northern California to Manhattan after receiving a journalism fellowship with a popular magazine. After ending a brief romance with Andrew, who is a white, upper-class writer, the protagonist is befriended by “Greta Hicks,” a fact-checker at the magazine who is also biracial. Greta, who quickly insinuates herself in the protagonist’s life, assists the protagonist with finding an apartment to sublet from the enigmatic, “white,” Vera Cross who is fleeing her financial problems and social entanglements.

However, the narrative takes a gothic turn as Greta's behavior becomes erratic and possessive after the protagonist begins dating Ivers, who is a black, up-and-coming photographic artist. The protagonist searches for relief from alternating bouts of disgust and paralysis until a raving and embittered Greta, ultimately revealed to be Vera Cross, falls to her death while attempting to kill the protagonist. Apparently free of Greta, the protagonist gives up journalism for the "truth" of fiction writing and returns to California. But the reader understands from her direct address to the now dead Greta at the end that like *Caucasia*, the narrative of *Symptomatic* refuses the successful "Killing [of] one girl in order to let the other free."

Beginning her fiction with "a spark of something autobiographical" often involves race for Senna because of her interracial family story. But, as readers have learned from many writers, race is a national narrative just as much as it is a family story. As Senna explains,

to write about America is to involve the subject of race that is so much a part of our national identity. And for me as a person growing up in this country it was always a part of my family's conversation. And I think growing up black or growing up biracial, it's something that's part of your daily language and your daily awareness of the world you're living in.

So, race is part of the conversation the characters are having. It's part of their identity. But there are then these *universal stories* that emerge from their lives of, you know, loneliness or motherhood or jealousy

and these are the real subjects of the story. But then race is always there in the background because this is where we live and this is the world that I observe in front of me as a writer. (Qtd. in Martin, emphasis added)

Senna's interracial family narrative reflects the national race story. Moreover, her perception of race as a national narrative from which "universal stories" materialize repeats midcentury calls in the black American literary community for "universal" expression.

In midcentury black American discourse, as evidenced by James Baldwin's essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), and the 1950 *Phylon* Conference, writing that was "universal" transcended race. I read this midcentury universalism as the beginnings of a postrace aesthetic. While these writers sought to depict conditions of the human experience that a reader could relate to regardless of race, this construct of universalism did not move beyond race. Instead, the expression of an identity experience like blackness would operate as a lens that shed light on what it means to be human.

Senna's position on universal themes emerging from the depiction of race points back to midcentury postrace black expression. This return to past race narratives also reflects the contemporary expressions of the post-Civil Rights black experience, or the New Black Aesthetic (NBA). In a promising, but flawed, essay, author Trey Ellis defines the NBA as the artistic expression of "cultural mulattos" who move between awkward binaries, like "black" and "white" worlds. My reading of the

fiction produced by this artistic movement complicates these binaries and defines the NBA as a postrace movement.

The term “postrace” usually accompanies a narrative of progress. This narrative depends on the achievement of civil rights and the middle-class status that is afforded as a result of these rights. While this narrative operates at the national level, it also drives the teleological vision of the African American literary tradition that imagines the achievement of social justice for future generations. The post-Civil Rights middle-class figure of the NBA might gesture to a postrace concept that includes a narrative of progress. But, NBA fiction questions this middle-class status as a marker of progress. Protagonists in NBA fiction, like Senna’s, recall the past and map indefinite lines of genealogical positions within the black literary tradition. Instead of moving beyond race, the intersectional black middle-class figure questions the ways that current discourse invokes the term “postrace.”

NBA fictional representations undermine the position of the black middle class through figurative returns to the past. By gesturing to the past, NBA fiction collapses the binaries of “old” and “new” and “black” and “white.” I refer to these gestures as “postrace moments.” Central to these postrace moments are “temporal drags,”⁸² or moments in the narrative that connect contemporary protagonists to political histories and narratives of race in relation to other identity forms, like gender and class. Because of this position, NBA protagonists occupy a transient and vague in-between position in which they are associated with earlier narratives of social identity. Therefore, NBA protagonists never fully access the imagined societal

⁸² Elizabeth Freeman theorizes that “temporal drags” can connect performative post-identities to the political histories—the identity politics—that they supposedly abandon (729).

benefits of progress. Relentlessly confronting past and present narratives of race, gender, nationality, and sexual orientation, the protagonists of NBA fiction disrupt the narrative of progress.

NBA fiction therefore echoes the question implicit in this chapter's first epigraph taken from Senna's, *Symptomatic*: if "Time does not heal and history is not progressive" then what is the purpose of continuing to pursue Martin Luther King's mountaintop dream? To answer this question, we focus in this chapter on *Symptomatic* to explore post-identity politics in the superficial fissure between "black" and "white" subjectivity. This engagement in NBA fiction undermines the insufficient binaries that limit Ellis's essay. And, this engagement suggests a better way of defining the postrace narrative.

Essence magazine included the "overlooked" *Symptomatic* in a March 2009 "Books We'd Make into a Movie" section, claiming that Senna's plot has "more twists and creativity than a single frame of *Single White Female*." *Library Journal*, while invoking the reception of Senna's acclaimed first novel *Caucasia*, "highly recommended" the "thoughtful and exciting" *Symptomatic* for all academic and public libraries. Yet, the slight shadow cast by Senna's first novel over her second in the recommendation for libraries is more apparent in the American Library Association's Booklist review in which Donna Seaman compares Senna's "fine debut" to the second "strained and *peculiar* tale...that could be pitched as a tragic mulatto meets *Psycho* in Brooklyn" (emphasis added). Sharing Seaman's disappointment *Kirkus* laments, "credible characterization is the biggest casualty of this *slight*, depressing, *issue-driven* second novel. Senna covered this ground much

more convincingly in her award-winning debut” (emphasis added). And, according to *Publishers Weekly*, “Senna addressed similar issues of race and identity with verve and panache in *Caucasian* [sic], but this follow-up shows signs of the sophomore slump.”

Because *Symptomatic* revisits the negotiation between the perceived binaries of white and black—and in so doing demonstrates the NBA’s conflation of race, gender, class, and sexuality—we must not overlook the novel that some critics have deemed “peculiar” and “issues-driven.” The following pages examine how Senna’s treatment of biracial identity in *Symptomatic* functions within the frame of the New Black Aesthetic, specifically by engaging and disrupting the primary narrative of the African American literary tradition. In repeating the narrative of the post-civil rights biracial subject, Senna brings to the fore in *Symptomatic* the racial gothic elements that quietly haunt *Caucasia*; and in so doing, she overwrites prevailing notions regarding race and gender protocols through the conflation of the trope of the tragic mulatto and the madwoman in the attic.

The Postrace Moment—the Millennial Mulatto

Despite her desire to end the constant fleeing of parts of her identity, like Birdie in *Caucasia*, the protagonist in *Symptomatic* cannot escape experience and history. With this depiction, Danzy Senna engages the late-twentieth century multiracial movement as well as longstanding racial protocols in American literary studies. Senna significantly sets *Symptomatic* in 1992, on the advent of what she has

satirically defined as “The Mulatto Millennium.”⁸³ The events of the narrative coincide with the actual publication of Maria P. Root’s anthology, *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992),⁸⁴ and occur just one year before the appearance of *Time*’s controversial special issue on multiculturalism in the U.S. that featured on the cover a cyber-generated, multiethnic new “face of America” with whom the managing editor insists “several staff members promptly fell in love.”⁸⁵ Both publication events were precipitated by a perceived increase in the multiracial population in the U.S. due to immigration and *Loving*. The multiracial population gained fluid identities that were separate from traditional ideas of race, and societal institutions from academia to Wall Street took notice.⁸⁶

⁸³ Senna’s essay, a satirical look at the burgeoning mixed-race movement and black identity, was first published in Claudine C. O’ Hearn’s *Half + Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural* (1998).

⁸⁴ According to David Brunsma in “Mixed Messages: Doing Race in the Color-Blind Era,” Root’s collection “was the first serious volume devoted to assessing the state of our understanding of mixed-race people in the United States” (1).

⁸⁵ On 18 Nov 1993, *Time* published a special issue on the nascent multiracial movement, including articles on topics such as globalism, immigration and undocumented workers, Wasp identity, multiethnic society and jury composition, interracial marriage and childrearing, ethnic consumerism and marketing, ethnic Americans in the arts, Asian American identity and “exemplary immigrant” status, religious diversity in the U.S., and multiculturalism and political correctness. According to the managing editor, the cover picture of “Eve” or the future “face of America” was generated “to dramatize the impact of interethnic marriage” that he claimed “increased dramatically in the U.S. during the latest wave of immigration.” Using photos of models to produce the final image, the picture of “Eve” contained a final, computer-generated racial composite of “15% Anglo-Saxon, 17.5% Middle Eastern, 17.5% African, 7.5% Asian, 35% Southern European and 7.5% Hispanic.” While “Eve” generated some public interest, the issue has been largely criticized for failing to acknowledge the U.S.’s history of racial and ethnic injustice while presenting a facile nod to multiculturalism. See, for example, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24:2 (Winter 1998).

⁸⁶ According to Kimberly McClain Da Costa, in the 1990s several companies (e.g., Levi Strauss, IKEA, Tylenol, Nike, Verizon, and GE) began to incorporate multiracial images into advertising campaigns in order to brand themselves as “hip” and appeal to young consumers as well as “a broad, ethnically nonspecific audience” (184). See “Selling Mixedness: Marketing with Multiracial Identities” in David L. Brunsma’s *Mixed Messages: Multiracial Identities in the “Color-Blind” Era* (2006).

While this multiracial movement is credited with adding to the interrogation of racial classification in the U.S., its advocates appeared to contradict their arguments against defining race in terms of essentialism and fixity in their demand for an unequivocal “multiracial” classification (Brunsma 2-3). This classification not only increased the popularity of the increasingly lucrative multi-race figure in advertising, but also led to changes on U.S. Census forms, beginning in 2000, that allowed respondents to claim more than one race.⁸⁷ I would suggest that the inherent contradiction found in the multiracial movement’s fixed definition of a unfixed race identity reflects the influence of the fourth and fifth phases of U.S. neoliberalism, as defined by Lisa Duggan, that immobilizes “political analysis activism” (xxi).⁸⁸ This “stripped down” form of equality politics, influenced by the promotion of “national values” during the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, created a multiculturalism fit for “global consumption”—a separation of economics and class from identity politics that allowed for the “continued upward redistribution of resources” (xii). Senna’s postmodern expression of blackness as a changing construct explores this

⁸⁷ Barack Obama’s decision to claim only “Black, African Am., or Negro” on his 2010 census form, despite having the option to claim also “white” or to write in “multiracial” has stirred some controversy regarding race identification in the 21st Century. See, for example, Oscar Avila’s “Obama’s census-form choice: ‘Black,’” *LA Times*, 4 Apr 2010. Melissa Harris-Lacewell compares Obama’s and John McCain’s backgrounds (i.e., educations, professions, marriages, and even choice of running mates) to show how Obama has disrupted social constructions of whiteness. See “How the First Black President’s Approach to Race Is Transforming What It Means to Be White,” *The Nation*, 18 May 2010. See also, “Why It Matters that Obama Marked ‘Black’ on His Census Form,” *The Nation*, 19 Apr 2010.

⁸⁸ In *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Duggan outlines five phases of U.S. neoliberalism: phase one involved the dismantling of Popular Front and New Deal programs at the beginning of the Cold War; phase two attacked social movements of identity politics that divert money to social issues; phase three concerned corporate and small business collusion to divert funds away from global competition and social movements; phase four entailed the “culture wars”; and phase five established a national construct of multiculturalism that continued to move funds away from social issues (xii). A detailed discussion of Duggan appears in Chapter One of this study.

lack of political power and thus offers us the opportunity to interrogate this form of multiculturalism.

Despite the appearance of the multiracial movement's social advancement, the biracial protagonist of Senna's *Symptomatic* appears caught in time. Unlike Birdie in *Caucasia*, circumstance does not compel or motivate the protagonist of this novel to actively pass for white or black—and her refusal to perform race in these definitive ways leaves her, ironically, unable to move beyond constructions of race. The protagonist's lack of performance indicates an NBA postrace moment. Midway through the narrative, Ivers defines the protagonist as “one of those ‘new people’ I keep reading about in the papers” (103) during their first interview and after he insists upon moving their meeting to a club in Harlem. But, the protagonist reflects this “new” status to Ivers precisely because she objects to his insistent gesture toward historic definitions of blackness. When Ivers whispers, “Are you a quadroon?” the protagonist answers definitively: “No....That’s not the word I’d use to describe myself....I’m half. And anyway, that word just seems pretty archaic” (103). Still, Ivers persists, and his impish persistence in getting the protagonist to identify her racial leanings through performance—to declare whether she identifies as “black” or “white”—causes her to abruptly depart (103).

This scene with Ivers stands in contrast to the “unlabeled” racial status that the protagonist achieves at the beginning of the novel. The protagonist achieves this status because she initially refrains from defining how others should read her body. Andrew, for example, first approaches her and indicates his misread of what he perceives as her “otherness” by asking if she speaks Spanish. Instead of identifying

herself as biracial, the protagonist gives a coy response—“*What makes you say that?*” (2, original emphasis). As the protagonist acknowledges, this response opens “space” for “danger [to] arise[.]”(2). Her response opens the dangerous space between “truth” and “fiction.” And, this dangerous space where the protagonist accepts a misreading of her race resembles the same space that she occupies during her encounter with Ivers later in the narrative. Both situations ultimately force the protagonist to negotiate historic definitions of race.

The protagonist, in fact, appears entangled in history despite how her body is read. This entanglement is most apparent in the narrative when she encounters the racist attitudes of Andrew and his friends from his prep school, Andover. Like Andrew, Andrew’s friends are unaware of the protagonist’s biracial identity.⁸⁹ In a scene that resembles the opening chapter of Andrea Lee’s *Sarah Phillips*, the protagonist participates in game-playing with Andrew and his friends. After a game of charades ends in the caricature and ridicule of ‘Retha, a black woman who cleaned the dorms at Andover, the protagonist retreats to the bathroom and tells us

I thought of things I could do or say—things I’d already said and done. But I was all of a sudden so sleepy. I yawned, literally unable to move from my seat by the window. I curled up on that cold tiled floor and closed my eyes. And I started to fall asleep. Me, the insomniac. A profound heaviness came over me. In the dream I was babysitting for

⁸⁹ This scene in *Symptomatic* resembles a moment in Andrea Lee’s novel-in-stories, *Sarah Phillips* (1984). In the opening chapter, “In France,” the title character retreats to the women’s room after her French boyfriend describes her as “*notre Negresse pasteurisee*” (11). In his malicious imagining of her “very American tale,” the protagonist is the product of the rape of an Irish woman, who is also part American Indian and Jewish, by “a jazz musician as big and black as King Kong” (11). Chapter 4 of this study focuses on Andrea Lee’s fiction.

somebody else's child. A baby, no more than a few months old. I'd put it down on a bed to sleep, but had somehow lost it under the sheets and comforter. I heard the baby's smothered cries, but no matter how many blankets I ripped away, I could not find the baby. I was frightened, not of the baby suffocating but of the mother coming home to find what I'd done. (15)

The protagonist, "literally unable to move" from a position of observation (a "seat by the window") and overcome by "a profound heaviness," dreams of losing "*somebody else's child*" after acknowledging that she has already encountered and addressed similar incidents.

The dream of the lost child is the first of three dream events in *Symptomatic* that serve to push the novel's racial discourse beyond discussions of performance (versus essence) and community formation based on constructions of identity. Some scholars interpret this scene in which the protagonist dreams she cannot find a child as a challenge to assertions that the biracial subject, like the protagonist, possesses an authentic "black" self beneath her white skin.⁹⁰ While in some respects persuasive, this reading might be complicated by taking note of the fact that the protagonist perceives the baby in the dream as *belonging to someone else*, not herself. If we examine the baby as the child of someone for whom the protagonist perceives that she is responsible, we might view the lost child as emblematic of the historical definition of the race struggle, or the narrative of progress that lies at the foundation of African American literature.

⁹⁰ See Hershini Bhana Young's "Black Like Me: (Mis)Recognition, the Racial Gothic, and the Post-1967 Mixed-Race Movement in Danzy Senna's *Symptomatic*," *African American Review*

I read the child in the protagonist's dream as a symbol of a future ideal black identity. As Lee Edelman argues in *No Future*, "to serve as the repository of variously sentimentalized cultural identifications, the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust" (11). In other words, the figure of the Child frequently indicates the promise of the future in socio-political discourse—in this case a futurity in which 'Retha's descendents would not experience racism. Read in this way, the protagonist's dream of losing someone's baby in her care immediately after a racially charged incident in which she is powerless to move beyond the role of observer indicates her inability to advance the teleology that characterizes African American studies.

The protagonist's dream also suggests that she is less concerned about the wellbeing of this figurative child than of the potential discovery that she does not value this promise of the progression of history. In this way, Senna's late-twentieth century protagonist appears to resemble earlier literary depictions of mixed-race characters that refuse to advance the narrative of progress—a futurity that we can neatly imagine in the figure of the child—that is central to African American literature.

Scholars have noted how Senna's work gestures toward other novels, like Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*, that have advanced narratives of passing and the trope of the tragic mulatto. The mixed-race figure has long served as a narrative device to mark and mediate race in American literature. The academy has produced compelling scholarship on Senna's

millennial handling of the passing narrative and move away from the trope of the tragic mulatto.⁹¹ I contribute to this scholarship by offering an analysis of Senna's work in relation to a midcentury author, J. Saunders Redding, who gestures to the postrace universalism that Senna asserts emerge from narratives of race.

An examination of Redding's controversial *Stranger and Alone* (1950)⁹² illuminates Senna's treatment of racial identity within the African American literary tradition. Moreover, this examination traces the origins of the NBA to midcentury calls for universal themes in literature that moved away from overt examinations of economic and social conditions. This move is the first phase of U.S. neoliberalism as defined by Duggan. In Redding's novel, defenders of Jim Crow strategically appoint the mixed-race protagonist, Shelton Howden, Supervisor of Negro Schools to counter the pre-*Brown v. Board* grassroots efforts of "radical" teachers in the South who demanded equal pay and facilities. Like Senna's protagonists, Howden's negotiation of environmental factors that privilege whiteness forces him to become "totally conscious of *another self taking possession of him* and yet leaving a part of him free to watch and weigh" (SA 107, emphasis added).

Redding's novel plots Howden's attempts to remake himself in ways that will not impede his social and economic progress. Believing that the nascent Civil Rights

⁹¹ See for example Brenda Boudreau's "Letting the Body Speak: 'Becoming' White in 'Caucasia'" in *Modern Language Studies* 32:1 (Spring 2002) and Lori Harrison-Kahan's "Passing for White, Passing for Jewish: Mixed Race Identity in Danzy Senna and Rebecca Walker" in *MELUS*, Indeterminate Identities 30:1 (Spring 2005). See also Michelle Elam's "Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Phillip Roth, and Colson Whitehead" in the *African American Review*.

⁹² Arthur P. Davis, Redding's friend and coeditor of *The New Cavalcade*, refers to *Stranger and Alone* as "as perhaps [Redding's] most glaring mistake in judgment." Davis, Arthur P. *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900 to 1960*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974, p. 160. In the introduction to her edition of selections of Redding's work, Faith Berry suggests that Howden "was intended to reveal certain characteristics of Booker T. Washington, a figure whose social philosophy and duplicitous *modus operandi* Redding loathed, as is clearly revealed in his nonfiction writing about Washington" (6).

Movement is powerless to change Jim Crow culture, Howden fails to advance the African American narrative of progress by betraying local black grassroots activists to white town officials. Howden is caught in “old time” (304). Additionally, he is haunted by a movement leader’s question, “Do you know what time it is on the clock of the world?” And Howden’s inability to move forward in time compels him toward the town’s judicial offices:

Crossing the bridge over the green-scummed slough at the end of The Chute, Howden could see the clock tower on the county courthouse. The clock had not run for years, but that phrase was in his mind, though he was only half thinking of it. Then he fell to wondering whether the county courthouse clock had stopped in the daytime or at night; but such speculation was short-lived. He could see the geometric slant the sun had, like theatrical lighting effect, in the street leading to the square....About this street there was nothing torpid and inert....

It was just as it had always been and always would be, he thought, with its permanent wooden awnings around the first stories of some of the buildings on two sides of the park....From his whitewashed cement pedestal, the Confederate soldier in his crushed cap and sleeve-ripped coat, his musket at the ready, watches over the tieless, faded blue-shirted, rosette sleeve-gartered, drooping old men who sat in quiet indestructibility on the green wooden benches. Every part of the picture was there in focus, timeless, changeless. (305-06)

Like the stuck clock, the “inert” street, and the frozen Confederate soldier, Shelton Howden cannot move in time. Like the protagonist of *Symptomatic*, Howden operates in opposition to reader expectation and the teleology of African American literary studies.

Both Redding and Senna gesture to historic debates regarding race trauma and identity formation through mixed-race characters that desire to step outside of identity politics concerning race. The similarities between Redding’s and Senna’s depictions indicate ways in which we can again (as suggested by an analysis of Ellis’s fiction in Chapter One) locate the roots of the NBA and postrace expression in midcentury calls for movement “toward an unlabeled future.”⁹³ Redding imagined this future emerging from the social and economic freedoms achieved after WWII and through the New Deal. To Redding, these new freedoms meant that the black writer “could begin to see himself as in no fundamental way different and particular. *He could begin to explain himself and his motives and his character in terms of conditioning forces common to all humanity*” (373, emphasis added). In other words, Senna’s “universal stories” could emerge from the portrayal of a race experience. In creating a nameless character like the protagonist of *Symptomatic*, Senna advances the goals of midcentury postrace expression and explores the possibilities and complications involved in the potential unlabeled status achieved through the U.S. judicial system and the dismantling of Jim Crow culture. And in so doing, Senna, like Redding, relies upon the mixed-race figure to disrupt African American teleology.

⁹³ In 1950, the editors of the journal *Phylon* asked major black writers if the tradition of black literature was moving toward an “unlabeled future.” See the Introduction and Chapter One of this study.

I find the trace of a figure like Redding's protagonist in Senna's texts. However, *Stranger and Alone* intertwines Shelton Howden's subjectivity and the tragic mulatto trope—his inability to stay in time specifically stems from a loathing of the “black blood” (48) that blocks his progress in Jim Crow society. Howden, for example, examines his reflection in a cracked mirror while in college and notes that “His tawny hair had a crisp, loose curl; his lips were full almost to thickness; his skin had as much red as yellow in it” (48). Comparing his image to classmates who were “indistinguishable from whites,” Howden wishes that “he were as white as they” (48).

Howden's encounter with the image in the mirror shows his identification with the “abhorrence” that cultural hegemony associates with blackness. In this way, Redding's depiction of Howden echoes Claudia Tate's Lacanian reading of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, in which she argues that Helga Crane's subjectivity is constituted by “the gaze of the racist other” (120). Her identification with her white family's disdain for her blackness therefore reflects “the misrecognition of the specular image as the self and the self-object of a racist gaze” (120-21). Howden, like fellow biracial orphan Helga Crane, constructs his subjectivity through his identification with the gaze of Jim Crow culture that loathes the markers of blackness that he projects in the mirror. This identity compels him to stop “black” advancement.

In contrast, after the charades incident the nameless protagonist in *Symptomatic* appears to refrain from internalizing the gaze of the other by instead

calming herself with a familiar image⁹⁴ that she constructs in the mirror. Just before falling asleep in the bathroom the protagonist uses steam on the mirror to draw an outline of the face that she has been doodling since childhood. She states it was

an anxious tic I resorted to whenever I felt out of place. It was a crude sketch of a woman. She had big eyes with long lashes, a long nose, full bow lips, and wavy lines around her face to signify hair.

Ambiguous. Guarded. There was a certain refracted quality to the features that made her hard to place. I don't know who she was supposed to be—only that her face calmed me, like an old friend who shows up at just the right moment. (15)

By featuring a biracial protagonist, the narrative employs a black-white binary. But, as illustrated by the comforting figure the protagonist produces in the mirror, the narrative refuses the protagonist space to dwell on either side of the black-white divide. Therefore, even as we read the protagonist's first dream as a desire to disrupt the narrative of progress, the following sections will demonstrate why we must not view this disruption as the protagonist's move away from blackness in particular or a race identity in general.

Reproducing Postrace: Revising the Tragic Mulatto Trope

The reviews and synopsis of *Symptomatic*, as noted above, suggest that Senna uses her second major work to revisit terrain already covered in *Caucasia*; and several critics lament the loss of “credible characterization” in the second, and

⁹⁴ Again, Senna echoes Andrea Lee, the subject of Chapter Four of this study. Lee's protagonists dream of and encounter familiar women who connect them to a sense of community. These women are familiar to Lee's protagonists, but they also inspire feelings of anxiety.

significantly shorter, narrative. For these reasons there is value in examining *Symptomatic* as a novella, rather than as a fully developed novel—this second narrative focuses on a single, suspenseful conflict that features a surprising, though not unfounded, end.⁹⁵ In treating again the problem of identity in *Symptomatic*, Senna denies the reader the scope of character development that occurs over time in the plot of *Caucasia*. My study is interested in examining Senna’s reliance on stock devices—a nameless protagonist and a racially ambiguous double—to reiterate the constant dissolution and invention of race. In fact, *Symptomatic* “could be pitched as a tragic mulatto meets Psycho in Brooklyn” tale precisely because Senna exchanges the mirroring of Birdie and Cole in *Caucasia* with that of the unnamed protagonist and the maladjusted Greta in *Symptomatic*.

Birdie and Cole suffer from the dissolution of their parents’ marriage and both express frustration with their parents’ lack of understanding as they try on and remove different manifestations of their identities. Cole resents their mother’s ignorance of her needs in terms of hair- and skincare. And Birdie resents their father’s refusal to acknowledge the reality of her blackness in terms of historic constructions of race and passing. These issues of mixed-race identity are, however, inextricably intertwined with other forms of psycho-social identity formation (i.e., parent-child relationships, gender, and sexuality) that would characterize a *Bildungsroman* that did not necessarily focus on race. Neither character is Shelton Howden or Helga Crane whose psychological and social development focus on race trauma while containing more subtle confluences of race and other forms of identity.

⁹⁵ See J. A. Cuddon’s definition of “novella” in the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*.

In *Symptomatic*, however, Greta's bitter fixation on defining herself in terms of the protagonist to avoid feeling like "the fucking half-caste misfit that everybody wanted but nobody loved" (203) appears to reinforce tropes supposedly erased by the so-called "Mulatto Millennium" and *Caucasia*. Gagged and bound by Greta after rejecting her near the end of the narrative, the protagonist recalls her college boyfriend's marijuana-induced assessment of her multiracial identity that reifies the absurdity of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century scientific racism:⁹⁶

The thing about mules...is they can go either way. They either get the best of both worlds—the strength of the donkey and the showmanship of the Thoroughbred horse—or the worse of their lineage—the braying stubbornness of a donkey and the genetic weakness, rubbery limbs, and low IQ of an overbred horse. You just never know. It's the luck of the draw....In other words, chicks like this? They either end up genius messiahs, or craven hybrid monstrosities. (201-02)

A friend counters that "they don't make mules like that anymore" (202) because "that breed went out of style with the hula hoop" (202). The friend continues that "Mulattos these days are all ordinary and well adjusted" (202). But, despite the friend's assertions, Greta's obsession with the protagonist seems to support the boyfriend's anachronistic characterization.

⁹⁶ See, for example, the depiction of "mulatto" characters Lydia Brown and Silas Lynch in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Thomas F. Dixon, Jr.'s *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) on which the film is based. In *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination* (1868), for example, John van Evrie argues that the offspring of a biracial union is sickly, becoming sterile in four generations (144), and prone to ambition and violence that "the typical pure-blooded Negro" is not (150).

Senna's depiction of Greta Hicks as the tragic foil to the protagonist of *Symptomatic* serves as the primary source of conflict in the novel. Greta's identification with the protagonist as a biracial subject becomes too intimate rather quickly in Senna's short work—Greta's luring of the protagonist into her (i.e., alter-ego Vera Cross's) apartment leads to the coworker's suggestion of giving each other bikini waxes and insistence that they wear identical dresses before Greta attempts to kill the protagonist in the second half of the short narrative. These jarring events depict the nature of Greta's obsession. As Greta explains, her fixation on the protagonist is not sexual, but rather stems from a desire to create and inhabit an unlabeled future ideal: "This isn't some dyke come-on. Yuck. Don't you understand? This is about the future. We could build our own reality. Fuck all those motherfuckers. Fuck the white boys and the white girls and the niggers and the gooks. Fuck the dykes and the shirt-lifters. We don't need them. We're a new race. A new people" (54). Greta fixates on the protagonist specifically because of her racially ambiguous status. The form of the novella ensures that in Senna's revision of the mixed-race narrative, a fixation like Greta's is so dissonant that the reader must grapple with its implications.

In contrast, critics admire Senna's handling of the mixed-race narrative in *Caucasia*. Lori Harrison-Kahan, for example, argues that "Almost forty years [after the portrayal of the tragic mixed-race figure in *Imitation of Life*]...the narrative of passing does, finally, experience a significant shift. In contrast to most literary and cultural representations of passing, Danzy Senna's 1998 novel, *Caucasia*, casts

blackness as the ideal, desired identity” (19-20).⁹⁷ Harrison-Kahan points to Birdie and Cole’s embrace of the Golliwog,⁹⁸ a black caricature from a series of early and mid-twentieth century children’s books, which Sandy’s mother gives to Cole.

According to Harrison-Kahan, unlike the wayward Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life*, Birdie and Cole have not learned to loath blackness. But the girls’ fondness for a signifier like the Golliwog hardly evidences their ultimate privileging of blackness. We see this point in Harrison-Kahan’s assertion that Senna’s revision of the passing narrative in part lies in Birdie’s initial desire to pass for “black” by braiding her hair and altering her speech and dress. Further, Birdie comes to understand that her identity is unraveling in the chapter entitled “Golliwog’s Revenge”⁹⁹ where she realizes that Cole, whose image Birdie initially believes evidences her existence (5), can see herself in the mirror of their father’s black girlfriend, Carmen.¹⁰⁰ While

⁹⁷ Despite her initial assertion that *Caucasia* privileges black identity, Harrison-Kahan argues that Sandy and Birdie’s employ of the ambivalent whiteness of Jewish identity exceeds the black/white racial dichotomy and therefore functions as a type of ethnic queering that points to the multiplicity of whiteness, and concomitantly identity itself (24-25).

⁹⁸ The black character “Golliwog”—inspired by a minstrel doll—initially appeared in Florence Kate Upton’s children’s book, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwog* (1895). Enid Blyton included offensive black characters called “Golliwogs” in her mid-twentieth century “Noddy” children’s books. To avoid additional controversy, Blyton’s granddaughter, Sophie Smallwood, omitted the Golliwog’s from the new “Noddy” story (*Noddy and the Farmland Muddle*, 2009) that she authored in celebration of the character’s 60th birthday. The term “golliwog” and derivatives “golli” and “wog” are used as racial slurs in the U.K.

⁹⁹ Birdie recalls in this chapter her grandmother giving Cole the Golliwog doll for Christmas while she received a “dreary” Enid Blyton “Noddy” book (97). While Deck views Cole’s attachment to the doll as “hysterically funny” and “Golliwog’s revenge,” Sandy is furious with her mother’s gift of “a racist tool, a parody, a white supremacist depiction of African people” (98).

¹⁰⁰ *Caucasia* opens with Birdie’s assertion that “Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was still too small for mirrors, I saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence... That face was me and I was that face and that was how the story went” (5). However, certain slippages occur in her narration to indicate the ambiguity of Birdie’s identity formation. Specifically, Birdie’s recollection of her first mirror, her sister’s image, changes. Birdie states, for example, “[Cole] had my father’s *kinky hair* and *small, round nose*. Her eyes, however, were my mother’s—the color of sea glass, forever shifting between blue, green, and gray” (my emphasis 43). In noting her mother’s recollection of Deck as a student, however, Birdie notes “His face spoke of something other—his high

Carmen reflects Cole, Birdie believes that her own lack of visible blackness denies her reflection.

The uncanny image of the Golliwog as a racist construction subtly haunts the text of *Caucasia* and thereby serves as a narrative tool to interrogate black subjectivity. The girls' father drolly identifies Cole's embrace of the Golliwog doll that her maternal grandmother gives her as "Golliwog's revenge." For Birdie, however, Golliwog's payback is that she cannot construct herself in Carmen's image. And in this chapter Birdie is reminded of her introduction to the uncanny "Golli" with the stereotypical "perfect black" circular face and "half-moon strip of red felt...perpetually mocking smile" (98). This image marks the Freudian definition of the uncanny because it instills within Birdie a horror that is simultaneously known and unknown, familiar and foreign.¹⁰¹ Significantly, Birdie becomes familiar with "Golli" at the same time she becomes aware of that which renders her powerless to move forward: "In my memory, this is when things speed up. This is when something starts to dawn on me, begins to clarify, but before I can stop it, it's too late. Like a deer who pauses in the road to watch the oncoming traffic, *I froze as well*, to watch what was coming at me, what was coming at all of us" (107, emphasis added).

Birdie might initially embrace and seek blackness. Nevertheless, Birdie's frustration that stems from her compulsion to pass through various identities and her

cheekbones, his *large bony nose*, his deep-set eyes, and his thin lips against the brown of his skin...*His hair wasn't so woolly*, either. It was more like that of some of the Jews she had seen who had afros—black ringlets pleasantly curling into his scalp" (my emphasis 34).

¹⁰¹ Freud's definition of the uncanny as *unheimlich* is particularly indicative of how a haunting image like the Golliwog or Greta Hicks, as discussed later, operates in Senna's work. In Part I of "The Uncanny," Freud explains how the German term *heimlich* can mean "intimate," "familiar," or "of the house" as well as the opposite as in "concealed," "kept from sight," or "strange." Freud therefore argues that the term *heimlich* coincides with its opposite *unheimlich*, thereby making the uncanny (*unheimlich*) a part of what is familiar or like home.

father's refusal to acknowledge the reality of her lived experience as a racial outsider suggests that Senna's revision of the tragic mulatto trope does not privilege blackness. The author's revision of the passing narrative, as noted by scholars like Harrison-Kahan, depicts racialized identity as performative and iterative. Yet, by conflating the uncanny (i.e., the Golliwog) and Birdie's feelings of powerlessness, Senna subtly depicts the repetitive performance of race as problematic. Despite a brief and early appearance of "Golliwog's Revenge," the uncanny nature of "Golli"—a racist remainder that challenges the narrative of progress—should challenge and disrupt the characters' performance of race throughout the narrative. In her second novel, Senna forces both the protagonist and the reader to confront the uncanny.

In her retelling of the mixed-race narrative Senna sustains the sense of the uncanny through the racial gothic to posit a (racialized, feminine) subjectivity that revises the tragic mulatto trope. Unlike earlier versions of the tragic mulatto or passing narratives in which a mixed-race character's reconciliation of an ascribed stigma of "blackness" determines subjectivity, Senna's narratives involve the negotiation of stable and fluid definitions of identity. In *Symptomatic*, Senna complicates this negotiation by removing the black-white binary established in *Caucasia*. Birdie and Cole, the darker sister whom Birdie seeks, become the unnamed protagonist and Greta, an equally racially ambiguous "double" that the protagonist is compelled both to find and escape. In effect, the relationship between the protagonist and Greta mirrors Ivers' artistic transformation of "ghoulish" and unflattering snapshots of people caught in ordinary acts. In these snapshots, the

subjects are always observed by Ivers' "Menchu,"¹⁰² a "half monkey, half poodle" creature that Ivers scribbles "at the edge of each photo—grinning wickedly at the subject" (94).

The narrative reinforces Greta's position through textual signs—offering repeated images of mirrors and mirrored pagination in addition to introducing the reader to the mixed-race Greta between the protagonist's white and black suitors. Moreover, Greta, who was raised on various global U.S. military installations as the daughter of "a German woman and a black GI" (47) resembles the "hard to place" (15) image that the protagonist draws in the mirror just after the charades incident with Andrew and his friends. This resemblance becomes clear as the protagonist learns of Greta's background and tells the reader

As she spoke, I laughed inwardly at the coincidence. It was funny. I hadn't noticed it before, but now that she'd said it, I could see it—what we had in common. In fact, we bore a slight resemblance to each other. Nothing obvious, but yes, we could have been related. We had the same straight brown hair and olive skin, and the same vague look about our features. (48)

Greta therefore becomes a reflection of the protagonist—a mirror image like her sketch that the protagonist recognizes on some level as a part of self.

¹⁰² Ivers' Menchu might be a nod to Rigoberta Menchu, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate in 1992, the year of the novel's setting. Menchu's autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, critiques racism and poverty in Latin America. U.S. conservatives have pointed to inconsistencies in the text as way of undermining Menchu's class critique. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* defined Menchu's autobiography as "a cornerstone of the multicultural canon."

If we read Greta as a manifestation of the image in the mirror we can easily place her as the *unheimlich* or uncanny signifier in *Symptomatic*. The protagonist has been sketching this calming, but unknown figure since childhood. Conversely, Greta tells the protagonist that she drew comfort throughout childhood by imagining her (203). Like the Golliwog in *Caucasia*, Greta is a frightening figure that ultimately leads the protagonist to what is known and familiar. And by relying on the shorter form of the novella in the retelling of the narrative in *Symptomatic*, Senna heightens the importance of the connection between the uncanny and returns to historic definitions of race in contemporary constructs of the postrace aesthetic.

The plot of *Symptomatic* turns on the relationship between the protagonist and Greta. Moreover, the narrative decision to mark Greta as uncanny, both foreign and familiar, refuses easy separation between the protagonist and the tragic figure that Greta represents. The narrative opens, for example, with the protagonist admitting that she rashly decided to move in with Andrew because she felt “a loneliness so complete it made my teeth hurt. A loneliness like grief, as if I were missing somebody who had died and would never come back” (3). We might, in fact, view this refusal of separation between the protagonist and Greta as a potential treatment for the protagonist whose primary intent is to narrate the symptoms of an ailment that she is powerless to cure. The protagonist notes that, in addition to escaping loneliness, her desire to live with Andrew involved avoiding illness and decay:

the place I’d been living had become unbearable: a mold-infested women’s boardinghouse in the mid-Thirties, where I’d fought chronic athlete’s foot and mild bronchitis....My room smelled vaguely of egg-

salad sandwiches, and each night I lay awake listening to the sounds of communal living: coughs, vomiting from the resident bulimic, flushing toilets, sobbing from the girl next door, whom I wasn't sure I'd ever laid eyes on. (2-3)

The protagonist's living conditions sicken her. But, living with Andrew, of course, does not offer relief.

The protagonist can reorient herself, but she will not escape disease. While living with Andrew, she still suffers from insomnia (15). After the charades incident with Andrew's friends, the protagonist continues to encounter the grotesque as she goes to work: "All along the way, out of the corner of my eye I saw things that made me twitch and gasp. A wet, pink fetus curled in the gutter, which was really just a raw chicken wing. A severed finger lying between two trash cans, which upon closer inspection was really a steak fry with ketchup on the tip. A puddle of colorful vomit that was just that" (19). She describes the apartment that she sublets from Vera Cross (who masquerades as Greta Hicks) as "a blunt space meant to serve single lonely desires," (39). But, the protagonist is "overwhelmed" (39, 51) by a scent resembling "curdled perfume" (39) so overpowering "it had outlasted the [former occupant] herself" (51).

Attempts at relief serve to further disturb her senses—opening a window only brings in additional odors (i.e., marinated chicken and marijuana) and making tea only brings attention to the "scratching" and "squeaking" of a mouse caught in a glue trap behind the stove (51). Later, at Happy Hour with Greta, the protagonist is unable to eat a chicken wing because she associates it with the vermin caught in the glue trap

that she is afraid to remove from the kitchen (70). The decay and dreadfulness of existence permeates the protagonist's experience and she is powerless to escape it.

The disgust experienced by the protagonist contributes to her paralysis, thereby further indicating the narrative's disruption of the narrative of progress. After her first night suffering the odors of Vera's apartment, for example, the protagonist awakens temporarily "paralyzed" and "unable to move" (47). On her second night, she narrates her second dream that again indicates feelings of powerlessness:

In the dream Vera had returned home from her travels to find me asleep in her bed. She crawled in beside me. A big-boned white girl with blind, baby eyes and a scratchy Janis Joplin voice, she held one hand loosely around my neck while the other circled my areola. She whispered that she was going to kill me, but first she had to make me come. I wanted to stop her, but I was paralyzed. Leaden. (55)

The combined homoeroticism and violence caused by Vera in the protagonist's dream indicate that the protagonist connects a loss of control over her body to the end of her existence.

This dream of involuntary arousal in which the protagonist lacks bodily authority echoes her first night in Vera's apartment. While bathing to calm herself from the ranting of a woman on the street that penetrated the walls, she narrates

I took note of the features like a doctor examining a patient for the first time: broad shoulders, narrow hips, teardrop breasts that didn't quite match. One breast was small, prepubescent, with a pale nipple, the other slightly fuller, with a deeper mauve nipple. Like they belonged

to two different women. . . . I felt a surge of pity for this body—as if it were something separate from myself rather than something I lived inside. (45)

Greta/Vera therefore becomes a “double” that the protagonist must attempt to reconcile. Greta, as noted above, is a mirror image of the protagonist; and, Greta/Vera becomes an entity that threatens the protagonist’s sense of a separate self. The narrative emphasizes the unnamed protagonist’s struggle to distinguish herself from Greta in her third dream in which she is watching a diminishing shoreline from the deck of a ship¹⁰³ as her ears are assaulted by a woman whispering a joke and children singing “John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt.”¹⁰⁴ Echoing the travel motif found in *Caucasia*, the disappearing shore paired with the assailing presence of the woman and children indicate another unsuccessful attempt by the unnamed protagonist to flee one identity to preserve another.

In depicting the unnamed protagonist as suffering from bouts of disgust and paralysis, Senna gestures toward Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection and the

¹⁰³ As noted above, Senna connects the image of travel and a loss of a form of identity in both *Caucasia* and *Symptomatic*. *Caucasia* opens with a recollection from Birdie that echoes the experience of the Middle Passage: “I disappeared into America, the easiest place to get lost. Dropped off, without a name, without a record. With only the body I traveled in. And a memory of something lost” (1).

¹⁰⁴ This children’s song has a few variations, however, the following lyrics are taken from the National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services’ web site: <http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/lyrics/john.htm>

John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt
His name is my name, too!
Whenever we go out,
The people always shout
There goes John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt!
Da da da da da da da

(Repeat verse again but not as loud,
and then shout the “There goes John...” line)

formation of subjectivity. The repulsion the protagonist experiences from food and odors signify the “unclean” and “improper” threats to the body that Kristeva argues one abjects or expels to constitute a separate sense of self (2-3). In the narrative of *Symptomatic*, the protagonist’s focus on decay, mold, rotting food, and vermin suggests a compulsion to separate self from other, to deny the transgression of identity signified by the function of the uncomfortable familiarity of Greta, including the intimate fantasy and dream encounters with Greta as Vera, the whispering woman, and the singing children who remind her of the identity that she shares with Greta/Vera. The protagonist therefore desires to identify herself as separate from Greta.

Reconstructing the Narrative: Revisiting the Madwoman in the Attic

The unnamed protagonist’s process of abjection and attempt to narrate a separate self involves her identification with and expulsion of her twice named double. I note that Senna fashions this assertion of subjectivity through the negotiation of a monstrous mirror image as a form of narration that precipitates the protagonist’s move from journalist to fiction writer. Thus, Senna’s depiction of an author’s fearful encounter of an unstable mirror image echoes Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s theory of the “madwoman in the attic” trope, modeled after the white Jamaican Creole Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the madwoman trope connects Western nineteenth-century women writers (e.g., Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, and Mary Shelley) and their twentieth-century “descendants” (e.g., Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, and Sylvia Plath) (78).

Senna's protagonist confronts Greta/Vera—the “hybrid monstrosit[y]” (S 202) in the mirror. Her attempt to achieve subjectivity therefore involves facing “the monster that she fears she really is rather than the angel she has pretended to be...[a] figure [that] arises like a bad dream, bloody, envious, enraged, as if the very process of writing had itself liberated a madwoman, a crazy and angry woman, from a silence in which neither she nor her author can continue to acquiesce” (Gilbert and Gubar 77). In Senna's narrative, Greta/Vera—and all that she symbolizes—exists in tandem with the protagonist. The protagonist's inability to escape her double demonstrates how we might view her story as a return to, rather than a revision of, the tragic mulatto narrative.

By presenting Greta, and therefore the protagonist, as both anachronistic tragic mulatto and madwoman in the attic, Senna's revision of *Caucasia* reflects a conflation of racial and gender discourse that undermines African American teleology. I see similar confluences in the other texts in this study (i.e., Trey Ellis's *Platitudes*, Percival Everett's *Erasure*, and Andrea Lee's *Interesting Women*). Additionally, I note that *Symptomatic* refuses the Western and its “not-yet-human Other” (Spivak 247) binary that critics like Gayatri Spivak convincingly argue advances the discourse of imperialism by constructing Western feminine subjectivity (i.e., Bronte's *Jane Eyre*) through objectifying the figure of the colony (i.e., Bertha Mason). While the unnamed protagonist of *Symptomatic* moves from a white lover to a black one, Greta operates not as her “dark double” but rather as the uncanny reflection of an already “ghoulish” and hybridic figure. Like Ivers' Menchu, the figure drawn into the liminal space of his photographs “who [also] doesn't like

labels” (102), Greta shadows the protagonist, “grinning wickedly” back at her as she attempts to establish her subjectivity.

Senna’s conflation of the madwoman and mulatto tropes refuses easy separation of social identity forms within the text. As demonstrated by the protagonist’s and Greta’s relationship, race and gender are inextricably intertwined. This conflation also includes class. The narrative reinforces this synthesis of social identity through consistent occurrences of mistaken identity in the text. While subletting the apartment located in the “transitional” neighborhood undergoing “subtle hints of gentrification” (37) the protagonist, for example, frequently attempts to persuade callers—primarily sexual liaisons and bill collectors—that she is not the “white” Vera Cross (whom the protagonist believes is the biracial “Greta Hicks”). The protagonist in particular has trouble defining and separating identities throughout the narrative.¹⁰⁵

Despite her privileged status as a Stanford graduate and fellowship recipient whose parents and closest friend are not available because of sustained travel abroad throughout the narrative, the protagonist does not mind the initial elision of boundaries between herself and Vera. Her embrace of this erasure is most apparent in her remembrance of Andrew’s “Old Money[ed]” dislike of “bourgeois pretensions” (69). In fantasizing about a cross-country trip, Andrew imagines rejecting the train in lieu of a romanticized journey with the working class on Greyhound (69). But, the protagonist tells the reader that she likes Amtrak particularly because of the train’s “womblike,” and therefore comforting, environment where “you saw poor people

¹⁰⁵ This difficulty is evidenced, for instance, by the protagonist’s inability to determine if a wheelchair-bound panhandler with an enigmatic grin is “a runaway teenaged boy” or “an old woman” (61-62).

riding side by side with rich flying-phobics” (69) and lines broke down” (70). This break down of boundaries is reinforced through the protagonist’s narration of Vera’s financial problems. In detailing one of Vera’s collection calls, the protagonist collapses self and Vera as she tells the reader, “[a bill collector] had called yesterday before dawn and demanded *I pay the institution to which I owed money*. I could not make out the institution’s name....He had not believed me when I told him I was not Vera Cross” (74, emphasis added).

Senna’s *Symptomatic* challenges the narrative of progress specifically by refusing to separate the protagonist from her double. Unlike Bertha Mason, Greta Hicks/Vera Cross continues to disrupt the narrative after she falls to her death, suggesting that, like Birdie, Senna’s unnamed protagonist is powerless to stop the constant play of interchanging identity for more than a moment. This protagonist is not indicative of the “new people” or postrace figures constructed by the media and political discourse. At the end of the novel the protagonist returns to the west coast where, as a student of fiction writing, she values “los[ing] control” and learns ““to inhabit the space between truth and fiction....[to]... keep climbing into that abyss where nothing is certain. And [where]...only the logic of the lie...matters”” (211). In a concluding address to both the reader and Greta, the protagonist states

I was at home, watching the six-o’clock news and sipping a Corona, and I thought I heard her voice, wheezing and ragged, right outside my door. I was so certain, I muted the television’s volume, closed my eyes, and just listened, my heart beating overtime. (I really thought in

that instant you had found me.) But when I got up the courage to open the door, there was, of course, nobody there. (213)

The narrative allows the protagonist no closure, no assurance of a subjectivity that does not involve the tragic figure caught endlessly in historic definition of race, gender, and class. In this way, *Symptomatic*, disrupts the narrative of progress and affirms the protagonist's dream of the loss of the baby. In other words, Senna's narrative refuses to participate in the "reproductive futurism" that Edelman argues serves only to reproduce hegemonic forms of identity.

Senna's narrative therefore echoes the other texts of my study in its insistence that race is defined through an iterative narrative of progress—a performance compelled by the heteronormative power structure. Moments of the protagonists' paralysis disrupt the narrative and thereby call attention to the performance. As do moments of the protagonists' return to historic definitions of race. These moments conflate various social forms of identity and open space for the "radical critique" of the multiculturalism that separates economic and class politics from identity and cultural politics, like race, gender, and sexual orientation. This common thread shows how the NBA operates as a postrace expression that never really gets beyond blackness.

The next chapter focuses on Andrea Lee's fiction to explore NBA postrace expression from a transnational perspective. Lee's conflation of race, gender, class, and nationality echoes Senna because her protagonists also struggle with simultaneous feelings of familiarity and foreignness, or the uncanny. Lee's narratives align black femininity with the state. However, I identify a connection between Lee's

post-Civil Rights middle-class protagonists' and figures of liminal status. This connection illustrates the NBA postrace moment of return to historic definitions of race, gender, and nation.

Chapter Four: Brave New World: The New Black Aesthetic in the Fiction of Andrea Lee

O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in't!
(Miranda, *The Tempest*, V, i)

There are great similarities between being a Black [sic] woman in America and an American woman in Italy....As one, I feel foreign at home; as the other, I feel foreign abroad. Andrea Lee, (qtd. in *Essence*)

[O]ne might raise “black” identity to the level of the universal by paying strict attention, as Du Bois himself does, to the fact that blackness is never, as those nine members of the [Supreme] Court undoubtedly imagined [in deciding *Plessy v. Ferguson*], a final answer but always a site of contradiction, always in a sense, a question. By doing so, one might resist the white-supremacist efforts of the American state by precisely not refusing the newly formed racial identity recently fashioned for “black” citizens but instead foregrounding the theoretical and social instability that by necessity must be met by the sheer weight of human resolve in order to resist the cynicism inherent in the state’s racialist claims. “Who wills to be a Negro? I do!” Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black*

When asked what it is like to be an African American writer in Italy, expatriate author Andrea Lee invokes the theme of alienation that is common to the NBA writers considered in my study. During an interview for her latest novel, *Lost Hearts in Italy* (2006), Lee insists, “In America, especially if you are a person of color, you feel apart from an ideal ‘American.’ You feel a bit foreign. So it felt quite familiar when I came to Italy. Being African-American made me feel more comfortable as an expatriate. I knew what feeling apart meant. Being a writer also means feeling apart, because you have to take a step back to look. So it all ties

together: being African-American, being an expatriate, and being an artist” (qtd. in Vercellino). Lee explores how these states of being come together in relation to feelings of alienation in *Lost Hearts*.

Lee’s latest novel works as an ideal focal point because, like the other works in this study, this novel depicts identity formation from the perspective of a protagonist who is a writer¹⁰⁶—black American travel writer, Mira Ward, who, like Lee, lives primarily in Italy. Like Danzy Senna’s work, Lee’s body of work contains recurring forms and themes that are meant to challenge the reader’s understanding of blackness; and, an examination of *Lost Hearts* repeats the same themes found in Lee’s earlier fiction. Juxtaposing vignettes from the mid-eighties and the middle part of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Lee’s novel narrates the tale ostensibly of love lost because of infidelity. Mira, the descendant of a line of black educators and attorneys from Philadelphia and D.C., meets Nick Reiver,¹⁰⁷ the scion of a white “old New England family tree,” at Harvard. They marry, in spite of their families’ concerns about their racial differences. Four years into the marriage, Nick’s job in international finance moves the couple to Rome. On her flight to join Nick, Mira meets Zenin, an older Italian who has built and runs a multi-billion dollar toy company. Zenin’s eventual seduction of Mira leaves Mira and Nick divorced and

¹⁰⁶ Madhu Dubey notes in *Signs and Cities* that postmodern African American fiction frequently feature themes of reading, writing, and books-within-the-book (2). The primary texts examined in this study feature protagonists who are writers.

¹⁰⁷ Lee implicitly gestures to American modernists Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner with Nick’s name. The character Nick Adams, who like Lee’s Nick is an American recovering from psychic trauma, appears in several of Hemingway’s short stories. Wounded while serving in Italy during WWI and struggling with difficult familial relationships, several of the Nick Adams stories echo the experience of Lee’s Nick. Nick’s surname recalls Faulkner’s *bildungsroman* *The Reivers*, in which the protagonist loses his innocence while on an adventure with his provisional family of “reivers,” or petty thieves, who must learn to negotiate malevolent forces.

married to others; yet, they remain connected by their daughter and through the triangle that Zenin completes.

Lee's twenty-first century fiction, both the novel and the collection of short stories, repeat themes found twenty years earlier in her first novel, *Sarah Phillips*—the maturation process of middle-class women whose identities are in flux and who frequently vacillate between leaving and returning home. In *Sarah Phillips*, the title character narrates the events of her early life—growing up in a black middle-class neighborhood, attending the church where her civil rights activist father is pastor, integrating summer camps and an all-girls prep school, graduating from Harvard, and travelling in Europe. As Sarah attempts to escape what she perceives as the confining environment of the black bourgeoisie she finds herself in France, haunted by constructs of her black American identity and the figures of the old churchwomen who would root her to her past. *Interesting Women* depicts American middle-class women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds who struggle with feelings of isolation and foreignness while abroad and even at home. These fictional depictions, particularly Sarah and Mira, have much in common with the author—Andrea Lee, whose father was a pastor at Philadelphia's First African Baptist Church, travelled abroad with her first husband after they graduated from Harvard and now lives in Italy with her second husband and family. Further, all of these depictions echo Lee's feelings of foreignness whether living as a black person in America or as an American in Italy. We must therefore remember that figures like Mira and Sarah and the "interesting women" who inhabit Lee's short story collection are the products of

integration—they negotiate and/or return from interracial relationships and integrated social settings.

Lee is best known for her depictions of ivy-league, middle-class products of integration—usually black women who navigate a world both within and outside U.S. borders after the Civil Rights¹⁰⁸ and Black Arts Movements.¹⁰⁹ While transnational and middle-class depictions certainly appear in the African American literary canon, Lee's protagonists are controversial because they seem to refuse any sense of belonging to traditional black communities. In other words, because Lee's protagonists distance themselves from most readers' understanding of blackness, the middle-class figures in Lee's work appear to violate the protocols that drive African American literature.

Black American writers have traditionally featured migration stories that involve such international border crossings and global travel. Martin Delany, for example, depicts his title character in *Blake* (1861-62), the son of a wealthy black landowner in Cuba, as escaping U.S. slavery and traveling the South to instill within the black population the desire for insurrection before returning home to Cuba where he plots to establish a multiethnic black nation. In *Of One Blood* (1902-03), Pauline Hopkins features a Harvard medical student who travels between the U.S. and Africa to discover his family lines and royal birthright before settling as King of the African underground city of Telassar. James Weldon Johnson moves his protagonist in *The*

¹⁰⁸ For the purpose of examining Andrea Lee's work, I define the Civil Rights Movement as the era in the U.S. when a series of judicial decisions (e.g., the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act) made Jim Crow discrimination in public spheres illegal.

¹⁰⁹ The Black Arts Movement (from roughly 1966-1975) brought black culture and art to mainstream U.S. universities and media.

Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) from Connecticut, to the U.S. South, to New York City, and then to Europe until the protagonist's return to the South (and more significantly witness of a lynching) prompts him to give up his black "birthright" and pass for white in New York City. In *Quicksand* (1928), Nella Larsen charts the migration of protagonist Helga Crane from a southern black boarding school, to white relatives in Chicago, to a black community in Harlem, to white relatives in Copenhagen, and back to New York before she settles in misery in the Deep South. Not all depictions of international travel, however, are limited to middle-class protagonists in African American literature. Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1929), for example, presents a set of international black drifters in Marseille. Moreover, Langston Hughes's "Home" in *The Ways of White Folks* (1933) somewhat revises Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* through its depiction of a black musician, the son of a single mother, who gains some wealth performing in Europe and is lynched when he returns home to Missouri.

So Lee's work comes out of a long tradition of African American "travel." On the other hand, Lee's work differs from these examples in its focus on a middle-class black woman who enjoys the privilege of a legally desegregated U.S. education. The love story found in *Lost Hearts* develops from this privilege, though this point seems to confound reviewers. The tone of Marjorie Valbrun's review of *Lost Hearts in Italy* for *Black Issues* reflects my point: "Poor Mira. Poor impulsive, bored, selfish girl. She marries her college sweetheart and moves to Rome with him to start their new life together. Then she throws it all away. That, in a nutshell, is the premise of Lee's new novel, which moves back and forth between the mid-1980s and the present

day, *laying out in vivid, detailed prose* the unraveling of a marriage that seems made in heaven but eventually devolves into an emotional hell” (emphasis mine).

The plot of *Lost Hearts* does depict the unraveling of a marriage, but reviewers seem to miss how much this marriage resembles the project of U.S. integration. Referring to the narrative as a “puzzle” Barbara Hoffert¹¹⁰ for *Library Journal* assets, “[t]he portraits are incisive, the cultural insights fresh, and the *deliquescent prose a pleasure to read*, yet the novel can seem static” (emphasis mine). Hoffert feels the plot simply does not explain why Mira leaves Nick. Erica Wagner’s assessment for the *New York Times Book Review* is even more revealing of the bias of Lee’s flaunting of middle-class privilege:

I DID not go to Harvard. You don't care, I hear you cry? Fine. Neither did I, until I started to read Andrea Lee's fiction and came to feel oddly excluded because we did not share the same fond memories of our dear old alma mater, because I never slept in a bed at Adams House or felt the presence of my own ghost in the Yard. Another cry from you: unfair! Fiction's job is to bring detail to bear upon story and to make it at once specific and universal. This is the great trick of the best narrative fiction, its miraculous sleight of hand. How is it, then, that some evocations of the particular simply feel locked away in the realm of a private conversation between the author and herself?

¹¹⁰ Hoffert oddly ignores Mira’s class by identifying her simply as “African American” in comparison to Nick, whom she reduces to a location by describing him as “old-line (if not rich) New England.”

Wagner does not clarify why, from her position, Lee's work fails to be "at once specific and universal";¹¹¹ yet her review reiterates the views of literary critics who note the distance between the reader and a character like Lee's Sarah Phillips. Again, Wagner echoes some literary critics' frustration with Lee's focus on class privilege: "Reading Lee's collection of stories, 'Interesting Women,' [*sic*] I found myself in Harvard Yard again; with more American black women married to European men; observing yet more glamorous sexual adventures. I began to feel tired." Wagner's fatigue is telling: not all of the protagonists in Lee's *Interesting Women* (2002) are "American black women married to European men." But Lee's focus on the particular (i.e., Harvard and interracial marriages) explores the ramifications of the achievement of integration in the U.S.—Harvard, for example, facilitates Mira and Nick's otherwise unlikely meeting and marriage. The reviewers are so focused on the love story that they miss the point that this book is about the historic representation of race. The love story is important, but it is informed by the race narrative.

In the "Foreword" to the 1993 edition of Lee's first novel, *Sarah Phillips*, Valerie Smith notes the lack of published "critical and analytical studies" of both *Sarah Phillips* and *Russian Journal*.¹¹² Smith notes that despite the complexity of Lee's characters and the subtleties of her prose, neither of her first two books maintains widespread popularity in the U.S.; and, Smith's assessment holds true for

¹¹¹ Many black writers of the mid-twentieth century aspired to achieve the artistic universal as mentioned by the *Times* reviewer. For the writers like J. Saunders Redding, who participated in 1950 Special Issue of *Phylon*, the "universal" was achieved when the reader connected to a particular (like race or ethnic experience) as his or her own. I read this construct of universality as the origins of postrace aesthetics. See the introductory chapter to this study.

¹¹² Shaun Myers' work on African American travel narratives and transnational experience includes a compelling chapter on Lee's *Russian Journal*. See "Worlds beyond Brown: Black Transnational Identity and Self-Narration in the Era of Integration," Dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2011.

Lee's later work. I refer back to Smith here because in the last eighteen years, the few extant studies on Lee's *Sarah Phillips* echo the three foundational readings¹¹³ that Smith cites in her "Foreword." Additionally, Smith's observations about a lack of scholarship holds true for Lee's later work: aside from book reviews, published studies of Lee's work typically focus on *Sarah Phillips*. Whether examining the text as modern or postmodern, most critical readings lead back in varying degrees to questions about the title character's ability to recognize and respond to racism and sexism and understand her connection to a black community. Lee's protagonist, an incarnation that Lee repeats in later work, defies reader expectations of a black female protagonist in African American literature. Moreover, in each of her texts Lee repeats the narrative that appears to confound her readers; and reader response,¹¹⁴ like reviews, suggests that Lee's depiction of class privilege can foster a lack of sympathy that distances the reader from the protagonist and the narrative. Given that in *Lost Hearts* Miranda and Nick's marriage is racialized by Lee's decision to make it interracial, Lee does not intend to depict Mira simply as the stereotype of a housewife who suffers from ennui. While some critics cannot understand Miranda's motivation to leave Nick, the text makes clear that Miranda's decision to stray suggests her dissatisfaction with Nick—and the idea of home that he represents—that she tries and fails to escape with Zenin. Miranda cannot root herself to a stable construct of home

¹¹³ These critical studies are Mary Helen Washington's "Young, Gifted and Black," *Women's Review of Books* 2 (March 1985); Sherley Anne Williams' "Roots of Privilege: New Black Fiction," *Ms.* 13 (June 1985); and Valerie Smith's "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other,'" *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989). Kaylen Tucker's "Integration and White Flight in Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips*" is a notable exception that charts Lee's documentation of changing racial categories in her first novel.

¹¹⁴ Smith discusses the negative reactions to *Sarah Phillips* expressed by many of her students who echo some of Lee's reviewers.

or even identity. Instead, the narrative locks her into repetitive role play that collapses race, gender, class, and nationality to show that Mira (like Lee's other protagonists) cannot escape history. This collapse, however, also shows that history, like identity, is produced by perspective and marked by instability.

Voicing Sycorax and Decentering the Master Text: Restaging *The Tempest*

At its heart, and despite most reviewers' focus on romance and infidelity, *Lost Hearts* is a narrative of exile and return, subjugation and freedom, vengeance and forgiveness, and the gravitas gained in journeying between these states of being. In this manner, Lee's novel is a revision of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—a comedy and revenge play that charts the machinations of the exiled sorcerer and Duke of Milan, Prospero, who occupies an island undiscovered by the West as he exploits his perceived resources—his magic, his daughter Miranda, and the island inhabitants Ariel, a spirit, and Caliban, son of the witch Sycorax who initially ruled the island after being banished from Algiers—to return home and restore his power. Lee's revision creates an effective device to trouble constructs of identity and distinctions between the archetypal “Mirandas,” “Caliban /Ariels,” and “Prosperos” established by Shakespeare's comedy, as seen in the narrative's most obvious allusion to *The Tempest*—the name of the black female protagonist.¹¹⁵

In addition to learning in the first chapter of *Lost Hearts* that “Mira” is short for “Miranda” (13), the reader discovers in a later chapter that Mira's father, a high school English teacher, names her “Miranda” because “*The Tempest* was his favorite

¹¹⁵ Other oblique references appear in Lee's work. Miranda's son, for example, is named “Stephano”—the name of one of the minor members of the shipwrecked party in *The Tempest*. “The Birthday Present” in *Interesting Women* features a protagonist named Ariel who sees herself as “competent and faithful” (5) as “Shakespeare's Ariel” (5).

part of the AP curriculum” (56). The reader, in fact, learns the significance of Mira’s name in a chapter told from Nick’s perspective as Nick—the man who ultimately brings Mira to the “Old World” of Rome—recalls how he and Mira initially bonded outside a poetry class at Harvard. When Nick tells Mira that he likes her name, she explains that despite her father’s affinity for the play she “always thought Miranda was kind of a sap. Fell for the first guy she saw after Caliban” (56). And Nick responds, “If you think of it, Shakespeare’s Miranda was just an overprotected only child” (56). Because of the privilege afforded by desegregation in the U.S., Lee’s Miranda occupies a class position that is similar to that of the Miranda found in Shakespeare’s play. Mira, however, is neither overprotected nor an only child; and, as Nick’s betrayer, she fails to resemble Prospero’s docile pawn. Determining how Lee positions Mira in relation to Shakespeare’s Miranda gives us a better understanding of how race and other forms of social identity operate in Lee’s work.

Mira reminds us that in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare’s Miranda, upon first seeing the countrymen her exiled father, Prospero, has brought to the island on which they live, utters her wonder at the “goodly creatures” and “beauteous mankind” she discovers in her “brave new world.” At this moment in Shakespeare’s play, Miranda’s position as both an insider and an outsider becomes clear—as Prospero remarks, this world is only new to his daughter who has lived most of her life in exile. To Miranda, her father’s countrymen of the Old World of Milan and Naples are the New World. Despite her status as Prospero’s daughter and new fiancée of the crown prince of Naples, Miranda represents an intersectional figure like her namesake, Mira Ward in Lee’s novel.

The Tempest is a critical tool for examining *Lost Hearts*. This revision places Lee's African American narrative in conversation with postcolonial and performance discourse. But, Lee's nod to the discourse that surrounds Shakespeare's last play takes an unusual turn because *Lost Hearts* explores the black American female's connection to hegemony as well as to other people of color in a post-9/11 world. By connecting her protagonists to power in addition to subjugation, Lee allows space to define the African American literary tradition in ways that acknowledge and then move beyond social protest. Lee's work therefore depicts millennial black subjectivity as grappling with defining self outside the narrative of achieving social justice. It is important to note here that this move away from protest is not a move away from political discourse. Lee, like her predecessors, refuses to separate ideology and form.¹¹⁶ The politics of Lee's work therefore involves depicting Paul Gilroy's notion of "seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation" in addition to defining identity in relation to roots (19).

In Lee's revision of *The Tempest*, race, gender, class, and nationality operate as processes of "movement and mediation" that repeat, with a difference, the cultural exchange between Africa, Europe, and the Americas that results in the circum-

¹¹⁶ Toni Morrison, for example, states "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels... isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say yes, the work must be political... The problem comes when you find harangue passing off as art. It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (344-45). See Morrison's "Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers 1950-1980*, Ed. Mari Evans, p. 339-45.

Atlantic.¹¹⁷ This repetition of the circum-Atlantic allows for postrace narrative moments of return or “temporal drags”¹¹⁸ in which Lee’s protagonists act as transatlantic surrogates, the latest in a genealogical line, who cannot escape a collective memory. These postrace moments undo the fixedness of the middle-class figure in Lee’s work—the idea that middle-class status can be easily maintained is undone by the unfolding of the narrative. Because of these repetitions of the past, Lee’s protagonists lack stability and they appear powerless to overcome this lack. Moreover, these repetitions of the past violate racial protocols by disrupting the narrative of racial progress in African American literature. But, according to Joseph Roach this violation points to the very definition of genealogy:

Genealogies of performance take from Foucault’s seminal essay in *Hommage a Jean Hyppolite* (1971) the assurance that discontinuities rudely interrupt the succession of surrogates, who are themselves the scions of a dubious bloodline that leads the genealogist back to the moment of apparent origin in order to discover what is and is not ‘behind things’: ‘not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms...What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity’ (Foucault, ‘Nietzsche,

¹¹⁷ I rely here on Joseph Roach’s concept of the circum-Atlantic as the result of a cultural exchange between the various peoples that inhabit the Atlantic rim. See *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*.

¹¹⁸ In situating post-identity queer studies, Elizabeth Freeman defines “temporal drag” as an identity signification that gestures to earlier incarnations of queer identity (e.g., lesbian feminist). See “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” *New Literary History* 31.4 (Autumn 2000).

Genealogy, History,' 142). The practical experience of applying this principal suggests that it is far more hortatory than nihilistic" (25).

As the latest iteration of black femininity caught in the repetition of the past, Lee's protagonists illustrate the instability of identity.

In recent years, *The Tempest* has been read, staged, and revised in light of twentieth century narratives about human development and the psyche¹¹⁹ as well as narratives of dominance, subservience, and colonialism, to include studies on race, gender, and national identity. Twentieth century stage productions of the play frequently cast actors of color in the roles of Caliban and Ariel. Further, postcolonial readings, like Aime Cesaire's 1969 adaptation *A Tempest*, indict Western imperialism by focusing on the effects of colonial rule and the colonial subject's desire for freedom. Identifying with Caliban has become a prominent theme in postcolonial, Caribbean, and African American discourse. Additionally, several feminist readings critique the play's assertion of patriarchy and examine the power that Prospero exerts over his daughter Miranda as an asset that allows the extension of his power through a marriage contract. Miranda, in fact, is the only female character that appears onstage in the play—Prospero's wife and Sycorax are referred to but never appear in the drama. Most contemporary productions cast women in the role of Ariel to increase the presence of women on stage.¹²⁰ In her reading of *The Tempest* as a colonial metaphor, Abena Busia argues in "Silencing Sycorax" that colonial fiction

¹¹⁹ In applying the grand narratives of the twentieth century to the play, Garber suggests, for example, that a Freudian reading of the play would make Prospero a model for the human mind and Ariel (as the superego) and Caliban (as the id) manifestations of his unconscious (16).

¹²⁰ Actor Gina Daniels, of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, states, "In strictly casting terms, most Ariels are women. And this is truly just to add female roles. No theatre these days wants to do a production with only one woman and twelve men. If a woman doesn't play Ariel, the only woman you would have in the production would be Miranda" (email, 3 Mar 2011).

aligns itself with hegemony precisely by constructing African women as unvoiced and therefore powerless. Director Julie Taymor's 2010 cinematic version appears to gesture to feminist critiques of the play with its casting of Helen Mirren as "Prospera," a female version of Prospero. Within the African American literary tradition Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) depicts the title character, whose given name is "Miranda," as a black female "Prospero" or the matriarch of the island of Willow Springs. Naylor's decision to place a black "Miranda" center stage, of course, undermines the hegemonic elements of the narrative by giving voice to the black female subject. Unlike Shakespeare's Prospero who controls natural forces for his own gains, Naylor's *Mama Day* / *Miranda* works with nature to assist her family and community.¹²¹ Yet, while Lee also figuratively gives voice to Sycorax in *Lost Hearts in Italy* by presenting the reader with another black Miranda, she moves away from the kind of narrative interrogation of *The Tempest* that twentieth century readers have come to expect. If, like Naylor, Lee insists that her readers hear the voice of Sycorax through her descendent, she also demands that we question Mira's culpability within the hegemonic structure. In Lee's work Miranda represents the latest in a genealogical line, a repetition that echoes earlier constructs of black femininity with a difference that at times aligns black femininity with the state.

The theme of repetition provides the foundation of *Lost Hearts in Italy* as well as Lee's other narratives. Lee's work therefore echoes *The Tempest* that, according to critic Marjorie Garber

¹²¹ For a thoughtful discussion of how Naylor's *Mama Day* revises *The Tempest* and refers to others texts, see Gary Storhoff's "The Only Voice Is Your Own: Gloria Naylor's Revision of *The Tempest*." *African American Review* 29.1 (Spring 1995).

is a comedy that recuperates what could have been a tragedy. It belongs as well to the genre of the revenge play, a popular mode in the period—but one that in its more usual form ends with death, and repetition: the ghost returns, a past wrong is recalled and righted. In this case the repetition comes at the beginning, as the very engine of transformation (storm, wreck, loss, plot, discovery). Events of twelve years ago are retold, recalled, and revisited, as the magical storm wrought by Prospero brings to the island the very same people who were the cause of his usurpation and exile. So it should come as no surprise to find that the internal mechanism of the play—*repetition with a difference*—becomes, as well, the mechanism of its history, or histories (in the plural) in modern culture. (4-5 emphasis added).

In exploring the history of the play, Garber argues that *The Tempest* has become a drama of “competing narratives...intertwined with a certain view of history, and a certain view of man” (8). Lee constructs *Lost Hearts* in the same manner. Events of the novel’s present as well as twenty years ago are retold, recalled, and revisited as the narrative brings to the reader’s attention the players in the drama. While reviewers focus on Mira Ward as the protagonist, and therefore the particular experience of the unfaithful Harvard alumna, the narrative provides equal weight to the major players of the drama by providing Mira’s, Nick’s, and Zenin’s perspectives in alternating chapters primarily using free indirect discourse. In other words, because Lee’s works are projects of integration the narrative itself refuses to allow the reader to see *Lost Hearts in Italy* as just Mira’s story. The narrative divides each

chapter into three sections—a reconsideration and/or reconciliation post 9/11; a recollection of the mid-eighties; and, a first-person commentary from a minor player who—like the reader—observes the drama and therefore responds to either period as required by the narrative to provide insight. The reader therefore witnesses the betrayal, exile, manipulation, and redemption from competing narratives that, as depicted by Lee, deliberately question modern constructs of *The Tempest*.

Like *The Tempest*, *Lost Hearts* offers competing narratives of the displaced. Lee, in fact, constructs the brave new world that echoes what Miranda perceives in Shakespeare's comedy—Mira, Nick, and Zenin are characterized by their ambiguous connections to their environment and attraction to what they perceive as foreign—and each character uses his/her negotiation of an insider-outsider status to establish power. The narrative challenges reader expectation by associating Mira, like Nick and Zenin, with a hegemonic desire to invade and conquer new worlds—an association that the reader must reconcile with the narrative's depiction of Mira as intermittently powerless. From the beginning of the narrative, as the narrator shares Mira's apprehension about moving to Rome, we learn that having been groomed for the frontline of integration, "Mira Ward is good at going into new worlds, at being a foreigner. She is one of the generation of black children pushed out of the bourgeois ghetto of their parents to become pioneers in private schools and camps that before the seventies had never admitted a black or a Jew. She's used to the feeling of being inside, yet not, watching. It suits her inquisitive nature, though at times it can be heartbreaking" (13). Mira's sister, Faith, resentfully states that when they played as children "Mira was always a buccaneer or a treasure hunter or James Bond" (141).

Further, we find the trace of this character in Lee's earlier work—Sara Phillips integrates a private, all-girls school and discusses interracial clashes at summer camp. Like Sarah, who loses herself reading about the adventures of E. Nesbit's treasure-seeking Bastable children (*SP* 27-28),¹²² Mira is drawn to adventure and figures that seek adventure through border crossing. As suggested in *Sarah Phillips*, however, this desire for adventure comes at a price. Sarah states that on the Sunday afternoon when she defies church elder Aunt Bessie and refuses to be baptized she decides to escape through reading, noting that when reading she “fell away into a remote dimension” (28). But while reading Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* on this day Sarah states, “I felt a vague uneasiness floating in the back of my mind—a sense of having misplaced something, or being myself misplaced” (28). Black female protagonists in Lee's fiction desire adventure—a desire that distances them from family, home, constructs of blackness, and even a sense of self—in a way that positions these figures within Western constructs of hegemony and expansion of empire.

Positioned in the narrative as an explorer, Mira, like her earlier incarnation Sarah, constantly moves beyond the familiar. In describing Mira's marriage to Nick, the narrator tells us that “she enters yet another new country” (*LH* 13). Faith suggests that “Mira married a white boy and went off to Italy as one of her adventures and then

¹²²Sarah reads Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* in “New African,” the chapter in which Sarah refuses to secure a position within her community by being baptized in her father's church. The allusion to this children's story reinforces the idea of questioning the stability of identity. At the beginning of the story, the narrator invites the reader to discover his identity: “We are the Bastables. There are six of us besides Father. Our Mother is dead, and if you think we don't care because I don't tell you much about her you only show that you do not understand people at all. Dora is the eldest. Then Oswald--and then Dicky. Oswald won the Latin prize at his preparatory school--and Dicky is good at sums. Alice and Noel are twins: they are ten, and Horace Octavius is my youngest brother. It is one of us that tells this story—but I shall not tell you which: only at the very end perhaps I will. While the story is going on you may be trying to guess, only I bet you don't.”

got bored when she found out it was work like anything else” (141). The novelty of Nick wears off for Mira as they discover their shared American culture of television and “playground games” and a shared “boredom in families that, though of different races, shared the same blithe suburban hopes for their children” (159). Eventually, Nick “feels sometimes like the brother she never had” (13). This feeling of sameness—a homogeneity missed by reviewers who fail to understand why Mira would leave her husband—accounts for why Zenin attracts Mira’s attention away from Nick. Zenin has a “foreign smell” (123) and she realizes that she finds in her cheating with Zenin “something there made to measure for her. . . . Something Nick, with his open blue gaze, can’t see” (123). In fact, Zenin makes his decision to pursue Mira because “what makes her vulnerable is her greed to see and know everything at once” (34)—Mira wants to conquer Rome. But for Zenin, “the first in his family to achieve a university degree” (61), this vulnerability is overshadowed by Mira’s status as a married woman, a writer, a middle-class (rather than wealthy) American. According to the narrator, Mira in the role of “the little adventuress acquired a certain rank. While Zenin felt smaller and humbler” (36). Frequently noting that Mira’s clothes look “cheap” (131), Zenin buys her designer clothing as way of controlling her: “Mira’s savage ignorance—like a Wild West Indian, he jokes to himself—has annoyed him and made him feel vaguely powerless. Now, watching her fall under the spell of the red suit, he experiences the same satisfaction a trainer might feel who has managed to bridle a half-broken colt. Satisfaction mingled with slight pity” (139). During their affair, Zenin in fact feels “strong and excited by his power to snatch a woman [Mira] out of one dimension and place her into another. By the fact that,

though she tries to conceal it, she is amazed” (165). Zenin derives power from fostering and controlling Mira’s desire for difference. Mira’s compulsion to explore and defy boundaries, however, drives and defines her relationships with both Zenin and Nick.

Much of Zenin’s and Nick’s attraction to Mira involves her interracial look—a look that privileges Mira as an ideal candidate for pushing boundaries by desegregating public institutions in the U.S.¹²³ Zenin initially surveys Mira at the airport because he overhears flight attendants discussing a “colored girl, maybe Cuban or Brazilian or North African, traveling first class” (10). The narrator explains that Zenin actually sees “one of the mixed-race faces common on the streets of New York and Los Angeles and Miami. Faces of a mongrel beauty that are about to become fashionable in advertising” (10).¹²⁴ The narrator informs us that Nick—with “a mockery barely masking the bedazzlement of a New England boy enamoured of Asian and Cape Verdean beauties since prep school”—defines Mira and other women who reflect an amalgam of races as “off-color girls” (10)—the amalgam that Lee depicts in various forms in *Interesting Women*.

Miranda represents an intersectional figure that appears throughout Lee’s body of work. Lee further displaces this figure, however, in making Miranda’s

¹²³ Mary Helen Washington argues that civil rights leaders chose students for integration who fit a certain criteria of suitability. These criteria responded to the project of Southern moderate governors to invert the premise the *Brown v. Board* decision—segregation damaged the psyche of black children. In *The Ghosts of Jim Crow*, Anders Walker charts the efforts of southern moderate governors to argue in opposition to *Brown* that desegregation would psychologically damage white students because of exposure to alleged black pathology (i.e., a lack of intellect, hygiene, and morality supposedly evidenced by test scores, incidents of sexually transmitted disease, and marriage rates). Walker notes that civil rights’ leaders, like Martin Luther King, Jr., started to address black morality in response to the efforts of Southern moderate governors (41). According to Washington, students who countered stereotypes of black pathology were deemed ideal for integration.

¹²⁴ See the chapter on Danzy Senna in this study for a discussion of the popularity of mixed-race figures in the media starting in early 1990s.

perspective only one of the competing narratives found in *Lost Hearts*. In terms of appearance, Nick's fair-haired status seems to afford him a certain insider currency; and yet, the narrative emphasizes Nick's lack of connection to any location. The narrator tells us in the opening chapter that Nick "with his blue eyes and old New England family tree is less expert at being an outsider than [Mira] is. In fact—except in her family—he has never been an outsider at all, a fact that Mira in disgruntled moments sees as a failing in Nick, a basic lack in his education" (14). The narrator later notes, however, that "Nick is a powerful man nowadays, one of the tall blond expatriate masters of the world, the *gweilo's gweilo*, his adoring second wife [Dhel] tells him teasingly" (21). In doubling the Cantonese pejorative "*gweilo*" or "foreign devil" Dhel, who is of Swiss-Vietnamese descent, simultaneously establishes Nick's role as an alpha hegemonic powerbroker and labels Nick as also foreign to the other Western capitalists with whom he only appears to identify.

In presenting Nick in the position of alpha male, the narrative initially aligns Nick with patriarchy and thereby fashions him as the text's Prospero. Nick's work is the reason for the couple's exile in the Old World and from the moment he sees Mira at the airport in Rome, the narrator tells us Nick feels "like a conjurer with the power to pull wonders out of thin air" (23). Further, just as Prospero conjures the storm to avenge his loss of position, Nick's loss of Mira moves him "to know what it looks and sounds and tastes like to plot a vendetta" (211) until he comes to realize at the narrative's end that he has stopped hating Mira (236). In its reproduction of *The Tempest*, however, the narrative again provides the audience with a difference. Nick,

unlike Prospero, comes from humble beginnings and his need to fulfill a lack drives him just as much as his need for vengeance.

Nick is under no illusions about what he bought into when he went to work in finance. He likes money—money which was in short supply in the underheated rooms of the beautiful shabby Federal house in Little Compton, where he grew up. Given the choice, he might have tried to be a writer, but he has already been witness to his father's gentle bohemian failure. And so he watched with benign detachment through the sixties and seventies as his rich older cousins took off for Maoist communes or teepees in Maine. Knowing that his role is to make up for a lack, to provide. Yet he hopes that somewhere underneath he is different from the men in charge and longs for people to understand this. He tried to demonstrate it to Mira's family and was amazed by their stony indifference. And the same happened earlier with the kids he tutored in the Providence Head Start project. (81)

Nick's job in finance likens him to Nesbit's Bastable children who seek treasure in order to restore the family's wealth; yet, the role of fair-haired capitalist moves Nick away from his sense of self and home. His constant state of exile, this distance from self, provides Nick with "a curious feeling of freedom" and "an undisguised glee" at the "whopping price" he receives for selling his family home in Maine during the height of the real estate market in 2005 (176). Yet, he feels a sense of loss over his unfixed status when comparing his selling of the house in Maine to his friend's

purchase and restoration of her ancestral home in Soochow (Suzhou, China) and her joking accusation that “white boys have no respect for roots” (193).

Zenin, unlike Nick, primarily resides in his home country; yet, he still carries the mark of an outsider in the narrative. The narrator tells us that upon meeting Ezio Zenin, Mira “hears the first name, but she discounts, is never to use it. For her [and everyone else in the narrative], he will always be Zenin. That *strange, stateless name*” (15, emphasis mine). Further, Zenin suggests at this first meeting that his surname—a Venetian name belonging to old nobility—connects him to Mira as a transatlantic figure. As Zenin explains, “we are not noble....Not so fortunate. My father was a peasant from Istria. From a family of peasants, poor as beasts. Maybe they got the name because they were at one time the property of an aristocrat.... Slaves, too, perhaps” (15). Thus the narrative presents Zenin, like people identified by transit from a homeland, as bearing a name that distances him further from remote ancestors. Further, “Zenin’s *lifelong* private flash point” is the “sound of girls laughing” (30, emphasis mine)—a reminder of the “Teasing laughter like that of the girls at school who called him *il tartaro*—the Tartar—because of his foreign-looking lankiness and narrow eyes and one memorable year, when he’d suddenly outgrown his single pair of long trousers, made up a mortifying chant: *il tartaro in pantaloni cinesi*—the Tartar in Chinese pants” (30). This childhood teasing that marks Zenin as an outsider even when he is at home fuels Zenin’s anger toward women—just their laughter sends him into a rage—and desire for power and wealth that echoes the desires of Caliban.

The narrative defines Zenin's drive for power in terms of an ever-expanding hegemonic militarism. The narrator tells us that Zenin has in fact become "famous" in his homeland where "his name is synonymous with the postwar explosion of prosperity and also with a kind of enlightened yet patriarchal way of handling big business that some call regionalism. He is best known for an ever-expanding army of plastic cartoon miniatures that invades millions of children's houses every day, camouflaged in boxes of breakfast cereals and snacks or marching straightforwardly across television screens" (31-32). Even after moving production to China presumably to reduce costs, Zenin runs his expanding toy empire from his headquarters in his childhood hometown. Yet, from the perspective of Zenin's deckhand, despite his location Zenin resembles "what the old people call *lo zio d'America*. That means a man who left his family, left Italy went off across the ocean to someplace like America and made a bundle" (42). Despite Zenin maintaining his ties to home, others see him as an outsider.

Zenin desires Mira because he perceives her as foreign and conquerable. In 1986, one of his happiest times, Zenin enjoys the "luxury" of his wealth (i.e., a larger boat, a jet, owning part of the Grand Prix) as well as "another kind of luxury"—declaring his love to Mira. According to the narrative, Zenin's love for Mira "means that he feels he owns her and that he gets intense pleasure from fucking her, not the least because she still feels distant to him. For Zenin at this point she is still the American writer, adrift in a rarefied atmosphere where he is out of place" (150). Further, Zenin's desire is evident in his need to continue to contact her long after their affair has ended: "[Mira's] wary voice on the line revives for him, for an instant, the

excitement he always felt with her of intruding, of breaking into somewhere he doesn't belong, with her half consent. A strange play of remoteness yet accessibility that makes him remember the thrill of being a sharp provincial boy on the way up, making his first trips abroad. Of all the foreign girls he has had, Mira is the one who made him feel foreignness most. It's what made fucking her so good" (33). Despite Mira's realization that Zenin no longer holds power over her (5), from Zenin's perspective, the narrative suggests that Zenin stays in contact with Mira "because once Zenin owns something, he doesn't let it go easily" (33). Zenin uses his ability to conquer—from building his financial empire to securing Mira's submission—to challenge his status as "parvenu" or the text's Caliban who eventually usurps Prospero.

By contextualizing *Lost Hearts* in relation to *The Tempest*, we see that the narrative relies equally on these three characters—Mira is not the sole protagonist of this story. Further, like their counterparts in Shakespeare's play that represent "positions in a structure" (Garber 27), Lee's characters occupy structural positions in which each character attempts to create the role of the other through varied assertions and relinquishment of power. Yet, Lee unravels the master/slave, dominator/dominated binary that twentieth century critics have come to ascribe to *The Tempest*. Mira, Nick, and Zenin vacillate between the roles of dominator and dominated. In this way, by positioning Mira along with Nick and Zenin both within and without the hegemonic structure Lee pulls a descendent of Sycorax from the margins of the text and provides her, for better or worse, with a voice.

Staging and Playing Identity

Lee's reliance on *The Tempest* to construct the narrative of *Lost Hearts* points to the importance of performance in the novel. The novel relies upon free indirect discourse to narrate Mira's, Nick's, and Zenin's perspectives in respective chapters, but switches to a first-person narration of supporting characters' commentary at the end of each chapter. This effect allows the minor players to operate as observers and positions them within the audience with the reader. The content found in the supporting cast's disruptions of the major players' perspectives at the end of each chapter reinforces the significance of reading the novel—and the actions of the major players—as a performance. Consider, for example, the Ancient Etruscan caretaker's note at the end of Chapter 2, told from Nick's perspective, when Nick remembers being caught with Mira trespassing at Cerveteri in 1985: "this couple were decent kids, and good to look at, the boy blond like a movie actor and the girl like one of those Brazilian dancers on TV" (29). Additionally, consider Mira's neighbor Madame S.'s musings at the end of Chapter 10, told from Mira's perspective, when Mira remembers having her cards read that same year: "Well, God punishes you through the cards by letting you see too much, and in these last months, I've watched two young Americans [Mira and Nick] the way you do when you know the end of a book or a television show" (90). This narrative strategy reinforces the depiction of identity as performance—a theme that runs throughout Lee's fiction.

The narrative of *Lost Hearts* relies on the notion of performance to position the minor players with the reader. Moreover, the narrative uses the notion of the theatrical to reposition the major players—unfixing them from roles or identities in

which they have been cast by other players and perhaps even by the reader. Read as a staging of events, *Lost Hearts* becomes Hamlet's mirror to nature¹²⁵ that both recalls and reinvents history. In effect, in all of Lee's texts characters cast themselves into alternate realities—and thereby destabilize their identities—through notions of theatrical performance. In Rome in 1986, for example, Mira has fallen into a private ritual of watching old movies in the morning when she is home alone and supposedly working on her travel writing. The act of watching film actually precipitates Mira's rewrite of her identity. On the morning that she watches *L'amore a Roma* (*Love in Rome*) a film about a woman who moves in with a young noble poet, but who cannot remain faithful as she "learns to move in high society" and therefore eventually leaves the poet for "his playboy friend" (103), she correctly predicts that she will soon hear from Zenin, after a year of separation at her request. While watching the film Mira realizes that "the fact of Zenin...[gives her] an odd kind of nostalgia for things that never happened, for a presence that, like these old movies, *opens a door on another dimension*. A place where late-night footsteps echo in foreign streets and you hold your breath, perishing to know what comes next" (104, emphasis mine). Pulled into the narrative, Mira accepts Zenin's call. Just before Mira agrees to meet Zenin she realizes that a new film is now playing on the television screen and "she [also] has plunged into a different plot" (104) in which she dresses like an Italian, uses Italian idioms, and attracts men in the Roman crowds while she lunches in a fine restaurant "with a man whose eyes look dead" (104) but who inspires her passion.

¹²⁵ In Act III, Scene ii, lines 20-24, Hamlet argues that the purpose of "playing... both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as it 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of time his form and pressure."

Identity for Mira depends on the role she performs, a theme that Lee also explores in *Sarah Phillips*.

Lee's first novel sets the stage for the identity or dimension shifts found in *Lost Hearts*. In *Sarah Phillips*, the idea of performance also destabilizes the protagonist's identity and separates her from constructs of community. Sarah asserts, for example, that her intimate knowledge of the theatricality of the baptismal ceremony fosters her inability to fully participate in a construct of black identity by entering the body of her father's church—Sarah and her brother Matthew “knew how the bread and wine were prepared for Communion, and where Daddy bought his robes” (19). Sarah states “there was an unassailable magic about an act as public and *dramatic* as baptism. I felt toward it *the slightly exasperated awe a stagehand might feel on realizing that that although he can identify with professional exactitude the minutest components of a show*, there is still something indefinable in the power that makes it a cohesive whole” (19). The connection between performance and identity is reinforced in a later chapter in which Sarah alarms her mother when she likens integrating the Prescott School for Girls—as the sole black student—to being in a play because she is always watched (53). Likening the stigma of being a racial outsider to a dramatic performance allows Sarah to gloss over the glaring race and class divisions that the narrative reveals to the reader—the concurrent 1960's civil unrests in U.S. cities, the bleak and segregated living conditions of the school's black workers, and Sarah's being typecast as the black maid in *You Can't Take It with You* despite her lauded audition for another role. Further, near the end of the narrative while in the limo on her way to her father's funeral, Sarah imagines herself as “a

tragic heroine” (112). Sarah already associates the church with the theatre and her role as tragic heroine allows her to ignore her family’s and her father’s congregation’s expectation that she contribute to the community. The focus in *Sarah Phillips* on the connection between performance and identity focuses the reader on the unstable nature of identity—and sets the stage for the dimension shifts that occur in *Lost Hearts in Italy*. Moreover, the narrative’s emphasis on staging and the performative nature of identity reminds the reader that Lee’s characters depict identity as changing reenactments and reinventions of the historical record.

Staging Race and Gender

Noting how Lee’s narratives liken identity to role play allows us to see how Mira, Nick and Zenin reenact the historic cultural exchange between Africa, Europe, and the Americas. This reenactment shows how Lee’s fiction disrupts the teleology of African American literary studies—a racialized narrative of becoming in which the end is the achievement of social justice—by alerting the reader to Mira’s lack of roots, questioning her position within hegemony, and troubling assertions of progress that a figure like Mira might represent. To illustrate this disruption to the primary narrative of African American studies, we turn here to the postrace moment in the text when the narrator states that “For an instant [Mira] sees herself as she really is: pregnant [by Zenin], divorced, alone, crazy, the slave of Rome and the rest of the Old World in her own country, in the city where she once basked in love and freedom” (218). The narrator omits here an explicit reference to Mira’s race; but, Zenin’s ridicule at the thought of keeping the baby “throws Mira from one dimension to another” (218). The reader, therefore, must grapple with how a pinnacle example of

the benefits of desegregation—a black middle-class Harvard graduate—could be reduced to a state of apparent powerlessness by embodying the status of an enslaved person of the Old World. This postrace moment in *Lost Hearts* echoes a scene in *Sarah Phillips* in which the title character plays the game Galatea with her white boyfriend and his companions (*SP* 6-7)—standing nude on a box so that her white boyfriend and his friends can appraise her body, Sarah reenacts a scene that would resemble a slave auction to most readers. These anachronistic moments in which Mira’s and Sarah’s identities shift represent a pull on the present by the past—a “temporal drag” that, in positioning queer studies, Elizabeth Freeman theorizes can connect performative post-identities to the political histories—the identity politics—that they supposedly abandon (729). In these postrace moments, post-Civil Rights figures like Mira are inseparable from past understandings of race.

The postrace moment in *Lost Hearts* is relayed from Zenin’s perspective and occurs late in the novel when the narrator reveals that in 1987 Mira and Zenin travel to New York so that Mira, at Zenin’s insistence, can have an abortion. Mira gains this self-knowledge about her status and the limitations of her autonomy after she faces Zenin’s ridicule and anger at her suggestion that they could keep the baby. As a member of the black middle class—and therefore the child of privilege primed to transgress segregated space—the narrative fashions Mira in the same hegemonic terms as Zenin and Nick. In this moment, however, Mira performs the role that she and Zenin fashion, agreeing to play her part in the reenactment of the subjugation and the control over the reproductive rights of black women. Far from depicting Mira as a victim, the narrative depicts Mira’s powerlessness as her own production—and,

again, examining *Lost Hearts* in relation to Lee's earlier narratives supports this assertion. Evoking the image of the church as theatre from *Sarah Phillips*, Mira explains at the beginning of *Lost Hearts*, "she understands that Zenin has no real power over her" (5), but she "agrees, as she always does. *Va bene*—all right—has a ceremonial sound. Like the close of a church service, a sign of acceptance and submission" (5). In this scene Mira's performance temporarily puts into question her social and legal post-Civil Rights privileges. Further, her performance aligns her politically with past and present women who experience the oppressive force of the state. Mira's act of aligning with these women involves the symbolic forfeiture of her rights of US citizenship. In this moment she is a slave of Rome, not a citizen of the US. Further, we must note that Mira's submission to Zenin involves Mira setting aside her national identity. In the supporting narration found at the end of this chapter, the doctor privately tells Mira, whom he reads as a mixed-raced American, that she can leave without having the abortion. But Mira claims she is Italian and has nowhere to go (219). We know that Mira is an American who has lived and worked in New York and still has family in nearby Philadelphia. But, in examining Mira as a transnational figure, the narrative relocates Mira in relation to women who are oppressed by the State. Therefore, in this reenactment of transnational exchange between Africa, Europe and the Americas, Mira occupies the space of subjugator and subjugated.

At the narrative's insistence that Mira, Nick, and Zenin reenact the cultural exchange of the transatlantic, we can identify these characters as surrogates in the process of making identity. By using the term "surrogates" I rely upon Joseph

Roach's concept of "*surrogation*" in which culture replicates itself over time by replacing (both real and imagined) openings or absences within a social network (2). These surrogates embody and succeed previous cultural representations that, like the surrogate, operate from equally unstable positions—the reenactment becomes a repetition with a difference. Consider that this vignette about the abortion from 1987, two years after Mira and Zenin meet on her way to Rome, precipitates Mira's memory of Logan International in 2005, when she and her son with her second husband are detained by security before attempting to travel from Boston to Philadelphia. Both moments depict Mira's loss of status through hegemonic (i.e., patriarchal and state) attempts to curtail Mira's reproduction or movement. Further, both moments occur within specific sites in the U.S. that represent a form of "home" for Mira—New York, where Mira and Nick lived after college; Boston, where Mira and Nick met and where their daughter is now studying at Harvard and thereby negotiating her parents' legacy status; and Philadelphia, where Mira was born and her sister and relatives still reside.

The mixed-raced heritage the doctor notes in Mira identifies her as product of Diaspora. Mira resembles racially mixed Cubans, Brazilians, North Africans, and fellow Americans—a likeness that attracts Nick and Zenin. She resents the likeness in 2005, however, when enhanced security at Logan International—the airport where two of the 9/11 attacks were launched—fills her with a terror that "transforms her into an illegal immigrant from Honduras, vainly proffering badly printed false documents; or a timid Columbian mule, nauseated from the drug-filled condoms she has swallowed; or a trembling suicide bomber, forgetting the sweetness of revenge, the

promised paradise of the faithful, only aware of the sweetness of the body that is about to be smashed to atoms” (221). The narrative effectively emphasizes the connection between Mira’s lack of roots and her racially ambiguous appearance.

Documenting Mira’s frustration the narrator explains

You’ve got to learn to take it in stride Mira’s friends have said over and over to her. *It’s your passport with all the back and forth on it, all the foreign visas, the fact that you have residence outside the States. It looks suspicious these days. Then, it’s the way you look. That swarthy mixed-race thing. You used to be just colored. But now you could be from any terrorist nation on the planet. We’re at war, a war based on idiocy, but a war. Deal with it. Don’t take it personally.... But she does take it personally. Is this something I chose, to be treated like a criminal in the place I was born, to have my son puzzled and scared and mortified by people staring at him? Is it my destiny, because, no matter how elegantly I dress, I look like a Cuban or North African and acquire a refugee bloom of guilt that shines like a spotlight whenever I pass a checkpoint?”* (223, emphasis added)

Inherent in Mira’s fear is her anger over the fact that her class privilege and national standing—a status that the tone in the narrator’s explanation of Mira’s fear suggests Mira believes should elevate her above her Caribbean, South American, Middle Eastern, and North African likenesses—do not exonerate her from the humiliation of being detained by security. To Mira’s irritation her second husband, an Italian like Zenin, asks, “Why the hell do you look so guilty? You own the world, bourgeois

American wench. Just strut on through. Look at me. Nobody ever bothers me, not even the customs people” (221). Comparing her second husband to her ex-husband while emphasizing their gender and Western status, Mira tellingly notes that “he [just like Nick] looks exactly like who his is: one of the lords of the earth....The men who are never suspect, even in the long fearful wake of 9/11” (222). The state’s fear caused by the 9/11 attack reinforces her status caused by the temporal drag in the preceding scene—Mira in this case, despite her class status, is positioned in opposition to hegemony. In juxtaposing these events from 1987 New York and 2005 Boston the narrative allows the reenactment of history, the repetition with a difference, to demonstrate Mira’s unstable position within hegemonic structure.

The text destabilizes Mira’s position within hegemony, but it refuses to align her fully with the dispossessed—a lack of connection seen in an earlier chapter in which the text foreshadows the depiction of powerlessness in relation to Mira’s instability. In 2006, Mira thinks of her legacy while trying on old clothes—some of which are the clothes Zenin had bought for Mira twenty years early—with her daughter. Trying on her mother’s dress that she had borrowed during childhood, Mira recalls Shakespeare’s Sonnet 3. The sonnet suggests that procreation (or progression) is the only way to escape death. The narrator states, “A basic pleasure, [Mira] thinks, to put on the old lady’s dress and steal the past. Or is it the future?” (187). This moment precedes a memory from 1987 when Mira, who resembles “a junkie” due to a lack of sleep and food, appears to be dying. She experiences a “feeling that is devouring her flesh” because of “The knowledge, in body and spirit, that she is traveling a rebours. Against the grain” (169) during her affair with Zenin.

While attending the bar mitzvah for Zenin's London partner's son in Tel Aviv, a bored Zenin perks up at the evening's entertainment—Brazilian dancers in transparent body stockings. The guests laugh and applaud when one dancer rides and whips the other like a pony; and eventually the hosts join the dancers in giving and receiving rides (171). Mira notes the happy demeanor of the dancers and the guests, and feels distant as she “*wonders if she's missing something*” (171 my emphasis). This feeling returns when Mira and Zenin are detained and questioned by Israeli security officials at the airport. Again, the narrative conflates Mira's powerlessness to her unfixed position—with Zenin Mira operates “against the grain,” but, her imagined connection to the Brazilian dancers due to race fails because of Mira's position of privilege. We see this privilege in Mira's ability to perform as a guest—not a sex object—at the party.

Lee frequently depicts the troubled relationship between her privileged expatriate female protagonists and the other racialized immigrants they encounter. Just before the narrative recalls how Mira enters a new plot and changes her identity by agreeing to see Zenin, the reader sees a 2005 exchange in Turin between Mira and Bakhid, a Muslim Moroccan bag boy who has also immigrated to Italy. Feeling guilty about U.S. foreign policy, Mira attempts to befriend Bakhid through seemingly empty gestures—paying “triple, [or] three euros instead of one” (101) and encouraging him to go to school despite her Italian brother-in-law's warning that Bakhid belongs to “an invading immigrant army that little by little is colonizing Italy” (102).¹²⁶ To Bakhid, Mira resembles someone from his country, but reads as

¹²⁶ Mira's brother-in-law sheds light on controversies surrounding immigration in Italy. According to Michael Dummett, the United Nations predicted in the 1990s that Italy needed to admit roughly

American and therefore represents the wealth that can endow him with a cell phone—a status symbol that would allow him to separate himself from the other “foreigners” (104) who line up to use the payphone. Mira, despite her similar appearance, is not subject to the poor living conditions and discrimination experienced by Bakhid.

Further, Mira’s troubled position between worlds is echoed in *Interesting Women*. In “The Birthday Present,” for example, when a racially unmarked American woman who lives in Italy hires a Brazilian escort to entertain her Italian husband for his birthday, she finds herself drawn to the eyes of Nigerian prostitutes on the side of the road: “if she let herself go, she would...crawl toward that flat dark gaze” (17). In “Brothers and Sisters Around the World” a black American protagonist slaps two local women for flirting with her French-Italian husband while they are vacationing off the coast of Madagascar: “All three of us know perfectly well that the man—my European husband—was just an excuse, a playing field for our curiosity. The curiosity of sisters separated before birth and flung by the caprice of history half a world away from each other. Now in this troublesome way our connection has been established, and between my guilt and my dawning affection I suspect that I’ll never get rid of these two” (67). As surrogates in the retelling of the history of the Old and New Worlds Lee’s characters destabilize our understanding of identity by occupying

300,000 foreign workers, or nearly five times the number of workers from outside the EU than the Italian government had planned to admit, to compensate for its aging workforce. Further, the EU Office of Statistics estimated in 1999 that Italy, along with Germany and Sweden, would have experienced a decline in population if not for immigration (64-5). Net immigration into Italy began in the 1970s, primarily from Africa (i.e., Somalia and sub-Saharan countries). Echoing other EU nations, the rise in immigration in Italy has incited violent protests and attacks on the immigrant population (144). In response to the poor living conditions of Somalis in Italian cities, Italy passed the Mancino law in 1993 that granted refugees the rights to residence, work and medical care. The Mancino law, however, has not been widely enforced (147). Stefano Allievi states much of the anti-immigration debate in Italy comes specifically from anti-Muslim sentiment expressed by political, religious, and academic sources in 2000, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S., and Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci’s controversial criticism of Islam following the 9/11 attacks.

positions of subjugator and subjugated. This dual occupancy serves to focus the reader on the performative nature of identity—even as it reinforces the understanding that Lee’s protagonists enjoy a construct of Western identity that they do not desire to lose.

The narrative’s focus on surrogation and performance allows for the comingling of past and present—a handling of time that echoes Trey Ellis’s and Danzy Senna’s fictive depictions¹²⁷ that suggest time fails to denote progress. Much of this depiction of time, in which characters vacillate between present and past constructs of social identity, troubles the narrative of becoming or achievement that underlies the African American literary tradition. In the case of Lee’s *Lost Hearts*, this troubling of time reminds the reader again that the narrative, and the construction of race, gender, and nation that it symbolizes, does not solely belong to Mira, despite the fact that the reviews of the novel focus on the African American character. The making of race (and other forms of social identity) in Lee’s work always occurs in relation to the past, the other, and the negotiation of the familiar and foreign. In *Lost Hearts* specifically, Mira’s narrative comes into being with Nick’s and Zenin’s at various points in history.

The novel opens in the present tense in 2004, when the narrative voice, at this moment from Mira’s perspective, informs the reader that Zenin, appearing to sense Mira’s “moment of weakness” when she feels “abandoned” by the words that she needs to finish an article, calls Mira. This phone call from Zenin establishes how time and space operate in the novel, as Mira explains

¹²⁷ For a detailed discussion of how Trey Ellis’s novel, *Platitudes*, disrupts African American teleology, see Chapter One. See Chapter Two for an analysis of Danzy Senna’s collapse of time in *Symptomatic* through the reification of the trope of the tragic mulatto and the madwoman in the attic.

when Zenin phones, the rest of the world recedes. They alone are real, two points of brightness connected by sound waves and the past. But as the connection is established, like lights on an electronic map, she imagines a third point lighting up somewhere else. *Mai due senza tre*, as the Italian saying goes, never two without three. The essential third point is her first husband, Nick, Zenin's formal rival....Nick is somehow always present at these encounters in space, *where all times are one time*. (6, Emphasis added)

The narrator informs the reader that in this narrative encounters in certain space can collapse time, making the present difficult to distinguish—at times even inseparable—from the past. In fact, this opening foreshadows an earlier moment in time that occurs later in the narrative—the phone call from Zenin in 1986 that plunges Mira into another plot. And immediately after establishing that this narrative will defy our conventional understanding of time as moving forward through space, the narrative voice moves us in this first chapter from the present in 2004, back to the present of 1985, when the story of “Nick and Mira and Zenin begins” (7) at the airport—Zenin hears about an attractive “colored girl...traveling in first class” and swoops in for a quick look at Mira with “the swift reconnoitering of a predator or a thief” before leaving without speaking because he “never sits and waits” (10).

When the narrative shifts in Chapter Two to Nick, the reader encounters a still embittered Nick in 2004 before moving to 1985 to learn the novel's “truth”: space, and its way of bridging the past and the present, creates identity. We learn this “truth” through Lee's gesture to D. H. Lawrence's *Etruscan Places* (1932), a

collection of essays in which Lawrence documents his travels through Tuscany to contrast what he sees as a natural and vital ancient Etruscan civilization with Mussolini's fascist Italy. As soon as Mira arrives in Rome in 1985, Nick takes her to the town of Cerveteri, known to house ancient Etruscan tombs that date back from the 9th to the 3rd century BCE. Nick and Mira's first trip in Rome is meant to foreshadow the end of their marriage that the narrative will liken to the loss of their nation and roots. Lawrence, for example, opens the first essay of *Etruscan Places*, "Cerveteri," by asserting

The Etruscans, as everyone knows, were the people who occupied the middle of Italy in early Roman days, and whom the Romans, in their usual neighbourly fashion, wiped out entirely in order to make room for Rome with a very big R. They couldn't have wiped them all out, there were too many of them. But they did wipe out the Etruscan existence as a nation and a people. However, this seems to be the inevitable result of expansion with a big E, which is the sole *raison d'être* of people like the Romans. (11)

The happily married Mira and Nick in 1985 are destined to the fate of the Etruscans—discarded condoms and bottles instill within the couple “a feeling of affectionate communion with all the village kids who come here to drink and fuck under the indulgent eyes of their ancestors, a first glimpse of the palimpsest of generations that is Italy” (Lee 28). Further, the caretaker accepts Nick and Mira's trespass because of his fond remembrance of an earlier generation of Americans—“black and white GIs” who brought food to his village in 1944 during the chaos of

WWII (29). Thus this visit to Cerveteri suggests that the dead weigh on constructs of Mira's and Nick's identities, thereby merging time and space.

Nick and Mira's visit to Cerveteri establishes the collapse of time in space in the narrative. In the second essay, "Tarquinia" from *Etruscan Places*, Lawrence describes the landscape that now covers the ancient Etruscan city as covering the dead that "lie buried and quick, as seeds" and suggests that the hills that symbolize both the modern and ancient "are as inseparable as life and death" (54). Lee's narrator then parallels this collapsing of time in space by folding Mira's perspective into Nick's; although this chapter belongs to Nick, the narrator tells the reader that upon rereading *Etruscan Places*, Mira will "feel a shiver of recognition at Lawrence's words describing Cerveteri: 'and the land beyond seems as mysterious and fresh as if it were still the morning of Time'" (Lee 29). Additionally, in accompanying their daughter to Harvard, and remembering the "happy ending" of their marriage in a Cambridge garden, Mira knows "that nothing is lost, that all times are one time" (45).

As surrogates who reenact history, Nick, Mira, and Zenin are always connected to the past or the dead who lie beneath the surface. Nick and Mira spend their last summer together in 1986 in a rented farmhouse northwest of Rome on Lake Bracciano. The narrative presents the lake as another city of the dead like Cerveteri where the past, present, and future—and the incarnations that each point in time produces—are indistinguishable:

Bracciano, liquid eye of an extinct volcano, rimmed in gritty black beaches and tourist restaurants specializing in eels, is said to be haunted like all lakes in Latium.... The lake has a disorienting

simultaneous feeling about it, as if time were blurred and a million past and future lives floated in its atmosphere, without the gross material weight that is history in Rome. Popes, dukes, Partisans, Roman generals, Samnite guerrillas, Etruscan kings, Swiss tourists, all present, all unimportant. As if a series of transparent stage sets have been laid one over the other, giving the landscape in every direction a shimmer, like something seen through tears. (145)

The collapse of time and identity at Lake Bracciano imbues the vacation spot with a sense of dread. Nick's friend, Lorenzo, who visits them nearly every weekend at the lake describes this scene as "a happy, wise, and good world...But with something rotten behind it, as is always the case. *Et ego in arcadia*. And you don't have to look too far" (146). The phrase *et ego in arcadia* or "Even in Arcadia, there am I" or "Death is even in Arcadia" often serves as a reminder that mortality lurks at the margins of paradise and recalls "Et in Arcadia Ego," Nicolas Poussin's pastoral paintings of shepherds gathered around a tomb, a theme that also appears in *Sarah Phillips*. In France at the Louvre Sarah states she is drawn to "Poussin's 'Paradis Terrestre,' where a grand stasis seems to weigh down the sunlit masses of foliage, and the tiny figure of Eve, her face unscarred by recollection, looks delicate and indolent" (SP 7). Despite appearance, the threat of death/mortality/sin underlies the idyll in Lee's work. This stasis therefore questions Sarah's assertion at the end of *Sarah Phillips* that she is part of a new generation in transit.

In *Lost Hearts*, Mira, Nick, and Zenin cannot escape the cities of the dead, presented in this text as Rome, New York, and London as well as Cerveteri and Lake

Bracciano. These locations persist “as occasions of memory and invention” (Roach xi) that become the venue for the protagonists’ reenactments of history. Cerveteri lies beneath Rome, where the narrative states Mira “realized that she’s completely out of place” (40) and asserts Nick is pushed like no other place “to act like one of the lords of the earth” (81). Further, Rome has produced Zenin with the dead eyes that so attracts Mira. New York is where Mira and Zenin find stasis or end their pregnancy, and Nick believes “New York is dating badly” (106). Speaking to his cousin in 2005, Nick foreshadows Lorenzo’s thoughts (from 1986) that the reader encounters later in the narrative: “I was thinking about it as I walked down Sixth Avenue to get here. *Sun on brick. Stasis. Deserted shop fronts. It was like a museum piece. It was—quaint. And not just Sunday morning. I felt it even when I’m working. A kind of ongoing nostalgia. Frozen in time. Like stepping into a Hopper painting*” (107 emphasis added).¹²⁸ As Nick’s cousin notes in defense, the stasis or death that sits beneath the façade of the city is most apparent in the “architectural phantoms” (108) left by the towers and the people who died in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center—a wound from which the city cannot just “move along” (108). Again, the narrative of *Lost Hearts* returns us to *Sarah Phillips* when the title character must confront the racist construct of her black American heritage despite her efforts to escape it. After retreating in the bathroom when her white boyfriend jokes that she is the distinct American product of an ape jazz singer’s rape of an Irish Jew, Sarah is

¹²⁸ The narrative echoes and directly quotes here reviews of Edward Hopper exhibits that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *London Times*: “Hopper created a new type of pictorial heroism, the heroism of failure. ‘At some point in its cultural stalling, the world began to confuse inertia, impotence, poky hotel rooms and losers with things to look up to. A world view made and exported from America’” (107). See Waldemar Januszczak’s “Truly, deeply, sadly,” in *The Sunday Times*, 30 May, 2004. See also John Daniszewski’s “Edward Hopper’s lonely America,” in *Los Angeles Times*, 30 Jun 2004.

reminded of a Hopper painting and a sense of loss (13). Sarah might believe that she is part of a generation in transit, but the events that occur after she expresses this belief suggest her stasis through her connection to the dead and her role as surrogate.

In addition to Rome and New York, *Lost Hearts* depicts London as a dead city through an allusion to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, an allusion that reinforces how the competing narratives of the text merge into one. In comparing New York to his current home of London, Nick argues "London is a total mess—overpriced, filthy, and more girl gangs than the Bronx. But it's awake. It's got that future buzz that Asian cities have. It's America that's asleep. We're at war, but we're lost in a provincial daze" (107). Further, Nick suggests that his status as an expatriate gifts him with second sight—a suggestion that echoes the author's double consciousness of being American in Italy that is quoted in the second epigraph to this chapter. In response to his cousin asking if he even continues to feel American Nick states, "I feel more American than ever before. Nobody lets you forget it. Not since we started colonizing Iraq. And you see stuff better from a distance. I can despise Bush and the neocons better if I'm despising Blair and Labour at the same time. *Like having bifocals*" (107 emphasis mine).¹²⁹ Nick's implied bi-focal sight or two-sightedness, however, comes at a cost; Nick initially fails to see both the reason behind New York's stasis and London's stasis as well. In this way, the narrative likens Nick to the essential figure in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*—Tiresias, the blind clairvoyant from Greek mythology who possessed life experience as both a man and a woman.

¹²⁹ Nick's exchange with his cousin foreshadows Mira's light teasing with her sister's husband—a Malcolm X look-alike and staunch Republican—who accuses her of losing her American identity in addition to her supposed long lost blackness because she admires Italian protests against the War on Terror (136).

Nick's reference to *The Waste Land* reminds us that despite Nick's insistence to the contrary, London is another dead city in which the living and the dead merge through cyclical repetitions of history. In their reenactment of history, Nick and Zenin mistakenly look for life in their perception of the exotic—a construct that becomes the East particularly when Mira and their joint performance of the transatlantic seems less appealing. Nick envies his Chinese American friend who maintains her ancestral roots and, growing weary of London, he contemplates a move to Shanghai with his second wife and their daughters (192). Similarly, Zenin envies his Chinese business partner because he “seems to have settled tranquilly into a complex life that is an uncanny blend of tradition and mad contemporaneity” (97). Zenin's partner can balance the trappings of wealth in a global economy and maintain a sense of roots in his homeland to the past and he tells Zenin that he surrounds himself with women (i.e., his mother, wife, and even his girlfriends) from his own province who understand his culture (98). If Zenin's partner has a secret, he admonishes Zenin, it is “Don't waste time on strange girls” (98). Both examples suggest that the life Nick and Zenin desire requires establishing roots. Further, Mira's fantasy of living a lesbian suburban existence in the States (65)—a fantasy that involves a reproduction of her identity as female, suburban, and American—reinforces the notion of rootedness. In fact, no matter how far Mira moves away from the States, like all of Lee's black female characters she is constantly confronted by reminders of her roots.

Staging Roots

A middle-class status distances Lee's protagonists from constructs of a black community; yet, Lee's fiction consistently depicts her black female protagonists struggling with an ancestral figure who would connect them to a community. This figure occupies space of the uncanny in Lee's work in its simultaneous representation of the foreign and the familiar. The concept of rootedness, according to Toni Morrison, lies at the foundation of the African American literary tradition. For Morrison, evaluation of the tradition relies upon "what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor. Which is to say a grandfather as in Ralph Ellison, or a grandmother as in Toni Cade Bambara, or a healer as in Bambara or Henry Dumas. [sic] There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (343). We see this ancestral figure throughout Lee's work and in *Lost Hearts* this figure appears in multiple forms. Mira's mother, for example, insists that Mira carry a "shamingly huge old suitcase" from her parents' attic to Rome, "the kind of strapped mastodon of a cracked-leather case that is meant to be dragged over borders in the wake of famine or pogrom, and appears in old pictures of Ellis Island" (8). The suitcase "has always been upstairs under the eaves, legacy of some flighty distant cousin or great-aunt, and when Mira's mother came to help pack up Mira's West Side apartment, *she bullied Mira into accepting it, arguing its practicality with a vigor that suggested the bag was stuffed with maternal wisdom*" (8 emphasis mine). The narrator tells us that "its presence looms over Mira" (8) as she travels to Rome. In Rome, one of Mira's

maternal surrogates becomes her “neighbor and friend, an agoraphobic Bolognese gentlewoman of sixty, divorced and abandoned” (87) who recognizes when reading Mira’s cards that Mira is romantically attached to a man in addition to her husband. The card reading prompts Nick to call her Madame S., “for Eliot’s Madame Sosostris” (87) the fortuneteller from Part 1 of *The Waste Land* who accurately foretells events that will come to pass.¹³⁰ Madame S. warns Mira against a relationship with Zenin and ultimately provides Mira, once she becomes distant from Nick and her family in Philadelphia, with security in Italy after she leaves Zenin. Madame S., for example, admonishes Zenin, “I realize that a man of your extraordinary resources would be all the more aware of the precarious position of a young woman in a foreign country without official protection in the world. She needs a *sistemazione*. A secure position” (232).¹³¹ Recognizing Madame S. as a “sister in spirit” to the women of his world, “the phalanx of respectable women who form the ultimate barrier—the shaping force that substitutes morality—to the behavior of men” like himself (232) and respecting Mira even more for befriending Madame S., Zenin negotiates with her the amount of financial support he will provide for Mira.

The narrative constructs Mira’s mother, Madame S. and other figures as members of an unclear line that attempts to stabilize Mira in relation to her roots. Similar depictions appear in Lee’s other fiction. While traveling through an immigrant neighborhood with her potential Milanese lover, Merope, the black

¹³⁰ Madame Sosostris’s reading in *The Waste Land* alludes to *The Tempest*. In lines 47-48, Madame Sosostris describes the Phoenician Sailor by quoting Ariel’s macabre song that lures Ferdinand to Prospero and Miranda: “(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!).”

¹³¹ The term *sistemazione* has several different meanings in Italian: order, place, placing, placement, tidiness, arrangement, location, setting, accommodation, position, and laying.

protagonist in “Full Moon over Milan” from *Interesting Women*, is haunted by an indefinite dark figure—perhaps a woman holding a child or a man with dreadlocks holding something else (53-54). After encountering her white boyfriend’s racist construct of her identity, Sarah dreams of “conducting a monotonous struggle with an old woman with dreadful spidery strength in her arms”(SP 14) whose “skin was dark and leathery” (14) and who reminded her of “the old Philadelphia church women” (14) who babysat her. This figure, in various forms, pervades Lee’s fiction. Yet, the multiple forms of this figure—always uncanny as a marker of both the familiar and the foreign—suggest that it is as unstable as Lee’s protagonists.

Lee’s reliance on the trope of the ancestral figure and the value of roots gestures to the African American literary tradition. Yet her troubling of this figure as indefinite, distant yet close, foreign yet familiar, points us to the importance of examining identity as performance. In tracing the instability of identity—mapping indefinite lines and folding supposed disparate narratives into one—Lee’s work urges us beyond fitting blackness (and gender and nationality) into a construct that is already unstable. Therein lies the value of Lee’s—and really the NBA’s—focus on the black middle-class figure in a post-race moment. The intersectional nature of this figure undermines any attempts at absolute constructs of identity; however, the impossibility of stable constructs has always been apparent in the varied articulations of blackness found in the historic movements (e.g., the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement) that currently define the African American literary tradition.

The narrative racial progress in African American literature has created a myth that contributions to the black American literary tradition must look a certain

way, but Lee's fiction shows that our understanding of this tradition must continue to evolve. By reading Lee, and examining how the collapsed identity, time, and space threads all of her work—including *Interesting Women* that does not consistently focus on a black experience—we begin to see the value in looking at the fiction that appears not to fit into the current dominant narratives of blackness. For example, the white (or racially unmarked) characters in fiction written by writers who identify as black also inform our understanding of race and identity. But, we frequently miss this point because, as Gene Jarrett argues in *Deans and Truants*, these texts are not read or are not read in context of the author's race work—the work that would be included in the canon. Tracing Lee's collapse of identity and critique of integration—her refusal to separate a black figure from whites—helps us to see why we might include other texts that have been here all along (i.e., Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, Dunbar's *The Uncalled* or *The Love of Landry*, and now even Morrison's *A Mercy*) in the canon. In reading Lee's work as a transgression of the construct of blackness—"a site of contradiction" as suggested by theorist Robert Reid-Pharr—we begin to see how the particular black middle-class subject represents the universal in this moment of postrace identity.

Conclusion: Postscript on Postrace: Narrating Past and Present

Now more than ever, there is a general awareness that race is a story still under revision in the United States. For some, our twenty-first-century awareness of the changing race narrative signals a not-so-distant postrace future—a U.S. that has moved beyond judging people based on race. In thinking about the possibility of this future, I am reminded of how my nephews narrate race. And, I am struck by how much their narration echoes the narration of race, and other forms of social identity, found in the NBA fictional texts considered in this study.

Like Andrea Lee's Mira Ward in *Lost Hearts in Italy*, my nephew Chris would look especially suspicious at an airport. Chris sports a full beard and he captures the attention of security or the police. He tells stories about being followed and stopped. His family and friends tease him. Jokingly tell him not to fly because he cannot sport the fatigues that legitimize his brother, Matt—fatigues Matt forgets he does not have to wear when he is on leave. If Chris's stories remind me of Mira's narration of race in Lee's novel, Matt's stories remind me of Michael Herr's account of the Vietnam War in *Dispatches* (1968). Herr reports that he accompanied Marines to pick up a "two-month-old corpse of an American" (159), but some Marines initially did not want to accept the corpse. They initially read the body as Vietnamese and therefore, in their minds, not American, despite the U.S. uniform on the body. Upon closer inspection the Marines thought the body could be black, and therefore American, but the language they used suggested that either way the corpse was the Other to them.

I understand Matt's stories in relation to Herr's narrative history of the Vietnam War. When Matt returned from Afghanistan, he brought home a stockpile of war stories to compete with his grandfather, great-grandfather, great-uncles, and cousins. To Matt's delight, Chris does not have this repertoire. But, some of Matt's stories echo Chris's stories. Matt shared how "battle buddies" liked to tease him about keeping on his uniform so no one would mistake him for "a local," or an Afghan as I often interject. And one of Matt's favorite stories involves a processing clerk at Fort Hood, TX, gesturing for him to lean closer when he arrived "home." "Did you know this says you're black?" she whispered. Despite his attempts to distinguish himself from his brother, Matt's stories are intertwined with Chris's stories.

My nephews, twice removed from the Civil Rights generation, narrate the NBA postrace moments that return us to collective memories of race (and gender, class, and nationality). In telling these stories, Chris and Matt narrate race, nationality, and masculinity in the twenty-first century. I understand my nephews' race experience in relation to the memory that I access through Herr's accounting of a moment in Vietnam, the war my father fought before he could imagine my existence. I note the similarity between my nephews' narration of race and the NBA's narration because my comparison questions recent assertions that young adults have the potential to advance the race narrative in the U.S. due to collective memories that only span the twenty-first century. In *Creating a New Racial Order* (2012), Jennifer Hochschild et al. argue that

For young adults, marches, riots, and grape boycotts are what they study in history books; their collective memories include the New Orleans' Superdome in 2005, the immigrant rights march in 2006, and Barack Obama's Grant Park speech in 2008. Because, we predict, the cohort of young adults will retain this new set of views and perspectives, young adults are the preeminent transformative force. They disproportionately comprise and engage with immigrants, they are most likely to identify as multiracial, they will be most affected by genomic innovations, and they have the broadest set of life chances. They may create a new American racial order. (Kindle Locations 162-163)

In imagining the "transformative force" that can create a U.S. that no longer has dominate racial or ethnic groups Hochschild et al. describe people like my nephews. As the second generation descendents of the Civil Rights Movement, the collective memory of my nephews' multiracial experiences includes Hurricane Katrina and their "victory" that Obama accepted on their behalf in Chicago. Hochschild et al. suggest that my nephews might help to create a new racial order because "marches, riots, and grape boycotts" exist for them in "history books." And, implicitly, Hochschild et al. suggest that this history must remain in books if young people are going to advance the race narrative.

But, the NBA's depiction of the post-Civil Rights black middle-class narration of race suggests that stories and collective memories do not work that way. We must understand the collective memories of Katrina, the immigration march (that

apparently defied the history books by slipping out of the covers), and the victory that Barack Obama declared theirs in relation to history if these events are to have any meaning that might lead to a new race order. My nephews understand Katrina because *de facto* segregation is a remainder of Jim Crow. They understand the significance of the Grant Park speech because Obama insisted that his election should quiet any “doubts that America is a place where all things are possible,” *despite* its history. If my nephews’ generation cannot access this history, their collective memories cannot help them to advance the race narrative in the U.S. The postrace figures in NBA fiction, always oriented to political histories of race, remind us that new race narratives must consider the past. New narratives that lack an historic foundation are simply platitudes.

The potential of the narrative depictions found in the NBA fiction lies in the postrace moments that connect post-Civil Rights figures to historic narrations of race. For this reason, I view NBA fiction as a vital and expansive part of the canon. Trey Ellis’s *Platitudes* and Percival Everett’s *Erasure* embed their respective protagonists in narratives of racial realism and Jim Crow. Danzy Senna’s *Symptomatic* traps its protagonist in the narrative of the Tragic Mulatto. Lee’s *Lost Hearts* arrests its protagonists in the narrative of the circum-Atlantic. Moreover, postrace moments of return appear in NBA fiction not discussed in this study.

The protagonist in Darryl Pinckney’s *High Cotton* (1992) is forced to return South where he is caught in narratives of essentialism. The protagonist in Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) struggles to avoid any ideas of a fixed identity but is eventually caught in the narrative of racial uplift through leadership. The

protagonist in Michael Thomas's *Man Gone Down* (2007) is caught on the color line that runs through his family. All of these novels feature post-Civil Rights middle-class protagonist who must grapple with old narratives of race, even if they desire to move beyond race. But, because the NBA focuses on the middle-class experience of individuals, some scholars question whether we should include the NBA in the African American literary canon.

The most incisive discussion of the challenge the NBA presents to the African American literary tradition stems from Kenneth Warren. "The idea that sustains the possibility of an African American literature is a belief that the welfare of the race as a whole depends on the success of black writers and those who are depicted in their texts" (*What Was* 139). Warren characterizes the black American literary tradition as the depiction of the problems of individuals (writers and/or characters) that apply to an imagined black community as a whole. It is therefore fair to question, given that most people are not globetrotters or ivy-league graduates, how the welfare of a figure in Ellis's, Everett's, Senna's, or Lee's work has any connection to black people who lack access to education and wealth.

In his book, *What Was African American Literature* (2011), Warren defines the black American literary tradition as a response to U.S. legal and social policies designed to other blackness and limit black participation within the body politic. Warren, in fact, provocatively argues that the tradition first appeared only after emancipation as a response to Jim Crow culture and ended after the judicial and legal address of "separate but equal" policies in the fifties and sixties (1-2). Post-Civil Rights or NBA literature, a body of work largely produced by writers who are

middle-class products of integration, might, according to Warren, depict individual suffering of discrimination; but, the fate of the group does not rest upon the suffering of this individual. If we are to understand post-Civil Rights fiction that focuses on the privilege of the black middle-class experience, we must discover how this experience connects up with our conception of the black experience.

NBA writers depict middle-class black characters negotiating discrimination despite their position of privilege. Warren convincingly asserts that the focus on individual examples of discrimination—examples that however reprehensible still carry the possibility of legal and social redress even at the highest levels of government in a twenty-first century U.S.—makes the disparities suffered by a growing working class less apparent:

At present ... a **literature** insisting that the problem of the 21st century remains the problem of the color line paradoxically obscures the economic and political problems facing many black **Americans**, unless those problems can be attributed to racial discrimination. If the nation's black citizens are suffering largely for the same reasons its white citizens are suffering, then that is a problem about which such politics has nothing to say. In the world we inhabit, discrimination stands out most blatantly as the problem to be addressed when you've got a lot of life's other problems whittled down to a manageable size-- which is why college professors being snubbed by cab drivers and accosted by police officers in their own homes, or wealthy celebrities

being dissed by upscale retailers, have become iconic figures in demonstrating that race still matters. (*Chronicle*, emphasis in original)

As Warren notes, a focus on individual examples of race discrimination can ignore the implications of the privilege of legal recourse and overlook economic inequities that many blacks and other Americans face. The 2009 arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. by Cambridge police, for example, carries overtones of racial discrimination. The incident received attention, however, specifically because of Gates' status as a well-known scholar with powerful connections. Warren's point is clear in this example—due to Gates' connections and legal and political options, the incident ended in a potentially productive, though benign, “teachable moment” that distracted attention away from the more significant forms of injustice often faced by people of color in the U.S. who lack Gates' position.

Warren persuasively shows how the experiences of the black middle class are not necessarily indicative of the conventional African American experience, but his dismissal of the “very fine novels and poems” (*Chronicle*) that would depict a racialized incident like the one involving Gates is less convincing. NBA fiction conflates race, gender, class, sexual orientation and/or nationality in ways that write that individual experience into the African American literary tradition. The NBA's intertwining of social identity suggests that the black American bourgeois figure does not enjoy a secure position within the middle class. Moreover, literary depictions of this figure's lack of security make readers aware of persistent social (i.e., racial, gender, class, and national) inequalities. The class privilege of the Post-Civil Rights

black middle class might not indicate the African American experience; but its fictional representation is decidedly relevant.

NBA writers give their novels post-Civil Rights settings, but their texts are always oriented toward past expressions of black experience. This study compares NBA and midcentury fiction to define the postrace aesthetic as an examination of universal themes through the particular of race. If we continue to connect NBA texts to earlier canonical works, we can begin to define the tradition in ways that dislodge the timeline and themes that organize most course syllabi in African American literary studies. An African American course that begins with Senna's *Caucasia* raises provocative questions that we cannot imagine when starting with William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853). A course that pairs Lee's *Lost Hearts* and Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) gestures to the instability of form as well as the shifting routes of the transatlantic. NBA comparisons could take a Harlem Renaissance text away from narratives of racial representation and white privilege, or bring a Black Arts text into the postrace narrative.

Collapsing the NBA into the African American literary tradition, instead of simply attaching it to the end of a timeline or removing it altogether, allows us to rethink how we talk about canonical texts. Similarly, comparing NBA texts to texts outside the African American canon can shed light on key concepts in literary studies. Lee's *Lost Hearts* and Nadine Gordimer's *The Pick Up* (2001) both feature female protagonists who embrace a transnational orientation to empire due to the status of birth—Lee's as a post-Civil Rights black American and Gordimer's as a white South

African, and both from wealthy families. A comparison of how nationality informs privilege in both novels points to the differences and similarities between transnational and postcolonial identities.

NBA fiction gestures to and outside the African American canon. This versatility is the very definition of postrace expression, at least in this moment. By constantly engaging the changing narrative of race in relation to history, NBA fiction shows how the particular narrative of race conveys a myriad of other narratives. Narrating both past and present, the NBA gives us a “new racial order” right now.

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