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FROM ESSENTIALISM TO CHOICE: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

Editors
Agnieszka Łobodziec and Blossom N. Fondo

Uniwersytet Zielonogórski

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INTRODUCTION

The reconsideration of culture and identity within the last three decades is very applicable to an analysis of varied modes of identity formation within the American context. Identity is no longer associated with unquestioned particularity relative to an individual sense of belonging to a specific nation, ethnic group, geographical location, religious organization, political party, and essentially defined features of other entities. It is deemed rather to be a continued process of cultural changeability and fluidity. Here, culture is understood as "the semantic space, the field of signs and practices, in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories. […] Culture always contains within polyvalent, potentially contestable messages, images and action. It is, in short, a historically situated, historically unfolding ensemble of signifiers-in-action, signifiers at once material and symbolic, social and aesthetic" (Camaroff & Camaroff 1992: 27).

Toni Morrison formulated the term "Foreigner's Home," which expresses a certain condition of place established by migrations of peoples from one geographical and cultural space to another. Historically, America has been a major voluntary and involuntary migration destination. In an interview at *America Festival* in France in September 2012, Toni Morrison stated, "Everybody in America has come from some place else, except Native Americans. And immigrants who came because they were pursued, or because they wanted riches, or because they were bought, sold, told 'Either you go to jail or you go to America,' as they did in England. Everybody was from some place else. Thrown out or exiles. So the idea of home for Americans is fraught with yearning. It's a romantic place. It's a kind of utopia, just out of reach. So it's less a place than a mental state that you acquire when you are in a place where you are safe and nobody is after you, and people will help you."

Multiple identities have arisen and are still rising from this cultural and socio-political context. Some of these culturally constructed identities have been conceptualized under various rubrics such as hyphenated identity, hybrid identity, racial identity, gendered identity, and fluid identity. The American context also produces to good measure so-called playful identities that may have dual meanings: encompassing a deconstruc-

tionist concept of play indicative of "the instability, the permanent unsettlement, the lack of any final resolution" (Hall 1990: 228) or entailing amusement. Playful identities, therefore, may engender postures that ultimately cause identity crisis or/and guarantee privilege and recognition, the latter frequently resulting from individual choice.

The volume presents perceptive interpretations of the literary representations of culturally constructed American identities. The questions considered are: How do the writers' narratives challenge essentialist categories of race, gender, sex, and nation? What attitudes do the characters develop in relation to these categories? How do the writers envision the future development of American identities? What sorts of identities do their characters represent? What roles do space, ethnicity, politics, and social status play in the characters' (re)definition of their identity? What factors and circumstances encourage or impel the characters to reconsider themselves? What role do racial consciousness and gender consciousness play in the characters' development of identity? What choices do they make? How are post-colonialist, deconstructionist, psychoanalytical, and feminist approaches applicable in the analyses of literary representations of identity formation? What is the relationship between the sense of identity of individual writers and their attitudes towards their own literary practice?

In response to the questions above, **Gerardo Del Guercio** discusses the question of hybridity as a narrative strategy in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to create the self of the heroine Claudia which enables her heroic survival in a hostile cultural environment. **Yapo Ettien** investigates the African-American feminine self-assertion in opposition to racialized aesthetic standards that lead to the stigmatization of blackness not only in the inter-racial but also in intra-racial contexts portrayed in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. **Iwona Filipczak** places the identity formation of selected characters in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, "Orbiting" and *Desirable Daughters* within the framework of voluntarist model of identity, evidencing performative nature of the characters' identity. **Blossom N. Fondo** explores the evolution of African American female identity in Terry McMillan's *Getting to Happy* and how the woman reinvents the female self from a perspective other than race. **Terri Griffith and Nicholas Alexander Hayes** carry out a structuralist analysis of the literary representation of disputable American gendered and sexual identities through juxtaposing female and male characters in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* as binary oppositions. In her discussion of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, **Anneliese Heinisch** explores the white poor character's self-affirmation through nonconformist behavioral and attitudinal patterns in challenge of derogatory stereotypes and social marginalization that the so-called "white trash" is believed to be essentially destined to. **Tammie Jenkins** exposes the manner in which the characters in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* choose to redefine in their individual ways the essentialist categories of race, gender, and class. **Paulina Korzeniewska-Nowakowska**

evidences the determining nature of sports and outdoor activities in the formation of ethnic, national and gendered identities of the selected characters from Jack London's "A Royal Sport" from *The Cruise of the Snark*, "On the Makaloa Mat" and "The Mexican." **Agnieszka Łobodziec** employs the theory of the stages of racial identity development in her exploration of the Polish American character's attempt to define his sense of belonging in a racially stratified realm of American northern city depicted in James Baldwin's *Another Country*.

Agnieszka Łobodziec & Blossom N. Fondo
Editors

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From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

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HYBRIDITY IN MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE:* THE DIALOGIC FORMATION OF CLAUDIA'S SELF

Abstract: Toni Morrison's stories have centered on reciting life stories, mounting new and individual ideas of the self. The present essay revisits Morrison's first book, *The Bluest Eye*, to consider her first female her, Claudia, and her hybrid growth. Hybridity is used, in *The Bluest Eye,* as a narrative approach to craft Claudia's self through the course of the novel, enabling her gallant endurance within an antagonistic cultural milieu. Yet, in *The Bluest Eye,* hybridity is not conceived as an undecided or liminal existence in Homi Bhabha's sense. For Toni Morrison, being trapped "in-between" is never an industrious space for characters that resist with inner and exterior acceptance. Consequently, this essay provides a critical reassessment of Bhabha's hybridity through the examination of Claudia's self-development. I contend that Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* confronts the conception of "liminality" for its incapability to illustrate the narrative route by which subjects form themselves productively outside the weight of peripheral primers of identification. Instead, Morrison chooses a dialogic configuration of subjectivities more similar to M.M. Bhaktin's "inner speech" and "hybridity" conjectured in his influential work, *The Dialogic Imagination*.
Keywords: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye,* hybridity, Homi Bhabha, M.M. Bhaktin

Introduction

Toni Morrison's novels have centered on the narration of life stories, developing new and individual conceptions of selfhood. This paper revisits her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, to analyze the first of her heroines, Claudia, and her hybrid development. Hybridity is used, in *The Bluest Eye,* as a narrative strategy to create Claudia's self through the course of the novel, enabling her heroic survival within a hostile cultural environment. However, in *The Bluest Eye,* hybridity is not conceived as an ambivalent or liminal state in Homi Bhabha's sense. For Toni Morrison, being stuck "in-between" is never a productive space for characters that struggle with internal and external acceptance. Thus, this paper offers a critical reevaluation of Bhabha's hybridity through the analysis of Claudia's self-development. I argue that Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* challenges the concept of "liminality" for its inability to describe the narrative process by which subjects constitute themselves successfully outside the demands of external primers of identification. Morrison opts instead for a dialogic formation of subjectivities more

akin to M.M. Bhaktin's "inner speech" and "hybridity" theorized in his seminal work, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

Hybridity, Mimicry, and Otherness in Bhabha and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Contemporary literary discourses on hybridity have adopted Homi Bhabha's work as a model to understand the power dynamics of cross-cultural contexts. Ambivalence, liminality, third space, in-betweenness are terms that have gained currency in the vocabulary of ethnic, race, and postcolonial studies due to Bhabha's extensive analysis of the discursive productions of cultural encounters. Homi Bhabha and Toni Morrison are interested in the power that language has to define cultures and individuals. However, Toni Morrison, unlike Bhabha, believes in the possibility of articulating a hybrid, but independent, voice. Thus, hybridity in *The Bluest Eye* is not characterized by indeterminacy and ambivalence, but by its ability to dialogize dominant cultural discourses. In fact, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* exemplifies the way in which hybrid subjects are formed in dialogue and the catastrophic consequences of failing to do so. Claudia and Pecola embody these two scenarios. While Claudia acquires a voice through the process of telling the stories of others on her own words, Pecola repeats and internalizes other peoples' discourses, getting caught in the ruse of mimicry. Madness is the result of Pecola's liminality and inability to escape the master's text. In contrast, Claudia's hybrid self emerges through dialogism. Her dialogic formation is presented in the novel as the process that elucidates "how" one escapes objectification, succeeding at realizing an independent, hybrid subjectivity (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 6).

Bhabha maintains that the hybrid element embedded in dominant cultural discourses comes from a profound insecurity towards otherness as an object of desire and derision. As Robert Young explains, hybridity is "founded on an anxiety" (145). Insecure in its ability to assert power through the written Word, the dominant culture generates representational narratives–stereotypes–to fix the identity of the minority group. As such, the stereotype is intended to signify difference, objectifying the Other to contain the anxiety that otherness produces (Bhabha, "Difference" 204). The stereotype, according to Bhabha, turns into an image of identity, functioning similarly to the Lacanian mirror stage. It transforms the members of the minority group as they individually assume the image as a coherent representation of their selves. Mimicry results out of this process of objectification. Once the image of the stereotype has been completely adopted, the individual, Bhabha asserts, rejects that image of himself for a "better model" based on the cultural representation of the dominant counterpart. Therefore, mimicry, the complete adoption of the values, norms, and cultural practices

of the paramount group by those subjected to the stereotypes, creates "authorized versions of otherness:" subjects that are "white, but not quite" (Young 147).

Under these circumstances, establishing a counter discourse appears impossible. But Bhabha insists that mimicry itself allows for subversion, for "mimicry is like camouflage" (*The Location* 90). That is, while mimicry is a strategy to "reform" the Other in the image of the dominant group, a visible difference between the American and the Americanized, the White and the White-like appears. Hybridity, according to Bhabha, emerges with subversive qualities within this gap. The slippage intensifies the anxiety of the dominant culture and threatens its power since it is a constant reminder of its inability to completely control and fix the Other (Bhabha, *The Location* 86-89). In Bhabha's own words, "hybridity unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" ("Signs" 154). Hybridity in Bhabha's theory seems to have the power to question the effectiveness of the dominant culture, but in doing so, the subject is denied the ability to escape the binary between an imposed self and other, having been relegated to inhabit the space in the middle of the two, since hybridity only works within the parameters of mimicry. Therefore, hybridity does not solve or change the condition of those who are objectified. Indeed, Bhabha concedes: "Tensions are not resolved by means of hybridity" ("Signs" 156). Hybridization only occurs as a repetition of the master text, creating a "mutation" that might challenge authority, but still depends on it for its formation (Bhabha, "Signs" 153).

Then, resisting dominant discourses by means of Bhabha's conception of hybridity means to remain invisible and difficult to apprehend, frightening, menacing for the dominant group (Bhabha, *The Location* 47). It is no surprise that Bhabha gives this empty and duplicitous "I" the sinister appellation of "Evil Eye" (*The Location* 52). Yet, as disturbing as this "evil eye" might be for the dominant culture, its constitution as a trace–an invisible, "missing person," "nothing in itself"–is utterly damaging for those individuals condemned to live in this liminal space (Bhabha, *The Location* 53). Subversion comes at the cost of any alternative representation for individual subjects, since they need to occupy and "speak" from the site of in-betweeness and non-existence (*The Location* 47). According to Julia Kristeva, this state of in-betweenness causes psychosis. Bhabha's hybrid will eventually get lost in semblances and masks, "battling for a power without any place"(Kristeva 114, 115) since for Bhabha, "the access to an image of identity is only possible in the negation of any sense of originality" (*The Location* 51). Consequently, hybridization as a way to overcome cultural alienation in Bhabha's theoretical framework entraps individuals within the parameters of the master's language. Bhabha's hybridity does not provide individuals the ability to speak

on their own terms since occupying a liminal state precludes the possibility of attaining a single, unique voice.

Bhabha's theory thus begs the question of whether the "subject" can keep his/her sanity while being an ambivalent shadow, "always the split screen of the self and its doubling" (Bhabha, "Signs" 156). Toni Morrison suggests in *The Bluest Eye* that speaking from a site of ambivalence is impossible. Those who mimic fall victim to the dominant system, losing their sanity, their coherence. In sum, their entrapment produces their psychosis because constant repetition without the possibility of creating new meaning–without originality–results in madness (Kristeva 106, 107). Ania Loomba asserts that there must be a different way of understanding hybrid subjectivities beyond Bhabha's radical indeterminism (172). In fact, there is. A reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* against Bhabha's theory of hybridity serves to reconsider the usefulness of liminality to understand contemporary narratives of subject formation under conditions of asymmetrical power relations. In Toni Morrison's work, dialogism, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory about forming open and ongoing identities through the dialogue produced by encountering otherness, is central to analyze those female voices that, in Morrison's novels, dare to defy dominant discourses, creating their own subjectivity in the process of telling the stories of others.

Mikhail Bakhtin argues that truth can only be perceived in dialogue and communication since truth resides in the multiplicity of voices and points of views that concern themselves with a given issue (Morson and Emerson 266). For Morrison, as for Bakhtin, language is the site where we can negotiate meaning. That is, power is contested in words. In her "Nobel Lecture," she underscores the urgency to use language creatively to "reject, alter and expose" those other "oppressive" languages–sexist, racist, theistic–that "do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas" ("Nobel Lecture" 2). For Morrison, as for Bakhtin, dialogism should replace monologic claims of truth. Yet, only those who engage actively in discourse can effectively negotiate meaning. Such engagement is in fact "the fundamental indicator" for Bakhtin of "ethical, legal, and political human beings" (*The Dialogic* 349-350). The "speaking person" grows as they challenge and re-establishe the boundaries of other people's discourses, resulting in a narrative of his or her identity. Similarly, Toni Morrison is interested in the way that storytelling determines subject formation: the way in which the stories we tell "create us" as they are being created ("Nobel Lecture" 4).

Storytelling and subject formation is also a well-known narrative strategy in African American literature. Slave narratives, a fundamental influence in the work of Toni Morrison, developed and asserted the humanity of the slave for the white majority through the story itself. The slaves/authors used the signature, "written by himself" or

"herself," both to "authorize" and to "authenticate" their selves as human beings and thereby worthy of freedom (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 189). In these texts, the author regains the control of defining his or her subjectivity through the act of writing the story, mixing together the oral tradition of storytelling and autobiography. Alice Deck characterizes this writing as "auto-ethnographic." It consists of an "intricate interplay of the introspective personal engagement expected of an autobiography and the self-effacement expected of cultural descriptions"(238). The polyphonic and dialogic structure of these accounts avoid, as Deck states, "a monolithic observing self in favor of one that narrates from the multiple positions of personal anecdotes, generalized descriptions, and personal irony"(238-239).

This intentional mixing of multiple languages into a single narrative is precisely what constitutes hybridity in Bakhtinian terms (*The Dialogic Imagination* 358). Therefore in Bakhtinian philosophy and Toni Morrison's oeuvre, the development of a hybrid identity depends on three main principles: Individuals are created by words as much as words are created by individuals; individuals can constitute themselves meaningfully through the incorporation of other people's narratives into their own; finally, individuals have the ability to escape objectification by the conscious creation and orchestration of external narratives into a single, unique voice in constant dialogue with others. Based on these principles, Claudia's voice in *The Bluest Eye* is hybrid and as such she is able to constitute herself as a subject while resisting the master narratives that alienate not only Pecola, but many of the characters in Morrison's fictional world.

Morrison opens *The Bluest Eye* with a story from the series of *Dick and Jane*, a very popular primer used in the United States in the 1950s. This preamble is intended to make reference to the dangerous interaction between learning, images, and personal identifications. The reader features Dick and Jane's very "happy" family, their suburban house, their dog, a cat, and a "very nice" mother and "a big and strong" father, all of whom laugh and smile while a friend comes to play with Jane (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 3). This simple story is meant to teach literacy skills, but it also introduces the child to the discourse that typifies the archetypal "American Family." Dick and Jane simplistic narrative solidifies a single representation of what is to be American that permeates into the consciousness and the language of social consent. As such, this is a monolithic discourse because it defines "who" is an American and excludes from the community those who are not represented in the story. For that reason, *The Bluest Eye* deconstructs the Dick-and-Jane text, exposing the power of representation and emphasizing the importance of dialogizing narratives of signification geared to privilege some and exclude others. The same Dick-and-Jane text is reproduced three times. Each time the primer is repeated, it gets distorted to the point that it loses meaning, and therefore, its

power. This linguistic manipulation emphasizes that the story is built by words within an established language system, and like words, the story itself is simply an image, an empty signifier. This basic premise–language is arbitrary–opens the space of the novel and Claudia's ability to change preconceived meanings of belonging.

In her "Nobel Lecture," Morrison clearly states that, "the vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers… [Language] arcs toward the place where meaning may lie" (3). In her novels, those characters that fail to realize that there is no pre-established connection between signs and meanings simply reenact existing, monologic narratives, falling victims of the Word and the stories of others. Yet, Morrison's very first heroine, Claudia, refuses to accept monologic forms of representation that not only exclude but also objectify others. Early on in the narrative, Claudia realizes that language determines people's behavior. Therefore, Claudia does not readily accept any external form of signification. Instead, she deconstructs the master text, much the way the preamble of the novel has been distorted, in order to re-make its meaning. In the process, Claudia creates an alternative discourse that validates her own perception of the world against the one externally imposed by others. This process causes monologic narratives to lose grip on her subjectivity and Claudia's singular voice appears, as a result, in the form of the novel.

From the beginning of *The Bluest Eye,* it is clear that Claudia's house is not as "nice" as Dick and Jane's. Hers is "old, cold, and green" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*10). In fact, Claudia's world is described in direct opposition to the one that appears in the preamble. Roaches and mice substitute for the cat and the dog, and adults "issue orders" without smiling or taking into consideration the children in the house (10). This environment, compared with the "healthy" and "moral" life presented in the primer as a model to aspire, appears to be detrimental to Claudia's wellbeing. Economic status is paired up with a sense of moral impoverishment that, at first glance, seems to cause the depravity of Claudia's world. Sickness, then, is a fitting metaphor for this unwholesome life. When Claudia comes home after collecting coal to warm the house on a cold winter day, she gets sick and is yelled at by her mother, "'Great Jesus. Get on in that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on that head? You must be the biggest fool in town'" (10). Claudia's mother's reaction to her child's cold seems insensitive–it lacks the "motherly" affection and tender care that one would have expected from the "nice" white middle-class mother featured in the preface. However, Morrison's narrative strategy produces a different effect. The white middle-class decorum of the primer is replaced by an almost grotesque realism, focusing on Claudia's body and its sickness:

> I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do promptly. Later I throw up … The puke saddles down the pillow onto the sheet-green-gray, with flecks of orange. It

> moves like the insides of an uncooked egg. Stubbornly clinging to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. How, I wonder, can it be so neat and nasty at the same time? (11)

Bakhtin reminds us that, "[the body] offers a liberation from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (*Rabelais* 34, 94). Dick and Jane's wholesomeness and pristine congeniality of the primer suddenly appears artificial in contrast to Claudia's puke. Thus, by focusing on the reality and materiality of body functions, Claudia's narrative gains a greater sense of personal affirmation that renders any attempt at identification with monologic narratives, such as the Dick-and-Jane story, pointless. Certainly, the more Claudia speaks about her experience, the more the preamble loses the power to exclude Claudia's life, making her story more compelling than the "eternal happiness" of Dick and Jane's happy family life. Claudia gains the ability to give universal signs a different meaning. Puke itself becomes "neat," and Claudia's "motherly love" no longer is defined by the standard presented in the middle-class white primer: "Mother is very nice … Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh" (3). Claudia's mother loves more significantly and, perhaps, more realistically. Her love, Claudia says, is "thick, sweet and dark" (14). "Love" and "darkness," antithetic terms in the dominant discourse of the primer, join in Claudia's language to signify her experience of motherhood and the tenderness of those hands that "don't want [her] to die" (14).

Claudia's hatred for dolls is an even more poignant example of the way in which the body serves as a site of struggle with predetermined meaning in *The Bluest Eye*. While children and adults alike seem to rejoice looking at the "blue-eyed Baby Doll" as a sign of supreme beauty, Claudia cannot understand where the value of "the thing" actually lies. Her instinct leads her to deconstruct it, literally. She looks inside the plastic body of the doll with the hope of finding the source of its power, but finds nothing (20-21). There is no substance, no essential meaning in the thing itself. Nothing makes her beautiful. Thus, Claudia discovers at a tender age the arbitrariness of language. She also notices the social value of signs, which she does not accept readily "as is" or "just because." Indeed, "the word of a father, of adults, and teachers" demands an unconditional obedience that Claudia is not ready to give (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 342). In response, Claudia starts a dialogizing process of signification. The result is Claudia's unique voice, one informed by a complex array of discourses that have been analyzed and re-organized to signify on her own terms. Claudia develops what Bakhtin calls an "internally persuasive" discourse that, while not directly opposed to the "authoritative" one, struggles with it in order to demystify its power and privilege (*The Dialogic Imagination* 342).

The same drive that leads Claudia to demystify "beauty" in white dolls forces her to grapple with the unconditional deference that everyone seems to show for white

girls. Claudia hates them for what they represent to others (22-23). Yet, Claudia had already learned by dismembering the doll that there was no essential reason to consider white girls superior in their beauty. Their bodies are indeed no less material than that of a doll. She concludes that white girls' power must be "magical," something invisible that exists independently and despite their bodies. She does realize, however, that white girls, unlike dolls, are human. Therefore, she cannot subject them to the same objectifying process by which she examined, dissected, and dismembered the white doll. Indeed, she realizes that such "disinterested violence" toward others is "shameful" (23). Claudia's inner discourse then settles for "fraudulent love" (23). Some critics like Donald B. Gibson and Cynthia A. Davis have found this to be "devastating" or at least not as "appropriate" as her first reaction, "pristine sadism" (162, 11). Yet, Claudia's response towards white girls is more sophisticated than her violence. Claudia uses the power of language, being consistent with Morrison's choice. Claudia discovers that the "magical secret," controlled by dominant culture, is the power to name, define, and create the meaning of things. Once she realizes she can do the same, she becomes an active and conscious participant in the game of making meaning. Moreover, she understands now that her emotional responses–love or hatred–are towards an image that the authoritative discourse imposes and that she has learned to break, change, and dialogize. Her "love" for "cleanliness" as much as for "whiteness" becomes a conscious and strategic positioning towards a discourse that has lost its powerful spell because she now understands that "whiteness" is created in and by language. Thus, she continues subjecting the discourse of "whiteness" to the same irreverence she shows for the dolls. This complexity in Claudia's voice is typically hybrid in Bakhtinian terms. Her hybridity is formed by and through dialogizing the discourses of others. Yet, a hybrid voice achieves independence through its intention to defy and change the master text. Thus, Claudia's consciousness is not in between or marginal, as Michael Awkward contends, echoing Bhabha's theory of liminality (183-184). On the contrary, hers is a unique but engaged voice that emerges out of the struggle to dialogize those other voices that constantly compete to define the meaning of things in her world. Incidentally, "it is not *finite,*" either, because it continues creating, examining, and changing for as long her dialogue continues in the form of the novel (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 345, 346).

Claudia's voice contrasts with other characters in the book. The Breedloves, for example, represent the antithesis to the Dick-and-Jane family. They are introduced as "poor and black." But, more importantly, "they believed they were ugly," Claudia reports (38). She understands what they themselves do not: blackness and beauty are not biological, essential terms, but stereotypes in the dominant discourse geared to objectify and marginalize designated groups. Claudia affirms that "[they] wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them" (38). The paring

of blackness and ugliness, while whiteness is associated with beauty, is the main stigmatizing element of this binary system within the dominant cultural discourse. Those individuals who, like the Breedloves, do not learn to dialogize the binaries, fully adopt the stereotype as part of their ontology. Claudia explicitly states,

> The master had said, 'You are ugly people.' They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. 'Yes,' they had said. 'You are right.' And they took their ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (39)

Bhabha's conception of the stereotype as the source of hybridity and therefore potential subversion is thus challenged in the novel. Bhabha claims that, as a strategy to assert power and appease the master's anxiety, the stereotype assigns rigid roles to those considered "Other." Yet, as we already discussed, the individual, according to Bhabha, can look back at the master's text, reminding him of his lack of complete control over those deemed different, causing the master's paranoia. Yet, in *The Bluest Eye* no one looks back. On the contrary, those subjected and objectify by means of stereotypes suffer its devastating power.

One of the main characters affected by the power of stereotypes is Pauline Breedlove. While Polly's life is reported to have been "lovely" in the beginning, Polly's physical characteristics, a cavity in her front tooth and a crooked foot, determine her isolation from others. To compensate, she delights in taking control of the material world around her by ordering and counting things. Ironically, once she moves north with her husband, Pauline becomes an object herself. City folks classify her as unrefined, Southern, and ignorant. She tries straightening her hair, wearing high heels or putting on make-up, but nothing seems to be enough to get the "look" required to fit in (118). She still feels as "*no-count*" (117, my emphasis). Then, giving in to the pressure, she literally and figuratively disappears in the darkness of movie theaters. While her body becomes invisible in the dark auditorium, the image of the white world that emerges illuminated on the screen becomes Polly's object of desire, committing herself to its imitation as a way to escape "blackness." Polly's mimicry–the process of accepting the stereotype as an image of self and then rejecting it to adopt the values of the master–does not cause any debilitating ambivalence in the master's text itself, as Bhabha claims it does. On the contrary, in Polly's case, it fortifies the devastating power of the master's discourse (122). Having accepted a new set of "foreign" values dictated by an idealization of beauty and goodness marked by "whiteness," Polly "settled down to just being ugly" (123) and a "perfect servant" (123). Being a maid for a white middle class family gives her "second-hand" power and perpetuates the hierarchical structure of objectification that master discourses create (127-128). That is, the little power Polly may attain as "a good servant" in the value system of the master, she holds over whom

she considers her inferiors, even when those are, in the case of Polly, her own family. Moreover, Polly finds validation for her own self-aggrandizement in the language of Christianity, "holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, [bearing] him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross"(126). In this sense, Polly becomes part of the discursive strategy by perpetuating the idea that "otherness" begets evil whereas "goodness" comes exclusively from the values of the master's world. In becoming a mimic woman, Polly is an "authorized" Other. Like the "good Indian," or the "good savage," the "good" servant is "white but not quite" (Young 147). She becomes but a sign within the master's discourse. Rather than questioning the stereotype in any way, she reinforces it by becoming a representative element of the system.

Geraldine, unlike Polly, does not consider herself "ugly," but her whole life also evolves around the stereotype (81). "Brown, narrow, and tall," she is closer to the white ideal than Polly (82). Yet, just like Polly, Geraldine has internalized the norms, culture, and values of the dominant culture in an attempt to "civilize" anything in her and around her that remotely might be associated with "otherness." For that reason, she zealously guards her body and behavior, making sure "to get rid of the funkiness" (83). She fears any sign of "blackness," becoming a prisoner of the system of signs that denigrate her own body (87). Both Polly and Geraldine become signs within this system of oppression since they do not imagine themselves differently, outside the realm of "whiteness." Instead, they accept and embody the objectification of their beings, losing any ability to speak other than through the master's language. Moreover, they play a role in the reaffirmation of the narcissistic demands of the "authoritative language," by accepting it and modeling themselves after it to the point of invisibility. When Polly goes to give birth at a hospital and the doctor refers to her as a "horse" to "teach" his medical students the "fact" that black women deliver with "no pain." Polly remarks, "*They never said nothing to me. Only one looked at me. Looked at my face, I mean. I looked right back at him. He dropped his eyes and turned red*" (125). Polly's look does not disturb anyone in any significant way. Her gaze is by no means "radical" or powerful enough to challenge the doctor's teaching. Polly cannot articulate her condition, and like in the case of animals, people dismiss her suffering because she cannot speak (125).

Therefore, hybridity in *The Bluest Eye* does not appear as a by-product of the psychological ambivalence of the master's psyche. Nor does it contest or subvert the master's authoritative discourse. Active subversion comes out of the process of dialogizing, not repeating, external languages. In the mere repetition of the values and the language of the dominant culture, there is no room to express oneself differently to become a subject. On the contrary, mimicry requires the objectification of others in a hierarchical structure. For Geraldine, that scale is clear. Thinking of herself in a better position as "colored," she signifies the border between "whites" and "niggers" (87). Polly, unlike

Geraldine, cannot use her body to associate herself with those deemed superior. Yet, she adheres fiercely to their ideology to the extent that she communicates with her family using only the punitive language of the master. She thereby loses her ability to empathize and identify with anyone other than the white world. One casualty of this pervasive and sadist system is her own daughter, Pecola, the most vulnerable character in *The Bluest Eye*.

Pecola, Pauline's daughter, is born into this system that condemns her to be "ugly" from the very beginning. Her mother cannot see her otherwise (126). Pecola's response to these stereotypical codes is primal, pre-linguistic, and, for that reason, even more damaging. She obsessively drinks milk out of a Shirley Temple cup with the hope of transforming into the image everyone respects (46-47). However, Pecola seems to have possessed early in the narrative the ability to create a language of her own. For example, she cherishes the beauty of dandelions, even when everyone scorns them for being "many, strong, and soon" (47). Yet, when the white immigrant clerk "needs not waste the effort of a glance," and Pecola becomes completely conscious of her invisibility, the dandelions, that she once thought pretty, "*are,*" emphatically, "ugly" (48). "They *are* weeds," for she no longer dares to image them otherwise in her own inner language. Pecola's incipient dialogism lacks the support and strength to look or speak back. As a result, she immediately accepts the exterior, authoritative language without question. Significantly, at that moment, she also loses her internal compass, the beginning of what could have been a personal voice, and "trips" on the "familiar" sidewalk crack on her way back home (50). Her language is replaced by the reality of anger and her downfall starts to unfold. Unlike Claudia, she fails to see the emptiness of the symbol and the futility of pursuing it. She loses, early on, the ability and strength to give a different meaning to things that already signify for others. Instead, she firmly believes that by literally consuming those meanings that are already created for her, she will finally become one of them: "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50).

Pecola's complete objectification makes her the ultimate Other. Her community and the larger society, so dependent on exclusion to maintain the hierarchical order, send Pecola to the very bottom of the scale. She is the one who everyone despises and keeps down since to raise one's status depends on pushing others down and away from the center of society. Claudia clearly articulates society's participation in Pecolas's demise: "We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength" (205). Mimicry, a necessary part of the oppressive system, does not provide a realistic chance at subversion. Indeed, the gaze, which Bhabha assures hybridizes the master text, is returned by very few, if any. On the contrary, mimicry exacerbates the difficulty of attaining individuality for those who are pushed to the

bottom, since people's punitive look is not directed toward the master, but towards those who are the most vulnerable. People who, like Pecola, cannot find a way to get out of this pervasive, destructive system, disintegrate.

Understandingly, Pecola does the only thing she knows: she asks for blue eyes in a desperate and instinctual attempt to flee from her body. If she were able to change her body, she thinks, she would change her existence, her experience, her whole being along with it. Soaphead, a mimic man himself, having been subjected to the pressures of colonialism in the Caribbean, is familiar with Pecola's plight–a little back girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of blackness and see the world with blue eyes (174). But indeed, the "evil of [its] fulfillment" is devastating (204). After the visit to Soaphead and the working of his "magic," Pecola starts having hallucinations of a self with blue eyes, and another self who sees them. Pecola splits, entering a psychotic stage that destroys her ego, precluding any possibility of her ever becoming a "speaking subject." She enters what Kristeva calls a "borderline" state, in which one becomes both "actor," involved in life, and "spectator," observer of life (106-107). Both positions are unstable and fluid within the "self" as well as disconnected from others. The subject loses its limits becoming within itself subject and object, an ambiguous entity without a stable "I" from which to speak. Significantly enough, the next time we hear from Pecola in the novel, she is looking at herself in a mirror and two indistinguishable voices speak back and forth about Pecola's blue eyes and whether they are the bluest they have ever seen (193-204). Morrison calls Pecola's ambiguity a state of "unbeing," agreeing with Kristeva's assessment of borderline experiences (Morrison 215 and Kristeva 114). Bhabha, on the other hand, considers this ambiguity, invisibility, indeterminacy and complete instability the moment in which hybridity causes paranoia in the master's psyche. Bhabha's "evil eye/I" is for Morrison the "bluest eye/I" (Bhabha, *The Location* 52). Far from being able to return the gaze, Pecola ceases to exist, having no voice, language, and experience of a concrete body to host her subjectivity. Imitation, the basis element of mimicry, precludes the creation of new meanings with which subjects can fight back.

Morrison also explores self-imposed isolation from dominant discourses as an alternative way to fight back in *The Bluest Eye*. Miss Marie, Poland, and China are prostitutes. They rent the room above Pecola's storefront apartment, and, unlike the rest of the community, do not despise her. They tell her stories, give her clothes, and acknowledge her with "fond" epithets, unlike the rest of society (50-51). Indeed, the prostitutes are the only ones who show Pecola any kind of affection. These characters are important in the novel because they categorically reject any participation or complicity with the dominant culture. So while in the novel Miss Marie, Poland and China are the most humane of the characters, they reject all the possible ways their profession would be "acceptable" in the eyes of society (56-57). They are free from the suffocating lan-

guage of official authorization. That is also the reason why they treat Pecola differently. However, their freedom comes from a complete and conscious removal from society. Consequently, the dominant language does not have the power to define them. Yet, according to Claudia, they are limited by their hatred toward everyone who operates within the main system of signification. She explains, "these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology or discrimination … Neither did they have respect for women … it made no difference" (56). Despite their amiable interaction with Pecola, the prostitutes' model to resist objectification seems to remain marginal. Therefore, for Claudia, it is insufficiently engaged to have the power to change the master's discourse that the process of dialogism affords.

There is one more character in the novel described as positively "free" from language, Cholly, Pecola's dad. He is difficult to analyze. While Morrison does not justify his actions, specifically the rape of his daughter, she does not allow easy judgment. After a life characterized by abandonment, reproach, racism, and oppression, his "ugliness" stems from the abusive treatment he has received at the hands of others. Cholly "reacted to [his children,] and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment," the narrator explains (38). A mixture of tenderness, powerlessness, and love is what Cholly feels when he is raping his own daughter. If the prostitutes and Soaphead understand and sympathize with Pecola, Cholly purportedly loves her the only way he knows, for as the narrator tells us, "love is never any better than the lover" (206). Cholly's characterization as a "free" man is even more troubling. He is free because he is completely outside a shared language system (159-160). Completely untethered to society, with nothing more to lose, he is "dangerously free." His linguistic disconnection from society allows him to manifest his "love" or "hate" for Pecola any way he feels at a given moment for the dominant cultural language does not have the power to restrain Cholly's behavior. His physical reactions are the only language he knows. Consequently, it is his actions that speak for him. In this regard, Bakhtin asserts that, "two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence" (*Problems* 252). Morrison seems to agree. The characters who, like Cholly, are "free" from oppressive discourses, do not engage actively in dialogue with them. Their isolation does not allow them to change the main system of signification in any meaningful way. That is, Morrison, as Bakhtin, believes that engaged subjectivities recognize that the "I" of the other is always a subject, and therefore an active participant in the production of meaning. For Bakhtin, the way to break free from monologic discourses is not in isolation, but engaging in the construction of an "I" that serves as author and narrator of a personal identity, using, changing, discarding, and redistributing the words of others. The result is a polyphonic text of the self: a plurality of voices orchestrated into a narrative independent altogether of the dominant language and immune to its power to objectify (*Problems* 6, 10).

The Bluest Eye is then the narration of Claudia's I. Indeed, as Matus argues, Claudia becomes "indistinguishable of the novel itself" (124). Her voice is the one that makes the effort to negotiate its way through the multiple languages the novel presents. She considers "all speech a code to be broken" (191). Even when she does not understand, she is "careful to listen for truth in timbre" (15). While she shows respect and understanding for each character's subjectivity, the novel offers only the aesthetic discourse that has translated others' consciousness into Claudia's inner speech. In doing so, *The Bluest Eye* narrates the formation of a hybrid voice: a single narrative authority oriented towards someone else's discourse that goes beyond other characters' subjectivities (Bakhtin, *Problems* 199). Claudia thereby partakes from the tradition of slave narratives and their ability to authoring one's self through storytelling. The stories Claudia tells reveal her own self in a through the novel. Certainly, the eye/I of the title refers to the novel itself, narrated as the sign of Claudia's hybrid consciousness that *can see* others, particularly Pecola, but in relation to herself. *The Bluest Eye* is Claudia's meta-language. Claudia creates her own self by narrating the stories of others with the purpose of telling how one escapes objectification while still engaged in dialogue with the rest of society. Claudia's authorship, the distinctive feature of a hybrid consciousness, underscores the discursive quality of the subject. In this sense, identity is not reduced to an essential truth, stable and unchangeable. The subject imagines herself to be a sign in a given time and place. As in language, the signifier–I–cannot contain its signified–the self–in its entirety and complexity. The I, understood in its narrative, discursive form, is always in the process of development, as Claudia is in *The Bluest Eye* (Bakhtin, "Notes" 357).

Similarly, the temporality of the novel is not rigid or stable. A mixture of past, present and future framed within the circular movement of seasons infuses a sense of open--endedness to the narrative and therefore to Claudia's self. While the past is revisited in the stories, it is not constituted as a source of origins. Cyclical time does not allow such reification. The novel, just like Claudia's hybrid consciousness is narrated out of a sense of unfinalizability. Claudia narrates from the future where Claudia continues her process of development as a hybrid subject. Bakhtin affirms that for the "I," "memory is memory of the future; for the other–it is memory of the past" (Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* 125). That is, past discourses and stories from which Claudia's voice is born are finished for they are produced through her memory. Yet, for as long as she keeps dialogizing the discourses of others, her voice is never finished. It belongs to the future with no end. Claudia's narrative voice consists of past stories, dialogized in the present of the narrative, projecting her voice into a continue process of development that resembles a spiral rather than a linear trajectory.

Conclusion

In brief, hybridity, in *The Bluest Eye*, is the stabilizing element that keeps the narrator, Claudia, attached to a personal voice, while monologic languages battle to erase the subjectivity of those who mimic. Pecola, in particular, but also Polly, Geraldine and the rest of the characters in the story fall victims to monologic discourses of race, class, gender, and history. They are isolated, go mad, disappear, die, or self-destruct. These characters repeat the words of others or, by exiting completely the realm of signification, become dangerously free. Claudia, the first hybrid protagonist in Morrison's fictional universe, is followed by Violet in *Jazz*, Denver in *Beloved*, or Florens, in *A Mercy*. All Morrison's heroines are able to transcend master narratives, opting for a dialogic hybridity as a more productive form of identification and survival. They find their individual identity in the discourse and stories of others while resisting and transcending monologic languages by creating one single, yet not finished, text, called their self (Holquist 315).

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From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

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QUESTIONING BLACKS' EXISTENCE IN AMERICA: TONI MORRISON'S VISION OF BLACK BEAUTY IN *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to examine the issues of African American identity by questioning Blacks' existence in America. Indeed, in *God Help the Child* Toni Morrison renders black beauty a central issue. In seeking to sublimate black beauty in general, and particularly that of the African American woman, the writer makes a relatively humiliating presentation of the African American woman through Bride, the protagonist, who appears to be an abject character under the stigmatization of the black race. Through a multivocal narrative, Morrison establishes an intersubjective relationship between various African American narrators who share the stigmatization of their identity as it is conceptualized prior to the Civil Rights Movement and still prevailed during the 1990's. Their commitment in such a relationship is a vibrant manifestation of their becoming conscious of their identity as the opposition between Whites (the Self) and African Americans (the Other) in American society. Accordingly, Bride's constructivist shifting from ugliness to beauty helps her assert her femininity and refuse the image of Blacks' inferiority too. Thus, she demonstrates that colorism has nothing to do with African American women's femininity because they concretely testify to Simone de Beauvoir's idea that women are not born women but they rather become women. So, in her novel Morrison deconstructs the racial bias and posits blackness as a positive racial trait.
Keywords: Blacks' existence, identity, stigmatization, constructivist shifting, femininity, colorism

Introduction

Many African American writers, for instance W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Ernest J. Gaines, focus on the issue of African American identity because it has always been difficult to be Black in America owing to the trauma of slavery and racial prejudices. Accordingly, Toni Morrison, a contemporary African American woman writer, also explores this issue in her novels.

In her last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison foregrounds the complexity of the notion of black beauty. Set in the 1990s, it relates the story of Bride, the protagonist, who is rejected by her parents because they are scared by the blackness of her skin, as a result of their conformance to the standards of beauty promoted in a racist America. Therefore, in seeking to sublimate black beauty in general and that of African American women in particular, Morrison makes a relatively humiliating presentation of Bride. As a consequence, Bride appears to be an abject-subject whose story summons the study of Morrison's vision of black beauty. This paper seeks to examine the issues of African American identity by questioning Blacks' existence in America. The first goal is to show

that black beauty is a stigmatized beauty because an African American is a constructed other that favors group or racial distinction in multicultural America. Secondly, the article focuses on the ways in which African American women refuse to be ugly and struggle to assert their beauty although some of them internalize the stigmatization. Finally, Morrison's deconstruction of the racial bias and positing blackness as a positive racial trait by asserting black femininity are explored.

Black beauty: a stigmatized trait

In *God Help the Child*, the stigmatization of African Americans in general, and black beauty in particular, is indicated from the first pages when Sweetness, Bride's mother, confesses that she was compelled to disdain her baby daughter because of her blue-black skin color: "It's not my fault. […] An hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong, she was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. […] Tar is the closest I can think of …" (3). Even her husband blamed her as if she had decided by herself to give birth to a blue-black child. Of course, in general, we cannot talk about black beauty, blackness, black race, and African American identity without referring to specific Black American experience from which these concepts stem. Accordingly, the attitudes of both parents result from their internalization of racist conceptualizations of beauty, a process that constitutes one of the ingredients of African American experience.

Not only Sweetness but also Queen and Bride are characters whose attitudes reveal the stigmatization of African American femininity. For instance, Bride wonders whether or not Booker, the man she loves, repels her because of her physical appearance. She asks, "I am not exciting enough? Or pretty enough?" (8). In fact, not only does she reflect upon her boyfriend's bad feelings towards her, but she also relates the abuse her mother inflicted on her. She has been rejected by her parents, and perhaps by other members of her community not because she is really ugly but because of her skin color.

Like in her other novels, Morrison uses the multivocal narrative coined by Bakhtin in *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics* as the polyphonic narrative to display the meeting of the characters' consciousness with her own. Indeed, for Bakhtin, the author only can express the truth directly and non-authorial truths remain an attribute of mere characters. Therefore, polyphony implies the meeting of multitude consciousnesses. He maintains, "the consciousness of the creator of a polyphonic novel is constantly and everywhere present in the novel, and is active in it to the highest degree" (1984, 68). To clarify his idea, he further asserts: "The author of a polyphonic novel is not required to renounce himself or his own consciousness, but he must to an extraordinary extent

broaden, deepen and rearrange this consciousness (to be sure, in a specific direction) in order to accommodate the autonomous consciousnesses of others" (1984, 68).

Bakhtin's position can be verified through the analysis of *God Help the Child*, in which the narrative sequence is clearly set up because each chapter bears the name of its narrator, except for the first and the third chapters of the second part, and the first chapter of the third part, which are narrated by an unnamed heterodiegetic narrator. Bride, Sweetness, and Queen, the African American characters-narrators, who share the stigmatization of their identity that was conceptualized prior to the Civil Rights Movement and continued to prevail during the 1990's, the time of the setting of the novel, develop intersubjective relationships. They reveal their respective identities, but mainly their voices carry the physical and psychological trauma of African Americans.

Intersubjectivity and experience are linked. Intersubjectivity can be applicable in case of searching to determine one's relation to others, and the link between one's experiences of others as subjects of experiences that cannot automatically be given to self. Therefore, the characters' commitment in such relationships is a vibrant manifestation of their consciousness of their stigmatized identity, which highlights the opposition between Whites (the Self) and African Americans (the Other) in American society. As Jean-François Staszak argues,

> Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("Us", the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them", Other) by stigmatizing a difference real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. To state it naively, difference belongs to the realm of fact and otherness belongs to the realm of discourse. (2)

Thus, the potential difference between Whites and African Americans is simply biological: the skin color. African Americans' skin color is the category employed to justify their discrimination in American society, and it is on the basis of that biological difference that Whites, the dominant in-group or community, have constructed the dominated out-group, which is the African American community. In this respect, the "Negro" appears to be a victim of white civilization, which determines that blackness equals sin, ugliness and immorality. Black man's identity is constructed and imposed on him by the White power structure. As such, he appears as a cultural subject defined by his belonging to a community whose history, memory and authentic values are denied.

Consequently, and paradoxically, White cultural values and standards of beauty are idealized and internalized by African Americans themselves, which, to a large extent, engendered African American physical and psychological trauma as well. Therefore, some African Americans pass for white because of their belief that the lighter you are, the better you feel in American society, as evidenced by Sweetness's statement regard-

ing her mother: "Because of my mother's skin color, she wasn't stopped from trying on hats in the department stores or using their [white] ladies' room" (4). Her mother is accepted as a member of the in-group, the dominant group, because she has a light skin color. Since white standards of beauty are idealized, Bride's "skin color is a cross she will always carry" (5). This psychological pain is endured by all the black people because blackness has always been associated with negative traits, with everything that is ugly. Through Bride, Morrison denounces racism and demonstrates that beauty is discursively constructed.

In this line, *The Bluest Eye* (1987) appears to be a prequel of *God Help the Child* because it deals with the idealization of the Caucasian standards of beauty. In this novel, Morrison also denounces racism through Pecola, the protagonist, who believes that she is ugly because she does not have blue eyes, which would make her beautiful. Nevertheless, while this ugliness causes Pecola to be an abject character, Bride resists racism and the psychological trauma it causes, and she succeeds in sublimating black beauty by imaging blackness positively. Thus, she transcends the mainstream conceptions of ugliness by recognizing her beauty.

From ugliness to beauty: a constructivist shift

Ugly and beautiful are two contradictory adjectives that give rise to the following question: can ugliness be converted into beauty or vice-versa? The answer to this question might obviously be positive because both concepts are not immutable. With time, something held to be beautiful can undergo changes and become ugly. It loses its value. As a matter of fact, in *God Help the Child,* blackness, regarded as a signifier of ugliness, sin, and immorality for a long time and utilized to determine African American racial identity is turned into beauty, an ideal that symbolizes the divine perfection and sensibly represents goodness.

Indeed, contrary to some African Americans like Bride's parents who have internalized racist conceptions of beauty and stigmatization of the black race, Bride refuses to be ugly. She also refuses to believe in the so-called inferiority of the black race. As such, she overcomes all the obstacles, even the most objective ones, to her integration into American society. She receives school education and succeeds in taking advantage of a job opportunity after several refusals. She becomes the regional manager of Sylvia Inc., the cosmetic company. She thinks she was given this job opportunity thanks to her attractiveness. For her, then, beauty is a means to get opportunities. With high self-esteem, she proudly asserts, "I am young; I am successful and pretty. Really pretty, so there!" She adds, "I am proud of myself, I really am …" (53). In addition, her beauty is

generally admitted because "neighbors and their daughters agreed: 'She's sort of pretty under all that black'" (35).

Bride is conscious of her-Self. And it is on the basis of her Self that she constructs her identity. According to Daphna Oyserman and Kristen Elmore, self-concept and identity provide answers to the basic questions "Who am I?", "Where do I belong?", and "How do I fit (or fit in)?" (2001). They distinguish three types of self-concept and identity: first, they view them as mental concepts, that is, they are mental constructs. Second, self and identity are social products because contextual effects on the self may be distal-parenting practices, schooling, the culture, the time, and place in which one lives, the experiences one has had early in life. And at last, self and identity stimulate action because the "self" influences individual behavior. In any case, these three types of self-concepts and identity are to be referred to as the respective answers to the above questions. And by reflecting on her-Self, Bride knows who she is, the community or society she belongs to, and how she integrates into this community.

In addition, Bride thinks about her-Self, and her reflection influences her behavior. The construction of her identity is viewed in connection to the active knowledge of herself, which is a conscious reflection that involves getting information about oneself. Thus, she becomes conscious of her identity as a human and a moral self. Then, she is regarded as an 'I' that reflects on an object that is 'me.' She reflects on herself because self consists of both the person who thinks (I) and the object of thinking (oneself). The awareness of having thoughts recalls the Cartesian syllogism "Cogito ergo sum" or I think, therefore I am (Descartes, 1973, 123): Bride thinks, therefore she exists. She apprehends the unmistakable character of the assertion of her existence as a thinking being. Her use of the "I" narrative and the pronoun object "me," and the possessive adjective "my" throughout all her narrating sequences testifies that she is a homodiegetic narrator.

As the protagonist of the novel, she constructs her narrative with her life experience. Doing it, she answers the existential question which is "who am I?". Of course, she focuses on the psychological trauma caused by the social rejection she has suffered during her childhood when her mother denied her affection because of her blue-black-skin. Thus, Morrison acts like a narrative therapist when she gives her the speech to narrate her life experience. She establishes a dialogic relationship between her and Bride. And Morrison's objective is to assist her to create a story about herself which helps the character to construct her identity by identifying her values. Consequently, Bride has been capable of using her skills to model her personality.

Moreover, Bride justifies the constructivist idea that identity can change over time. As far as self-identity is concerned, constructivism postulates that people actively play

a role in constructing who they think they are. Correspondingly, it focuses on individuals' self-representation in the construction of self-identity as a response to certain social environment. In sociology, the formation of oneself or of the "me" as the object of the "I" subject is an important means that serves to analyze various possibilities in which interactions between people direct a person's sense of self. Thus, as Bride reflects on her own image, she plays an important role in her identity construction. As it is written above, she actively contributes to constructing what she thinks she is by taking into account the social environment that she belongs to.

Through Bride, Morrison demonstrates that African Americans are human beings. Therefore, they share the same human attributes and qualities with people of other races. As a matter of fact, judging black people on the basis of their skin color is a subjective judgment because "the color's agreeableness belongs to subjective sensation, feeling, through which no object is presented, but through which the object is regarded as an object of our linking (which is not a cognition of it)" (Kant, 2000, 92). Indeed, Kant defines the word "linking" as a sensation (of pleasure). As he has a subjectivist approach of aesthetic judgement of objects, for him satisfaction is so indeterminate that it can not be used to define beauty. So, beauty remains a subjective trait because what pleases me or you may not please someone else. But it is something attractive to the sight, the heart, and the consciousness. It exists only for people who enjoy physical and moral integrity.

Physically, Bride has "silky hair" (23) which appears "like a million black butterflies asleep on her head" (131). She always dresses in white clothes, a color that allows her to be in the full radiance of her beauty, so that Jeri, a designer and her adviser, says that she has a "licorice skin." In fact, the licorice is a sweet, chewy and aromatic black substance made from the juice of a root. Therefore, "licorice skin" is a metaphor by which Jeri highlights her smooth and attractive skin.

Bride does not use makeup nor lipstick or eyeliner. She even wears no jewelry. So to speak, she is naturally beautiful. Instead of being upset by her blue-black skin color, she unlikely uses it to her advantage, and Sweetness, her mother states, "Each time she came I forgot just how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes" (43).

In addition to her external beauty, Bride becomes morally beautiful and she has a strong self-love after she overcomes moral confusion. First of all, her lack of parental love and tenderness does not hinder her education and she becomes a successful regional cosmetics company manager. Her self-love, which obliges her to love others, is a catalyst to redeem herself for the lie she told during her childhood to send Sofia Huxley, an innocent woman, to jail because she hoped that in this way she would earn her mother's attention and love. That is the reason why she approaches the prisoner to express her compassion but she is beaten and wounded by her. When Booker, her

boyfriend, leaves her because he is angered by that affair, she finds solace in sex, drugs, and alcohol. Fortunately, she stops after a while and goes to seek for her lover. Though she experiences instability and pain, Bride always finds of psychological strength to overcome the vicissitude of life.

"She's gone, my black lady" (104) and "I miss my black lady" (106) are respectively the first and the last phrases uttered by Rain in her narrative sequence. She embodies a white girl taken in by the white family that receives Bride after she wrecks her car in northern California. She has her own torments owing to her hard background. Through various discussions she and Bride hold, she realizes that Bride is her listener and mindful of her. In other words, she regards her as a protector. That is to say, Bride brings her psychological relief. This bodes Bride's capacity to be a good mother.

Jeri asserts that black is the new black (33). It is in reference to the economic and sociocultural transformation occurring in the lives of African Americans that this phrase is uttered. It may reflect a resurgence of the New Negro ideology of 1920s which prompted African Americans to have self-confidence and be active to refuse the Jim Crow Law and change their plight. Then, the New Black is the African American who embraces new psychology and spirit to refuse racial prejudices. In this context of Blacks' social and psychological change, Morrison teaches us what it really means to be black. She demonstrates that Whites have a mistaken vision of the black race. Blackness is just a matter of color. It is "a genetic trait, not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin" (143). She thus deconstructs Whites' conceptualization of blackness as a villain feature. From this point of view, it appears that colorism has nothing to do with African American women's femininity, the fundamental element of their beauty and that they proudly assert.

Black beauty: asserting black femininity

Generally speaking, asserting femininity means highlighting the qualities of being feminine. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison sublimates the black woman by specifically highlighting her qualities. But as there is no biological difference between white women and African American women, they share the same qualities and abilities. Consequently, the specific feminine qualities and abilities will be emphasized by taking the opposite course of view to the political and binary masculine-feminine opposition set up by feminists. As such, black femininity is not to be viewed in an explicitly symmetrical relation to masculinity. It is important to make clear that through questioning women's inferior status, feminism aims to make women and men equal by improving women's social position.

Indeed, like the white woman, the black woman is a motherly and eductive subject. In this perspective, biologically, Bride embodies an ideal woman: she has a female sex

and spectacular, plump, and flawless breasts (166). She started to menstruate during teenage years (75), and she continues to menstruate during her adulthood (95), which is a symbol of fertility for a healthy woman, though she temporarily stopped menstruating when her body inexplicably changed after she had her car wreck (95). In general, a woman who does not have her menses is a barren or unhealthy person. In many traditions, especially patriarchal ones, all these features are considered to be characteristic of a true woman because they indicate her ability to procreate, a function devoted to women unless they refuse to have sexual relationships with men.

As far as human sexuality is concerned, and on account of the reproductive function of women, heterosexuality is the natural norm that can help preserve and perpetuate procreation and human species. Today, though technological practices can help procreate without direct sexual intercourses between a man and a woman, heterosexuality has this normal and sure aspect. If Bride gets pregnant and is expected to give birth, it is thanks to her heterosexual relationships with Booker, her boyfriend. Thus, the institution of normative heterosexuality viewed by the naturalized construct appears to be inevitable.

Furthermore, although homosexuality is expanding because it is legalized in many countries, including America, and homosexuals' rights are recognized, societal norms that establish heterosexuality as the normative sexual relationship still prevail. For instance, social institutions such as churches, mosques, and schools regard heterosexuality as naturally normal and morally compulsory. In those institutions, the term "sexuality" automatically refers to heterosexuality.

Obviously, it is on account of her heterosexuality that Bride accepts Booker as her boyfriend. He is the only man she trusts because he makes her feel safe. "Without him the world was more than confusing – shallow, cold, deliberately hostile" (78). Her relationship with Booker defines who she is, enhances her capacity to survive and succeed, and creates harmony in her life. As such, it implies perfection, a core element of the feminine universe. So, Bride contributes to the triumph of the good upon the evil. That is the reason why when she informs Booker that she is pregnant and she attributes the responsibility to him. He replies, "It's ours" (174).

As we notice, sexuality is an indispensable function in the assessment of the qualities of a true woman with regard to the biological renewal of oneself and the human species. And Simone de Beauvoir does not contradict it when she asserts, "the renewal of genetic diversity through mixing of parental chromosomes would benefit the line's rejuvenation and vigor; in this view, then, in the more complex forms of life, sexuality is an indispensable function (42).[1]

1 We use the version of *Le Deuxième Sexe* by Simone de Beauvoir edited by Gallimard in 1949 and translated in English (*The Second Sex*) by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier in 2009.

Besides, femininity determines the way of making love. Here, it is important to remind that Bride is a heterosexual because from this point of view one easily perceives her way of making love. According to Queen, Booker's aunt, Bride probably knows more about love than she does (160). And to demonstrate that she makes love very well, Morrison uses a crude language: "I stroke every inch of his golden skin"; "sucked his earlobes"; "I fingered the dimple in his upper lip"; "I poured red wine in his navel and drunk its spill" (37). "I'm tone-deaf but fucking him made me sing …" (38).

In *God Help the Child*, therefore, Morrison highlights the black woman's femininity by describing love as the expression of beauty because lovemaking is an art. The idea according to which love is like art is not far from the hedonist doctrine whose fundamental element is the quest of pleasure. Obviously, in the sexual domain, the quest of pleasure is the hedonists' main objective even if loving or being loved remains an important factor of bringing a couple together. However, sex should not provide pleasure only, but it should also be the outcome of an act of love. In other words, sexuality should fully serve as a reproductive tool. And the offspring born of reproduction is the real sign of love between a man and a woman. It is in the respect of the reproductive function of sex that Bride gets pregnant at the end of the novel. The words of the novel's title *God Help the Child* are the wish that Sweetness addresses to that unborn child because she wants him/her to be protected by God and to avoid his/her mother's bad experience. In so doing, she worries about the future of that baby who will also have a dark skin.

Moreover, Bride belongs to the American women's middle class. She is a successful regional cosmetics manager. Although that professional accomplishment cannot heal the psychological trauma she experienced in her childhood owing to her blue-black skin, she breaks up the cliché that the black woman could not meet the standard of living conditions unless she is light-skinned. So to speak, contemporary black women are capable of achieving social and economic autonomy. There are for example Whoopi Goldberg, an award-winning comedian, actress and human rights advocate; Mae C. Jemison the first African American female astronaut; and Oprah Winfrey, the Billionaire and well known for hosting her own internationally popular talk show from 1986 to 2011.

Even in the political domain, many African American women occupy high posts, for instance, Condoleezza Rice who was the State Secretary of the George Bush Jr. administration. The ex-American first lady, Michel Obama, is an African American. Her social and political success is linked to her husband's. In a way, this evidences the relative symmetric social evolution of African American masculine and feminine. Despite the obstacles such as the consequences of slavery and racism, and the idealization of White femininity which perpetuates the degradation of Black femininity, African American women have been able to be independent of both White supremacy and White men.

Like African American men, who challenge white men in the social, economic and political fields, they endeavor to assert their respectability as true women. They do not display a jeer image of themselves, but they rather present an image of dignity. Thus, they concretely testify to de Beauvoir's opinion about femininity when she asserts, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman. (2011)

For de Beauvoir, women become women but they are not born women because what we are results from our will. We mold ourselves according to our own resources and those supplied by society. This implies self-consciousness and self-knowledge. In other words, it implies Descartes' cogito ergo sum. Yet, biology attests to sexual differentiation but gender is culturally constructed. Although some feminists and biologists have reacted against de Beauvoir's theory, it made her famous because she is one of the first scholars who theorized feminism.

Analogously, Bride and those successful African American women have created themselves and have acquired social, economic and political values because they have endeavored to be ideally feminine. As we notice, through Bride, Morrison focuses on the notion of an ideal African American woman in her novel.

Conclusion

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison shows that black beauty is stigmatized and internalized by some African Americans because blackness has always been associated with negative traits. This stigmatization is mainly due to the construction of the African American as an Other, a member of a dominated out-group. Through a multivocal narrative, Morrison denounces racism and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is discursively constructed. She teaches what it really means to be Black and argues that Whites have a mistaken vision of the black race. Blackness is just a matter of color. That is the reason why she sublimates the African American woman who constructs her identity as a beautiful woman. From this point of view, one must acknowledge that colorism has nothing to do with African American women's femininity, the fundamental element of their beauty they proudly assert by highlighting the qualities of being feminine. Their physical and moral beauty, their ability to give birth, and their professional accomplishment prove that they are capable of achieving social and economic autonomy. They endeavor to be ideally feminine and they simply demand to be loved. All in all, Morrison focuses on the notion of an ideal African American woman to deconstruct Whites' conceptualization of blackness as a villain feature.

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From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

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"I CHANGED BECAUSE I WANTED TO" – IDENTITY PERFORMANCE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S SELECTED WORKS

Abstract: This paper focuses on the performance of cultural identities in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), "Orbiting" (1988) and *Desirable Daughters* (2002). The paper argues that Mukherjee for the most part dismisses the notions of contingency and is inclined to the presentation of a voluntarist model of identity. Intentionality, choice and conscious transformation are perceived here as means for identity formation. The theories of performance provide a useful framework for the discussion; they help to accentuate the "restored behavior" (Schechner) of Mukherjee's characters. Discussing identity as a performance points also to the agency of the subject, who in the process of changing is also transforming the surrounding reality.
Keywords: South Asian American fiction, Bharati Mukherjee, performance, agency, voluntarist model of identity

With growing globalization, immigration, and border-crossing it becomes challenging, if not impossible, to essentialize national and cultural identities. Increased mobility of people, goods, images and ideas, enables frequent cultural encounters and leads to homogenization of culture around the world. Recent theories of cultural identity question the essentialist notions of a stable, unified, universal subject, and emphasize the fluidity or multiplicity of the subject. Stuart Hall aptly presents the issue in his discussion of diaspora identities:

> Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (222)

In this excerpt Hall asserts that cultural identity is subject to discursive practices. It is in a continual process of (re)formation in relation to changing spaces and times, it is continuously "becoming". Nevertheless, the critic recognizes another way of thinking about identity. It is an essentialist outlook, which emphasizes the similarities among a group of people, their "oneness", which provides "stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of … actual history" (Hall 223). The intricacies of identity make the concept by no means "transparent" or "unproblematic" (Hall 222).

One of the common claims made by contemporary scholars is that the transformation of identity is determined by movement and changing locations. For instance, Linda McDowell argues for spatial construction of identity. She states that identity is "fluid and transitional, based on fragments of place memories, on desires and experience" (220) and claims that any type of a journey will have a transformative power for the subject: "movement involves the remapping of cultural identities" (210). This idea assumes that cultural identity is contingent, that is, dependent on particular circumstances, while the agency of the subject is insubstantial. The subject reconstitutes itself anew through movement and/or encounters with others.

The present article discusses three texts by Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* (novels) and "Orbiting" (short story). The paper argues that in these texts, in the presentation of fluid or fragmented identities, the novelist for the most part dismisses the notions of contingency and is inclined to the presentation of a voluntarist model of identity. Mukherjee challenges thinking of cultural identity as dependent on circumstances or happening by chance and exposes the element of intentionality. Thus, even though Mukherjee's characters in the discussed texts are relocated, that is, migrate from one place to another, neither the journey, nor the encounter with the cultural Other is the sole factor that induces the transformation of the subject. It is volition that is exposed as a necessary element of change (or resistance to change) and in this way the subject's agency is asserted.

In my discussion I would like to draw attention to the element of performance of identities as it is linked to the question of intention. The characters who are immigrants in America are often depicted like performers (or are performers, e.g. Padma in *Desirable Daughters*), who consciously work on their behavior, who have to learn and rehearse how to act, who use appropriate costumes, and whose volition and intentionality to transform their behavior are indicated in the texts. While Mukherjee strives to show the making of a consciousness, she pays in fact a lot of attention to the immigrant body, which is the key element when talking about performance: the posture, gait, gestures, the costume in which it is clad, voice, or actually the language. She thus indicates the consciousness of one's transformation. Furthermore, she demonstrates that as a cultural construct ethnic identity is subject to continuous change brought about in its enactment or performance.

The concept of performance as an analyzing tool draws our attention to the question of awareness. As Marvin Carlson has pointed out, all human activity that is "carried out with a consciousness of itself" can be understood as performance since "our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior" (qtd. in Schechner 31). In Mukherjee's texts the consciousness that an immigrant subject displays about his or her behavior or body as markers of cultural identity is crucial. For Richard

Schechner, performances are human actions or events that have been constructed through a multi-stage process: they have been rehearsed and prepared; a performance is the second (or third or fourth and so on) presentation of a practiced act. Therefore he calls performance "twice-behaved behavior" (29) or "restored behavior" (34). The fact of repetition does not dismiss the non-essential nature of performance, for as Schechner argues "every performance is different from every other" (30), because there may be, in fact, endless variations of behavior; another thing that changes is the interaction with audience, as well as the audience itself.

The idea of learning and rehearsing how to perform American identity is conspicuous especially in *Jasmine* and "Orbiting". Theories of performance direct our attention to the result; it is the outcome of performance that is particularly interesting, what the action, behavior does, how it relates to other actions or subjects, for "Performances exist only as actions, interactions and relationships" (Schechner 30). In my analyses of the texts I will try to ponder about the results of the characters' performance. Finally, performance and performativity can be connected to the question of agency, since in the process of changing (becoming) the subject is also changing the surrounding reality (Domańska 52).

The discussion does not cover the texts chronologically but it starts with Mukherjee's most well-known text, *Jasmine* (1989). The novel brings an interesting tension between contingent and voluntarist presentation of identity. On the one hand, one observes that the protagonist changes in the course of her journey from India across the US, which is an illustration of how location and identity may be treated as inseparable. Jasmine finds herself an eager student of Americanness, adapting to the new circumstances each time she starts to live in another place. In each new location she is given a new name, which aims to signal the remapping of her cultural identity. She is born as Jyoti in Hasnapur, India; her husband Prakash Vijh calls her Jasmine and triggers in her a willingness to educate and transgress the borders of Indian tradition; she is renamed as Jazzy at Lilian Gordon's shelter in Florida when she is taught to imitate Americans; she is called Jase by the Hayes family, for whom she works as a domestic in Manhattan; finally, in Baden, Iowa, she is Jane, married to Bud Ripplemeyer, on the one hand an exotic wife of a local banker, on the other an independent and determined woman who controls her life.

Though the transformation of the main character is shown as dependent on circumstances, that is, the re-location of the subject, the novel also exposes the element of willingness and conscious effort to transform. Jasmine's agency is underlined in the pivotal moments of her life. One of the memorable moments is her wish to change the meaning of the scar she receives as a young girl. As early as a seven year old she dismisses the foretold future of exile and widowhood and the angry astrologer hits her, which is how she wounds herself in the forehead. The scar disfigures her and may

dramatically diminish her chances of getting married in the future. The mark symbolizes patriarchy, male dominance and the low status of both a woman and a child in India. Jasmine intends to give it a different meaning, and she knows she has to perform therefore differently, not like a victim but a conscious and controlling subject, so she decides: "It's not a scar… it's my third eye … Now I'm a sage" (*Jasmine* 5). The belief in the power of performance will give her strength in the future.

The novel abounds in other instances of Jasmine's agency. She arrives in America in order to commit suicide (sati) after her husband's death, and yet, although victimized by the carrier of immigrants (Half-Face), she changes her decision and decides to live. She takes revenge on her perpetrator, whom she kills, and sets off on a journey across the US in search of a better life. Jasmine's agency is underlined each time she decides to abandon the place of her next residence, which happens for a variety of reasons. For example, she leaves Professor Vadhera's house because she is not satisfied with his family's non-American lifestyle, and she leaves her husband Bud Ripplemeyer (even though she is pregnant with his child) because she refuses to accept his Orientalizing attitude toward her.

Jasmine is an incredibly active character and through her activity she demonstrates a conviction that there are things that depend on her. Due to her will to survive and strength she has been likened to the American figures of the cowboy or pioneer (Hoppe 138), while Mukherjee's immigrant characters in general are identified as "settlers, Americans" (Drake 61) in the recognition of their American spirit. And indeed, Jasmine displays the spirit of the first settlers, who arrived in America and wished to start an entirely new life, and who had to discard their past identities in order to adapt to the new circumstances. The protagonist suggests that she makes a conscious choice whether to change or not: "I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward" (*Jasmine* 185). She does not act in the retrospective vein but wants to create new alliances, she wishes to belong to the new culture and the new country.

Thus, Jasmine undertakes the conscious effort to transform, in other words, she wants to discard her old cultural identity and adopt a new one. What is more, hers will be a performance aimed at having a particular effect on the spectators, that is, "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman qtd. in Schechner 29). The protagonist's actions and behavior are meant to convince Americans that she can belong; her imitation of Americans is directed at easing the tension, which results from cultural difference. The earliest facilitator in this venture is Lilian Gordon, a woman who runs a shelter for illegal immigrants and teaches them how to find their bearings in American reality and

to perform as much American as they can. Gordon is like a director who teaches her actors how to act, in other words, how to use their language, clothes, and physicality.

The inability to speak the language of the country of arrival is one of the major difficulties with which immigrants are usually confronted. It is a significant obstacle in adapting to the new reality. What Gordon considers as a very happy coincidence is Jasmine's knowledge of English. The fact that she can communicate with Americans already makes her successful: "I was lucky, she said, that India had once been a British colony" (*Jasmine* 132). Although one may have reservations about this positive validation of the colonial heritage it has to be admitted that Jasmine's position in America is privileged compared to the situation of other females in Gordon's shelter, namely the Kanjobal women. Their possibilities to establish themselves in the US are significantly restricted because they do not know the English language.

The second aspect of a good performance is the costume. Gordon teaches her female residents that to survive in a new country, immigrants, who are mostly illegal, undocumented, must blend in, not stand out, and clothes are a very effective way to cover up. Jasmine undergoes a transformation at Lilian's place, who gives her a new outfit and good advice how not to violate certain rules of American dress code:

> She gave me her daughter's high-school clothes: blouses with Peter Pan collars, maxi skirts, T-shirts with washed-out pictures, sweaters, cords, and loafers. But beware the shoes, she said, shoes are the biggest giveaway. Undocumented aliens wear boxy shoes with ambitious heels.… My daughter calls them Third World heels. (*Jasmine* 132)

Particular clothes guarantee at least partial "invisibility" in a new cultural environment. The American clothes offered by Lilian will help Jasmine pass for an American at first sight; also shoes turn out to be an important element of the costume, therefore they need to precisely match the rest of the outfit.

Finally, an element that can be learned, practiced and rehearsed is gait, the way of walking, which creates the sense of feeling comfortable in space, the sense of belonging. Just like in a theatrical performance where actors' movements have to be studied and then rehearsed, Mukherjee's heroine is "directed" by Lilian: "Walk American, she exhorted me, and she showed me how. I worked hard on the walk and deportment. Within a week she said I'd lost my shy sidle" (*Jasmine* 133). Jasmine is taught even how to do some basic things such as using the escalator because without this knowledge she could be easily detected as an immigrant and deported because of her illegal status: "They pick up dark people like you who're afraid to get on or off" (*Jasmine* 133). On leaving Lilian Gordon for New York, she receives another piece of advice: "Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything else" (*Jasmine* 135). Jasmine's success in the new land depends on her

performance, while her identity, as it can be observed throughout the novel, changes in the course of its enactment.

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee holds a view that cultural identity is subject to change but only when the criterion of intentionality is fulfilled. A mere change of locations, even involving enormous distances, such as a journey from one continent to another, may not be sufficient. The Indian couple who hosts Jasmine in New York is an illustration of this belief. Professor Vadhera and his wife are immersed in their Indian way of life, affirming their Indianness through every daily act, and in the consequence, isolating from Americans. Taking into consideration Jasmine's words, "I changed because I wanted to", it can be inferred that the Vadheras have not changed because they refuse to do so. They prefer to recreate their homeland traditions in the new country and to cherish their "one true self" to use Hall's words (223). The novel does not endorse this way of life as desired. The protagonist finds the Vadheras' lifestyle stifling and oppressive, which makes her move on to another location.

It is interesting to look at *Jasmine*, and, in fact, at other Mukherjee's works, as a response to the transformations of America's population after the country opened its gates to immigration with the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. This new wave of immigration originating mainly from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean Basin has significantly increased the ethnic diversity of American society, and in the result it has inspired a lot of controversy and fears about a possibility of the disintegration of the American society. The questions about the possibility of assimilation of new immigrants were raised. Mukherjee stresses that an immigrant from a non-European country, that is, a controversial subject, is able to assimilate. One can be taught a new cultural identity but one needs to be willing to change physically and mentally. The external transformation (clothes, movement, language) will produce the effect of invisibility and enable one to pass for an American, as a result, the subject will not be immediately rejected by the new society. Simultaneously, through the sheer presence in a new environment, let alone conscious action, one has the potential to transform it, as Jasmine implies when she speaks of herself: "I am subverting the taste buds of Elsa County" (*Jasmine* 19). The novel shows therefore the agency of the subject and implies that assimilation works in two ways; it is not just Jasmine who transforms but also the American society may change in the result of encounter with others. It is the second text, "Orbiting", that gives a better focus on this issue.

The short story "Orbiting" from the collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* published in 1988, a year earlier than *Jasmine*, presents a similar "formula" for performing American. The subject needs to make a decision to transform and it is strictly connected with the process of learning the cultural codes of the new country: one has to adopt an appropriate kind of language, clothes (costume) and particular movements

of the body. Again the situation of an immigrant brings associations with an actor's performance. In this story, the deMarcos family meets the new boyfriend, Roashan, of their daughter Rindy. The setting is symbolic, the occasion for Thanksgiving dinner reinforces the theme of immigrant identity. Moreover, the construction of characters helps to develop this theme – the welcoming family are Italian Americans, while the boyfriend is an immigrant from Afghanistan.

Just like the previously discussed heroine Jasmine, Rindy's boyfriend Roashan has the advantage of knowing the English language – the "blessing" of the British colonial heritage. Nonetheless, Rindy, as well as the rest of the family, sees deficiencies in his way of speaking: it is more British than American, as a result it startles and amuses. What is more, his clothes, which are "made to measure in Kabul" ("Orbiting" 71), stick out and attract attention. Yet, the way he moves is the most significant marker of his cultural difference:

> Asian men carry their bodies differently, even these famed warriors from the Khyber Pass. Ro doesn't stand like Brent or Dad. His hands hang kind of stiffly from the shoulder joints, and when he moves, his palms are tucked tight against his thighs, his stomach sticks out like a slightly pregnant woman's. Each culture establishes its own manly posture, different ways of claiming space. Ro … holds himself in a way that seems both too effeminate and too macho. ("Orbiting" 70)

Rindy notices that even such a basic gesture as nodding can look different: "Even his headshake is foreign" ("Orbiting" 71). Mukherjee again pays a lot of attention to the physicality of the immigrant and indicates that the movement of the body, gestures, and particular ways of behavior are fundamental in expressing cultural belonging. In order to claim a different identity one has to focus on the physicality in the first place.

"Orbiting" and *Jasmine* are linked by the idea that an immigrant can be taught to look like an American. Like an actor, an immigrant has to work on his or her language, choose adequate costume, and practice appropriate bodily movements. Moreover, it is stressed that the subject needs to exercise his/ her volition. Rindy, for instance, is ready to give Ro a new national identity but he has to make the decision, as she states: "I will give him citizenship if he asks" ("Orbiting" 74). She also declares help in teaching Ro how to perform American: "I shall teach him how to walk like an American, how to dress like Brent but better, how to fill up a room as Dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way" ("Orbiting" 74-75). Due to her eagerness to teach Ro American ways, Rindy has been called an "Americanizer" with a "patronizing attitude" (Nyman "Ethnosexual encounters" 159). This statement, however, may be too strong. Rindy is not intimidating or coercive but she respects Ro's decision, as her first statement "if he asks" ("Orbiting" 74) implies. This context of voluntariness cannot be ignored. What is more, she wants to undertake action out of love rather than

other, more selfish reasons: "I realize all in a rush how much I love this man with his blemished, tortured body" ("Orbiting" 74).

The short story like *Jasmine* implies that controversial immigrants are able to assimilate. Even Roashan's dark skin color poses no problem; the narrator, Rindy, makes analogy to Jews, Greeks and Italians, who were considered inassimilable in the past mostly because of their appearance, and yet in the course of time became included in the American mainstream ("Orbiting" 68). Mukherjee suggests that the same will happen to immigrants from Asia, whose visible difference may no longer be conspicuous in the future. The story seems to be written primarily for the American audience, Ro's imagined transformation and performance of the new acquired identity is meant to demonstrate that the acceptance of new immigrants can be a seamless process which does not pose any threat to disintegration of American society. Nevertheless, it may result in the transformation of American cultural codes. In her essays, Mukherjee explains that she wants to view an immigrant's process of integration as the "two-way transformation" of the immigrant and of America ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 34). Her way of thinking is compatible with sociological research which states that assimilation is not a one-way process, but rather a process of change that works in two directions: transforming both an immigrant and the host society (Alba and Nee 25).[1]

The question of imitation present both in *Jasmine* and "Orbiting" brings associations with Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry. In his discussion of mimicry, which involves a complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, but can be used also in the immigrant context, Bhabha claims that mimicry eases the tension that results from cultural difference. And indeed, in the texts discussed, mimicry may be the first step to a meaningful social interaction, to reducing the tension between the members of a marginalized group and the dominant. When an immigrant is imitating the dominant culture, thus trying to blend in, there is a possibility for him/her of being included in the ranks of society rather than being relegated to an inferior position. For Bhabha mimicry is at once resemblance and menace (86) because it means resistance to colonial power, and ultimately has subversive potential. Mukherjee's characters in the analyzed texts may be interpreted as subversive when one takes into consideration their agency, namely their impact on the host society, which is envisioned as a gradual transformation of the American mainstream.

In a later novel *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee's notion of a voluntarist model of identity is expressed as two opposite formations of identity. The novel exposes the conflicting ideas about cultural identity, which may exist even within one family. Mukherjee depicts different life paths of three Indian sisters: two immigrate to the

1 On a more extensive treatment of the question of assimilation in this short story see Filipczak.

United States, while one stays in India. The two sisters living in America are entirely different: older Padma is active in maintaining her Indian self while Tara has chosen to gradually Americanize. Both of them are subject to the same circumstances such as a transcontinental journey, a necessity to establish oneself in a new location, and direct contact with a new culture, yet only one of them transforms her cultural identity. It transpires therefore that Mukherjee highlights again the subject's intentionality as a factor that determines the change of one's identity.

The conflict between cultural purity and hybrid identity is quite conspicuous and marked as an effect of the character's volition and taking effort to create a particular identity. Padma, who is a performance artist, a television personality and celebrity, an "icon among Bengalis of the tristate area" (*Desirable Daughters* 231), is a preserver of Bengali tradition. Very traditional in her appearance and manners, with an Indian husband, she helps other diasporic Bengalis keep up with the latest Indian fashion (*Desirable Daughters* 231) by organizing parties which are fashion shows, not ordinary social occasions. Jopi Nyman recognizes the essentializing portrayal of Padma's identity when he states that the woman "constructs Indianness as a form of purity rather than hybridity" (*Home, Identity, and Mobility* 210). This form of identity, that is, adherence to one's homeland culture and values, is criticized in the novel by Tara, who is Americanizing. For her

> [Padma's] clinging to a version of India and to Indian ways and Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a 'charming' accent had seemed … a cowardly way of coping with a new country. Change is corruption; she seemed to be saying. Take what America can give, but don't let it tarnish you in any way. (*Desirable Daughters* 134)

In Tara's view an immigrant's unwillingness to adapt to the cultural codes of the host country is cowardice, a disability to perform in an appropriate way. She believes an appropriate way of coping with a new reality is creating new alliances and changing loyalties, in other words, showing care for the new homeland.

The intention to change and taking effort to do so characterizes Tara, Padma's younger sister. She is an example of cultural hybridizing which occurred at her will, yet she is not really aware of this process. The journey to America is a liberating event for the woman and from the very beginning she displays openness to new experiences and desires to embrace the novelty in her life: "This is the life I've been waiting for, I thought, the liberating promise of marriage and travel and the wider world" (*Desirable Daughters* 81). Tara is committed to the new way of life and for this reason she divorces her Indian husband, who wants to remain an upholder of Bengali tradition, and who therefore is not supportive of Tara's ideas. When "the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled" (*Desirable Daughters* 82) the woman decides to leave Bish. Describing Tara's hybrid identity Nyman aptly highlights her sense of past and

present, memories of India, returning to her grandmother's stories of the past, which make her travel to India in search of her roots. In Tara's case mobility is connected to the transformation of identity: "The novel emphasizes how Tara's identity is imagined through space and linked with movement and plurality, not stasis and singularity" (*Home, Identity, and Mobility* 212). Yet, it cannot be overlooked that Tara, contrary to her sister Padma, has an intention to change and lets the new circumstances influence her.

The novel reinforces a view that mobility does not necessarily result in the change of identity through the portrayal of other traditional Indian immigrants in America. Tara's husband, Bish, is one such character stuck to traditional values. Interestingly, even though he has worked in the field of modern technologies in the US for several years and has achieved a great financial success globally with the invention of CHATTY, a transnational computer network, his beliefs or way of life are in no way advanced: "He lived and prospered by commonsense precepts that are ingrained in any middle-class Bengali boy. … Whatever he liked at twenty, and still liked at forty-two, now had tenure in his life" (*Desirable Daughters* 263). Bish insists on both a wife and a son of traditional outlook: "Bish could not tolerate a son who was not a perfect replica of himself; hardworking, respectful, brilliant, soberly, sociable, effortlessly athletic" (*Desirable Daughters* 154). He does not indulge in his son's independence and is upset when Rabi decides on an art school rather than becoming an engineer or scientist. Other characters who illustrate the common attitude of recreating the homeland traditions in the country of arrival is the New Jersey community of Indian immigrants and particularly Dr. Ghosal's grandparents. The former eagerly attend Padma's fashion shows showing themselves as followers of Indian fashion and style, and seeming more engaged in the matters of India than the US. Dr. Ghosal's grandparents on the other hand are so old and so attached to the Indian way of life that they do not leave their quarters, which are almost a perfect replica of the Indian home with Indian cooks, servants, furniture and decorations.

In *Desirable Daughters*, one can see an analogy to Mukherjee's personal situation. As she recounts in her essay "Two Ways to Belong," she and her sister also had conflicting views about how to "belong" in America. While the novelist eagerly accepted the new culture and integrated, her sister Mira cherished her loyalty to India and preferred to keep her status as an expatriate Indian. Thus, Mukherjee stresses that the aspect of intention is again the most vital element that guarantees the transformation of identity. Furthermore, the novelist evaluates her sister's choice negatively and implies that it may be taken as disintegrative for society because it is highlighting divisions or differences between groups of people. In another essay "American Dreamer" she reveals her fears connected with emphasizing one's ethnic distinctiveness and the state policy of multiculturalism: "We must be alert to the dangers of an 'us' vs. 'them' mentality"

("American Dreamer"). Mukherjee advocates strongly the policy of integration and she calls for the immigrants' willingness to integrate, which is clearly visible in her literary works. Critics recognize it as an endorsement of assimilation[2], e.g., David Cowart writes that she "reaffirm[s] the American immigrant myth" (71), the myth of blending in, assimilating into the dominant culture. Nevertheless, Mukherjee's view implies that assimilation does not assume the complete erasure of the individual's cultural identity but rather his/her becoming similar to the host culture with a simultaneous contribution to the existing culture, which, in the case of America, is already a fusion, or mixture of cultural elements.

The idea that cultural identity is a matter of choice rather than a result of changing circumstances inscribes Mukherjee in the line of social activists. In fact, the novelist makes it clear in her essays that she is concerned with the situation of immigrants in America. Her fiction is devoted to this agenda, aimed at influencing the immigrant's and American consciousness. In the first case she advocates that the best way to belong in the new country is to integrate and she intends to show that American identity can be successfully learned and rehearsed. Her portrayal of characters who persevere in maintaining their cultural patterns despite their dislocation and contact with other cultures serves two purposes: it emphasizes the novelist's emphasis of intentionality and it shows a possible, but not recommended, way of belonging.

As regards the change of American consciousness, it is Mukherjee's presentation of the subject's agency that matters. Her fiction expresses a conviction that the immigrant subject has a significant impact on the host society; a voluntarily assimilating subject will have a positive interaction with the audience. Moreover, the novelist's idea of assimilation does not entail a complete erasure of the immigrant's cultural identity but rather his/her contribution to the existing fusion of cultural elements, in other words a two-way transformation of identity. Yet, with this belief it seems that Mukherjee cannot entirely avoid the notion of contingency. In the assumption that the arriving immigrants will change American consciousness and American cultural patterns hides the belief that the American (un)willingness to transform can be disregarded because the change will happen in any event.

2 It has to be indicated that Mukherjee dismisses the word "assimilation" and prefers to use the word "mongrelisation" instead. She offers three reasons for doing that. Firstly, "mongrelisation" immediately suggests the mutual exchange of cultural elements in the process of assimilation, that is, transformation of identity working in both directions. Secondly, by this word she wants to acknowledge that the outcome of various cultures mixing is unpredictable. Thirdly, she distances herself from the political context of assimilation as established at the beginning of the 20th century, when assimilation was a coercive practice of the state. Although her concept bears a strong resemblance to the discourse of hybridization, Mukherjee wants to dissociate also from the academic discourse, stating that the term "hybridity" is too scientific or biological (Edwards 164-5).

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From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

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I TOO AM A BLACK WOMAN: TERRY MCMILLAN AND THE REIMAGINING OF THE CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMAN IN *GETTING TO HAPPY*

Abstract: Identity in the African American context has often meant racial identity. This is explained by the deeply racialized society in which blacks had to live in America and where, by virtue of their racial identity, they were the subjects of gross abuses. As a consequence, race became the main thrust of much of African American literature. The rise of literature by black women witnessed the addition of gender to the race question as these women sought to illustrate what it means to be black and female in America. The gains of the Civil Rights Movement which included a marked improvement in the status and circumstances of African Americans (even if much still remains to be desired), encouraged writers to begin addressing other aspects of the African American reality. Terry McMillan is one of such writers whose popular fiction has not made race her central focus. She focuses especially on the experiences of the contemporary African American woman away from the racial perspective. Her works have come under harsh scrutiny and they have been considered apolitical and consequently irrelevant to the African American community. The purpose of this paper is to contest these accusations by underlining the ways the issues McMillan raises in her novel *Getting to Happy* constitute a worthwhile contribution to the discourse of identity in African American literature. My main argument is that the quest for selfhood by the women in this novel disrupts the stereotyped version of African American women and is therefore politically relevant. I underscore that, because identity is multidimensional and dynamic, McMillan's *Getting to Happy* fulfills the important task of imagining African American female identity from another perspective and through this McMillan crafts a new black womanhood not entirely dependent on race.
Keywords: Identity politics, sexual politics, personal identity, Black popular fiction, black womanhood

Introduction

The diversity of ethnicities, races, experiences and cultures within the United States of America has resulted in a vast literary production from different groups as they respectively struggle to represent the self. This desire was particularly more urgent for African Americans whose presence in this region has been singularly marked by myriad abuses. The very nature by which African Americans came to the United States had a bearing on how they would be treated in this society. African American identity served to single them out for second class treatment. Totally ignored by the mainstream writings or, when not ignored, presented in the most negative terms African Americans found it crucial to represent themselves and their experiences. This decision to write their experiences has produced a vibrant literature that seeks to lend a place to African Americans in the establishment. Their stories of enslavement and oppression became

the leitmotif of their writings. Needless to say, the first African American writers were mostly male and as a result their writings presented black experiences from the perspective of males. The experiences of the back woman still remained largely untold. Realizing this absence, African American women as well picked up their pens to recount what it meant to be a black woman in a rigidly racial and patriarchal, hierarchized society. Linda Trinh Moser and Kathryn West (2000) have noted this fact: "As the Black Arts Movement receded in the mid-1980s, African American women fiction writers began to appear […]. Their works signaled a significant shift in African American literature (23).

This shift was the tendency to now address the specific plight of the African American woman; her struggles to carve out a space and identity for herself and the nature and consequences of her struggles. This resulted in the production of a vast canon of writings by black women who recognized the marginalization of their experiences in the literary productions of their time and so decided to tell their own stories. Dana A. Williams notes that "post-1970s African American women writers explore the black feminine self, a self heretofore unexamined" (72). They told stories that provided a "woman's perspective on slavery, suffering, connectedness, and motherhood and [are] straightforward in outlining the multiple sites of oppression faced by black women. Her voice long absent from the historical record, was finally available" (Elizabeth Anne Beaulieu, X).

Writing about these "multiple sites of oppression" brought black female experiences to the forefront and gave readers first-hand accounts of what it means to exist at the fringes of society or at the intersection of diverse dominant discourses. They wrote not only about their suffering and struggles but also their hopes for a better future for black women in America.

This says that African American writings do not stagnate at a specific experience but move in tandem with the evolution of African American experiences and consciousness. This has also resulted in the rise of different art forms or subgenres all intended to provide an aspect of African American experience.

Women writers have adopted and adapted different literary genres to tell their stories and in the process have brought different inflections to these genres. This has seen the birth of new narrative techniques and sub genres. This paper is interested in the novel of bestseller writer Terry McMillan. She is considered the most financially successful Black Female Writer unlike several of her predecessors and contemporaries. McMillan has not squarely addressed the race question in her several novels. She has rather focused on the struggles of middle-class professionally successful women to find emotional stability through diverse relations.

Terry McMillan's popular fiction and the reimagining of black womanhood

Prior to the rise of literary works by black writers, the black race had received little positive representation in works of arts. Black women were either absent or negatively portrayed in works written by white writers. Terry McMillan's fiction recycled the image of the black women by casting her seizing other opportunities and modes of existence.

However, it is worth noting that in spite of her financial success as a writer, Terry McMillan has received a lot of negative reviews from the academia. Her writing has received a lot of criticism for what is considered as not responding appropriately to the burning concerns of the black race in America. Paulette Richard (1999) notes, "academic critics have been curiously silent about McMillan's work despite the milestone achievements she represents in African American history" (16). From a more detailed perspective Richard contends

> Academic critics question the merits of McMillan's form and many regards her work as disturbingly apolitical. Her description of affluent middle-class life style seems to avoid addressing the political and social issues that African and American literature has traditionally emphasized. Elizabeth Nunez head of the national black writers conference has expressed concern that McMillan's example will lead other black African writers to conclude "Hey, if you want to get popular then stop writing literature that is race concerned"(17).

The insistence on focusing on the race issue or racial identity conscribes fixity to human identity, whereas identity is dynamic and multifaceted. While the historical precedent and socio-political realities of African Americans gives an important place to racial identity, it does not justify nor imply the complete negligence of other aspects or performances of identity. Deidre O'Donnell (2011) has maintained, "in constructing and presenting identities, individuals are constantly engaged in on going interpretation of entities which surround them within their social world" (26). True to this observation, McMillan's women in *Getting to Happy* attribute much importance to their selfhood, to their emotional stability, which comes in part from their relationships with significant others. These relationships, therefore, come to signify a central aspect of their selfhood by which they define themselves. So even though they are black women in a racially dominant society, their self-realization comes from these relationships both amorous and familial. Sheila Greene (2003) has observed as follows:

> Challenges to the notion of the fixed and unitary self has result in an understanding of personal identity and selfhood as processes which are always under way, never achieved […]. The sense of self preservation and continuity within a normal dynamic flux of experience, mainly by dint of active interpretation of experience and its meaning in place and time (112).

This emphasizes the dynamic nature of human identity and a result of its close links with experience. The history of African Americans has placed accent on racial

identity, and rightfully so. Nevertheless, the individual has varied experiences, aspirations and ambitions which determine which aspect of identity is performed at a given time. Given the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, it became inevitable that black women would begin to move to occupy spaces hitherto denied them and that they would begin defining themselves and, by extension, black womanhood in a way that, although inconceivable before, is nonetheless liberating. It is in line with this thinking that Catherine Ross Stroud (2006) has contended:

> McMillan's novels serve to revise the narrative of what it means to be a woman in today's society. The female characters in her novels come to the realization that their oppression is borne out of the refusal to let go of dominant ideology of womanhood. McMillan constructs plot lines that show her female characters on both sides of the master narrative. First McMillan's women are constructed in plot lines where the female characters ascribe to the rule of the cult- of -true -womanhood. By the novel's end, these characters discover that self-empowerment and liberation comes when one defines herself in her own terms (616).

Such a project as undertaken by Terry McMillan can hardly be termed apolitical as critics have too often done. Rather McMillan's works focus on myriad possible ways of being and how none needs be sacrificed for the other.

I consider McMillan's novel as reflecting on the position that to be black is not the only possibility but that identity shifts as experiences evolve. She, therefore, creates black female characters whose blackness is not their only defining marker. Instead they are a beautiful mix of blackness, femaleness, emotiveness etc as Dana A Williams observes, "contemporary African American literature by African American women writers offers full expressions of the complexity of the contemporary African American life, particularly as relates to the black woman" (71). To dismiss her works because they are popular fiction and do not make race central is to dismiss the experiences of a contemporary black woman; to make light of her emotional well-being that comes in the form of relationships and also her struggles to stand outside of the dominant script that has predefined roles for her. I read McMillan as insisting that every aspect of African American women's realities count and, therefore, deserve literary attention.

Emergence of the "New" black woman in McMillan's *Getting to Happy*

Getting to Happy is the sequel to McMillan's phenomenal bestseller *Waiting to Exhale*, which follows the trials and triumphs of four black women: Savannah, Gloria, Bernadine and Robin in their quest for a stable personal identity. This facet of identity for these women largely depends on their relationships with significant others. So, even though they are all black women, through her focus, McMillan seems to suggest that their identities are not exclusively hinged on race. These four women are all professional women who, although relatively successful professionally, have troubled relation-

ships or have trouble having and keeping fulfilling relationships with male partners. The emphasis on their romantic relationships and struggles establishes this as a main source of personal identity for these women. Richards (1999) tags such a novel the "four-woman novel," and observes

> McMillan's narrative immediately invites readers to participate in the sisterhood presented in the text and the larger imagined community shared by readers who know and love the conventions of the four-woman novel. Readers recognize this narrative space as a forum for exploring the evolving facets of female identity in society. (124)

By bringing together four women, McMillan is able to create a space or a scenario whereby these women by sharing similar experiences can, therefore, stand to represent the larger community of women. It becomes easier to imagine how these women, because they are up to four and not just one, represent the diverse classes of black women. In this light, Richards adds,

> The four-woman novel is a character-driven form. Through the four main characters, the author can present a multiplicity of perspectives while emphasizing the commonality of experience women share across race, class or cultural backgrounds in male dominated societies. (124)

Also by bringing together these women and illustrating the ways in which their desires and struggles coincide, I read McMillan as insisting that the issues she raises are important to women and if so are worthy of narrative attention. As emotional and sexual beings, these women equally define themselves from these perspectives and it would be unseemly to insist that, because they are black in a racialized society, every other aspect of their identity should be subsumed in race. If that were the case, then even the rich corpus of female narratives that brought in new themes to the literary landscape would not have received the attention it did and still does receive. The quest for personal identity from the emotional and sexual point of view cannot be trivialized for this reason. This underlines the fact that race alone cannot totally define the individual and for the self to be complete and for personal identity to be stable, these other elements come into play. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor (2009) intimate,

> Some novelists such as Terry McMillan, take the race of their characters for granted and write unapologetically about the love and sex lives of privileged black women, reversing the long-standing equation, in African American literature of middle class status, sexual prudery and racial inauthenticity (165).

These black women step out of the stereotypes they have been forced to sit in for a long time and, in doing so, they enable a new facet of black female identity to emerge.

Each of these four women faces a struggle that is related to their relationship or the lack thereof. Savannah suffers from post-divorce depression following her divorce with Isaac. She says of herself,

> I feel like sliding back under the covers. I think I might be somewhat depressed. I've got all the symptoms. Some mornings it's been hard rolling out of bed, and regardless of what time I go to sleep I still feel sluggish when I wake up. There is no pep in my step and I don't get all that worked up over too much of anything these days. (215/216)

Even though overall, Isaac, her ex-husband, is seen as a good man, his acquiescence to her accusation of marital infidelity brings their marriage to a sudden end. She suffers from acute loneliness, which slowly degenerates into depression. Her reflection of her life alone presents a woman helpless and almost desperate for company, for emotional and physical support.

> Since Isaac has been gone, I've had to get used to a lot. Besides not having him to complain about, I've had to get used to doing almost everything alone: eating, sleeping, watching television, cooking, getting my truck washed … I realized how much stuff Isaac used to do around here and how little I actually know how to do. […] I am tired of paying the handyman and I wonder if they have classes to teach you how to fix stuff around the house, especially if you don't have a husband to do it. (216-217)

What the reader is confronted with here is the near falling apart of Savannah, following her divorce. Her sense of selfhood is threatened as she faces loneliness and total self-dependence. This underlines the importance of the relationship with a significant other for stability. More importantly, the feeling of desperation is not experienced by Savannah alone.

Her friend Robin has never been married and by the time we meet her in the novel, she is beginning to feel desperate about this. Sensing this desperation, her daughter urges her to try online dating. Unfortunately for Robin, her first date from this online site is with a character named Dark Angel who stands her up on their first date and turns out to be a dishonest individual. Deeply disappointed, she writes to him as follows: "in case you weren't aware, this is not a game, Dark Angel. There are millions of women out there hoping to meet a decent man online, and if your behavior represents what's out there, I'm bowing out now" (229). Robin's retorting highlights the importance she attaches to meeting a man and establishing a worthwhile relationship. So she adds, "I thought online dating was meant to save you time and help you get around the riffraff and avoid playing the usual game so you'd stand a better chance of meeting that special someone" (229). This expresses a deep desire for something that will bring her fulfilment.

For her part, Bernadine is falling apart due to betrayal. Pained by the betrayal of her ex-husband, who, she discovers, is leading a double life, she becomes addicted to prescription drug. In spite of her personal struggles coupled with advice and support from her friends, it becomes difficult or even impossible for her to get off the drugs. This emotional instability is doubtless as a result of the betrayal of her husband and their

eventual separation. She is twice divorced and this has taken its toll on her emotional well-being and sense of self, reason why she eventually becomes dependent on drugs.

At the time the reader meets Gloria in the text, she is happily married to wonderful man. Unfortunately, on the day they are to celebrate their wedding anniversary, he is killed by a stray bullet. This devastates Gloria completely and leaves her in the state of perpetual longing. It is said of her that

> Whenever she needed a plumber or electrician or handyman-even the new gardeners-her wedding ring told them she did not live alone. It protected her. This is the reason she'd been relying on it for almost eight months. She was afraid to take it off. It would make more things final. She was no longer married. And she didn't have a husband anymore. To Gloria they meant two very different things. (290)

Unable to come to terms with the loss of her husband, Gloria clings to her wedding ring for several months. All four women seek selfhood via relationships and that is the reason why the loss or absence of such relationships creates a void. Thus, when all four women meet, the following exchange ensues:

> No one has yet to answer my question. How's everybody doing? For real, says Savannah. Everybody's thinking how best to answer
> "I'm lonely and bored", Robin says
> "I'm frustrated with myself", Bernadine says.
> "I miss my husband and I'm worried about my son and my grandkids", Gloria says, pulling the blanket up to her shoulders. What about you, Savannah?
> "I'm getting better but I won't lie. This is some hard shit to go through. I wish I was telepathic and could see how long it's going to be before we're all in high spirits again." (247)

The pain and frustration experienced by these women is directly related to their relationships or the lack of them. Mitchell and Taylor have noted in line with this idea thus,

> Moving beyond the black arts movement, contemporary African American women writers sought to understand the self in relation to society, historically and politically as well as interior self, often through personal experience like motherhood and marriage. Explorations into the interior self characterize the diverse works by contemporary African American women writers. (8)

This highlights the importance and even the obligation to consider the complete picture of the self within African American women's writings. Identity for these women is multifaceted, and, while I evoke the concept of McMillan's new woman, I do not mean a woman for whom race is insignificant. Rather I recognize this woman as one who has come a long way as far as the race question is concerned but who, nevertheless, feels the importance of embracing other aspects of self. Through her women, she attempts to capture black female life from varying perspectives. This is in line with bell hooks' observation as elaborated by David Macey (2000), who underlines of hooks

> Yet whilst she emphasizes the enormous importance of 'homeplace' as a refuge and a place for self-renewal created mainly by women, she is very careful not to lapse into the essentialism that sees all African-American experience as expression of 'soul' (1990) and stresses the multiple and complex nature of black experiences. For hooks, the struggle against racism and sexism as such is inseparable from the struggle against racism *within* feminism and the struggle against sexism *within* black liberation movements. (189)

In response to the many accusations levied against her writing, especially her apparent silence on the race question, McMillan responded, "I don't write about victims. They just bore me to death. I prefer to write about somebody who can pick themselves back up and get on with their lives because all of us are victims to some extent. (qtd: Human, 2014: 76). And, indeed, the women in *Getting to Happy* do not wallow for long in victimhood. Eventually, they pick up the pieces, mend them and move on with their lives.

Savannah, devastated by her ex-husband's irresponsible defaulting on his debt owed her credit union, decides to take her long planned-trip to Paris. She tells her friends,

> I'm going for two weeks for the same reason Bernadine is going to Rehab to find my center. I need a break for everything. So I can accept the reality that I'm a fifty-one-year-old single woman which means I have to lunch a whole new program to help me live like this is a new beginning instead of an ending. (258)

So, even though she is painfully divorced and has lost 36 points of her credit ratings, she is still determined to move ahead and give herself another chance. When she arrives in Paris, she is able to come to terms with her reality that "my life didn't end just because my marriage did. I've got plenty of reasons to live, and much to look forward to. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. I didn't come to Paris to run from myself. I came here to run back to myself" (321). This captures Savannah on the road to self--recovery. For Bernadine, after a lot of hesitation and procrastination, she eventually checks into rehab where she is able to get help and quit drugs. As Bernadine goes to rehab, she explains "I just want my life back" (273). When her friends eventually ask what plan she has for herself, she responds, "maybe meeting someone possibly dating again" (369). She has not given up on life in spite of all what she has gone through nor has she given up on romance either. She refuses the permanent position of victim. Robin for her part proposes to boyfriend Michael and immediately warns: "I can tell you right now that divorce is out of the question. I don't care how pissed off we get, we will work it out" (332/333), and Savannah says of herself, "Romance isn't out of the question. And I haven't given up on men. I'm just not going to act like a hitchhiker on a two-lane highway waiting to get picked up. I've decided to take a move pro-active approach. I'm going to start asking men out. All they can do is say no. One monkey doesn't stop the whole show" (328). Although Gloria does not begin dating, she is finally able to take off her wedding ring. She equally gets a partner for her beauty parlor and

expands her business. These four women are determined to regain their happiness through recovering their lost selves. They all seem to adhere to Savannah's counsel that "I think we owe it to ourselves to start doing as much as we possibly can to make ourselves as happy as we possibly can for as long as we possibly can and to hell with all the bullshit that doesn't" (248).

To be wholesome, the contemporary black woman has to step out of the mould of her diverse oppressions and stereotypes and move into gains of the Civil Rights Movement. In one of their conversations, in the heart of their frustration, Savannah makes an important statement: "I read online somewhere […] that sometimes we have to reinvent ourselves" (248). This is what we truly witness reading through the novel.

Just like the first African American authors addressed the oppression of the slave establishment and female writers, noticing their invisibility in the literary scape, also wrote to tell their stories of racial and sexist domination, there is need for the contemporary woman's story to be told. Elizabeth McHenry (2002) notes that "students of African American literature, history and culture have come to know that "invisible things are not necessarily 'not there'" as Toni Morrison recently puts it, "certain absences so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves" (4). The experiences of the contemporary women must not be silenced as trifle. Rather, because it constitutes her reality, it must be explored.

Through Gloria, Savannah, Robin and Bernadine, McMillan has lent voice to the contemporary black woman in America to recount what makes her whole. Through Savannah, she brings to light some of these aspects in the following statement:

> Should I ever get an opportunity to stumble on another member of the opposite sex who rocks me even at this early stage of my life, I'm not jumping in the first train that pulls into my station. I don't want another husband. I just want someone to have dinner with a couple of times a month. Sex twice a month-three times would be better. Somebody to travel with, go to concert with, the movies and maybe spend the night every once in a while and then send his ass home. I'll date until I'm dead. (254)

A fulfilling relationship constitutes a major element in the sense of selfhood for the contemporary woman. Richard concurs with her observation that McMillan "debunks the myths of the virginal woman ideal and married to her hero. She constructs single, divorced and widowed womanhood as possibilities for the contemporary black American women" (20). For her part Beverly Tate argues that "McMillan's works might not address the longstanding history of racial politics in America, but she expertly exposes the deep fissures of sexual politics within the African-American community" (352). This too constitutes an important feature of black womanhood.

For these women, a sense of selfhood is attained when they find themselves in or are in the process of developing emotionally and physically fulfilling relationships.

Towards the end of the story, when they have all discarded their pains and frustrations and are reinventing themselves in part through re-establishing relationships, we see them more hopeful and self-assured than at the beginning. The novel ends on optimistic mode, as we see:

> When someone yells out, "party over here!" these four women-these four friends-cannot stop swaying and shimmying to the brand-new beat, jumping up and down and waving their hands in the air like they just don't care. But they do. They definitely do. (373)

This citation reveals a number of things that come with reinventing the self. The "brand-new beat" to which they dance could refer to the new sense of self, the creating of the new black woman who defies the boundaries set for her by the society. The freedom with which they jump and wave their hands in the air, I read as the freedom they have acquired by embracing the new self as it is. The last line where the author repeats that these women do care I consider as a reference to other markers of their identity. Not only do these fulfilling relationships make them whole but also the entire array of blackness, femaleness and contemporariness. They care about the whole self.

Mitchell and Taylor add, "contemporary African American writings explore the self, its desires, its longings, its aspiration and its possibilities, particularly in the post-civil rights United States" (71). McMillan has, therefore, crafted a new narrative of black American womanhood, which needs to be embraced and not rejected, because it is now clear that identity is a dynamic and all-encompassing aspect of human existence. This is well elucidated by Candice Johnson (2011), who notes Charles Johnson's reaction on the exclusive reliance on the race factor. She states,

> As Johnson asserts "experience of victimization" from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement within the black American narrative has as its protagonist every black person in America. However, Johnson […] notes that the black American narrative must begin to eschew the cultural consciousness of victimization and embrace the "rich diversity and heterogeneity" of black America in the twenty first century. Doing so celebrates difference and individualism within black America, allowing readers to redefine the collective based on multiple experiences including those that go beyond race. (661)

This long quotation is warranted here as it well captures the essence of McMillan's fiction which is the recognition of the multiplicity of layers of African American identity and the various performances of same identity as dictated by circumstances. It is this boldness of McMillan's narrative that is responsible for much of her success. As Goeff Hamilton and Brian Jones (2015) underscore, "much of McMillan's success stems from her uncanny ability to gauge the pulse of African-American women" (235). In doing this, she doubtlessly places the black woman in America at the centre of her own narrative and sends across the message that every aspect of her existence counts and she has the right to redefine herself on her own terms. Thus, Wanda Macon (2001) intimates that

"a black woman and her people need not be limited by the roles society expects them to play, allows them to play, or prohibits them from playing by virtue of their status in their community" (285). McMillan's fiction embraces the multifarious faces of the modern African American woman.

Conclusion

The gains of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA did not signal an end to racial concerns, but it equally opened up other possibilities for self-exploration and self-expression. Writers like McMillan responded to this by exploring the wholesomeness of black female identity. If the race question constituted the main subject in the majority of African American writings, there was the need to approach the black individual from another perspective; to address other aspects of the black female self and to highlight the fears, hopes and dreams of the contemporary black woman. This "new" woman is not entrapped in the racial space only but performs different aspects of her identity. Black life is about race but not exclusively so, it is actually about many things. Even in the most racialized societies, attaining racial equality is not a panacea that will adequately take care of the identity crisis of African Americans. Consequently, the whole self has to be addressed and it is in this that writers like McMillan, the foremother of black popular fiction, come in. No longer can African American (women) writers be obliged to focus exclusively on race in America. Amy Sickels (2010) has underscored that "the theme and subjects found in African American literature has expanded widely, and today more than ever it is nearly impossible to group the work of African American authors under a single heading. Cultural, social and political ideas continue to change and become entwined" (14). This is indicative of the diverse directions this literature has taken. Being a woman, and a fulfilled woman at that, is part of the social ideal in America. Therefore, McMillan's *Getting to Happy* emphasizes that no experience that contributes to self-actualization can be considered too minute or irrelevant to receive literary attention as to do that would be tantamount to marginalizing and/or belittling a group's sense of selfhood.

What McMillan's novel tells us is that no single aspect of human identity is so all-encompassing as to exclude others. Our discussion shows that identity is neither static nor constituted by just one element but it is dynamic, evolutionary and multidimensional. The gains or struggles of the Civil Rights Movements do not mean a close to other dimensions but rather the opening up of other ways of being and other routes to selfhood. One lesson that ought to be learned from the Civil Rights Movements is that it is important to give voice to everyone in the society. Denying other possibilities and perspectives stands in conflict to what this movement stood for. No class of

society deserves to have its experience marginalized or trivialized. McMillan's project in her novel leaves the reader with the comforting notion that every story counts, all lives matter, and all experiences are worthy of attention. If we are to go by John Wideman's metaphor that "a story is a formula for extracting meaning from chaos, a handful of water we scoop up to recall an ocean" (qtd. in Porter, xv), then, indeed, McMillan's *Getting to Happy* can be approached as providing another way of looking at the black experience in America, as another dimension of a being black woman in contemporary America. It is in assembling these different voices that meaning can truly be extracted from the complexity of African American selfhood. It is in line with this thinking that Dillahunt defends McMillan's fiction by remarking that for critics to characterize her work as terminable is to invalidate the importance of the contemporary black woman's experience, a distinctively new black experience that is not grounded in a slave-master genre of struggle for civil rights (237). This point is further emphasized by eminent African American critic bell hooks (2013) who concurs, "Most importantly, I am attempting to think and write beyond the boundaries which keep us all overracialized. To find a way to move beyond race is not only the goal of critical thinking, it is the only path to emotional longevity, the only true path of liberation" (8). This is the path McMillan has chosen in writing *Getting to Happy*.

Even a cursory survey of African American literature tells that concerns shift from one literary epoch to another in reflection of the mutating notion of African Americanness. Seen this way, it can be concluded that identity, to borrow from Jacques Derrida, has "no point of origin and no end" (qtd. in David Macey, 86). It is a continuum, a never-ending process, drawing from experience and, therefore, metamorphosing.

Whether we find McMillan's women likable or unlikable is beside the point; what counts is whether we appreciate their struggle to exist out of the frame and role that has been predefined by the society. Their struggle for selfhood represents the diverse facets of the struggles of African American contemporary woman who has been perceived by the dominant society from a negative point of view. The passion with which these women pursue their dream for wholeness is indicative of the place attributed to these dreams for their attainment of selfhood. And if it is important to the black woman, then it deserves a place in black American fiction. While it is unquestionable that collective identity, given the context, is central to African American society, it should also be an unquestionable fact that personal identity has an important role to play. We must, of course, bear in mind the fact that the collective (the whole) is made of individuals (the personal) and both dimensions need to be adequately negotiated for the stability of the society. This is what I consider to be part of McMillan's project in *Getting to Happy*.

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From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

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GIRLISH GAIETY: 1950S COLLECTIVELY-AUTHORED FEMININITY IN JAMES BALDWIN'S *GIOVANNI'S ROOM* AND THE MISS RHEINGOLD ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

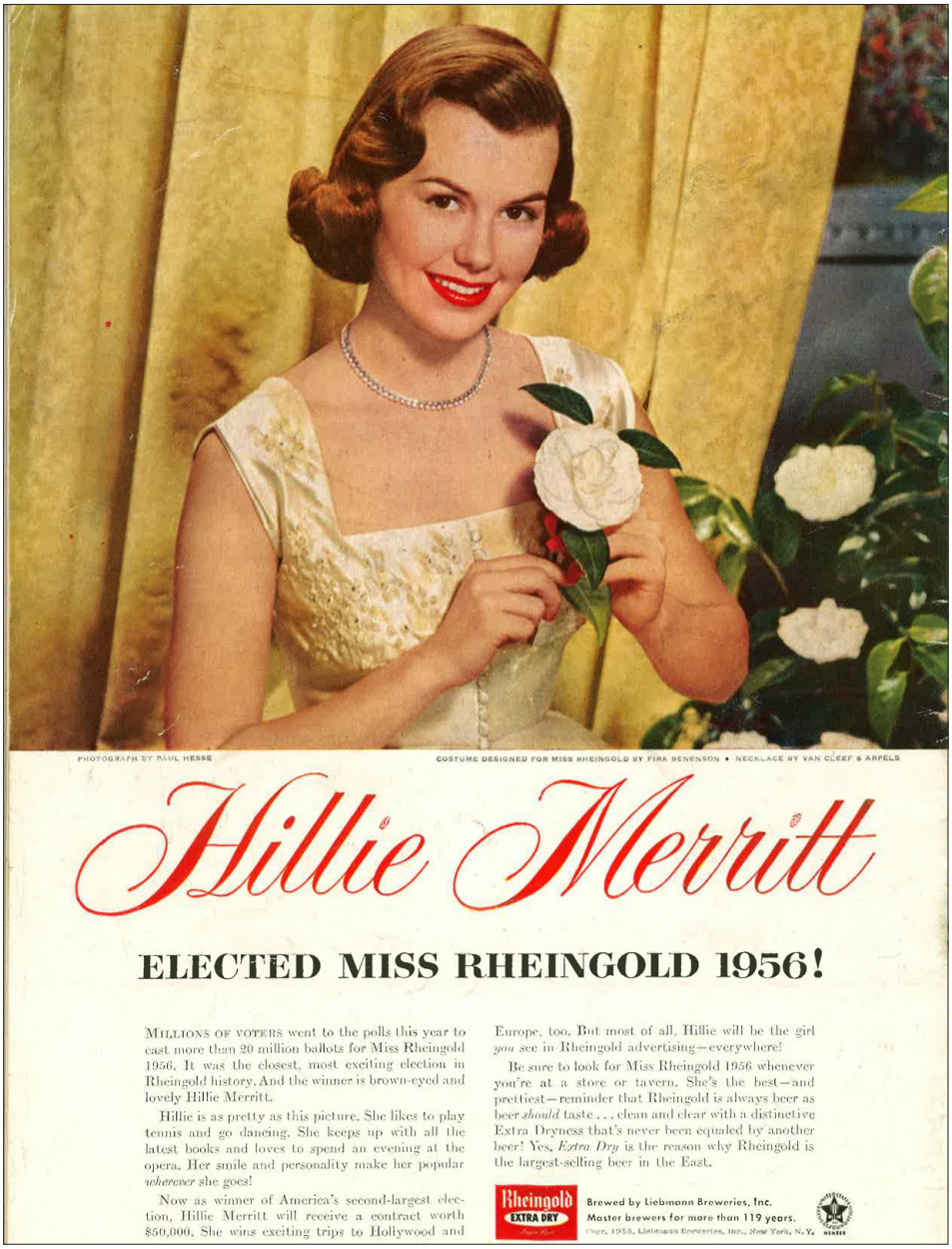
Abstract: In *Giovanni's Room*, James Baldwin explores the contentious nature of American manhood and male sexuality. Baldwin uses depictions of womanhood to contrast and define the parameters of masculinity. The secondary character Sue acts as a foil for the novel's protagonist. Furthermore, Baldwin uses her to critique collectively-authored American femininity by comparing her to Miss Rheingold, a popularly elected spokeswoman for Rheingold beer. This essay explores the way in which Baldwin characterizes the femininity of secondary character, Sue, and the way this depiction works to define the masculinity of the protagonist, David.
Keywords: femininity, advertisement, Miss Rheingold, James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is generally recognized as a quintessential Gay American novel. Its depiction of male sexuality has proved a poignant, pre-Stonewall narrative. But Baldwin's story is not one that is solely focused on the experiences of men who have sex with men. His perspicacity provides a damning reading of white American masculinity and its defining mythology which his protagonist describes as "[his] ancestors conquer[ing] a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past" (*Giovanni's Room* 3). The myth of the rugged, individual man and his "immaculate manhood" dominates the relationships between the protagonist and his lovers, male and female (*Giovanni's Room* 30). Scholars have extensively explored dominant masculine narrative currents. Our paper explores the way in which Baldwin characterizes the femininity of secondary character, Sue, and the way this depiction works to define the masculinity of the protagonist, David.

The foregrounding of this masculine narrative is given depth and gravity by a feminine background. Baldwin recognizes the way masculine and feminine nature play against each other, not as complements but as foils: "Men and women seem to function as imperfect and sometimes unwilling mirrors for one another; a falsification or distortion of the nature of the one is immediately reflected in the nature in the other" ("Preservation" 597). The dominant and defining position in which he places mascu-

linity is not surprising since it supports his observation that "[t]he American idea of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American idea of masculinity" ("Freaks" 815). This American assertion produces many of the dominant cultural binaries: "cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white" ("Freaks" 815). In "James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man's Estate," Mae G. Henderson furthers and narrows this argument by explaining that David's romantic relationships are foils for each other, in particular "the brief encounter with Joey [a boy David knew in high school] and the more extended affair with Giovanni parallel and contrast with the seduction of Sue, a rather pathetic white American expatriate in Paris on whom David attempts to test his virility" (317). Much of the novel revolves around Baldwin identifying and defining white American masculinity, both its source and its consequence. David's sole focus throughout is establishing and maintaining his "manhood," which he does through constant comparison to that which he considers feminine. By placing David's construction of masculinity at the center of the novel, Baldwin by extension, emphasizes the cultural construction of femininity. David's mother who died before he could form many memories of her anticipates the role women play throughout his life. She haunts his dreams: "…blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach, so enormous as to swallow me alive" (*Giovanni's Room* 10-11). The dread she represents overshadows both his long-term heterosexual relationship with his fiancée and his sexual encounter with Sue. Although Sue is a character who is only briefly alighted on in the novel, she represents unpretentious American femininity that is particularly vulnerable to social pressures and validation. Baldwin accentuates Sue's vulnerability by describing her as "blonde and rather puffy, with the quality, in spite of the fact that she was not pretty, of the girls who are selected each year to be Miss Rheingold" (*Giovanni's Room* 95).

Miss Rheingold was an apt emblem for collectively-authored femininity and immaculate womanhood. While David and the rest of the expatriate community were finding themselves and testing their boundaries in post-war Europe, men and women in the US were invited to cast their ballots for candidates to select each year's Miss Rheingold. From 1941 to 1964, the comely representative of New York state's popular Rheingold beer was an advertising mainstay. The Miss Rheingold competition, like many beauty contests, was a public forum on femininity. But unlike other tacit forums, the overt nature of the contest made the femininity in this context more fully participatory. Any individual sexual impulse was sublimated to the aggregate sexual impulse of all voters and beer consumers in this context. Additionally, the contest itself regulated the identity of the contestants, homogenizing them to a yearly ballot of six nearly identical



Rheingold Beer advertisement. Gourmet Magazine, January 1956, back cover.
From the private collection of Terri Griffith

pleasant faces. The candidates embodied the tropes of mainstream American beauty: white, young, agreeable, able-bodied, cisgender, fair. These tropes of American beauty were, and arguably still are, collaboratively authored by the media that offered up the prospective Miss Rheingolds for public validation through the beer-drinking audience who voted on her. These tropes offered a simulacrum of beauty, if not actual beauty. The qualities of Miss Rheingold were not simply popularly driven and collectively-authored, they were ubiquitous. The January 1956[1] advertisement introducing the year's winner in her new role also promised that "…Hillie will be the girl *you* see in Rheingold advertising–everywhere!" (Rheingold Beer advertisement).

Readers in 1956 would have interpreted the complex potentialities of identity through the advertising referent of Hillie Merritt and the previous fifteen Miss Rheingolds. The Miss Rheingold campaign ran on radio, television, national periodicals, and in-tavern promotions throughout the East Coast. Literally millions of people voted for her, which makes it interesting that current readers, certainly those born after 1964 when the competition ended, would probably miss the reference to the long-running beer advertisement. The actual voting in the competition took place in taverns and bars, the type of establishments that would be willing to place a cardboard ballot box on the counter or be tempted by free Rheingold advertising specialties such as coasters. Traditionally, watering holes such as these have been considered men's spaces, even if women were provisionally allowed. Prohibitions against women sitting at the bar or having specific hours in which they were allowed into the establishment was commonplace. The tacit goal of the Miss Rheingold competition seemed to be a search for a male vision of immaculate womanhood.

This vision stands in stark contrast to David's desperate attempt to preserve his so-called "immaculate manhood" (*Giovanni's Room* 30). Despite his homosexual and perhaps wifely inclinations, David vehemently tries to assert his tough, American masculinity in his rejection of all things feminine: feminine women, effeminate men, his own forbidden desires to nurture and be nurtured. Baldwin later critiques such approaches to masculine denial: "In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at a man's estate, that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected; whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitude towards women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust" ("Preservation" 597).

In "Into the Room and Out of the Closet," Luminita Dragulescu writes, "David's position towards women is not less complicated than it is towards men. The narrator, admittedly, is intent on a stable, 'normal' relationship with a woman, but only as a result

1 *Giovanni's Room* was first published in 1956.

of social pressure" (Dragulescu 40). Further, Dragulescu observes that whenever David's masculinity is undermined he can turn to Hella or "casual heterosexual sex to reestablish a traditionally masculine identity…" (Dragulescu 40). Evocatively, Marianne Sørbøen asserts, "David's strong belief in manhood as something which needs to be proven, eventually asserts itself in a complex image of manly identity as based on heterosexual sex acts" (Sørbøen 31). For David, femininity is essential in demarcating his masculinity. Paradoxically, femininity becomes a concept which men define, but they are then subject to the ways that definition limits the possibilities of masculinity.

Hillie Merritt, all the Miss Rheingolds who preceded and followed her, and Sue embody the tension between masculinity and femininity. James Bloom explores the connections that readers in 1956 would have made when Baldwin describes Sue and these popularly elected spokeswomen. Bloom furthers this observation about the gendered relationship with Sue by saying, "David's encounter with Sue should confirm his power as a gazer, since Miss Rheingold begins as a two-dimensional image widely available to millions of men but may become incarnate, immediately available for only a select few" (34). David's successful performance threatens to trap him. The access to such a woman reveals the contested border between gender performance and individual sexual impulses. As with any competition in which men anonymously rank women with the goal of choosing a single representative woman, the objectification becomes acute. However, an element that Bloom does not take into consideration is the role that Miss Rheingold plays in a post-Prohibition media narrative about women. Contemporary beer advertisements often depict women as seductive beer-wielding temptresses, as is the case with the St. Pauli Girl and Budweiser Girl. This is in contrast to post-Prohibition alcohol advertisements, which intentionally eschew depictions of the temptress. Instead, these advertisements position women as a stolid bulwark against masculine excess, where the image of wholesome women regulates the assumed inherent base instincts of men. David forces Sue into taking on a regulatory role.

Gender relations in beer post-Prohibition advertisement were often in keeping with those that Baldwin explores in his novel. In his article "Right at Home," Nathan M. Corzine explains that men were allowed to drink for fun, but women were forced into the role of "preservers of morality and societal values" who had to "insure the triumph of moderation and the defeat of intemperance" (844). Miss Rheingold's steady figure and her wholesomeness represent just this sort of authority. In *Giovanni's Room*, the women in David's life–his aunt Ellen, his fiancée Hella, the dim memory and nightmare of his mother–attempt to regulate masculine behavior. On returning to Paris from Spain, Hella's commitment to becoming a wife, and potentially domesticated, can be seen as being analogous to the "symphony of complications and contradictions" (Corazine 844)

that women present in the post-Prohibition beer ads faced. She could enjoy the party, but only if she accepted her obligations to be the agent of moderation.

Without access to these agents of control, David must find another, when his masculinity is undermined. In "Femininity, Abjection, and (Black) Masculinity," Keith Mitchell notes that David's performance of heterosexual masculinity is viable only when he is not around those who sense his deception but "…when a sailor catches [David] cruising him at the American Express Office and guesses his sexual orientation, David panics and picks up a girl to prove to himself that he is heterosexual" (266). In as much as David is looking for a woman to have sex with to reaffirm his masculinity when he has an encounter with Sue, he is also looking for someone to regulate his passions, particularly his sexual and emotional passion for Giovanni. His contempt for her is matched by his longing for someone to temper his desire. The sexual act they share resembles Baldwin's observations of couplings in roman noir works by Raymond Chandler or James M. Cain since what these characters "…bring to each other is not even passion or sexuality but an unbelievably barren and wrathful grinding" ("Preservation" 597-598.) The encounter between David and Sue operates in a way similar to the encounter in these other works. Still, David believes himself to be innocent while framing Sue as somehow duplicitous yet simple ("Preservation" 597-598). There is perhaps an inscrutable discomfort that David faces in engaging with Sue. Baldwin felt his own analogous discomfort when having sexual relations with white women whose motives he could never fully discern. As both a black man and a gay man, he feared white women might want "to civilize [him] into becoming an appendage…." ("Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood" 824). David's callous approach to the women in his life is a strategy to prevent himself from becoming that appendage. However, he also fears that he will become Giovanni's appendage (or worse yet, housewife.) At the root of this fear is David's anxiety, not just about appearing feminine to the outside world, but more so his terror that by loving a man his innate femininity will be concretized.

David is repulsed by Sue's innate, yet fragile femininity. He uses her to bolster his fears about his own manhood, yet this encounter falls short for both David and Sue. Instead of leaving them both more confident in their gender performance, both are left feeling more unstable than at the outset of their encounter. The Miss Rheingold advertisement carries with it secondary signs that overlay Sue's presentation of femininity, which Baldwin references. The precise nature of these Miss Rheingold contests and their desirability offered a place for interrogation in contemporary media outside of *Giovanni's Room*. In a 1963 *The Saturday Evening Post* article "Will the Real Miss Rheingold Standout?," reporter David L. Goodrich describes the candidates: "As always, there was nothing chic, glamorous or sexy about them. Their published 'vital statistics' made no mention of bust, waist or hips. The girls make you think of country air,

cod-liver oil, marshmallow fluff, apple cider—almost everything except beer" (48). Goodrich's observation resonates with Bloom's observation of David in "Queering, Gazing and Containment in *Giovanni's Room*." Bloom observes, "Both syntactically and lexically, he commandeers the entire discourse of women's attractiveness. The phrase 'in spite of the fact she was not pretty' awkwardly disrupts, literally intervenes in, David's move to pinpoint and provide a context for the 'quality' of Sue's appearance" (33). For both Goodrich and David, the appeal of these women is not sexual. Their appeal is sanitary, devoid of sexuality, appealing to American mid-century focus on conformity, consumerism, and the nuclear family. This helps to explain why women and religious figures participated in the election according to the brewery's president Philip Liebmann. Goodrich and Liebmann's assessment of the attractiveness of these women focuses on their desexualized embodiment. Wholesomeness is a wedge between domestic interest and erotic impulse. Baldwin likewise senses this in his assessment and use of the comparison between Sue and Miss Rheingold.

Baldwin writes, "[Sue] wore her curly blond hair cut very short, she had small breasts and a big behind, and in order, no doubt, to indicate to the world how little she cared for her appearance or sensuality, she almost always wore tight blue jeans" (95). Here Baldwin clearly tells us that Sue is trying, with mixed results, to desexualize herself and rebuff the erotic expectations placed on the other American woman in the story, Hella, whose solitary trip to Spain brings gossipy insinuations of sexual libertinism from Giovanni. Sue is uncomfortable in the roles that she has been assigned by men. She wears jeans to place herself in a liminal space between the role of other-woman in which she has been cast by David, and the broader societal role expected from a white, upper-class, American woman. Yet this intentional distancing only underscores how deeply ingrained the American cisfeminine ideal is, situating Sue within an uncomfortable opposition to the sexually attractive woman.

In "Reading Bisexually," Maiken Solli challenges the notion that Sue was not desirable: "…it is not necessarily that those encounters are described more positively due to the fact that it is sex with men instead of women, as many critics have understood it, but rather that it is positive because it is sex in combination with feelings of love and affection" (23-24). Sex without love is positioned as a psychically damaging act throughout the novel. David's old acquaintance, Jacques, warns the young American that if he did not embrace "affection" and "joy" he could lose his ability to love and only be capable of dissolute, meaningless, and disgusting encounters (*Giovanni's Room* 56-57). In contrast to Solli, Mae G. Henderson asserts in "James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man's Estate" that "[t]he absence of love is also what perverts the heterosexual relationship, as in the case of David, who uses women like Sue and Hella as objects upon which to test his 'manhood.' David betrays himself and makes his female

consorts unknowing co-conspirators in his desperate desire to find refuge within the boundaries of conventional heterosexuality…" (Henderson 322). In "Dividing the Mind," Yasmine Y. DeGout writes, "David's sexual ambivalence is a constant underlying theme of *Giovanni's Room*" (DeGout 427). Dragulescu complicates the notion of David's bisexuality by positing, "If bisexuality has worked for David up to a point, after passing through Giovanni's room and submitting to homoerotic desire, the sexual allure of the female body fades increasingly only to turn into utter disgust" (Dragulescu 40).

Before her sexual encounter with David, Sue describes herself as a brick wall. She tells David that her walls are impenetrable. Her sentiment reflects David's own sense of "immaculate manhood" (*Giovanni's Room* 30). These postures reflect each other in that both of them overstate their invulnerability to masculine sexual attention. The encounter does not perhaps leave them fatally damaged, but it does seem to compromise their defenses. For the most part, Sue is presented only as a foil to David. Without her, David has no mirror. However, it is also important to consider how she relates to the other main female character in the novel, Hella. Hella goes to Spain to see if she wants to be in a relationship with David; or more likely to see if she could remain on her own in a foreign space. Sue unlike Hella may have a sense of loneliness, yet she is a woman who does stand on her own. She may not be impenetrable, but she does not collapse like Hella or David.

When the sex with Sue is complete and they have dressed, David thinks, "When she came back she was wearing a dress and some real shoes, and she had sort of fluffed up her hair. I had to admit she looked better that way, really more like a girl, a schoolgirl" (*Giovanni's Room* 101). Having failed to make David like her, even, or especially after sex, Sue retreats back into the cisfemale trick for which she had spent a lifetime training. She transforms herself into a simulacrum of a traditional, wholesome "girl." She is now less a woman and "more a girl." Even more than that, "a schoolgirl." David likes Sue best when she is humiliatingly disempowered. She is most valuable to him when she has lost her agency and is willing to embody a disempowered femininity in order to be liked. Perhaps this is the consequence of even her modest attempt to reject this image of immaculate womanhood.

The reaction from David reveals something deeper. We read her as a more desperate figure since she has come back more traditionally feminine. The scene is of course read through the eyes of David whose externalized misogyny has the same roots as his internalized homophobia. David hates Sue for the same reason he hates himself; he is lonely and wants to love and be loved. To David, this is perceived as a feminine weakness and is the reason for his deep invalidation of all things feminine. Something he knows he should desire but something that he can never truly respect.

Sue's post-coital fashion makeover likewise would resonate with the 1956 marketing image of Miss Rheingold, and the layers of hetero-cismasculine expectations of American femininity. For Sue, there are few opportunities for alternatives. She has traveled to Europe and, the reader can assume, to find an alternative way to exist in the world, outside the scope of her family and American societal expectations. Like David, Sue maintains a temporary position as an expatriate and an outsider. She is almost queer in her imposed asexuality. Yet, even after her escape to France she finds herself in the arms of another American, David, who sees her only as a Miss Rheingold–an imitation of the hegemonic femininity of consensus. A copy of a copy of a copy. Ultimately both David and Sue fail to live up to mid-century America's collectively-authored cisgender expectations. In their book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith (Jack) Halberstam posits, "From the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideas, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures" (4).

To David, his homosexuality means he has failed as a man. To Sue, her failure comes in her unsuccessful ability to regulate David's masculine and sexual excess. In comparison to Miss Rheingold, who has succeeded completely in meeting or exceeding collectively-authored societal expectations, David and Sue have failed epically. They both now reside outside the immaculate cisgendered ideals of manhood and womanhood created collaboratively by both the media and society as whole. Unlike Miss Rheingold, it is through this failure that both David and Sue are offered the potential to become who they truly are. Yet despite this potential freedom, they allow culturally constructed and interlocked narratives of masculinity and femininity to dominate possible self-authored narratives.

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From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

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'OUT HERE … TRASH RISES': REFIGURING WHITE TRASH FEMALE IDENTITIES, HISTORICIZED BODIES AND THE ROLE OF BODILY FRAGMENTATION IN DOROTHY ALLISON'S *BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA*

> "The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers – stern and wild ones – and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss."
>
> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

> "To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing."
>
> Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008)

Abstract: Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) unflinchingly depicts the fate of a young girl, Ruth Anne Boatwright ("Bone"), who is in danger of succumbing to her oppressive environment marked by social stigmatization, extreme poverty, sexual abuse and neglect. It has been indicated that Bone comes to accept her identity as "a dumb and ugly white trash girl 'born to shame and death'" (Bouson 104) and that her "inherited vulnerability" is practically predetermined because she is her mother's daughter (Bailey 274). In fact, she questions and critically examines her own identity by picking apart what is commonly identified as white trash identity on several occasions throughout the novel. Although it is true that Bone faces numerous traumatic experiences and as a result exhibits several signs of "self-loathing" and "self-contempt" (Bouson 104) that go hand in hand with her initial hatred of her dirt-poor background as well as her yielding to rigid social classification, I aim to show how Bone in the end dismantles classification processes and throws back the essentialist labels she is ascribed with. She does this by choosing a path away from conformity. This paper aims to examine the extent to which class and ethnic background influence the continuous identity formation of Ruth Anne Boatwright in *Bastard out of Carolina*. In this context, a discussion of class dynamics in the US provides a backdrop to Bone's identity processes. Furthermore, I intend to show that Bone's identities are ambiguous and shift and exist simultaneously on several levels, with the aim to testify to the insufficiency of essentialist categories and classification. In addition, this examination will show how processes of Bone's identity formation are crucially mapped out on and expressed through her body in a fragmented manner, suggesting that bodily fragmentation functions here as a means for identity formation.
Keywords: white trash, poverty, identity, representations, *Bastard out of Carolina*

Introduction

In an interview with Carolyn Megan in 1992, Dorothy Allison addresses an unfortunate constant that underlies and motivates much of her work: "In this society, people hate the poor, so I thought it would be useful to get inside and let everyone see it" (Megan 78). She exposes an ugly truth regarding the treatment and portrayal of the poor in a US cultural context, one which her writing continuously strives to contest by giving us "an insider's view" of her protagonists' living conditions (McDonald 15). In addition to tellingly illustrating this truth, Allison's groundbreaking debut novel *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) yields several ambivalent portrayals of her 'white trash' female characters that complicate how the protagonists define and perceive themselves and how they are classified by others.

Acknowledging that much has been written on challenging stereotypes (McDonald, Reynolds) and on Bone's empathy with "racial otherness" (Bailey 283) in *Bastard out of Carolina*, I am using one of Allison's observations in her essay "A Question of Class" as a starting point to supplement these findings and open new interstices for examining the female protagonists' identities in her work: "[C]lass, gender […] and prejudice – racial, ethnic, and religious – form an intricate lattice that restricts and shapes our lives […] Claiming your identity in the cauldron of hatred and resistance to hatred is infinitely complicated, and worse, almost unexplainable" (Allison 1994: 23). This paper is dedicated to analyzing 'complicated' literary representations of white trash female identities, discussing understandings of class, and readings of bodily configurations in *Bastard out of Carolina*, hereinafter abbreviated as *Bastard*. A substantial part of my paper will map out how class dynamics are formed and perceived in the novel, accompanied by a brief overview of select examples of representations of poor whites in American literature. I will primarily focus on the main protagonist Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright and her mother Anney, as discussing other protagonists in this context would go beyond the scope of this project. In the course of these analyses, I will argue that Bone's identity negotiations in light of the labels she is ascribed with profoundly form her sense of self and mirror the effects of social stigmatization suffered by those who are culturally grouped into one of the lowest strata of society. Furthermore, I aim to suggest that critically examining the emergence of fragmented, ruptured, and similarly extraordinary corporeal constellations can significantly contribute to understanding the identities of the protagonists under examination. More precisely, my paper aims to critically respond the following research questions: How do the female protagonists challenge understandings of what is commonly termed 'white trash identity'? How do they handle classification processes and essentialist labels? Can analyzing examples of bodily fragmentation contribute to understanding their identity processes?

White trash stereotypes and essentialism

Allison's novel evokes insights that benefit from how we consider traditions of representations of poor whites as an important backdrop to understanding the multifaceted identity formations that pervade the novel. However, it is necessary for a reconsideration of the origins of the term 'white trash' to precede considerations of what have been termed traditional representations of the white working class in American literature. While the term 'white trash' can first be found in print in 1821 and was used to classify a physically deformed and "diseased breed" that was further characterized as having "ingrained physical defects," the concept became more widespread in the 1850s to describe "oddities with cotton-white hair and waxy pigmentation" who had horrible traits and drank themselves to death (Isenberg 135-6). As we know it today, 'white trash' denotes "social waste" and "detritus" (Wray and Newitz qtd. in Bouson 101) and principally refers to "whites who live in poverty," whereby it "also invokes long-standing stereotypes of poor whites as 'incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid'" (101). As the scenes I discuss in this paper will show, Allison notably recycles stereotypical depictions of the poor by not "gloss[ing] over the ugliness of poverty" (Reynolds 358) but by owning the language that has been used to describe them: "Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum. I can make a story out of it, out of us" (Allison 1996: 1). As McDonald has observed, Allison uses some stereotypical elements to defy standard understandings of 'white trash' (18). For instance, several of Bone's uncles exhibit some of the aforementioned traits that are frequently associated with 'trash.' As Reynolds puts it, the novel "reinforces many of the standard images of white trash" while simultaneously "transcend[ing] those images" (Reynolds 359) and presenting several characters who exhibit character traits that cannot be connected to the aforementioned attributes in any way. This circumstance stands in connection with the author's constant endeavor to render a complex, multifaceted, and deliberately "believable" (McDonald 15) portrayal of her characters by not excusing their behavior but by letting us see them "in the material realities of economic oppression" (Dickinson 81). It is noteworthy that it is Bone's stepfather, Glen, who comes from a middle class background who creates an environment of violence and incest – not any of Bone's immediate, dirt-poor relatives, most of whom are furious and determined to protect Bone after her abuse becomes known. Moreover, McDonald is right to point out that Anney and Bone allude to white trash stereotypes in several ways (18), though there are several moments in the novel that illustrate that Bone's mother Anney is extremely hard-working and strives to improve her family's quality of life and perceived 'standing' in society. Instances such as these indicate that essentialist understandings and categorizations exhibit

several shortcomings that dismiss them as tools to comprehensively and productively describe the characters' identity formations. Based on the notion that people or things have "deep, hidden, and unchanging properties" that crucially define them (Prentice and Miller 202), the classic understanding of essentialism is that it is "a belief in true essence – that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing" (Fuss 1). It is this understanding that Allison finds fault with in feminist theory:

Traditional feminist theory has had a limited understanding of class differences and of how sexuality and self are shaped by both desire and denial. The ideology implies that we are all sisters who should only turn our anger and suspicion on the world outside the lesbian community. […] The difficulty is that I can't ascribe everything […] to the patriarchy, or to incest, or even to the invisible and much-denied class structure of our society. (Allison 1994: 15-6)

In *Bastard*, Bone reflects on several events that result from essentialist classification, as becomes apparent in her considerations of how she and her family are treated: "We knew what the neighbors called us, what Mama wanted to protect us from. We knew who we were" (Allison 1992: 82). This treatment also pertains to her stepfather's side of the family: "They served us tea in the backyard, just us – Anney's girls, they called us. […] We sat still, wonderfully behaved, almost afraid to move. […] His people watched us out the windows […] wide-mouthed cousins […] staring like I was some elephant in the zoo" (Allison 1992: 101-2). In addition, she in part succumbs to essentialist notions, for instance at the end of the novel when she identifies with her mother: "I was who I was going to be […] like Mama, a Boatwright woman" (Allison 1992: 309). And we also encounter essentialism in depictions of poor white southerners who are reduced to a core set of properties.

Turning to literature to examine representations of the poor yields troubling insights into a literary tradition of portraying poor whites, particularly the "poor white southerner" who is "deeply ingrained in American literary consciousness" (Reynolds 359). In "Talking Trash, Talking Back: Resistance to Stereotypes in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*," Kathleen McDonald maps out the nature of representations of this figure in American literature, stating that these representations can first be found in the 18th century and primarily served comical purposes (16), at a time when "the poor, the waste […] were seen as a permanent breed […] unwanted and unsalvageable," whereby every era had different ways of dissociating "white trash" from the average social norm (Isenberg 1-2). McDonald refers to two strands that are used to justify the 'immorality' of poor southern whites, namely external factors such as diet, climate, and disease, and what has been referred to as the 'bloodline theory' by David Reynolds, a theory arguing that people have a genetic disposition to be, behave or act like white trash (Reynolds

qtd. in McDonald 16). Whereas the first strand is not entirely unproblematic, the second one is truly alarming for it suggests that certain people are born with unchangeable, inherent or essential qualities they cannot escape (McDonald 16). Both Reynolds and McDonald illustrate their claims by referring to the example of the highly successful theatrical adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's novel Tobacco Road (1933) (Reynolds 360-1; McDonald 16-7). As Reynolds states, Caldwell's novel is pervaded by stereotypes, by characters who are utterly poor, lazy, stupid, and promiscuous, and though Caldwell intended to call attention to the economic system that guaranteed those who were desperately poor to stay that way, the play was heavy on humorous portrayals that both attracted and repelled audiences who simply watched, mesmerized (360-61). Reynolds and McDonald are right to stress that these and similar depictions of the poor in literature are highly problematic, as they do not give an "inside" perspective, are one-dimensional, and do not consider social, historical, and economic conditions (McDonald 16-18). I believe that their situating these discussions in their texts indicates that Allison's fiction fills a void in this respect and complicates stereotypical depictions, as my examinations of textual excerpts from *Bastard* will demonstrate.

Representations of class – fluid or fixed?

Class continues to be a hushed category in the US (Isenberg 1; Campbell in Bailey 281) that rests on the mythical "rise of the individual ever-upwards through social and financial strata" (Campbell in Bailey 281), whose existence is even denied (Isenberg 4-5, 7; Allison 1994: 16). It is a category that needs to be addressed in terms of its role in US culture, including literary works that skillfully engage with it in spite or precisely because of the silence that surrounds it. For this reason, I would like to return to the question of defining 'trash' and argue that understanding the layers of Bone's identity and identification processes begins with rethinking static definitions of class in a US context. In Class and the Making of American Literature: Created Unequal, Andrew Lawson discusses the 'lived experience' of class coined by E. P. Thompson that offers a dynamic take on the concept (Thompson qtd. in Lawson 7). Thompson suggests taking an angle on class as "a very loosely defined body of people" sharing "the same categories of interest, social experiences, traditions and value-systems" and "hav[ing] a disposition to behave as a class" (Lawson 7-8). In addition, he stresses that class is something that happens (Thompson qtd. in Lawson 8). As Lawson observes, it is the 'lived experience' of class that according to Thompson causes people to conduct themselves as a class (Lawson 8). In similar terms, it is the experience of exploitation and struggling that causes them to become conscious of their class (Thompson qtd. in Lawson 8). I find it important to reflect on the notion of "lived experience," as it

counters rigid notions of categorizing people into groups and stresses the relevance of experience, thereby suggesting an angle that favors the perspective of the subjects under discussion – members of a given class. As Reynolds states, "[w]hile the list of white-trash characteristics is varied and lengthy, there is no constant element shared by all white trash, not even poverty" (Reynolds 362), to which Allison tellingly bears testimony in her work.

Bastard offers both static and fluid experiences of class, as the (in)visible 'stamp' on Bone's birth certificate, "a badge of shame for both mother and daughter" (Dickinson 78) that manifests itself in the lives and bodies of the female protagonists of *Bastard* exemplifies. The notion of this stamp that brands the characters emerges early on in the story with the birth of the young protagonist. As Bone's father is unknown and Anney is unconscious during her daughter's birth due to a car accident, her birth certificate reads "illegitimate," in response to which the narrator dryly comments: "[…] and there I was – certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina" (Allison 1992: 3). In her discussion of the use of the word 'bastard' in the novel, Emily Dickinson mentions the term 'symbolic' violence coined by Slavoj Žižek to show that the word "incites and reproduces the relations of social domination by functioning as both a warning and a punishment" (Dickinson 78). In observing the manner in which the young protagonist is rendered 'illegitimate' and she and her mother are treated by society as a result, Dickinson is not the only scholar to draw parallels between Anney and Bone's situation and that of Hester Prynne and Pearl in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (59). As Vincent King puts it, "deprived of her father's name, the only name that the state will recognize as legal, these scarlet letters not only label her 'illegitimate,' but as 'no-good, lazy' – and 'shiftless'" (126). Anney is not only expected to feel shameful because of Bone's missing father but is held responsible for 'marking' her child, as becomes apparent in a conversation with a preacher: "Your shame is between you and God, Sister Anne. No need to let it mark the child" (Allison 1992: 14). The young mother shoots back: "I got no shame […] and I don't need no man to tell me jackshit about my child (14). Both Leigh Gilmore (54) and Peggy Dunn Bailey (276) have remarked on the fact that being officially and legally declared illegitimate propels the story, since Anney's quest to have the dreaded word removed from her daughter's birth certificate may in part have driven her to accept Glen's marriage proposal, as this marriage would make Bone 'legitimate' "[a]ccording to the 1952 Legal Code of South Carolina" (Gilmore 54). Being stamped or labeled this way profoundly affects Ruth Anne and her immediate surroundings (46), except for Bone's grandmother, who is not at all concerned: "An't no stamp on her nobody can see" (Allison 1992: 3). However, the novel shows on several occasions that Anney lives with the immediate consequences of the sentiment that results from the stigmatization of her daughter (Bouson 104; Carter 886) that is justified by her legal definition:

> Mama hated to be called trash, hated the memory of every day she'd ever spent bent over other people's peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall and looked at her like she was a rock on the ground. The stamp on the birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her. No good, lazy, shiftless. She'd work her hands to claws, her back to a shovel shape, her mouth to a bent and awkward smile […]. (Allison 1992: 3-4)

When Annie asks a lawyer why the officials insist on enforcing the stamp on her daughter's birth certificate, he tells her in a patronizing manner: "Now, honey […] [y]ou've lived in this county all your life, and you know how things are" (Allison 1992: 9), which suggests that class or markers of class are unfixed. If she had been able to afford it in financial terms, the issue would likely have been settled without much ado. It also suggests that enforcing the stamp on her daughter's birth certificate can be read as an attempt to essentialize the two women and reduce them to their 'white trash status' in order to maintain an artificial hierarchy. Not until the end of the novel after Bone is raped by Glen and goes to live at Raylene's place does Anney manage to obtain the cleared version of her daughter's birth certificate: "It was blank, unmarked, unstamped" (Allison 1992: 309). Though Bailey claims that Bone "suggests suffering and subjugation as familial obligation and female destiny" (280), we must also consider the empowering and liberating effect of this act (Patterson qtd. in Bailey 279) that proposes that Bone's birth certificate can be read as a blank slate upon which she can (re)write her own identity.

Reconsidering ethnicity in *Bastard out of Carolina*

Allison's novel exhibits noteworthy identity negotiations that involve various ethnic backgrounds that shape Ruth Anne's identity throughout the story. Though these identifications may appear to foster notions of otherness, I argue that they allow for inciting reflections on race and race relations to emerge in Bone's awareness of her surroundings and herself. Furthermore, these analyses can exemplify how identities "are constructed through, not outside, difference" (Hall 4).

The possibility that the Boatwright family is related to the Cherokee first emerges in a comment Aunt Alma makes to Bone when she tells her about her father: "You just looked at him with your black Indian eyes" […] She grinned at me, reaching out to push my midnight-black hair back off my face" (Allison 1992: 25-26). As a result of a feeling of alienation that is connected to her physical appearance that deviates from that of the rest of her family, Bone becomes fascinated by the myth that she has Cherokee ancestors: "[Y]our great-great-granddaddy, he was a Cherokee […] no one but you got that blue-black hair […] Those dark eyes and that hair when you was born, black as midnight" (Allison 1992: 26-27). Bone responds to this remark as follows: "I looked at him [Earle] carefully, keeping my Cherokee eyes level and my face blank. I could not

have said a word if Great-Great-Granddaddy had been standing there looking back at me with my own black eyes" (27). In response to this scene, J. Brooks Bouson states that Bone's mixed racial heritage functions

> as a sign of her racial impurity as a member of the "dysgenic" white trash. Pointing to the power of culturally sedimented imagery, Bone comes to associate her putative Cherokee heritage not only with the "black-headed" and "man-type" part of herself, but also with her "nasty," "rock-hard," and quick tempered white trash identity (54-55): that is, with her reactive shame rage, the angry part of herself. (107)

Moreover, as Bailey adds, the mention of her Native American great-great-grandfather lets us see the Boatwright family as

> disenfranchised, the descendants of ancestors from whom land, language, and home were stripped, the victims of cultural rape and the inheritors of socially sanctioned violence and loss. Allison presents a young girl, Bone, as the especial inheritor of this legacy." (Bailey 282)

Above all, this scene exemplifies that it is not important whether Bone's rumored Native American lineage is grounded in facts: she succumbs to the idea of identifying with a mythical 'other' in her family and appears to become part Cherokee in the abovementioned scene in which she envisions her grandfather with her "own black eyes" (Allison 1992: 27). As Bone puts it later in the novel: "I kept looking for something special in me […] I am night's own daughter, my great-grandfather's warrior child" (Allison 1992: 207).

Another example in which Bone specifically reflects on how her family treats notions of race involves her Aunt Raylene who "was always telling people that we had a little of the tarbrush on us" (Allison 1992: 53). This contrasts the claim Bone's cousin Butch makes that the Boatwright descendants "all pretty much look alike, like we been rinsed in bleach as we're born […] 'Cept you [Bone], of course, all black-headed and strange" (54). Bone reflects on this and comes to see that "[p]eople were crazy on the subject of color […] and it was true that one or two of the cousins had kinky hair and took some teasing for it, enough that everyone was a little tender about it" (54). This may in part have been elicited by the description of "extreme whiteness" (Bailey 287) that her cousin shoots back at her at the mention of the possibility of having another ethnic background. Another time, a girl at school claims that Bone was "as dark and wild as any child 'born on the wrong side of the porch,'" which causes Bone to physically fight back, as she interprets the girl's comment as nothing short of indicating that she is a 'bastard' (54-55). Bailey discusses two scenes in the novel that are worth considering in this context (282-3). In the first one, Bone observes a young African-American girl, her cousins' neighbor, and compares her appearance with her own: "I slit my eyes against the bright light. The face in the window narrowed its eyes […] a very pretty boy or a very fierce girl for sure. The cheekbones were as high as mine […] [t]he chocolate

skin was so smooth […] I put my fingers up to my cheeks" (Allison 1992: 84). In the second scene, Bone draws painful parallels between how her friend Shannon speaks disparagingly about a group of African-American singers and how she is treated by others, including her stepfather's family: "My voice was shaking. The way Shannon said "nigger" tore at me, the tone pitched exactly like the echoing sound of Aunt Madeleine sneering "trash" when she thought I wasn't close enough to hear" (Allison 1992: 170). According to Bailey, these scenes express Bone's "emphatic response to those who are victimized" (282), but I would extend this observation by claiming that she not only empathizes with them but comes to identify with them.

Bodies "in chunks" and "in pieces": readings of bodily fragmentation

At this point, I would like to initiate a discussion of fragmented bodily configurations in this examination of class and identity dynamics to investigate "how larger social histories impose themselves upon an individual's bodily experience" (Dickinson 75). In doing so, I intend to reflect on how these corporeal images point to the fractured nature of the identities of the female protagonists who are marked by social stigmatization and constantly made to feel that they are "other" than a given social norm. For this purpose, I will consider Patricia Yaeger's observation that literary texts by women writers of the U.S. South offer extraordinary bodily constellations for addressing issues pertaining to the very regulated social framework and southern histories these bodies emerge in (xii-xiii). In particular, I aim to initiate a discussion proposed by Yaeger "about the relation between American history and the body – particularly, what happens to the body within a culture of neglect" (67).

Bone is a prime example of a victim of a culture of neglect. She is ridiculed and suppressed by others due to her dirt-poor background and though her mother loves her, she fails to take measures to protect her daughter from the horrors she knows she is suffering at the hands of her abuser. Upon examining Yaeger's characteristics of 'throwaway bodies' in southern women's literature, we can find striking aspects that pertain to Bone:

> We must pay attention to the difficult figure of the throwaway body – to women and men whose bodily harm does not matter enough to be registered or repressed – who are not symbolically central, who are looked over, looked through, who become a matter of public and private indifference – neither important enough to be disavowed nor part of white southern culture's dominant emotional economy. (68)

Bone can most definitely be defined in these terms: The physical harm she endures is not fully registered and acknowledged until the very end of the novel, she is not central to the social framework she lives in and is thus "looked over, looked through" (68).

It is in this sense that we can read Allison's portrayal of Bone as a way of describing individuals who are regarded as disposable and whose trauma remains unnoticed (69).

Understandings of fragmented bodies in *Bastard* may also benefit from a Gothic reading with reference to Bailey's discussion of Ellen Moers's "Female Gothic" in "Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*." Bailey calls attention to the notable focus on the body in Moers's analyses of Ann Radcliffe and Emily Brontë's fiction in connection with Moers's mention of the "'auctorial intention of the Gothic' […] 'to get to the body itself'" (Moers qtd. in Bailey 272). Bailey applies this notion to the rape scene at the end of *Bastard*:

> Glen's final, sexually and emotionally brutal attack on Bone is depicted in such unflinching, realistic detail, however, that it "scares," it "gets to the body" of the reader in a way that the other scenes do not, in a way that Moers probably did not have in mind when she wrote those early descriptions of the function of Gothic literature but that Allison, as a Southern writer, explicitly owns as intentional. (279)

This final act of violence is clearly the most prominent and most obvious scene that "gets to the body" of the readers, but we must consider it alongside the more subtle scenes in the novel that exhibit bodily devastation and rupture and 'get to the body' nevertheless. In the novel, fragmented body parts surface in dreams and can be linked to Bone's sexual abuse: "[M]ore and more those hands seemed to move before he could think […] big, impersonal, fast. I could not avoid them […] gorilla hands, monkey paws, paddlefish […] My dreams were full of long fingers, hands that reached around doorframes and crept over the edge of the mattress" (Allison 1992: 70). Bone's body bears testimony to the abuse and trauma she is suffering and not telling anyone about: "Maybe you're thin-boned […] I remained silent, stubborn, resentful, and collected my bruises as if they were unavoidable. There were lumps at the back of my head […] a rumpled ridge of bone. […] My collarbone fused with a lump the second time it was broken – an accident, Daddy Glen insisted" (111-3). Her sexual and physical abuse also marks her invention of horrific stories that call to the neglect and abuse she is suffering:

> My stories were full of boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered, babies cooked in pots of boiling beans […] Witches cut off the heads of children and grown-ups."
> "Girl," Cousin Grey told me, "sometimes your face is just scary!"
> "Bone's gotten almost mean-hearted," Aunt Alma told Mama. "Something's got to be done." (Allison 1992: 119)

Aside from addressing the horrors of unspoken sexual abuse, there are a number of scenes in the novel that let us read images of the damaged female body as results of processes of classification and classism, for instance in Bone's reflection on the appearance of the women in her family:

> [W]hy couldn't I be pretty? […] This body, like my aunts' bodies, was born to be worked to death, used up, thrown away. […] Aunt Alma had given me a big paperback edition of Gone with the Wind […] one evening I looked up from Vivien Leigh's pink cheeks to see Mama coming in from work with her hair darkened from sweat and her uniform stained. […] Emma Slattery, I thought. That's who I'd be, that's who we were. Not Scarlett with her baking-powder cheeks. I was part of the trash down in the mud-stained cabins, fighting with the darkies and stealing ungratefully from our betters, stupid, coarse, born to shame and death. I shook with fear and indignation. (206)

This scene exemplifies not only that representations matter, but that Bone is at this moment tempted to think in essentialist patterns about her own identity. Due to the lack of representations to identify with, she turns to stale depictions of the lower working class. However, it is necessary to remind that identities are "never unified" but "fragmented and fractured" (Hall 4), and that this is by no means a final stage of her identity formation in the novel. More than anything, the aforementioned scene illustrates that identity is connected to "questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being" (4) and questions of accessibility.

After having lived with different family members in an attempt to evade the abusive environment in her home, Bone spends time at her aunt Raylene's house beyond the city limits of Greenville. At one point, the two women are watching the river that winds itself past Aunt Raylene's porch and Raylene says to her niece: "Trash rises […] [o]ut here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time […] Time and men and trash out on the river. I just like to watch it all go around the bend (Allison 1992: 180). Here, 'trash' not only refers to the physical waste that passes them by but to those classified as trash, including Bone, her aunt, and several members of the Boatwright family. Raylene offers Bone an outlook for how to overcome her physical and sexual abuse and social stigmatization by choosing a path away from conformity. It becomes apparent that "Raylene's metaphor (and her actual work) of making beauty out of trash resonates deeply within Bone" (Horvitz 253), whereby above all the transformative power of the metaphor should be stressed in this context. A more graphic physical example emerges when Bone and one of her cousins fish an enormous set of hooks out of the river and damage part of Raylene's house with it. When she discovers what happened, Raylene angrily takes the hooks away from them, threatening that they were meant for dragging up bodies like theirs "in chunks" and "in pieces" from the bottom of the river (Allison 1992: 186). Her rant inspires further stories and nightmares:

> Aunt Raylene's tale didn't really scare us. When I tried to imagine my flesh in pieces it was like a cartoon, completely unreal, but in the night stringy terrible pieces of meat loomed in my dreams. The hooks got in my dreams too, dripping blood and river mud […] I made up stories about where those hooks had come from, who had lost them, until Patsy Ruth got

> nightmares. She dreamed that she had drowned in the river and the morticians had to sew pieces of her back together to look like somebody. Only they had to sew different people's pieces together just to make up one reasonable body to bury to show her mama. (Allison 1992: 186-87)

With these depictions, Allison joins several southern women writers whose fiction according to Patricia Yaeger is pervaded by partial bodies and images of scattered or fractured whiteness (xiii), by objects that "pass – or do not pass – the boundaries of race and class (61). These textual examples exhibit indicators that the "objects" in this novel, that is, the female protagonists, may have the capacity to transgress class and race boundaries but (can) only do so to a limited extent because they are impeded by certain factors.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined how *Bastard out of Carolina* maps out processes that crucially influence how the protagonists define themselves and their surroundings. As has been shown, the active use of and insistence on the legitimacy of "trash," "bastard," and similarly derogatory terms creates a detrimental environment that threatens to taint Bone and Anney's identity processes, though they also make use of the leeway they have to subvert stereotypical notions that arise as a result. It is noteworthy that the novel actively complicates stereotypes not by omitting them entirely but by showing a more comprehensive picture of the protagonists' situations (McDonald 15). I have proposed that the novel suggests both static and fluid understandings of class, which also requires us to understand how perceptions and notions of class change over time. Furthermore, the analyses of the textual excerpts regarding Bone's reflections on class, ethnicity, and identity contribute to a destabilization of a unified understanding of whiteness and further suggest that Bone identifies with the 'non-white' part of herself. I have also shown that critically examining fragmented, mistreated, and torn bodies in this context can contribute to more comprehensive insights into the characters' identities and the classification processes that impose themselves on them, but they also importantly point to issues of identification and a "culture of neglect" (Yaeger 67) that are crucially expressed in corporeal constellations.

Allison's novel compellingly exceeds an "unsentimental portrayal of profound poverty in the Old South" (Carter 887). By revising and complicating portrayals of the "ungrateful poor" (Allison 1994: 13), *Bastard* opens intriguing interstices for examining identity negotiations in the context of class and ethnicity and influencing factors in a society that is designed to "keep its victims impoverished" (McDonald 17). The novel's epigraph, a quote by James Baldwin, complements the main arguments I have

made, just as it contributes to the overall sentiment of the novel: "People pay for what they do, and still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it simply: by the lives they lead" (Baldwin in Allison 1992). These lines may take a stab at some members of the Boatwright family, such as Bone's uncles, who exhibit violent behavior and are more often drunk than they are sober or Anney, who deserts her daughter after her own blindness to Bone's sexual abuse. But they can also be directed at those in the novel who abuse their power to control and label the poorest and most desperate and decide to perpetuate violence – regardless of their perceived standing in society.

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From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

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(RE) IMAGINING RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS AS CHOICE IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *WILD SEED*

Abstract: For generations black writers have been searching for ways to insert their voices into larger societal narratives of race, gender, and class. They began using the genre of science fiction to create characters and stories that embody, deconstruct, and rearticulate many of the taken for granted assumptions regarding aforementioned intersections. The field of black science fiction has enabled authors to (re) imagine socially constructed dichotomies of black/white, male/female, and rich/poor through their texts. This essay examines Octavia Butler's use of race, gender, and class in *Wild Seed* to create narratives that transcend essentialist ideologies. In this essay, essentialism refers to social positioning in which the worldview of individuals or groups challenge prevailing social narratives while giving new life to these older beliefs. In this essay the following guiding questions are used: In what ways does Butler use *Wild Seed* to explore essentialism across intersections of race, gender, and class? What role does her characters play in the deconstruction or development of these discourses? How does she use her protagonist and antagonist to reflect and (re) imagine the attitude or narratives of the larger society? Utilizing relevant examples and excerpts from the novel, I consider how Butler situates essentialism in the lives of her characters as overlapping narratives in which her characters endeavor to establish their own ideas of race, gender, and class. Additionally, I employ narrative inquiry as my multifaceted research methodology to evaluate and to clarify Butler use of *Wild Seed* to move her characters from essentialism to choice.
Keywords: *Wild Seed*, Butler, (re) imagining, choice, race, gender, class

What is essentialism and how is it portrayed in literary works by black authors? In what ways have these writers used tropes of science fiction and superhuman abilities to challenge essentialist narratives? For generations black writers have be searching for ways to insert their voices into larger societal narratives of race, gender, and class. They have used the science fiction genre to create characters and stories that embody, deconstruct, and rearticulate many of the taken for granted assumptions regarding such intersections. The field of black science fiction has enabled authors such as Samuel Delaney, Tananarive Due, and Octavia Butler to (re)imagine socially constructed dichotomies like black/white, male/female, and rich/poor in ways that redefine these categories beyond standard convections. I use the novel *Wild Seed* to explore how Butler integrates the concept of choice to challenge the aforementioned categories, her depth handling of these complex issues through the use of choice to present her characters' narratives. In *Wild Seed* Butler employs the characters of Doro and Anyanwu to challenge essentialist notions of race, gender, and class as static classifications. She endows Doro and

Anyanwu with special abilities in which race, gender, and class are fluid and malleable exchanges that allow each to determine the best course of action to take based on their lived experiences.

The prequel to Butler's *Patternist* series (also known as *Seed to Harvest*), *Wild Seed* is the origin story for Doro and Anyanwu (Caravan 2013, 241). An immortal spirit who can transfer his essence into the body of any host, Doro is the novel's antagonist, while Anyanwu, the protagonist, is an Ibo woman, who can transform her body from human to animal at will (Keenan 1991, 497; Okorafor-Mbachu 2006, 241). Together they embark on a journey from Africa to the New World, where they must learn to negotiate with one another and the larger society. Each embraces or exhibits their understanding of one another beyond their outward physical appearance by redefining social expectations and deconstructing stereotypical representations. Butler accomplishes this task by incorporating African and African-American folklore with science fiction tropes as a vehicle for addressing larger social narratives across intersections of race, gender, and class.

Following the tradition of black science fiction, Butler uses *Wild Seed* to deconstruct the essentialized narrowness of these dichotomous categories by providing the reader with choices. Utilizing Susan A. Gelman's explanation of essentialism, as a "the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly but that gives an object its identity, and is responsible for other similarities that category members share" (404), I investigate how Butler uses her novel to (re) imagine the possibilities and limitations of choice with regards to narratives of race, gender, and class. Drawing on essentialism as a conceptual perspective in which innate attributes are used to classify individuals or groups based on a set of socially constructed traits, Butler employs *Wild Seed* to re-imagine the possibilities and limitations of choice with regards to narratives of race, gender, and class. In this essay, essentialism is a set of behaviors adopted by an individual or a group to present a particular image to the larger society.

The idea of essentialism is personal and not biological enables it to acts as a site where choices are made. From this perspective, essentialism is a form of social positioning in which the worldview of individuals or groups challenge prevailing social narratives while giving new life to these older discourses. Butler uses *Wild Seed* to create liminal spaces in which fact and fiction are used to "rewrite" (Scanlan 2004, 7) the narratives of Doro and Anyanwu from multiple points of view, an approach that enables Butler to,

> [destabilize], at least momentarily, our understanding of the distinction between the reasonable and unreasonable, a reason itself, the proper and improper, and propriety itself, by bringing into the field of play those we have forgotten, or do not believe accessible or feasible. (Iton 2008, 289)

This essay examines Octavia Butler's use of race, gender, and class in *Wild Seed* to create narratives that transcend essentialist ideologies. Utilizing relevant excerpts and examples from the novel, I consider how Butler situates essentialism in the lives of her characters as overlapping narratives in which her characters endeavor to establish their own ideas of race, gender, and class across time and geographical spaces. As a result I view, *Wild Seed* as storied text detailing Butler's literary endeavor to provide her readers with alternative interpretations that (re)imagines socially constructed categories across intersections of race, gender, and class. Additionally, I utilize narrative inquiry as my multifaceted research methodology to evaluate and clarify the ways that Butler uses *Wild Seed* to move her characters from essentialism to choice.

In this essay, I employ the following guiding questions: In what ways does Butler use *Wild Seed* to explore essentialism across intersections race, gender, and class? What role does her characters (Doro and Anyanwu) play in the deconstruction or development of these discourses? How does she use her protagonist and antagonist to reflect and (re) imagine the attitude or narratives of the larger society? First, I explain Butler's use of choice in *Wild Seed*. Next, I explore how Doro and Anyanwu deconstruct and develop these narratives. Finally, I analyze the ways that larger social attitudes or narratives are reflected or (re) imagined in the novel.

Hidden secrets, signifying what, and other common practices

The use of essentialism in *Wild Seed* is presented as a series of interconnecting narratives and social interactions among characters in which each endeavors to navigate between the intersections of race, gender, and class. This enables Butler to position essentialism in the context of choice using characters such as Doro and Anyanwu. These characters are then free to embrace, change, or reject traditional notions of race, gender, and class. Each possesses special abilities that both attracts and repulses the other. What began in Africa as a chance encounter between the two becomes a rediscovery of humankind's interconnectivity to one another and the larger society. This is evidenced by Doro's breeding program, which exceeds contemporary descriptions of race, gender, and class as fluid and malleable discourses. These intersecting narratives are used in *Wild Seed* to deconstruct essentialist concepts of beyond arbitrary attributes such as skin color, sex organs, and socioeconomic status. For instance, the residents of Wheatley Plantation provide insight into conversations race, gender, and class as a set of behaviors that the characters choose to portray in their public and private lives. Isaac tells Anyanwu that

> Wheatley is Doro's 'American' village. He dumps all the people he can't find places for in his pure families on us. Mix and stir. No one can afford to worry about what anyone else looks

> like. They don't know who Doro might mate them with—or what their children might look like. (Butler 1980, 102)

In the novel the words "wild seed" and "pure" (Butler 1980, 102) are used to describe individuals who were or were not part of Doro's eugenics program. This also places these individuals into hierarchal categories of specialness even at Wheatley. The plantation provides insight into conversations of race and class with the wealthy slave owners (e.g. Doro) at the top, while the slaves (e.g., Isaac, Anyanwu) occupying the spaces at the lowest end of the continuum. Isaac uses the words "mix and stir" (Butler 1980, 102) as if Doro were making a cocktail for consumption or cooking for his guests. This statement by Isaac also includes him as a product of a white mother and the body of a black man, borrowed by Doro for Isaac's conception. The population is comprised of individuals that failed to meet Doro's superiority criteria. While touring Wheatley with Anyanwu, Isaac explains why Doro established Wheatley. Isaac states that although he is "white and black and Indian" (Butler 1980, 102), he is able to reside on the plantation without any problems. Butler redefines race beyond skin pigmentation as evidenced by a conversation between Isaac, Doro's son, and Anyanwu. He states that, "As a white man, he knows what he is but he was raised white. This is not an easy place to be black. Soon it will not be an easy place to be Indian" (Butler 1980, 94/95). Isaac is describing the social climate of the United States during the nineteenth century. He acknowledges that his cultural heritage includes African-American and Native American ethnicities; however, he understands why he must embody the mannerisms of the dominant white culture. He also states that he possesses special abilities (telekinesis) that separate him from his indoctrinated race and categorizes him as other in this ethnic group. Essentialism emerges from Doro's separation of his people based on their abilities versus race, gender, or class; however, he unwittingly gives them a choice–whether to accept his decision or discard it. Innately, the residents of Wheatley are fearful of defying Doro; yet, in their own way they re-establish their independence by making the best decisions for their lives under extremely difficult circumstances. Many physically accept Doro's mandates, while verbally rebuffing them. For instance, Isaac disagrees with Doro's breeding program, although he silently and readily accepts Anyanwu as his wife and fathers her children at Doro's urging without question. This places Isaac in a feminized role by showing his subjugation at the hands of Doro.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler contends that social categories are performative texts whose narratives place individuals or groups into socially assigned roles. She argues that these discourses also contribute to the formation of designations that are used to marginalize or oppress specific individuals or groups. The author suggests that extensive revisions are necessary if individuals or

groups are to determine their own markers of identity in order to deconstruct and redefine larger social narratives on their own terms. This is represented by Doro's American colony on Wheatley Plantation. This estate is a diverse community in which each of the recognized classifications are its residents and "no one can afford to worry about what anyone else looks like" (Butler 1980, 102) because they do not know who they will be mated with. Doro has brought together individuals or groups that he perceives as inferior with regards to their abilities. These are persons who are too valuable for Doro to discard, but not extraordinary enough to reside in one of his more advanced colonies.

Narratives such as these are interwoven in *Wild Seed* and are presented in the language and accepted meanings associated with dominant discourses of race, gender, and class. For example, the term "wild seed" is first used by Doro in Africa to describe Anyanwu. During his conversation with her, Doro decided "he had to have the woman. She was wild seed of the best kind. She would strengthen any line he bred her into, strengthen it immeasurably" (Butler 1980, 22). The phrase "wild seed" is later repeated by Isaac in reference to other characters in the novel. Isaac uses this terminology as he introduces Anyanwu to the newest family on the plantation. He tells her that

> The Sloanes were the newest wild seed–a couple who had found each other before Doro found them. They were dangerous, unstable, painfully sensitive people who heard the thoughts of others in intermittent bursts. (Butler 1980, 137)

In reference to Anyanwu, "wild seed" is used by Doro to categorize her as an individual with special abilities who was not a direct product of his selective breeding program. Whereas, its use by Isaac places the Sloanes in a realm of inferiority in which Doro has to implement strategies that will weaken their abilities and strengthen that of their off-springs. This label is a common term applied to individuals or groups that Doro considers inferior to himself as inferred by the words "dangerous" and "unstable." They are people such as Anyanwu and the Sloanes who possesses superhuman abilities, born free, and resistant (temporarily) to Doro's breeding program. These are people that Doro feels he has little or no control over, as a result, he captures them through charismatic seduction or physical intimidation and then brings "them to Wheatley" (Butler 1980, 137).

On Wheatley Plantation "wild seeds" are the lowest of all the residents because they were born free, but like their fellow residents each are property in the eyes of Doro. This is evidenced in the language Isaac uses in his categorization of these people. The Sloane's display characteristics such as "dangerous," "unstable," and "painfully sensitive," which are attributes often associated with black people, specifically males, and those of other ethnicities as well as those of low socioeconomic status. These descriptors are essentialists representations used to classify individuals or groups without the use of

dichotomies, hence, subverting while contriving conversations across intersections of race, gender, and class in ways that open critical social spaces as discursive sites of resistance that disrupts essentialist underpinnings. From this perspective, Butler creates characters who challenge essentialism through their choices. She uses *Wild Seed* to transgress static narratives of race, gender, and class in ways that enable Doro's and Anyanwu's actions to act as ciphers into larger discourses.

Intangible secrets, ancient knowledge, and new recollections

The relationship between Doro and Anyanwu began as one of admiration and trust, but became a journey in which choice was embraced as an alternative to essentialism (Eshun 2003, 291). Their interactions signified an acceptance and a rejection of socially constructed narratives of race, gender, and class, which evolved over time through a series of exchanges. For example, while Doro assists Anyanwu in getting dressed, he thinks aloud as she listens. Doro states, "Someday…we will both change. I will become a woman and find out whether you make an especially talented man" (Butler 1980, 100). This offer is quickly rebuffed by Anyanwu; however, Doro's words "we will both change" suggests that gender is malleable, as indicated by "change" suggests that abstract narratives constructing social idea associated with gender are fallible and easily modifiable. During their brief exchange, Doro insinuates that one may "become a woman" or a "talented man" simply by choosing to adopt the attributes ascribed to these categories. Anyanwu's refers to Doro's idea as an "abomination" which demonstrates her essentialist underpinnings that highlights the internalized belief held by the larger society that gender is static.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha proposes the development of a third space as a site where individuals or groups are able to interact beyond socially imposed limitations of race, gender, and class. Using Doro's and Anyanwu's special abilities, Butler establishes a third space in which Doro is able to learn from his mistakes and co-exist with Anyanwu as equal partners. This is evidenced in Frank's, a plantation resident, expressing his disdain for the ways Doro's and Anyanwu's freely "[change] sex, [change skin] color, breeding like" (Butler 1980, 266) before trailing off. Frank's accusations against Doro and Anyanwu demonstrate the movement of narratives of sex, race, and procreation from that of static social expectations to that of free will and individual choice, where Doro and Anyanwu behaviors determine their own categorizations. Frank's assertion is countered by Doro, who offers to discuss Frank's pedigree, a proposal he quickly declines. However, Frank's comments illustrate the fluidity with which Doro and Anyanwu are able to deconstruct essentialist views of race, gender, and class simply by choosing an alternative path. Both Doro's and Frank's aforementioned

statements provide a glimpse into the ways that essentialism functions in Doro's narratives and explains his desire to create a sense of belonging in himself, hence, offering ways to frame, understand, and articulate these discourses in the larger society. Choice, then, becomes a form of concealment in which Doro and Anyanwu are both complicit with regards to hiding their true nature or appearance from others by changing their physical appearance and other attributes.

The relationship between Doro and Anyanwu represents one marked by essentialism in which larger social narratives are used to categorize them based on their perceived race, gender, and class. Their story is as old as humankind and fits into the current social climate of the United States. Their connection to one another transcends traditional ideas by enabling each to make choices based on their understanding and experiences (Enshu 2003, 291). Their relationship is one of consensual slavery in which Doro consumes Anyanwu's "life essence, taking her as close to death as he can without killing her" (Call 2011, 142). This enables Doro to challenge larger social ideas of race, gender, and class by living his life as spirit, while Anyanwu holds steadfastly to the many of the rigid expectations embedded in these larger social narratives. In *Wild Seed*, essentialism is a worldview imposed on Anyanwu by Doro as a normative practice through artificial constructs that he uses to reinforce his larger ideological practice. Anyanwu's movement towards choice began on her journey from Africa to the New World. It continued when Anyanwu became a plantation owner in Louisiana where she not only housed slaves, but also individuals with special gifts. She created a site, unlike Doro's colonies, where people were allowed to choose their partners and make many of their own decisions. Although Anyanwu admonished Doro for his desire to breed the people in her care, she ultimately does the same. Butler uses Anyanwu's choices (e.g., procreation, gender, race) to recontextualize the relationship between her and Doro by strategically placing their narratives in larger social conversations across the intersections of race, gender, and class.

Hostility, commonalities, and enemies

The novel chronicles Doro's obsession with his "breeding program" (Call 2011, 139) which he imposes on Anyanwu and the citizens of Wheatley Plantation. His ambivalence towards his residents is a form of essentialism used by Doro to separate his colonists from those of the larger society. Wheatley Plantation is a community Doro established for the purpose of furthering his dream of creating a superior group of people. Doro brought persons with varying abilities there in hopes of pairing the right partners to create children equal to him, but not his immediate superior. For instance, Doro chose a twenty-year-old man from the Whitten family to mate with his daughter

Nweke. Doro believed that the young man was of "fairly good breeding stock" (Butler 1980, 145) and that the boy's "family would be worth more in generations to come" (Butler 1980, 145). Doro selected the young man because the Whittens "had a sensitivity that puzzled" (Butler 1980, 145) him. Doro concluded that, "They [the Whittens] were a pleasant mystery that careful inbreeding would solve" (Butler 1980, 146).

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon explored the role of language and meaning in the facilitation or deconstruction of an individual's or group's unique traits. Fanon found that such distinctions were partially responsible for the arbitrary categorization of such populations. He concluded that each generation must assume responsibility for deconstructing and replacing the older, often essentialist, ideologies. Doro's use of the phrases "good breeding stock" and "worth more" as well as the word "sensitivity" to determine and rationalize the fitness of the Whitten bloodline to intermix with that of his. His actions (verbal or physical) are a form of essentialism in which othering across intersections of race, gender, and class is used to physically separate Wheatley Plantation citizenry from those of the larger society and their fellow residents (Call 2011, 142; Lingoria 2011, 4). Embedded in his use of coded language, Doro's essentialist assessment of the Whitten family justifies his decision to mate his daughter, Nweke, with the young Mr. Whitten. These choices transform Doro into a system of control, an essentialist power structure devoid of humanity who entices people to follow him and do his bidding (Wanzo 2005, 72). However, Doro realizes that he has a choice, whereas Anyanwu represents choice through her ability to conform, adopt, and modify the expectation of her new community and in many ways the demands of Doro. Yet, Anyanwu uses essentialism to explain her decisions. Through years of combativeness and quiet contemplation, Doro and Anyanwu are able to determine the best course of action for their lives. This idea is embedded by Butler throughout *Wild Seed* as special abilities enabling Doro and Anyanwu to communicate with one another and make their own choices individually as well as collectively regardless of their geographical locations.

Conclusion

This essay examined Octavia Butler's use of narratives of choice in *Wild Seed* to transcend essentialist ideologies. The novelist presents the characters of Doro and Anyanwu who are interconnected and conflictually relatable to one another in ways that reflect the social climate of the larger society. They are two sides of the same coin in which their many facets are fluidly exchanged for categories of other that exist across the intersections of race, gender, and class. These characters serve as representations of marginalized groups, specifically people of color and women, as each engages in the task of establishing an identity and a culture of their own design in an every chang-

ing world. Her reappropriation of dichotomies of black/white, male/female, and rich/poor transgresses these older discourses through the creation of choice. Their narrative transforms discourses of race, gender, and class from their essentialist associations to that of choice as all characters redefine these terms for themselves.

Using tropes of science fiction to deconstruct categories of race, gender, and class, Butler provides her readers with alternative ways of viewing these discourses through their engagement with her characters, Doro and Anyanwu. She creates embodied locations "across multiple sites and terrains" (Nunley 2008, 338) where her characters abilities to choose are based on their "understandings of the world (Youdell 2006, 37) and one another. Doro and Anyanwu are able to co-exist as well as "rewrite" their socially imposed classifications. Their special abilities enable each to challenge the essentialist world views imposed on them by one another and the larger society by using their lived experiences and social interactions to choose the best path for themselves. Given the view of the larger society, Octavia Butler, like other black science fiction writers, uses her text to demonstrate the constantly evolving and expanding interpretations of narratives of race, gender, and class by (re)imagining their associated meanings.

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From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

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NEGOTIATING IDENTITY THROUGH SPORTS AND OUTDOOR IN JACK LONDON'S FICTION

Abstract: Jack London went down in literary history as a versatile and colourful author. Having drawn from his abundant biography (London was preoccupied with journalism, pouching and gold digging, among others), he became a prominent representative of the "adventurous Romanticism". Critics and readers have also acknowledged and appreciated his considerable input into the tradition of sporting writing, as he frequently contextualized the dilemmas he explored in the sporting terrain. The main aim of the article is to present how London shapes various identities of his characters through sporting and outdoor activities. It is valuable to demonstrate how sports and outdoor experience, seemingly a trivial and common element of human existence, becomes crucial in the process of developing one's ethnicity, nationality, female and various forms of cultural belonging. The material selected for analysis constitutes three titles: "A Royal Sport" from *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), "On the Makaloa Mat" (1919) and "The Mexican" (1911).
Keywords: sports writing, Jack London, outdoor

Introduction

Already in 1970, Wojciech Liponski complained about the shocking absence of sports in academic humanities research. Although a cultural phenomenon and one of the most basic aspects of human activity, it had been neglected by sociologists, pedagogues, philosophers and historians. The reason for that, as Liponski held forth, lay in a centuries-old tradition of undermining sports and physical education in the process of shaping generations. This tradition dates back to the Middle Ages; physical beauty and fitness embodied sin and paganism, and was supplanted by the cult of spiritual values (9).[1] With such an attitude long gone, various fields, from economics, through marketing to cultural studies and tourism have included sports as an important area of their deliberations. Not literary studies, though. One may get the impression that European literary scholars and critics, including Polish ones, welcome sports writing with a pint of salt not giving much attention to its importance and literary value.

Unfair and detrimental, American readers and critics have by all means abandoned such understanding of sports writing. One of the finest American writers serve an example to break these invidious stereotypes. Ernest Hemingway's autobiographical,

1 Translation from Polish by Paulina Korzeniewska-Nowakowska.

raw and naturalistic descriptions of boxing (as he would famously say, "my writing is nothing, my boxing is everything") found a crucial place in his short stories and novels posing questions about human determination and sacrifice. As observed by Myers, "something as primal as boxing naturally provides a rich abundance of enduring metaphors concerning power, fear, life and death that have struck a chord with many writers" (2007). Nowadays a highly questionable discipline of bull-fighting was also among Hemingway's favorites, which he frequently used in his plots examining the edges of human mercy and people's undeniable need to enjoy violence and cruelty. David Foster Wallace, Phillip Roth, Cormac McCarthy or Bernard Malamud, just to name a few, all explored and challenged the arcana of human character and mind by means of making their characters athletes and their settings – athletic arenas. A considerable oversight would be not to include Jack London into this notable circle. "Jack London was our first celebrity sportswriter", as stated by Lachtman (XI), and it would be difficult not to agree with such a bold, yet well-earned, comment. Having drawn from his eventful and colourful life (one needs to know he occupied himself with poaching, sailing, gold digging and journalism, among others), London left behind massive literary heritage based on his sporting and outdoor experience. The notion of *outdoor* is mentioned here not without reason as these are outdoor activities that lie at the core of most of London's fiction. In the present article, I would like to address the issue of developing identities by means of sporting and outdoor experience in London's selected writings. I understand the notion of identity in a broad sense; as both a self-concept (Baumeister 1997) and a formation of social belongingness, and more generally – as a human quality which makes a person unique, different (or similar) to others. As identity formation may take place on a number of levels, the focus of the article will be narrowed down to the categories of culture, gender, ethnicity and self-development as seen by London. The research data consist of a few short stories which epitomize the perspective I wish to provide: "A Royal Sport" from "The Cruise of the Snark" (1911). "On the Makaloa Mat" (1919) and "The Mexican" (1911). My interpretations will be preceded by a brief introduction to the outdoor studies and their importance to American studies, whose understanding goes hand in hand with a close reading of London's texts.

I will pursue my research by means of a confluence of two methodological approaches. On the one hand, cultural criticism will serve as a diachronic tool to explore economic, political and historical conditions of literary texts paying attention to those marginalized in terms of gender or class. Cultural studies, moreover, use insights from various fields, such as history, psychology and, also, sports (Templeton 1992: 19), which makes them an interdisciplinary and multipurpose research facilitator. On the other hand, I will employ concepts of sociological criticism, which examines literature as manifestation of society, and by extension, societal behaviors, habits and dynamics

in a variety of contexts. In other words, it diagnoses social categories and orientations, and sees literatures as „equipment for living" (Burke 293-304).

Outdoor studies and their literary representation

The authors of *Routledge International Handbook of Outdoor Studies* define outdoor as "the term that fruitfully encompasses a broad range of approaches, foci and methods such as, but not limited to, experimental learning, adventure education, […] environmental education, outdoor leadership, nature-based sport and wilderness therapy" (Henderson, Humberstone and Prince 2). The outdoor studies, however, touch upon a variety of other areas and topics: life style, health-promoting trends, social studies, tourism and eco-tourism, literature, philosophy, art, etc. In other words, they examine those spheres of human activity in which people interact with the natural environment. To grasp the phenomenon of *outdoor* in the American realm, one needs to also examine the notion of *wilderness* – the concept which already accompanied newcomers as they settled in the New World in the XVII century. The geographical location of today's Canada and the northern part of the United States was a considerable challenge in terms of logistics, as severe weather conditions, demanding landform and backcountry covered with forest meant a heavy beginning for those who chose to start a new home there. "It was instinctively understood as something alien to man – an insecure and uncomfortable environment against which civilization had had waged an unceasing struggle" (Nash 8). Boundlessness of nature and its overwhelming power over men aroused the feeling of solitude and helplessness in the face of calamity. The perception of nature as an inhospitable and violent enemy inspired a proactive attitude, though. In wilderness, Puritans saw a beast that needed to be tamed, a place to harness with the help of God. Soon after, wilderness became a state of mind rather than a purely geographical obstacle; it left a significant imprint on the American thought. In "Wilderness and the American Mind", Nash admits that it had an immense impact on the formation of both American and Canadian identities ; it became a crucial part of the origin myth and a unifying factor in building nations, especially in the face of incomprehension and enmity between various ethnic groups striving to build a country. Vicissitudes of their history and fortune accompanied by rough natural conditions served as strong inspirations not only for settlers, but also for artists.

Given the Canadian and American preoccupation with the wilderness and nature, they found their significant manifestation in outdoor literature. Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. Pivotal representatives of *nature writing*, such as Emerson, Burroughs and Thoreau, whose cult *Walden* (1854), a philosophical reflection on the condition of the world of his contemporaries encouraged by his solitary time spent

in the back and beyond, epitomize main ideas of the outdoor experience. Atwood's *Wilderness Tips* (1991), a short stories collection evincing isolation and misery of an individual, show hostility of nature serving as a metaphor for life adversities. Vastly popular novels, such as Michael Punke's *The Revenant: A Novel of Revenge* (2002) and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012), both filmed and showered with awards, also explore the wilderness experience at its finest.

'Jack of all sports': London's preoccupation with outdoor and sports writing

Jack London combines it all. He is a keen observer of the surrounding nature, an informed reporter of human life in line with natural laws and an enthusiastic fan of outdoor activities - sports and pastimes which contribute to the image of his typical character as a *homo ludens*[2]. In "Royal Sport," London explores the arcana of surfing. Allegedly, in the early 1900s, he saw a surfer from the Waikiki beach in Hawaii and became amazed by his skilful command of the surfing board and bold attitude towards the powerful and destructive force of water. The surfer in question, Alexander Fume Ford, a traveller and an enthusiast of sports, introduced London to the discipline and served as an inspiration to the creation of the story's main character.

The story's narrator begins his deliberation on the beauty of surfing with a sullen ascertainment about the human spirit.

> […] one feels microscopically small, and the thought that one may wrestle with this sea raises in one's imagination a thrill of apprehension, almost of fear. Why, they are a mile long, these bull-mouthed monsters, and they weigh a thousand tons, and they charge in to shore faster than a man can run. What chance? No chance at all, is the verdict of the shrinking ego; and one sits, and looks, and listens, and thinks the grass and the shade are a pretty good place in which to be (London 1981: 3).

Self-doubt and inferiority seem to prevail in his judgement on men's abilities. The persona identifies himself as weak, in awe of the forces of nature and respectful towards its perspective. London describes him as "erect, full-statured, not struggling frantically in that wild movement […] He is a Mercury – a brown Mercury" (1981: 4). One may easily notice the immediate change of his tone as the surfer's achievements on the surfing board transfer into much deeper thought on the human quality – you may rise, develop and overcome any obstacle, which in a time of omnipresent coaching seems particularly up to date. London continues: "[Y]ou are a man, one of the kingly species and that that Kanaka[3] can do, you can do yourself" (1981: 5). Either a form of the American dream or a major dose of self-motivation, London suggests that sport

2 The term *homo ludens* was coined by Johan Huizinga in the book by the same title, in which he discusses the significance of play in the process of shaping culture and society.

3 A native Hawaiian.

puts a man on a pedestal, *makes* him, provides him with success, hence incorporates achieving goals into the human nature. Sporting activities strengthen the character's physique, but also reveal, as London seems to suggest, an athlete's unusual qualities, his superiority over any odds, the ability to practise and master a difficult discipline.

A significant importance of Hawaiian outdoor and sports is manifested in the short story, "On the Makaloa Mat". It brings forward the lives of two elderly sisters, true-born Hawaiians, who meet to reminisce about their youth and the times long gone. The collection by the same name in which the story was originally published depicts rural and pastoral Hawaiian islands in the face of the clash with the Western civilization.[4] Bella and Martha, both entrapped in patriarchal-model families (in this case, white men marrying Hawaiian women) for the first time share their youthful dreams and hopes with each other. Their words reverberate with sadness and nostalgia, yet Bella seems to have come to terms with her situation and speaks of her husband, George, with nothing but respect for his hard work and goodness. It is, however, when she mentions the horse she received from her lover, and used to ride that Bella's tone changes thoroughly and the reader may get to know her true colors. Not only does it offer an insight into the character in her outdoor, traditional activities, but also speaks volume about her psychological profile. This is how she portrays the animal:

> But Hilo! I was the first woman on his back. He was a three- year-old, almost a four-year, and just broken. So black and in such a vigour of coat that the high lights on him clad him in shimmering silver. He was the biggest riding animal on the ranch, descended from the King's Sparklingdow with a range mare for dam, and roped wild only two weeks before. I never have seen so beautiful a horse. […] Oh, when he ran with me up the long-grass slopes, and down the long-grass slopes, it was like hurdling in a dream, for he cleared the grass at every bound, leaping like a deer, a rabbit, or a fox- terrier—you know how they do. And cut up, and prance, and high life! He was a mount for a general, for a Napoleon or a Kitchener. And he had, not a wicked eye, but, oh, such a roguish eye, intelligent and looking as if it cherished a joke behind and wanted to laugh or to perpetrate it (London 1965: 123).

London brings together different kinds of identity formation. Horse riding gives Bella a possibility to be her true self on a number of levels. Firstly, it reminds her of her Hawaiian heritage which, on a daily basis, stays overshadowed. As a rider, she may embrace her Hawaiian character: dynamic, hot-blooded, passionate, enjoying her closeness to nature. As Reeseman (2011: 173) observes, "true cultural identity is not based here in race". Bella finds comfort in retaining her essential *hawaiiness*, even though it is in an ostensibly trivial episode of horse riding. The horse and carefree time it represented undoubtedly awakens her ethnic belongingness.

4 As London wrote in a letter to Edgar G. Sisson, "[t]his is true and genuine and correct and right of the old Hawaiian life (1988: 1553).

Instead of constantly fulfilling Bella's role of a housewife, her husband's obedient, submissive and silent companion, she could also experience a momentary escape into her true womanhood. The description of her encounter with Hilo was not only a treat which took Bella's mind off a humdrum life she led with George, but also a chance for her to experience true romance. Thus, the horse represents much more; namely, a gift of momentary happiness. Furthermore, as Bella proudly mentions, she was the first woman to ride Hilo and she elaborates on how magnificent the beast was. This also gives her a sense of uniqueness, some sort of personal satisfaction and fulfilment she could not find in her daily routines.

Probably the strongest and the most telling image of identity formation could be, however, found in London's short story "The Mexican". The author, a committed supporter to the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), challenges the theme of the common man's political involvement in a populist revolt against Porfirio Diaz's tyrant regime. London chooses boxing as his main tool for that involvement, as "[a]thletes for whom victory in a contest is also victory for a cause have become legend in both life and literature" (Lachtman 122). The eponymous Mexican, Felipe Rivera, joins the Junta organization to serve the revolution. Little do his fellow comrades know about his past; Rivera provides money for the revolutionary activities, yet does not reveal its source or discuss his motivations. The Juntas attempt to define him, but his identity stays strangely elusive, as if the more they are trying to get to the bottom of his background, the less familiar he is to them. Rivera displays barely any qualities; he is a nobody and an everyman at the same time.

> "A great and lonely spirit, perhaps, I do not know, I do not know," Arrellano said helplessly.
> "He is not human," said Ramos.
> "His soul has been seared," said May Sethby. "Light and laughter have been burned out of him. He is like one dead, and yet he is fearfully alive."
> „He has been through hell," said Vera. „No man could look like that who has not been through hell--and he is only a boy."
> Yet they could not like him. He never talked, never inquired, never suggested. He would stand listening, expressionless, a thing dead, save for his eyes, coldly burning, while their talk of the Revolution ran high and warm. From face to face and speaker to speaker his eyes would turn, boring like gimlets of incandescent ice, disconcerting and perturbing.
> „He is no spy," Vera confided to May Sethby. „He is a patriot--mark me, the greatest patriot of us all. I know it, I feel it, here in my heart and head I feel it. But him I know not at all" (London 1981: 126).

At this juncture, Rivera is a boxer who fights for money so that he can fund the revolution and in the story's climax fights against Danny Ward, an awarded American champion, to gather money for necessary guns. He is supposed to be "the lamb led to slaughter at the hands of the great Danny" (1981: 139). It is also when London describes the boy's true motives and hatred for boxing; it becomes a vehicle for his hidden anger

and grief over his deceased family. At first, one may get the impression that the boxing London presents in the story is a rotten, corrupt and primitive sport, thoroughly devoid of values, such as fair-play, brotherhood and equality.[5] As the fight proceeds, however, the reader may notice Rivera's determination and patient, methodical approach to his performance. All in all, it becomes clear that the will to gather the money for the Juntas is his primary desire, and boxing is portrayed as a powerful tool in hands of a young revolutionist. Rivera, a misunderstood loner, almost a Romantic hero, even "an Übermensch" as Furer puts it, wins the fight. As Furer further observes, "this superior individual fighting for the people combines the two attributes London valued the most: individual mastery and dedication to the socialist cause" (1998: 171).

In the story's finale, it is Felipe's national spirit that comes to the forefront. He may not be a born revolutionist, a brilliant speaker or a charismatic leader, yet he proves to be a devoted Mexican. Unsupported and alienated, tormented by personal trauma and fiercely determined, he wins an unwinnable fight and, *ipso facto*, saves the revolution.

> There were no congratulations for Rivera. He walked to his corner unattended, where his seconds had not yet placed his stool. He leaned backward on the ropes and looked his hatred at them, swept it on and about him till the whole ten thousand Gringos were included. His knees trembled under him, and he was sobbing from exhaustion. Before his eyes the hated faces swayed back and forth in the giddiness of nausea. Then he remembered they were the guns. The guns were his. The Revolution could go on (London 1981: 153).

Already the story's title suggests that Rivera's national belongingness is especially grounded in the text's significance, but it is the final passage that epitomizes his strong sense of patriotism. As opposed to canning and dishonourable *Gringos,* Rivera stays unshaken. He does not enjoy his victory, though, as he keeps focusing on the cause.

Conclusion

As it has been demonstrated, sports and outdoor writing brings an interesting input to the studies of identity in American literary expression. The introductory remarks on the phenomenon of outdoor experience evinced how interdisciplinary and universal field it is, whereas a brief description of the *wilderness* put this approach into the American context and also grasp an understanding of the specificity of the American literary terrain. The three characters selected for interpretation in the article presented different aspects of identity, their common ground being negotiating that identity through a broadly understood sporting activity. The narrator of "A Royal Sport" manages to find his inner strength and personal value in his attempts to master the art of surfing.

5 In a symptomatic passage, Danny Ward, applauded by the crowd, shakes Rivera's hand smiling, yet whispers to him "You little Mexican rat, […] I'll fetch the yellow outa you" (1981: 142).

Bella, the "On the Makaloa Mat" protagonist, finds her lost womanhood and forgotten ethnicity in a simple pastime of horse riding, whereas Felipe Rivera, in "The Mexican", builds his national identity through boxing for the cause of the Mexican Revolution. All these multidimensional characters and their endeavours show how crucial sports in the analysis and interpretation of a literary text can be and how London's over a hundred-year-old work still attracts an inspiring and complex reading.

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From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations

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WHITE POLE DILEMMA IN JAMES BALDWIN'S *ANOTHER COUNTRY*

Abstract: In his essay collection entitled *The Cross Of Redemption*, James Baldwin pens, "There are Poles: in Warsaw (where they would like us to be friends) and in Chicago (where because they are white we are enemies). […] It bears terrifying witness to what happened to everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket. The price was to become 'white.' No one was white before he/she came to America" (167). These words testify to the complex phenomenon of Polish redefinition of identity that specific racialized American environment incites. Polish immigrants undergo white racial identity development, the stages of which Helms terms as Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independent, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy, each encompassing individual attempt to define one's place amidst predominantly black/white racial dynamics. The process evokes a broad range of emotions towards one's self and the black other. Polish-American might feel confused and puzzled upon first encounter of strict racialism, anxious about being forced to adhere to a racial group, guilty of being a representative of white race (the epitome of oppressive power structure), superior over black people, or proud of being white but eager to confront racism. This constitutes an emotional and attitudinal dilemma that a character Richard Silenski in Baldwin's novel *Another Country* faces. The objective of this paper is to estimate what stage of white racial identity development the character attains and in what way Baldwin envisions the American city as a specific cultural environment that compels immigrants to redefine their identities over against racialized categorization.
Keywords: cultural identity, racial identity, racial consciousness, Polish-American, American city

Introduction

Polish American identity formation is a complex cultural phenomenon, particularly with respect to the development of racial consciousness accompanying this process. Historically, most Polish immigrants did not regard assertion of Polish national identity as a primary concern upon arrival to the United States. "Their concern was limited to seeking fulfillment of a few basic educational, cultural, and religious aims conceived in purely instrumental terms to help them function in the new environment" (Lyra 68). However, with time, they began to feel compelled, or became subconsciously vulnerable, to redefine their identity. Many realized that in addition to their former identification with the Polish nation, the Slavic ethnic group, the Catholic Church, their place of birth in the Tartar Mountains or any other Polish geographical region such as Silesia, Cuyavia, and Masuria, they also had to reconsider racial identity. This is a phenomenon that testifies to the reality of identity as a changeable process determined by culture. In this

context, culture is referenced as "the semantic space, the field of signs and practices, in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories" (Camaroff & Camaroff 1992, 27). Cultural experience encompasses all collective experience within a particular context. Immigration, therefore, is a facet of cultural experience because it involves a shift from one context to another, in which individuals define approaches to new conventions, beliefs, and customs, as well as satisfying yearnings to belong to the existing groups.

Toni Morrison designates the cultural space that migration generates "Foreigner's Home," represented, among many other countries, by the United Sates as a location, where

> Everybody was from some place else. Thrown out or exiles. So the idea of home for Americans is fraught with yearning. It's a romantic place. It's a kind of utopia, just out of reach. So it's less a place than a mental state that you acquire when you are in a place where you are safe and nobody is after you, and people will help you ("Morrison Interview").

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison elaborates on the same issue in the following way,

> The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. Although, in fact, the escape was sometimes an escape from license – from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined – for those fleeing for reasons other than religious ones, constraint and limitation impelled the journey. All the Old World offered these immigrants was poverty, prison, social ostracism, and not infrequently, death [...] In the New World there was the vision of a limitless future, made more gleaming by the constraint, dissatisfaction, and turmoil left behind. (34)

Morrison's observations are also applicable to Polish Americans who fled post-World War II poverty, and totalitarian communist oppression.

The intricate ingredient of immigration process in American context is defining one's position in a consciously racialized context. In an interview "The Pain of Being Black," Toni Morrison states,

> If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other's throats out, as they have done everywhere else. But in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for me – it's nothing else but color […] Every immigrant knew he would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group – and that was [black people] (Taylor-Guthrie 255)

Historically, particularly from the beginning to the end of the Great Migration, "the native-born African American population, including many […] migrants from the South, coexisted with, and possibly competed against, large numbers of […], foreign-born arrivals in the same urban settings" (Adelman and Tolnay 180). Polish immigrants also found themselves caught up in America's racial dilemma, especially in the

multicultural context of American Northern cities, where people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds struggled for employment and social advancement. Within this competitive environment, the Polish immigrants sought to locate the more privileged group and aspire to attain the same status and recognition. For instance, James Baldwin made a telling remark regarding Polish identification with Chicago white supremacists, an American metropolis that had, and still has, the highest Polish immigrant population. In *The Cross of Redemption*, Baldwin contended that

> There are Poles: in Warsaw (where they would like us to be friends) and in Chicago (where because they are white we are enemies). […] It bears terrifying witness to what happened to everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket. The price was to become "white." No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country. (167)

Considering cultural and psychological perspectives, Polish immigrants continue to undergo developmental stages of white identity, the processes manifested to a certain degree by the attitudes and emotions that Richard Silenski, a character of Polish descent in Baldwin's novel *Another Country*, holds towards black people. The identity crises that the character experiences evidence the cultural dimension of Silenski's racial identity in that they turn out to be very changeable, fluid, and fragile psychological conditions, indicative of "the instability, the permanent unsettlement, the lack of any final resolution" (Hall 228).

Developmental stages of white identity as cultural phenomenon

Beverly Daniel Tatum elaborates on six stages of white identity development defined earlier by Helms (1990). These are Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independent, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy. The first one entails knowledge of racial stereotypes, but unawareness of systemic, institutional racism. Moreover, a person undergoing this stage does not discern his/her belonging to a privileged group and the need to interact with people of other races. "The Contact stage often includes naive curiosity about or fear of people of color, based on stereotypes learned from friends, family, or the media" (400). Nevertheless, if a person brought up in such an environment finds himself/herself in a more racially diverse context and begins to observe more complex and direct forms of racism, he/she is likely to enter the Disintegration stage, which is accompanied by emotional discomfort that the person feels upon becoming aware of white privilege and the racist system that this privilege fosters. Coping mechanisms that are likely to enable the individual to overcome the sense of guilt and anger are denial, in effect of which the person may deny the existence of real racism; projection, by blaming racism on its victims; avoidance, by "avoiding contact with

people of color and the topic of racism" (401). Sometimes, just in contradistinction to the above, "response to the discomfort of Disintegration, […] involves attempts to change significant others' attitudes toward African Americans and other people of color" (401), an effort that, more often than not, fails in a context of deeply inculcated racial bias. The person that is unfortunate to live under social pressure constituted by systemic maintenance of racial prejudice and oppression and does not want to lose one's privileged status may experience Reintegration that involves conformity to the belief system "more congruent with an acceptance of racism" (402). At this particular stage, projection is intensified to the point that the individual blames black people, or people of other races, not only for the existence of racism but also for his/her own emotional discomfort. In effect, peculiar resentment towards black people emerges. Certainly, whether the person remains at this stage or not depends on individual value system as well as on the extent to which and the manner in which the person has an opportunity to interact with the underprivileged, victimized group. If one is sensitive to human misfortune, resistant to injustice, and empathetic towards the suffering, and, additionally, has an opportunity to maturely and critically observe racialized environment, a shift from the Reintegration to Pseudo-Independent is viable. At this instance, the individual is vulnerable to conflicting emotions, because, on the one hand, he/she seeks to abandon white supremacist mindset and to affiliate with black people, and, on the other hand, exhibits patterns of behavior relative to white supremacist system. As a result, one "experiences a sense of alienation from other whites who have not yet begun to examine their own racism, yet may also experience rejection from Blacks or other people of color who are suspicious of his or her motives" (403). The uneasiness that the individual feels in relation to the generally understood whiteness and being associated with it compels one to reexamine and revaluate racial misconceptions and stereotypes in search of positive connotations of whiteness. "Learning about whites who have been antiracist allies to people of color is a very important part of this process" (403). In other words, confirmation of the fact that not all white people are racist is comforting. This stage is labeled as Immersion/Emersion and might lead to the redefinition of whiteness and one's sense of self as white, which manifests the stage defined as Autonomy. "The positive feelings associated with this redefinition energize the person's efforts to confront racism and oppression in his or her daily life. Alliances with people of color can be more easily forged at this stage of development than previously because the person's antiracist behaviors and attitudes will be more consistently expressed" (404).

"Though the process of racial identity development has been presented here in linear form, in fact it is probably more accurate to think of it in a spiral form" (Tatum 400). The stages of white identity development discussed manifest a particular scheme that leads to a positive white identity development. However, one must take into consideration

the fact that the entire process of racial identity development is a precisely individual issue and depends on both internal and external factors, i.e. individual predisposition and intentions as well as the cultural and socio-political context in which one confronts the issue of racism and racial thinking. What is more, a given individual may never experience a shift from the first stage to another, not to mention undergoing all the stages. Or just the opposite, once one attains the last stage, under particular circumstance may return to the previous stage. Since the context plays a significant role in white identity development, the process itself is fluid, and an individual is likely to be left with, as previously cited, "the instability, the permanent unsettlement, the lack of any final resolution" (Hall 228), the nature of white identity can be categorized as cultural.

American city as a space of racial hierarchical confusion

In *Another Country*, James Baldwin locates his characters in late 1950s Greenwich Village. By that time, a number of black people from the South had migrated to Northern cities during the Great Migration, and many European immigrants had settled down in Northern metropolitan areas in flight from post-World War II crises. Baldwin portrays this multicultural milieu as a competitive space, where formerly marginalized people seek to attain recognition and establish positions on the social ladder. In this process, the racial mindset of the characters distorts both self-perception and inter-personal relationships. In the novel, a group of apparently good friends constitutes a kind of social circle. There is Rufus, a brokenhearted, self-contemptuous black man, who projects his frustrations resulting from racism upon his white girlfriend, Leona. Both characters come to a tragic end. Psychologically devastated Leona has to be consigned to a Southern mental institution, and Rufus commits suicide due to severe depression. While the storylines covering the lives of the two characters end in midpoint in the novel, the continuing plot focuses upon their friends, mainly Vivaldo, the married couple Richard and Cass, as well as Ida, Rufus's sister. Both Vivaldo and his Polish immigrant friend, Richard, have sought to write for more than a decade publishable novels. When Richard succeeds and begins to socialize with literary and show business elites, the relationship between the two deteriorates. Apparently, Richard even attains twofold status enhancement, in contradistinction to Vivaldo, by marrying up and becoming a renowned writer. Later, however, Richard's marriage is in crisis, when Cass has a love affair with a former friend of theirs, Eric, who has returned to New York from France. Added to his marriage problem, Ida, who is a self-conscious and socially-aware black woman, particularly sensitive to racial discrimination, has liaisons with two white men, first, Vivaldo, and then Ellis, a major television producer, who intends to launch Richard's career. In the end, all the characters, to a lesser or greater degree,

undergo emotional devastation, confusion, and identity crises. The critic Kevin Gates restates the dynamics among the aforementioned characters:

> In *Another Country*, Baldwin gives a sobering portrayal of an ostensibly integrated circle of friends in New York City. The novel is driven by its meditation on the psychological distance that separates the most intimate of friends, lovers, husbands, and wives. A crucial manifestation of that distance is the gulf between what African Americans know from their racialized experience and what white Americans refuse to know about African Americans and their plight. In the novel, desire is a double-edged wild card of sorts, carrying the promise of either self-acceptance and love or the betrayal of love through self-hatred and a perverse and dangerous will to power. (181)

Polish-American search for identity

To a large extent, as seen in the above, the identity crises of the main characters have racial dimension. Particularly intriguing case is that of Richard Silenski, who, initially, struggles to climb up the social ladder in terms of class and then imbibes racial, or rather racist, perspective, and exhibits the sense of racial superiority as a white man. Eventually, his obsessive and forceful pursuit towards self-development within the racialized realm turns out too overwhelming for him and for those around him. On the whole, his experience of racial stratification compels him to undertake behavioral and attitudinal patterns that represent particular stages of racial identity development.

Just upon his arrival in the United States, Richard probably was not race-conscious. Cass recalls him as a Polish immigrant, who, during the war, served in a quartermaster depot in North Africa, defending poor Arabs from the French occupation. They married after he returned. She was twenty-one, and he was twenty-five. Although he might have developed a sort of racial consciousness in Africa, it is not clearly stated whether he did. Instead, he was much more preoccupied with his low economic status, as Cass recalls, "he had been very conscious, in those days, of his poverty and her privilege" (213). Therefore, from the very beginning he sought to live up to his wife's social class. Although marrying her was a way up in itself, he believed he had to do more to prove to be worthy of her commitment and misalliance. His success was already conspicuous in the fact that he took up the position of an English instructor, whom his student, and then a friend, Vivaldo, idolized. Moreover, apart from his professional achievements, he aspired to set a family life, based on traditional gender roles, by means of which he would prove to be a reliable family breadwinner. On the surface, he appears to have attained his objective. After all, he and his wife are regarded as a "model couple" (179) in many terms. When they met, they were both first lovers to each other, as Cass remembers, "[h]e was the first […] the very first man I ever had, and I was the first for him, too – really the first, the first girl, anyway, he ever loved" (199). When

they were marrying, "[s]he had then been the most beautiful, the most golden girl on earth. And Richard had been the greatest, most beautiful man" (195). After twelve years of marriage, they still make enviable impression on others. On the jacket flap of the novel that he manages to publish, there is an image of an "open, good-natured face. The paragraph beneath the picture sum[s] up Richard's life, from his birth to the present: Mr. Silenski is married and is the father of two sons, Paul (11) and Michael (8). He makes his home in New York City" (110). Vivaldo, for instance, perceives Richard and Cass as a mature, successful couple, who thrive "in the blazing haven of their love" (221). Therefore, at first glance, Richard has attained two major objectives, mainly a respectable position and stable family life, while withdrawing from the development of racial consciousness and involvement in racial tensions. What he possesses and to what extent he efficiently fulfills his role as a family man determine who he is. In other words, to a certain degree, he formulates his identity more in patriarchal terms than according to racial categories.

Nonetheless, Richard's pursuit of success and elevation of his social status turn out to have a racial dimension, because at a number of instances he utilizes the presence of black people as a referent against which he ascertains his racial superiority. Therefore, the exploration of his particular approach towards black people helps to estimate the stage of racial identity development that he reaches.

Richard does not live in isolation from the black community. Not only does he encounter black people on the streets of New York, but he also welcomes them at his home. At least this is what one of the conversations between the black man Rufus and Richard's wife implies. When Rufus greets Richard and says that he wants to visit Richard and Cass, she responds in an openly inviting tone, indicating that they missed him for some time. The impression is that the white couple and the black man are close friends.

The actual meetings of the apparent friends prove otherwise. When Rufus pays them a visit, "he and Richard [grin] at each other. Then Richard look[s] at Rufus, briefly and sharply, and look[s] away. Perhaps Richard had never liked Rufus as much as the others had and now, perhaps, he was blaming him for Leona" (50). Bearing in mind the fact that Rufus is black and Leona is white, Richard, who knows how devastating the relationship between the two was, exhibits solidarity with the white woman, while avoiding closer affiliation with the black man. That is why, he glances at Rufus quickly and sternly. He also avoids in-depth conversations with Rufus. In a way, he tries to communicate with him in the middle of conversation with other people, but the questions he asks are sudden, out of contexts, and surprising. When everyone focuses on Richard's coming success due to the publication of his novel, unexpectedly, Richard turns to Rufus, "What're you doing with yourself these days?" (55), and then he ignores

Rufus's admission of his struggle to regain psychological and emotional balance. It is Cass who takes over the conversation, nonchalantly stating that everyone undergoes the same inner struggle. Immediately afterwards, they all return to glorification of Richard's approaching fame. Then, at another meeting in the restaurant, this time Cass, out of the sudden, seeks to lift Rufus up by convincing him that he should not blame only himself for what happened to Leona and that he should forgive himself. When Rufus seems to appreciate her empathy, and the mutual understanding between him and Cass resurfaces, Richard instantly enters in and urges Cass to stop celebrating his success and leave the party. No wonder then that Rufus experiences discomfort in the white couple's company. "The air in the back room [is] close, he [is] aware of his odor, he wish[es] he had taken a shower at Vivaldo's house." (55) Further, he even feels "black, filthy, foolish" (57). The episodes expose how effectively Richard draws the line of demarcation between himself as an educated, relatively well-off, self-fulfilled man and the impoverished, confused, and actually lost black man. Moreover, he conspicuously avoids deeper, more intimate conversations with and about Rufus, which testifies to the fact that he avoids closer relationship with the black man.

Richard's attitude towards the news of Rufus's disappearance and then death is also peculiar in that he exhibits striking nonchalance. When the black man's anxious sister, Ida, informs Richard and Cass about Rufus's absence, Richard does not share the others' concern. Prejudiced towards Rufus and driven by the anger in memory of the abuse that Rufus had inflicted upon the white woman, Richard refrains from empathy towards Ida and rebukes, "Bastard's probably found some other defenseless little girl to beat up […] Well, she hasn't got a very nice brother; she'll probably run into him someplace one of these days" (67). Further, without a flicker of sympathy, he expresses his certainty regarding Rufus' wellbeing. His anger and hatred towards the black man overrides other people's preoccupations. Infuriated, he tells Cass, "Hell, Cass, we saw him last night, there's nothing wrong with him" (67). When Richard, Cass, and Vivaldo are expecting Rufus' sister, Ida, and Cass and Vivaldo are anxious about meeting the frustrated and worried black woman, Richard demeans their emotions, stating, "Take it easy […] What're you looking so tragic about?" (71). Later, he repeats twice that after all, they all saw him the other day and he was alright, therefore, implying that they are all exaggerating and panicking unnecessarily. He finds all speculations senseless, especially since Ida has already checked the police, hospitals, and morgue. Finally, he reproaches Ida, who suggests searching for Rufus, "I don't see any point in rushing out in this damn Sunday-afternoon rain, when you hardly even know where you're going. And we all saw him last night. So we know he's around. So why not relax for a couple of hours? Hell, in a couple of hours you may find out you haven't got to go anywhere, he'll turn up" (74). In general, Richard does not exhibit any emotional involvement

when it comes to the disappearance of the black man. He remains indifferent to all the alarming allegations. He also exhibits arrogance and self-confidence in assessing that nothing wrong has happened with or to Rufus, although he does not have any factual evidence. Again, his skepticism and latent contempt towards the black man keep him emotionally distant contrary to the worry, concern, anxiety, and pity that the other people express. In a way, he looks down on them, particularly on the black people. He actually behaves as if the black man's case and all the turmoil around it disturbed his equilibrium.

At first glance, Richard's stance towards Rufus' disappearance seems to stem solely from his cold-heartedness or desire to project himself as a tough man. However, in the middle of other people's conversations and lamentations over possible tragedy, Richard's statements testify to his alliance with the white power structure. When Ida relates the racist and neglectful attitude of the police that claim that "it happens all the time – colored men running off from their families. They said they'd try to find him. But they don't care. They don't care what happens – to a black man!" (73), Richard refuses to acknowledge Ida's statement regarding racial prejudice of the police and says that certainly "they'll look for him just like they look for any other citizen of the city" (73). In other words, he denies the existence of racism.

Not only does Richard deny believing in permeating racism, but he blames black people for their misfortune and interracial conflicts between black and white people. When Cass falls into guilt and grief upon finding out about Rufus' suicide, Richard reservedly contends, "He was heading that way […] nothing, no one, could have stopped him" (76). Then, he goes on to accuse Rufus of egocentrism, stating, "I thought he was a pretty self-centered character, if you want the truth" (77). Finally, he poignantly articulates contempt he has held all the time towards Rufus,

> I didn't love Rufus, not the way you did, the way all of you did. I couldn't help feeling, anyway, that one of the reasons all of you made such a kind of – fuss – over him was partly just because he was colored. Which is a hell of a reason to love anybody. I just had to look on him as another guy. And I couldn't forgive him for what he did to Leona. (77)

Richard's hatred towards Rufus obviously is not of color-blind nature, although he maintains that he approaches Rufus without paying attention to race. He is clearly discomforted by the fact that Rufus is a black man, and he discerns it as the only reason why other white people sympathize with Rufus. Therefore, Richard's self-acclaimed colorblindness serves only as a means whereby he avoids facing racism.

Similarly ambiguous attitude Richard exhibits towards the black boys that one day attack his sons on the street. First, when his son, Paul, asks his father whether their whiteness and the attackers' blackness were the reasons, surprisingly Richard avoids putting the conflict in racial perspective, so he replies, "The world is full of all kinds of

people, and sometimes they do terrible things to each other, but – that's not why" (176). When Cass, in turn, gets emotional by the very fact of their sons' assault, Richard rationalizes the incident, stating, "All kids get into fights […] let's not make a big thing out of it" (176). Nevertheless, when his wife and the children are away, what he tells his visitor, Eric, manifests his racial consciousness and, again, blaming the black boys, and the black community in general, for the interracial tensions within their neighborhood. Enraged, he exclaims, "Little black bastards, […] they could have killed the kid. Why the hell can't they take it out on each other, for Christ's sake! […] This whole neighborhood, this whole city's gone to hell. I keep telling Cass we ought to move – but she doesn't want to" (177). Therefore, again, he only pretends to be color-blind, as he latently holds racial hatred towards black people.

Finally, Richard's encounter with a racially stratified milieu ends up with his identity crisis. It reveals itself in two spheres. One is his articulation of ambiguous, inconsistent stance towards the black community. As presented above, on the one hand, he feels compelled to exhibit color-blindness, on the other hand, he expresses contempt and prejudice towards the members of the black community when he feels free to do so. Concurrently, his racial confusion overlaps with his marital crisis. His pursuit of success in a white dominated context leads to obsession that renders him more and more emotionally distant to his family members. He choses to spend most of his time completing the book instead of interacting with his wife, children, and friends, although he claims that his intentions were different. He testifies to his endeavor to establish a stable family life: "And I've worked, I've worked very hard, Cass, for you and our children, so we could be happy and so our marriage would work. Maybe you think that's old-fashioned, maybe you think I'm dumb, I don't know, you're so much more – sensitive than I am" (277). As a result, paradoxically, when he attains professional success, he falls into identity crisis, and the inauthenticity of his hitherto life resurfaces. At one point, his wife muses, "If Richard doesn't know what kind of world he wants, how am I to help him make it?" (202). When Richard finds out about Cass and Eric's love affair, in despair he expresses his dependency on Cass: "By the way you look at me, by the contempt in your eyes when you look at me. What have I done to deserve your contempt? What have I done, Cass? You loved me once, you loved me, and everything I've done I've done for you" (273). This outcry evidences the fact that his marriage to Cass was a means whereby he sought to elevate himself. Assuring himself of Cass's recognition motivated him to pursue his career. All in all, he submerged himself in the obsession of playing certain conventional roles to the point that he lost control over his feelings and emotional relationships with others. He actually experiences the loss of himself, a state that his marriage to Cass has contributed to. Cass even comes to the realization

of the destructive nature of the relationship between her and her husband, or even the expectations she imposed upon him:

> […] how much responsibility I must take for who he is, for what he's become […] I score him, after all, for being second-rate, for not having any real passion, any real daring, any real thoughts of his own. But he never did, he hasn't changed. I was delighted to give him my opinions; when I was with him, I had the daring and the passion. And he took them all, of course, how could he tell they weren't his? And I was happy because I'd succeeded so brilliantly, I thought, in making him what I wanted him to be. And of course he can't understand that it's just that triumph which is intolerable now. I've made myself – less than I might have been – by leading him to water which he doesn't know how to drink. It's not for him. But it's too late now. […] He doesn't have any real work to do, that's his trouble, that's the trouble with this whole unspeakable time and place. And I'm trapped. (298-297)

The outcome of Richard's inauthentic life is his disappointment, despair, and confusion that lead to his drunkenness and sense of insecure future.

Conclusions

In *Another Country*, a novel that to a certain degree might be considered to represent "the so-called novel of white life" (Rasberry 85) authored by a black writer, Baldwin's character, Richard Silenski, exhibits a number of attitudinal and behavioral patterns that are characteristic of particular stages of racial identity developments. Certainly, for a person of Polish descent, racially diverse encounters would have been a new experience. Therefore, naturally, at a certain point Richard undergoes the Contact stage. This is most observable when he accentuates colorblindness even though he does not exhibit particular willingness to interact with the black community. Moreover, he regards Rufus's offbeat personality as the reason for his misfortune, which evidences the character's unawareness of institutionalized racism. This stance then reflects Disintegration. When Rufus's sister is outraged at the nonchalant attitude of the police towards her missing brother and reports of their racist, stereotypical statements about black family dissolution, and when Richard's wife, Cass, expresses a sense of guilt upon learning that Rufus has committed suicide, Richard denies even more explicitly that racism contributed to Rufus's misfortune and even blames Cass and other white people for misleading, exaggerated concern with Rufus's blackness. He even appears to be jealous of their concern for Rufus, which, he believes, is owed to Rufus' blackness. Concurrently, Richard does not want to lose mainstream acceptance within the white dominant cultural arena, especially since his writing career is about to flourish, which leads to Reintegration stage of identity development. He reaches even a point where he blames the black community itself for the permeating interracial conflicts and for

disturbing white milieus, which is particularly conspicuous in his reaction to an assault on his sons by the black boys in their neighborhood.

Since he does not manifest a flicker of sympathy or empathy with oppressed black people and consistently withdraws from acknowledging racism, he does not reach further stages of white identity development labeled as Pseudo-Independent, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy. In his overall posture, he becomes a new Pole as an outcome of his endeavor to assimilate with white mainstream society. James Baldwin goes on to inscribe Richard Silenski among the gamut of Polish characters typical of novels that deal with Polish American racial dilemmas.

> Assimilation and acculturation are, in fact, the major but subtle themes of all these novels, which feature the courtship and marriage of Yankee and Pole as a plot device. Through their union, a new type emerges, a new man who foreshadows an America of the future. In most of these novels, the new American Pole is decidedly more Yankee than Pole. Even as his characteristics are designed to ease fears of ethnic fusion, they are also meant to exemplify the inevitability of Anglo-Saxon racial dominance. (Gladsky 71)

On the whole, Richard manifests the above recapitulated stances interchangeably. Therefore, the development of his racial identity may be said to take place more spirally than linearly.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gerardo Del Guercio is formerly of the Royal Military College of Canada (St-Jean), Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, and l'université de Montréal. He is the author of *The Fugitive Slave Law in The Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin: American Society Transforms Its Culture* (Edwin Mellen, 2013). Additionally, he has published essays on Benjamin Franklin, Henry James, Nathaniel West, Edgar Allan Poe, Aldous Huxley, Joseph Conrad, Jean Toomer, and etc. His works have appeared in edited volumes from Oxford University Press and Palgrave Macmillan, in addition to journals including *Southern Studies and College Language Association Journal*. He holds a bachelor's of arts from Concordia University, a master's of arts from l'université de Montréal, and a TESOL from York College, CUNY. At present, he is teaching English in Montreal, Quebec, Canada , as well as completing a collection of essays on Edgar Allan Poe under contract with McFarland Books.

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