Agnese Marino

Writing from the Rift

Cosmopolitanism and the Multiracial Condition in Rebecca Walker, Barack Obama, and Mat Johnson

La scuola di Pitagora editrice | Le balene 12

LE BALENE
STUDI DI LETTERATURA AMERICANA COMPARATA
12

Collana diretta da Donatella Izzo, Giorgio Mariani, Mauro Pala

Le balene – Studi di letteratura americana e comparata
Collana diretta da
Donatella Izzo, Giorgio Mariani, Mauro Pala

…What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan!

Una collana intitolata all'animale letterario più famoso degli Stati Uniti, ma anche ispirata al suo vagare senza confini. Libri di studiosi emergenti ma anche di naviganti di lungo corso, uniti dal desiderio di tuffarsi in profondità e di sperimentare nuovi percorsi.

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The work presented here is an extensively revised version of my doctoral dissertation, *Rifts: Mixed-Race Cosmopolitanism in Self-Narratives by Barack H. Obama, Rebecca Walker, and Mat Johnson*, submitted to the Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Heidelberg, at the end of my Ph.D. program at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA).

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A mia madre

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Introduction

I. *An Ethical Question*

Commenting on her *Searching for Zion*,[1] the mixed-race author Emily Raboteau reveals:

> I struck out when I was twenty-three looking for a place to belong, but I was asking the wrong question. It shouldn't have been, "Where is my home?" but "What can I do for others?" This may sound obvious, but it took me until I was thirty-three and had trotted half the globe to come to such an understanding. Putting that understanding into daily practice is the harder part.[2]

The problem of not 'feeling part of' or not 'fitting in' a definite identity or community is a recurrent theme in biracial literature,[3]

[1] Emily Raboteau, *Searching for Zion*: *The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013).

[2] Clarence V. Reynolds, "Emily Raboteau and Searching for Zion." *Mosaic Magazine* (January 23, 2013). https://mosaicmagazine.org/emily-raboteau-interview/.

[3] In this study, the term "races" must be intended as carrying neither biological nor cultural connotations; it is indeed employed in reference to social and discursive constructs based on which the subjugation, exploitation, and marginalization of certain human beings have been justified over the centuries; it also defines those positive social and political identities around which oppressed

especially for black-and-white American authors. Thus, the passage above is somewhat representative of the experience of an entire generation of writers, including Danzy Senna, Rebecca Walker, Heidi Durrow, Mat Johnson and others, whose themes and approaches to mixed-race identity imply an ethical interrogation into the meanings of belonging. These authors' journey in search of a space (be it inner or physical) that they could call home ends not so much in a place capable of resolving the dichotomous and disoriented perception that they have of themselves, as in different questions. In the passage, the transition from the first question, "where is my home?" to the second, "what can I do for others?" represents the movement of an individual who, in order to find herself, gets out of herself (of a house that she does not perceive as home) and connects to the other, or better, the others, in their plurality. The second question, which initiates a new and more difficult inner journey, places instead the ethical issue at the center of the personal research: the autobiographical "I" becomes relational and dynamic, and the challenges it faces are mostly pragmatic. None of the Raboteau's questions reproduces the ontological binarism that got the research for a home started: *am I black or white?* And the boundaries of her ethical responsibility seem not to be limited by identity or community issues. Leading us towards a performative view of being, the author seems to suggest that we are what we *do*; that cultivating an ethical spirit and defining the spaces and modalities of our responsibility towards the Other is more urgent than finding a space of individual self-definition and social recognition. The author has entered a dimension of world citizenship which is in a way connected to and influenced by the experience of multiracialness in the U.S. context.

Similar questions and conclusions are displayed in the three biracial memoirs that comprise the corpus of this study: [4] *Black*

communities have organized their own politics of resistance. In short, my position is that human races do not exist, inhumane racism does.

[4] Page numbers of primary sources will be henceforth included in the text parenthetically.

White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self by Rebecca Walker (2000),[5] *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* by Barack Obama (1995),[6] and *Loving Day* by Mat Johnson (2015).[7] Through self-narration, Walker, Obama, and Johnson[8] provide a vivid representation of growing up mixed-race in a strictly color-coded and unequal society: the impossibility to fully self-identify with one or the other community; the fear of being accused by their black brothers and sisters of making a compromise with the dominant culture; and, above all, the lack of discursive tools to effectively express their identity and experience. But the condition of never feeling at home pushes them to cross the cultural borders of the United States in search of an alternative approach to identity and belonging. Here, in the freer context of a temporary detachment from home, a transformation occurs. The questions which have led me in my literary analysis are: what happened in the journey between the formulation of the first and of the second question? What is the relationship between the sense of intimate homelessness and the sense of living responsibly in the world? To what extent is this newfound ethical calling connected to the experience of being black-and-white in the U.S.? How does this shift affect the relationship between the multiracial individual and the communities of reference at home? The space that connects the concept of home to the concept of the world, the concept of placelessness to the concept of belonging, the particular to the general, the individual to multiple communities and to humanity seen in its heterogeneity, constitutes the research field of cosmopolitanism.

[5] Rebecca Walker, *Black, White and Jewish Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

[6] Barack H. Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004).

[7] Mat Johnson, *Loving Day: A Novel* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

[8] From now on, in order to distinguish the narrators/characters of *Black White and Jewish* and *Dreams from My Father* from their authors, I will use first names (Rebecca and Barack) for the former and family names for the latter.

Between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, when the three autobiographies I have chosen were conceived and/or published, a group of international scholars saw in the cosmopolitan idea a solution to both the crisis of identity as an analytic and political tool around which to construct social agency[9] and the spread of the so-called "culture wars" deriving from too much stress on identity and difference posed by liberal multiculturalism. The cosmopolitan idea has always been characterized by an appreciation for difference and an emphasis on civic duties and individual responsibility as well as transnational solidarity, but now it appeared enriched with new postcolonial and postmodern sensitivities. It began to flourish casually and spontaneously in anthropology, literary criticism, analytical philosophy, and political studies, giving rise to a great variety of discourses. Some of these neo-cosmopolitan studies questioned the usefulness of the old racial categories and identities as instruments of cohesion in the anti-racist struggle, claiming, as David Hollinger states, that the "boundaries of responsibility" of each individual should not be restricted to one's identity or community, but had to be "increasingly contested."[10]

As Brett Neilson (1999) points out, Paul Rabinow already advocated a *critical cosmopolitanism* in 1986; Arjun Appadurai then proposed the idea of a cosmopolitan anthropology that does not presuppose the primacy of the West. James Clifford's *discrepant cosmopolitanisms* and Bruce Robbins's *comparative cosmopolitanisms* offered examples of existing forms of cosmopolitanism around the world. Due to the controversial legacy of the cosmopolitan idea, several adjectives were used to re-shape it according to the needs of a new sensitivity, attuned to the issues of hegemony/subalternity raised by cultural studies: postcolonial cosmopolitanism, vernac-

[9] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", *Theory and Society* 29.1 (Feb. 2000), 1-47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108478.

[10] David A. Hollinger, "From Identity to Solidarity." *Daedalus* 135.4 (2006), 23–31: 23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028069. Here, Hollinger is quoting Samuel Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 65.

ular cosmopolitanism, and rooted cosmopolitanism are just some examples.[11] More generally, the many different articulations of cosmopolitanism can be divided into three main strands, namely cultural, political, and moral cosmopolitanism.[12] In my analysis, I will focus on cultural cosmopolitanism and, in particular, on those articulations of the cosmopolitan idea which concern race, identity, and belonging. Setting aside the biased expectation of elitism, aloofness, and Western privilege that cosmopolitanism often raises in readers, I privilege more intimate versions of the concept. Some scholars, such as Kwame A. Appiah, Cyrus R. K. Patell, Amanda Anderson, Katharyne Mitchell and David A. Hollinger, have redefined cosmopolitanism as an ethical *calling* or a *condition:* a sense of world citizenship deriving from a series of exploratory experiences, such as the encounter with diversity and the resulting mutual cultural contamination; or a condition of intimate in-betweenness and placelessness, which pushes the individual to seek new strategies of belonging, based not on identity and identification, but on affiliation and socio-political action. In fact, against the traditional definition of cosmopolitanism as being 'at home everywhere in the world,' Walker, Obama, and Johnson describe the painful experience of cultural homelessness, due to the fact that they inhabit both and neither of the worlds to which they belong (this is what I call *the rift*).

So far, critics inspired by a multiculturalist view of race relations have interpreted the works of my corpus as either assertions of a 'new' mixed identity or a defense of a mixed-black identity; my study, instead, argues that these texts shift the focus from an ontological level, centered on the meaning of identity and representation, to an ethical one, based on belonging, where commu-

[11] Brett Neilson, "On the New Cosmopolitanism." *Communal/Plural: Journal of Transnational and Cross-Cultural Studies* 7.1 (1999): 111-24.

[12] I use this distinction for clarity purposes; however, I am aware that keeping these three aspects separate makes little sense, since their combination constitutes the kernel of the cosmopolitan idea, and no cosmopolitan articulation may be elaborated without any of them.

nity membership is not inherited but achieved and, above all, it is proven not by the color of one's skin or by one's cultural heritage or racial performance, but by the active defense and promotion of the group's interests. From my perspective, the protagonists' transformation from divided selves to neo-cosmopolitan individuals starts with the interrogation of their liminal, transracial position and is fulfilled only after travelling abroad. There, they experiment a critical self-disconnection from the discursive practices and categories that defined (or *did not* define) them in America and new ways of connection with the cultural otherness. Such a cosmopolitan detachment allows them to develop a more inclusive sense of self, which is not necessarily restricted to communitarian or national borders but is inspired by a sense of universal commitment capable of overcoming political and cultural differences without disregarding them. As we will see, the process of cosmopolitan awareness entails a re-definition of the geographies of one's identity and responsibilities: the re-definition of what is home, the re-definition of the role of both their black and white heritages in individual self-assertion, the detachment from inherited paradigms, and the construction of a new ethical language. Therefore, my analysis will pay attention to the relationship between the individual and the communities of reference, as well as to the relationship between identity and solidarity.

This study also examines how the mixed-race and cosmopolitan dimensions of the subject matter interact with the autobiographical genre. The autobiographical process is not only conceived as a symbolic space of self-construction and self-representation, but also as a moment of connection and intersubjective exchange between the writer's "I" and the imagined community of readers. In autobiography, hyper-particular human experience, with its folds and fissures, is made somehow accessible to the readers by virtue of a general sense of humanness. From a cosmopolitan point of view, self-narrative can therefore be considered as a dialogic and reciprocal space capable of (1) sublimating individual and contextual differences; (2) overcoming the false division between what appears

infinitely personal and what appears, in a way, 'universal'; (3) becoming an instrument of reciprocal transformation. To conclude this overview, my analysis takes two coeval cultural phenomena, biracial autobiography and the new cosmopolitan theories, and puts them in conversation to see what light each might shed on the other. Placed at the intersection between mixed-race studies and new cosmopolitan studies, two perspectives that affected the 1990s-2010s multicultural debate, this study digs into some, perhaps less common, theorizations of the two concepts and looks for points of connection between the various ways in which cultural cosmopolitanism has been theorized in the last thirty years and the way mixedness is represented in the three works analyzed.

The selection of my corpus, which is not meant to be exhaustively representative of mixed-race literature, follows criteria akin to cosmopolitan thinking: first, the priority given to issues of ethics and responsible citizenship and, second and more important, the development of a sense of self which occurs after significant experiences abroad.

Walker's *Black White and Jewish* is probably among the most cited works on multiracial identity. We may define it canonical, if there is a such a thing as a 'biracial canon.'[13] The daughter of the writer and activist Alice Walker and of a Jewish civil rights at-

[13] Part of the analysis exposed here on *Black White and Jewish* appears in an article published in 2016, in *RSA – Italian Journal of American Studies* (see works cited). In that article, I read the memoir in light of the theories of performativity and David Hollinger's post-ethnicism and my analysis ends in an unsolved ambiguity: if, on the one hand, the author attempts to elaborate a hybrid, non-binary, and universalistic identity for herself, on the other hand, she only does so in the last pages. In the rest of the book she instead reinscribes, both in the narrative and at a metanarrative level, a highly dichotomized view of identity; therefore, her conclusion seems narratively unreliable and politically fragile. This critical problem represents the starting point of my new analysis, which focuses on the author's critique of discourse especially considering her relationship with her parents' generation and her experience abroad. Moreover, my new reading of the book is affected by some new cosmopolitan perspectives, as Patell's one, which were absent in the previous.

torney, Mel Leventhal, Walker starts her narrative from her birth, occurred shortly after Martin Luther King's death, to reexamine all inherited assumptions about race and racial divides, from an intersectional, post-identity point of view. At the core of Walker's literary and critical production there is the idea that writing is an instrument to scratch the surface of false authenticities and reach 'the real'—an exercise that might imply contesting one's family or community. In this sense, 'the real' is to be sought mostly within the intimate domain of individual experience and personal narrative reconstruction. Such an attitude emerges in her approach to the new challenges of feminism, when she explores the new interrelations between the personal and the political (as in *To Be Real* [1995]);[14] or when she digs *into her mother's garden*, re-interpreting the symbols and objects of the Black Atlantic tradition through her own categories and language (as in the introduction to *Black Cool* [2012]).[15] Thus, if the emphasis on the individual is a distinctive trait of multiracial thinking, portraits of Walker as a spokeswoman of a collective multiracial experience is rather restrictive or misleading. Similarly, reading the first autobiography of the so-called "cosmopolitan president",[16] Barack Obama, may lead to the conclusion that his story is somehow representative of a *canonical* cosmopolitanism, but endorsing such a view is not the aim of this book.

This study approaches Obama's first autobiography from an exclusively literary point of view, digging into the folds of narration and considering the author, as much as possible, as a writer rather than the future president of the U.S.. In the preface of *A Promised Land* (2020), Obama explains that his "career in politics

[14] Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

[15] Rebecca Walker, *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2012).

[16] Elizabeth Eaves, "The Cosmopolitan President." *Forbes* (15 Jan. 2009). www.forbes.com/2009/01/15/cosmopolitan-nussbaum-obama-oped-cx_ee_0115eaves.html#7c176c01393a

really started with a search for a place to fit in."[17] Such a moment of pre-political self-research is captured in *Dreams from My Father*, a self-narration that, differently from the next two autobiographical essays, is conceived as a literary work. He goes on by pointing out that his political career was

> a way to explain the different strands of my mixed-up heritage, and how it was only by hitching my wagon to something larger than myself that I was ultimately able to locate a community and purpose for my life.[18]

The complexity of his own story as a mixed-race American is entangled with the complexity of a globalized world, which he travels (and inhabits) with his mother, who has left Hawaii for Indonesia, or in search of his father's tracks in Kenya. In this intricate story, I am more interested in cosmopolitanism as an intimate, intuitive moral setting which orientates his choices as a young man than in cosmopolitanism as the rationale behind the lucid political remarks he provides throughout the narration.

If Obama's whole autobiographical production seems to claim complexity as the only possible key to read contemporary reality, Mat Johnson's prose—witty, honest, and hilarious—is equally at odds with labels and hyper-simplifications. In *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery* (2008),[19] the author explores the theme of "genetic randomness" and imagines a white-looking race spy who investigates lynchings in the segregated South. Interested in what can be done with that odd bodily *surface* which prevents him from feeling fully black, he makes his pale skin an instrument in support of "the war against white supremacy."[20] Although this is not new in the history

[17] Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Random House, 2020).

[18] Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, xiv.

[19] Mat Johnson, Warren Pleece, Clem Robins, Karen Berger, Jonathan Vankin, Cardner Clark, Cary Grazzini, and Mike Richardson. *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Berger Books, an imprint of Dark Horse Comics, 2018.)

[20] Mat Johnson, *Incognegro*, "Author's Note."

of black struggles, the idea that one may obtain full "citizenship" in a marginalized community through activism and solidarity, regardless of phenotypical discrimination, complicates the basis on which marginalized communities usually organize their own collectivity. This is the core theme of *Loving Day*, where the discourse on the connections between color, culture, and community belonging becomes more intimate: the protagonist, who needs to reconciliate with a too-white body, shares the same anxiety of inclusion into the black community as Rebecca and Barack, and the same avowal of complexity, which pushes him to look for a new language suitable to express the peculiarity of his condition. Although firmly rooted in black identity, when the protagonist feels forced to choose between his black identity and his mixed one, he decides not to claim either but rather to claim *a commitment* to the black community. In this book, published ten years after *Dreams from My Father*, the author compares his generation's ideals, doubts, fears, and aspirations with those of a new generation of multiracial people who claim their own social space. The presence of *Loving Day* in my corpus, therefore, has a comparative function, as it traces the evolution of the discourses inaugurated by Walker's and Obama's works to a time closer to the present day, digging into the crucial relationship between the black and the multiracial perspectives on race.

The elements at the core of this study—mixed-race thinking and cosmopolitan thinking—constitute a slippery ground for any reflection on race due to their complicated historical and ideological connections with the western and white culture: the first evokes the *ghost of compromise* which undermines the unity of the African American community and the second is undoubtedly entangled in a history of (cultural) imperialism and subjugation. For this reason, both are often subjected to skepticism and distrust, especially in counter-cultural environments, and both are often preceded, in books and public speeches, by long introductions aimed at justifying, more than explaining, the use of such terms rather than other, ostensibly neutral ones, such as "post-black" or "transnationalism" (which of course carry utterly different meanings). The historical

framework of this study, which focuses on a specific segment of the U.S. cultural history—from the mid-1990s to the end of the Obama presidency, approximately—enables a critical distance from discourses that might sound outdated if not treacherous in the current 'post-Floyd era.' On the other hand, as the title suggests, the aim of this book is also to direct the reader's gaze beyond the surface of what is usually known about those two 'ways of being in the world,' the cosmopolitan and the multiracial, to see what perspectives on race and human relations they can offer, when combined. As many multiculturalist critics have demonstrated, the mixed condition is an excellent point of observation of the most hidden and subtlest racial / racist dynamics, but the communitarian vocation of a multiculturalist perspective often ends up undervaluing (1) individual needs and moral responsibilities and (2) that there is a world beyond ethno-racial communities, and that transracial affiliations can be effective instruments of empowerment. By contrast, a cosmopolitan perspective is able to unveil the hidden dynamics of both the relationship between individual and racial community and the relationship between racial identity and political agency. It seems to me, hence, that the authors of my corpus ask us to practice a cosmopolitan reading, getting out of the "ideological boxes in which we find ourselves as members of societies and communities"[21] and invite us to consider their stories as stories of individuals divided between racial identity and human identity before a planetary scenario. The critical exercise that my study proposes is not aimed at a celebration of cosmopolitanism or multiracialism *per se* but looks with interest and curiosity to a certain way—a cosmopolitan way—of conceiving biracial experience in relation to the historical and social context in which the three books appeared.

As mentioned above, using the category of "black-and-white literature" is always a slippery slope, for both historical and ideo-

[21] Cyrus R.K. Patell, *Cosmopolitanism and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2015), 139.

logical reasons, and the overall issue of multuiracialness and its representations in the U.S. cultural history cannot be approached uncritically. Thus, in Chapter 1, I will provide some brief considerations which clarify the position of this study concerning the concept of racial mixedness, especially in relation to black historical and cultural heritages.

II. *Sketching the Rift*

I will use the image of the rift to explain how the encounter between the cosmopolitan and the mixed-race experiences emerges in the texts. The theme of the rift will be explored more thoroughly in connection with Barack Obama's first autobiography, but it can be applied to all the three works examined as it evokes, among other things, those fissures in the literary texts (the unsaid, the hidden meaning, the inexplicable of human experience) as well as in theoretical thinking (the unexplored implications of an idea) that compel a reader of these books into a precarious, unbalanced position, standing on the edge of what is "safe" and looking uncomfortably down into the unknown. In *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009), Berthold Schoene points out that:

> More often than not, what opens up between communities is a perilous rift or gap, ou-topia or "non-place", rather than a comfortably inhabitable "Third Space" enabling mutual encounter. Everyday living practices remain at mercy of ideological control, and any openness there is, more often than not strictly confined to the relative inconsequentialities of everyday intercourse, can effectively be proscribed at moment's notice.[22]

The term rift sometimes appears in both writings about cosmopolitanism and those about mixed-race experience. In this study,

[22] Berthold Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 4.

I have tried to expand the concept, looking beyond what Schoene describes as a gap between communities or people. In my reading, the rift is instead an intimate, dynamic space where discontinuity is illusory and where an individual can experiment with the secret connections between worlds otherwise perceived as incommunicable. It can represent the space between an individual's internal and external worlds; or between an individual and a community; or between an individual and humanity.

III. *Blurring Borders*

When Walker, Obama, and Johnson reached adulthood and started to write their own stories, in the 1990s, the U.S. was undergoing a deep cultural transformation, in a post-national and transnational direction, overcoming the traditional isolation that had characterized its own self-representation and its exceptionalist narrations. This brought a major attention to those spaces where different groups meet, mix, and contaminate each other as new contexts of cultural production. Within and outside of the United States, this was a time of blurring borders, both between and among world communities, and within the imaginary community of the nation-state. All around the world, there was a resurgence of ethnic-based movements of liberation, while at the same time nations and communities moved toward an ever-deeper interconnection. As Stuart Hall argued:

> In a world of constant movement, both forced and free, both at the centre and at the periphery of the global system, communities and societies are increasingly multiple in their nature. They are composed of communities with different origins, drawing on different traditions, coming from different places, obliged to make a life together within the confines still of a fixed territorial boundary or space, while acknowledging that they are making a common life, not living a form of apartheid or separatism. They want, nevertheless, to retain in some sense the

> distinctiveness of their historical roots in the place in which they have ended up.[23]

It was, as David Held suggests in *Cosmopolitanism: Ideals and Realities* (2010),[24] not only a utopian plan for the creation of an ethical planetary consciousness, but an existing network of solidarity, collective actions, and collaborations. Held and Brown dwell on the significant changes that were affecting the states' internal politics and social dynamics:

> The first expressions of a cosmopolitan politics are already taking shape within the framework of national states—expressions that require specific points to crystallise as political movements within and between national states. This creates the opportunities for cosmopolitan movements and parties which, even if they initially win over and mobilise only minorities for cosmopolitan interests, have the basis of their power in the act of opening out the transnational domain.[25]

International scholarship was penetrating the American domestic debates, challenging not only the categories deriving from the national history of racial oppression but also those implemented by multiculturalism to resist it. According to Donald Pease, at the turn of the millennium, transnational Americanist scholars fostered the idea that what happened within the nation, that is, the relations of dominance and subalternity between groups that multiculturalism had helped to uncover, were a result of global processes; thus, these scholars have encouraged a reformulation of domestic multicultural conflicts "in terms of cross-cultural processes carried

[23] Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.

[24] David Held, *Cosmopolitanism: Ideals and Realities* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010).

[25] Garrett Wallace Brown, David Held, eds., *The Cosmopolitanism Reader* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 226.

out in between national and transnational imaginaries," [26] which has also implied looking for solutions to internal conflicts through extra-domestic affiliations.[27]

IV. *New Cosmopolitanism and the Critique of American Multiculturalism*

Much of the criticism of the mid-1990s addressed the atmosphere of culture wars that was affecting American multiculturalism. According to Hollinger, multiculturalism has always been pervaded by an inner tension between pluralist and cosmopolitan forces. Both elements oppose Anglo-conformism and share the idea of a nation that is "home to a diversity of cultures,"[28] but while the first stresses the autonomy of each ethno-racial group, emphasizing their uniqueness, the second encourages a dynamic interaction between them.[29] American cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, therefore, are not to be considered as opposed forces; but the years of the transnational turn, along with an emergent fascination for hybridization and syncretism, witnessed the rise of "a cosmopolitan impatience with some of the pluralist tendencies within multiculturalism,"[30] that is, that celebration of diversity for diversity's sake that Hollinger calls "the diversification of diversity".[31] Throughout the 1990s, much of the ongoing critique of multiculturalism affected the system of categories that had supported the identity politics of the previous decades, which now appeared too strict, normative, and Eurocentric. In particular, the postcolonial

[26] Donald Pease, "Black Orpheus, Barack Obama's Governmentality." *Altre Modernità*, 1 (Sep. 2011) 1-28: 15. https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/AMonline/article/view/1290.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 11.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 104.

[31] Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 105.

critics challenged the possibility of defying racial hierarchies by appealing to the same pseudo-anthropological categories which had provided 'scientific' support to racism: "Multiculturalism is a prodigious movement," Hollinger wrote in 1995, "but its limitations are increasingly apparent".[32] "Multiculturalism celebrates cultural diversity," Homi Bhabha pointed out in 1990, "but differences are always located in the grid of a dominant culture. The most eloquent manifestation of the supremacy of one culture over the others is the fact that racism is still rampant."[33] Cosmopolitan theorists like David Hollinger also criticized the chaotic way in which the American multicultural discourse blended the concepts of biology, color, and culture in a "multiple" melting pot made of five colors.[34] The concept of race was deconstructed and called into question as both a (descriptive and sometimes normative) analytical tool[35] and an effective anti-racist tool. Furthermore, the idea that some cultural practices are the authentic patrimony of a single group was harshly contested and, finally, many called for a reconceptualization of the role of individuals in establishing their own racial identity. Similar deconstructive and anti-essentialist theories were shared by the exponents of an emergent multiracial thinking, gaining ground in the American public debate since the late 1980s in popular media and, later, in the academic production of the 1990s.[36] In "The Illogic of American Racial Categories" (1992), Paul Spickard denounced the fact that although all the people of the world are biologically mixed, the American system of identities propelled the idea that races are

[32] Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 1.

[33] Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha", in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207-221: 208.

[34] Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 24.

[35] About the deconstruction of identity as an analytical tool, see: Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", *Theory and Society*, 29.1 (Feb. 2000), 1-47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108478.

[36] Rainier Spencer, "Assessing Multiracial Identity Theory and Politics: The Challenge of Hypodescent." *Ethnicities* 4.3 (Sept. 2004), 357–379: 359.

mutually exclusive, he also denounced the cultural adherence to the one drop rule for people of black ancestry and the imposition of strict categories, and voiced the right to belong to more than one identity or even create new identities.[37] Recently, Malin Pereira (2019) has effectively summed up all those claims by arguing:

> Multiculturalism is dead and needs a replacement.
> What are the problems that it left? The emphasis on race and its biological justification; the ideal of racial authenticity; the excessive interference of the "ethno-racial pentagon" in American cultural life and the use of it as an instrument of (self-)identification; too little attention paid to class differences; an unresolved conflict between individuality and community membership. The latter is especially felt by the mixed-race people, who are explicitly excluded from Multiculturalism.[38]

From this point of view, the association between multiracial thinking and cosmopolitan thinking may appear intuitive, as both refer to subjects who prefer not to identify with a particular culture or community and tend to develop multiple, crossing identities in contrast with multiculturalist obsession for identity-based politics. However, my reading of three autobiographies by mixed-race authors demonstrates that there is more to this association than just such superficial affinities, and that a new cosmopolitan approach can reveal aspects of multiracial experience that have been overlooked.

[37] Paul R. Spickard, "The Illogic of American Racial Categories." In Jayne O. Ifekwenigwe, ed., *Mixed-Race Studies: A Reader* (New York: Routledge 2004), 149-151: 151.

[38] Pereira Malin, "An Angry, Mixed Race Cosmopolitanism: Race, Privilege, Poetic Identity, and Community in Natasha Trethewey's Beyond Katrina and Thrall" in Ewa Barbara Luczak, Anna Pochmara, and Samir Dayal, eds., *New Cosmopolitanisms, Race, and Ethnicity* (Warsaw, Poland: De Gruyter Open Poland, 2019): 254-274.

V. *Multiracial Experience As a Cosmopolitan Experience*

A multiracial and a cosmopolitan may have much in common. In a traditional sense, the cosmopolitan subject is described as rootless, or at least detached from any cultural identifications, open to diversity and multiplicity: s/he is someone who does not stop, who does not allow her/himself to be absorbed by a culture or group.[39] Similarly, the multiracial subject is, by definition, someone who affirms her / his own "multiple identities" and the hybrid or stratified quality of her / his identifications, characterized by the superimposition of two or more cultural dimensions and therefore open to non-exclusive identifications. In many cases, they are accused of being "compromised" with white supremacy or to show a "detached" attitude towards the black community and its history of oppression. Furthermore, the multiracial subject's traditional antecedent, the "mulatto," has always represented a wandering, transformist, and uprooted identity: someone who "passes" from one racial dimension to another (for social convenience), someone who lives in an eternal crossing movement.

In the accounts of my authors' generation, a biracial subject is one who continuously crosses the borders not only of race and culture but also of class, gender, ethnicity, and so on, exploring the unknown, just like a cosmopolitan adventurer. Hollinger highlights how this rising category has brought individual will back to the center of the racial question:

> Mixed-race people are performing a historic role at the present moment: they are reanimating a traditional American emphasis on the freedom of individual affiliation, and they are confronting the American nation with its own continued reluctance to apply this principle to ethno-racial affiliations.[40]

[39] Jeremy Waldron, "What is Cosmopolitan?" *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 8.2 (2000), 227-43: 227.

[40] Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 166.

For centuries, a universalist interpretation of cosmopolitanism has described it as "the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, are (or can and should be) citizens in a single community."[41] However, according to Hollinger (2001), "[c]osmopolitanism shares with universalism a suspicion of enclosures, but the cosmopolitan understands the necessity of enclosures in their capacity as contingent and provisionally bounded domains in which people can form intimate and sustaining relationships and can indeed create diversity."[42] Paying homage to Gayatri Spivak, Hollinger calls this way of being half-way between the liberal defense of individual affiliations and multicultural communitarianism "strategic communitarianism."[43]

My reading of the texts in my corpus connects them to coeval cultural strands in cosmopolitan studies that were concerned with the development of post-identity cultures and forms of belonging based on overlapping interests, as suggested by Stuart Hall in "Political Belonging in a world of Multiple identities" (2002).[44] Hence, an analysis of our corpus based on such a conceptual ground offers a glimpse of what a cosmopolitan critique can offer to contemporary readers: a broadening of cultural horizons through a confrontation with other systems of thought and the consequent possibility of conceiving one's identity according to different principles and categories. This also implies the capability of being critical toward the narrative legacies and mythologies of the American discourses on race and thus being less affected by oppressive discursive practices. According to David Held, cultural cosmopolitanism emphasizes the possible fluidity of individual identity: "people's remarkable capacity to forge new

[41] Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown. "Cosmopolitanism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2014), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmopolitanism/.

[42] David A. Hollinger, "Not Universalists, Not Pluralists: The New Cosmopolitans Find Their Own Way." *Constellations* 8. 2 (2001), 236-248: 240.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] Stuart Hall, "Political Belonging in a world of Multiple identities", in Vertovec and Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*, 25-32.

identities using materials from diverse cultural sources."[45] He also points out that one of the primary characteristics of cosmopolitanism is to create "a dialogue with the traditions and discourses of others with the aim of expanding the horizons of one's own framework of meaning and prejudice."[46] For example, as Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests, cosmopolitanism encourages the creation of a common language of values (words that express feelings) and, by doing so, it encourages cultural connection and exchange.[47]

The cosmopolitan experience stems from the encounter with the cultural other, but differently from multiculturalism, the contemplation and appreciation of diversity are not enough: the interaction must produce self-detachment and self-criticism toward one's original culture(s), and then the adoption of an ethical stance on the level of political practice. Stronger varieties of cosmopolitanism, such as Jeremy Waldron's, view the cosmopolitan identity as "a way of being in the world, a way of constructing an identity for oneself that is different from, and arguably opposed to, the idea of belonging to or devotion to or immersion in a particular culture."[48] On the contrary, more moderate articulations, such as Appiah's "rooted cosmopolitanism" or Martha Nussbaum's "patriotic cosmopolitanism," recognize the importance of local ties, especially for socially oppressed and exiled communities, and draw on the classical (or Stoic) cosmopolitanism, which modeled multiple identifications and loyalties as a series of concentric circles with the individual situated at the geometric center.[49]

[45] David Held, "Culture and Political Community: National, Global, and Cosmopolitan", in Vertovec and Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*, 58.

[46] *Ibid*.

[47] Anthony K. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 27-31. In this, cosmopolitanism is different from cultural relativism, which Appiah effectively summarizes in the following terms: "From where I stand, I am right. From where you stand, you are right" (*ibid*., 31) and which, according to the philosopher, encourages silence.

[48] Waldron, "What is Cosmopolitan?", 227.

[49] For the notion of cosmopolitanism in M. Nussbaum, I recommend reading M. Ayaz Naseem and Emery J. Hyslop-Margison, "Nussbaum's Concept of Cos-

VI. *A Mixed-Race Cosmopolitanism*

Western cosmopolitanism originated from the same question that has inspired much of the contemporary Multiracial narrative: "Where do you come from?"[50] Such a request for self-positioning usually represents the starting point of a search inspired by the Socratic imperative "know thyself." However, for diasporic, multiple, and nomadic identities it can become problematic. As is well known, the initiator of cosmopolitanism, Diogenes the Cynic, replied: "I am a citizen of the world," a *kosmopolitês*.

The story of Diogenes helps illuminate some uncommon aspects of cosmopolitanism useful for the interpretation of my corpus. First, cosmopolitanism can be used to elude questions about identity and locatedness. Diogenes eluded the question by providing a non-answer: a declaration of non-belonging either to Athens or to any other Greek polis. According to the critics, there was no universalist reference to human brotherhood in his words, but more "a reaction against every kind of coercion imposed by the community on the individual,"[51] by an individual who refused to be forcedly identified with a specific place, culture, or institution.

Second, cosmopolitanism can be understood as a destabilizing force, rising from the margins of social life. Diogenes's voice, his disruptive individualism and self-detachment, resounded from the margins of the Greek society as the voice of an anti-conformist and an outcast who wanted to challenge the customs and conventions of the civilized community.[52] Diogenes lived in a fast-expanding world, but his cosmopolitanism was not that of a well-traveled Al-

mopolitanism: Practical Possibility or Academic Delusion?" *Paideusis: Journal of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society* 15.2, 2006: 51-60.

[50] The implications of such question for multiracial subjects are expansively treated in the first chapter of Suki Ali's *Mixed Race, Post-Race: Gender, New Ethnicities, and Cultural Practices.* (Oxford, New York: Berg Publishers, 2003).

[51] Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* (London: Methuen, 1937), 34.

[52] Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.*, 34-35.

exandrian man, thrilled by the possibilities offered by an emerging empire: he was a wanderer and an exile who had been banished from his birth town (Synope) for having adulterated the coinage, and he would die as a slave. Although the fact of his crime has never been ascertained, it is certainly true that his declared mission was to teach people how to metaphorically "adulterate the coinage," by calling into question the very principles of city life and civil institutions.[53] This idea of cosmopolitanism as the citizenship of local outcasts and of people living at the margins informs the contemporary notion of 'cosmopolitanism from below,' which refers to "specific stories of often violent historical, economic, and cultural interaction,"[54] as opposed to consumerist and privileged visions of it. It refers to people living often traumatic and forced experiences of detachment and displacement due to human rights violations and conflicts, people who must learn to live in alien or cross-cultural contexts. But what interests me most is the idea of cosmopolitanism as a disruptive force, which tries to undermine well-established discursive categories.

Finally, cosmopolitanism can be understood as a way of finding comfort in the discomfort of loneliness and displacement. Despite having his circle of followers, Diogenes the Cynic was a lonely man. Diogenes Laertius mentions that he was "a dog whom all admired, yet few dared go hunting with him."[55] The isolation of the cosmo-

[53] Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.*, 22.

[54] James Clifford qtd. in Patell, *Cosmopolitanism and the Literary Imagination*, 14.

[55] Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.*, 37.

Original cosmopolitanism, as the Greek man's philosophical and inner response to the immeasurable expansion of the Alexandrian world, is not entirely dissimilar from modern and contemporary forms of cosmopolitanism, generated in response to the expansion of western borders and the globalization process. Cosmopolitanism can be conceived as an inner response to enormous geopolitical changes, hard to manage, which implies self-discovery and self-reflection. But there is more. Looking more specifically at the history of the African American people, with a leap of imagination, one can compare the feelings of dismay and disorientation that followed the murder of Martin Luther King, marking the

politan individual has been rarely explored, and mostly interpreted as a consequence of rootlessness and arrogant individualism.

However, Cyrus Patell provides an unusual conceptualization of it, which emphasizes the intimate relation between isolation and connectedness. He starts by analyzing two poems by Walt Whitman. In the first poem, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," a spider/poet stays isolated on a "promontory," at the center of "measureless oceans of space,"[56]forming bridges, linking the threads of its web, finding connections among elements of the real that appear fragmentary or totally disjointed. In an extract from the second poem, "Song of the Answerer," the poet is presented as the "answer" to a world of divided people and tongues: he therefore operates as the point of contact between uncommunicable realities. Reflecting on the fact that Whitman's poetry stemmed from the harsh life conditions of nineteenth-century Manhattan, Patell observes:

> Some people think that a cosmopolitan is someone who is "worldly" and therefore comfortable—at home—everywhere. I prefer to think of the cosmopolitan as someone who is "worldly" and therefore not fully comfortable—never fully at home—anywhere.[57]

Thus, the bridging is, for Patell, a way of "making virtue out of discomfort: it means cultivating comfort and discomfort simultaneously."[58] Going back to the poems, we can find an example of how this connecting labor occurs in the cosmopolitan imagination and the role of the individual in it. In the first, the image of the poet "surrounded by oceans of space" recalls the

end of the unitary experience of the civil rights movement, to that experienced by Athenian citizens in the face of the unjust death of Socrates, the philosopher of the great existential questions, who had questioned the city's government, and whose trial and execution had obvious political aims: such similarities may have some relevance for the reader.

[56] Patell, *Cosmopolitanism and the Literary Imagination*, 1.

[57] Patell, *Cosmopolitanism and the Literary Imagination*, 3-4.

[58] Patell, *Cosmopolitanism and the Literary Imagination*, 4.

traditional image of concentric circles which represents the pattern through which the individual is connected to the universe according to the Stoics.[59]

I will use this image as the pattern for a cosmopolitan theorization of the autobiographical writing. As expanding watery circles, the cosmopolitan identity covers the whole space around the individual, until the circles dissolve into the universal diversity of humanness. But the central point remains the single soul, the cosmopolitan "I," which I imagine as only partly immersed in the water: partly belonging and partly detached. This is what, for example, Stuart Hall calls "vernacular cosmopolitanism," which excavates in the harsh inner conflicts that processes of political belonging can produce in the subject:

> For most of us cosmopolitanism has involved and has a continued relationship to our family cultures. You think they are tremendously important, you would not dream of being bound by them any longer, you prize the moment when you left them but you know that as you leave them they continue to support you. They continue to be what you are. You could not be what you are without that struggle both to defend them and to exit from them. So, though this is not a logical political position, it is actually an existential political position we all perfectly well understand.[60]

The cosmopolitan soul needs to find harmony in the heterogeneity of the surrounding space and to create from it a more familiar context of relations which makes it possible to cling and to belong. This is a condition that simultaneously encompasses physical stillness and emotional dynamism.

The viscerality that Patell sees in Whitman's poetry clashes with the cold aloofness traditionally associated with cosmopolitanism. Just like universalism, transnationalism, and all the approaches

[59] Nussbaum, "Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism", 738-45.

[60] Stuart Hall qtd. in Vertovec and Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*, 30.

which privilege a broader sense of the human, also cosmopolitanism has often been represented in opposition to more passionate forms of affiliation, such as cultural patriotism or romantic nationalism. In fact, if any feelings are associated with the cosmopolitan hero in the popular imagination, they are curiosity, egalitarianism, and detachment—all qualities recalling the rationalist, Enlightened background of cosmopolitanism. However, according to Katharyne Mitchell (2007), Bruce Robbins's elaboration of the term in the early 2000s has undermined the equation "distance = coldness, nearness = warmth that have characterized the debates around cosmopolitanism for decades."[61] In this sense, the participation of women in the cosmopolitan discourse has been significant, especially in emphasizing the importance of the creation of a face-to-face, intimate space of encounter with otherness.

In "Geographies of Identity: The Intimate Cosmopolitan" (2007), Katharine Mitchell highlights the revolutionary character of a cosmopolitanism understood and practiced as an intimate experience that can lead to political action: "[i]ntimacy is about connections that are embodied and lived," she points out, calling for a new genealogy of stories about cross-border and cross-class affinities, where cosmopolitanism is "conceptualized as a lived process of ongoing political and ethical action and education."[62] In the introduction to *We the Cosmopolitans: moral and existential conditions of being human* (2014), Lisette Josephides and Alexandra Hall outline a way of conceiving cosmopolitanism as a moral and existential condition developed in response to situations of exploitation, sorrow, and danger.[63] Anne Sigfrid Grønseth remarks that, in situations of pain, cosmopolitanism can represent a place for the construction of subjectivity in a relational dimen-

[61] Katharyne Mitchell, "Geographies of Identity: The Intimate Cosmopolitan." *Progress in Human Geography* 3.5 (2007), 706.

[62] K. Mitchell, "Geographies of Identity: The Intimate Cosmopolitan", 716-17.

[63] Lisette Josephides and Alexandra Hall, eds., *We the Cosmopolitans. Moral and Existential Conditions of Being Human* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

sion, "something that happens within and between self and other, and which includes an experience and recognition of the other as a relational part of oneself."[64] Amanda Anderson stresses the cosmopolitan "moral task of developing a delicate intersubjective competence within a culturally diverse horizon," which requires "tact, sensibility, and judgement".[65] On the other hand, in "The Evolution of a Cosmopolitan Identity" (2009), Shannan Spisak insists on the transformative power of such an encounter, affirming that it produces an empowering self-awareness in the individual. Anderson, like Spisak, suggests that the encounter occurs in a space of intersubjectivity, that is, in a space where culturally different individualities meet and transform each other.[66] Thus, the cosmopolitan idea provides a reflexive dimension affecting the individual's relation with her/himself and her/his multiple identities. In this sense, a mixed-race cosmopolitanism must be thought of in intersectional terms, since the factors that intervene in the relational process that mixed subjects establish with themselves and the other are often characterized by conflicting identities and tied to very different living contexts and experiences. As the authors I have chosen show, the experiences of liminality lived by biracial subjects of their generation were often cross-cultural, cross-class, and (as in Walker's case) cross-gender, and thus difficult to trace back to a definite and stable category, or community, or group; but this does not necessarily amounts to more freedom of movement. The biracial condition, far from being celebrated in post-identity terms, is instead elaborated in terms of conflict and

[64] Anne Sigfrid Grønseth, "Experiences of pain: A gateway to cosmopolitan subjectivity?" in *We the Cosmopolitans. Moral and Existential Conditions of Being Human.* Lisette Josephides and Alexandra Hall, eds. (2014), 90-110: 91.

[65] Amanda Anderson, "Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity" in Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 265-289: 269.

[66] Spisak, Shannan. "The Evolution of a Cosmopolitan Identity: Transforming Culture." *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 12 (2009), 86-91.

dividedness. The idea of belonging as the result of a free political choice comes after a process of cosmopolitan self-liberation. The color, class, and race borders operating within and outside the authors look thick and inviolable, yet the points of contact between their different parts emerge from the folds of their narratives, and it is there that their cosmopolitan attitude appears, as a contingent, provisional space of coexistence and negotiation between opposite elements and as an overture to outer spaces of liberation. Speaking of cosmopolitanism, therefore, is referring to a transformation in self-understanding that results from the engagement with others over issues of human significance.

VII. *A Cosmopolitan Reading*

Chapter 2 opens with a reflection on the relationship between the autobiographical genre, the mixed-race experience, and the cosmopolitan idea. Autobiography is the place where individuals speak for themselves, shaping their own representation, and, at the same time, share their particular, unrepeatable experience with an imagined community of readers from whom they ask for empathy and recognition. From a cosmopolitan point of view, self-writing can be considered a social practice which allows an intersubjective, mutually transformative encounter between the author and the readers: an exchange that overcomes barriers of culture. In this regard, Patell describes an overlapping of consciousnesses between author and readers that is totally different from *identification* and has little to do with any identity except the human one. According to the critic, a cosmopolitan reading practice may help us to embrace difference more effectively:[67] it "may provide a way of thinking outside of the ideological boxes in which we find ourselves as members of societies and communities."[68] In this sense,

[67] Patell, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*, 137.
[68] Patell, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*, 138-139.

we might state that at the core of all autobiographical processes lies the cosmopolitan mediation between subjectivity and universality. However, as a site of narrative self-construction, autobiography also plays an important role in the processes of definition and social recognition of collective identities.

Especially in the case of ethno-racial autobiography, the community factor necessarily intervenes in the binarism subjectivity/universality representing a third level of interpretation. Issues of representation focus on the relation between the narrating subjects and the community they voice (or are expected to voice). Thus, the reader's interest in *"who is who," how that "who" is represented*, and *what relations among textual and extra-textual "whoes" emerge from the folds of narration* often coincides with a more general multicultural interest in the politics of identity and the different mechanisms of "diversity" construction. As regards mixed-race self-narrative, a multiculturalist approach focused on identity and representation has produced a long and engaging critical discussion about the limits of "representability," the normativity of some definitions, and the social and political effects of the creation of a multiracial construct as opposed to pre-fixed monoracial identities. My study diverges from this perspective, proposing not only an analysis of the cosmopolitan idea within narrations, but also a cosmopolitan reading of them.

Investigating a biracial autobiographical text through a multiculturalist approach means exploring the interrelations between race and color, color and culture, blood and culture, body and genetics, external ascription, and self-identification; it means interrogating issues of hybridity and diaspora, as well as the cultural and historical borders of pre-fixed races, the relationship between multiracial, white, and black identities and social statuses, issues of political power and social hierarchy, identity politics, and so on. On the other hand, a cosmopolitan perspective allows a focus on belonging, solidarity, responsibility—all issues which also pervade my corpus. As Patell suggests, reading (and critical reading) "is a way for us to be part of a larger network of people and

thoughts."[69] It can therefore be a cosmopolitan practice because the porous boundary between text and context allows the reader to meet, understand, incorporate, and be in dialogue with different cultural contexts through the text. But this idea of reading must not be over-estimated. In fact, the readers' first impulse is that of reinterpreting the unknown according to the known, trying to fit otherness into their ideological boxes. Engaging in a cosmopolitan reading means instead being able to self-detach from one's thought, which is not, as far as I understand it, an automatic response, but the result of a specific awareness, openness, and desire. Just like a multiculturalist approach, a cosmopolitan reading interrogates the political and social aspects of a work, the author's aims, dwelling on ethical issues, but differently from a multicultural perspective, it is more willing to break the barriers and find aspects in diversity which resemble and call into question one's own culture, in a continuous exchange. Thus, the mere observation of otherness from a distance without interaction, contamination, and intermittent dissolution into otherness cannot be considered a cosmopolitan experience. To conclude, self-departing from one's cultural background to embrace a different approach to belonging and identity, is something that both the books' characters and the cosmopolitan readers are required or seek to do.

[69] Patell, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*, 17.

CHAPTER 1
THE CASE OF MULTIRACIALNESS:
CONTEMPORARY REFLECTIONS ON A CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECT

1.1 *Racial Identities and Political Commitment*

Before moving to the analysis of the autobiographical works by Walker, Obama, and Johnson, it is necessary to illustrate the complicated and, to some extent controversial, case of the multiracial representation (especially the black/white one) in U.S. racial discourses. First, all studies about race mixing in the U.S.A. start (or should start) from an assumption: due to a history of rigorous and meticulous separation of all that could not be considered white from whiteness, blackness has always included racial mixing. The idea of a biological 'mixedness' dissociated from the category of blackness is historically illogical: the African American heritage is populated by stories of border crossing and racial mixing which, although challenging the absolutism of the hypodescent rule, have never been able to invalidate the white/non-white binary ruling the U.S. society.

Molly Littlewood McKibbin argues that it is hard to determine if multiracialness can even be considered a racial identity: "Given that racial identity has always been linked to both phenotype and a history of shared experiences as a race, multiracialness poses a problem as a racial identity because it possesses neither."[1] Moreover,

[1] Molly Littlewood McKibbin, *Shades of Gray: Writing the New American Multiracialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 39.

according to the critic, the bases of multiracial unity as a group are less clear than those that keep together black people, since multiracial people do not necessarily share the same "historical, racial, or cultural similarities that brought black people together in racial pride and political solidarity."[2] She also warns about the dangers of a too strict overlapping between ethno-racial identification and political identity:

> […] using race as an "exclusive identity" not only makes identity rigid and ethnoracial identity a dominant identity (as opposed to class, gender, sexuality, or age for instance) but also makes it difficult for people to consider themselves or others outside the confines of such identification. As Marable points out, it leads to make false assumptions about people's political commitments.[3]

Such a view is, in my opinion, very close to some neo-cosmopolitan stances. In fact, McKibbin goes on arguing that:

> Angela Davis—who had to make a famous choice between groups in which her race stood for all (the Black Panthers) or nothing (the Communists)—proposes that political commitment is most effective when it bases "identity on politics rather than politics on identity".[4]

An identity-based idea of racial community considers a person part of a community by virtue of how she or he is (mis)treated by a racist society, and regardless of her/his real contributions to it, while it excludes those who cannot share the same experience of oppression, regardless of their actual contribution for the advancement

[2] McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 38.

[3] McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 147. Here, McKibbin refers to Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics* (London: Verso, 1995).

[4] *Ibid.* McKibbin quotes Angela Davis's statement from Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 75.

of a community. One of the neo-cosmopolitan contributions to multiculturalism consisted therefore in the articulation of identity in a relational dimension, which neglects descriptive or prescriptive aspects, avoids fixed definitions, and thinks outside the limits of community, race, and nation. In other words, it introduced in the equation of identity individual affiliations and actions.

The challenge to the category of identity (or racial identity) as an indispensable source of shared responsibility has been reproposed by McKibbin with regard to multiracial individuals: she observes that any "responsible discussion of Multiracialism" must reflect on the dangerous possibility that Multiracialism may "abandon race and in the process abandon the social justice struggle."[5] She also points out that it would be "a mistake to assume that all black people will exhibit this kind of black political allegiance"[6]. In *Beyond Black and White: Transforming the African-American Politics (1995)*, Manning Marable, quoted by McKibbin, states that "racial identity doesn't say anything significant about a person's political beliefs, voting behavior, or cultural values"[7], while in *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*, published ten years later, Tommie Shelby proposed…

> a conception of black solidarity that is not only, or even primarily, concerned with questions of identity, but that urges a joint commitment to defeating racism, to eliminating unjust racial inequalities, and to improving the material life prospects of those racialized as 'black', especially the most disadvantaged.[8]

Indeed, the relation *identity/solidarity* has always represented a crucial issue within Multiracial critical studies, an issue that cannot

[5] McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 3.

[6] McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 146.

[7] McKibbin, *ibid*.

[8] Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundation of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005) qtd. McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 147.

be avoided, since it has deeply affected the relationship between multiracial and black critical studies, and even the relationship between multiracial advocates and the black community. In this study, the relation *identity/solidarity* is particularly relevant because it represents one of the points of encounter between a politically responsible reflection on the multiracial identity and the forms of belonging proposed by the new cosmopolitanism. The new cosmopolitan scholars of the nineties had the foresight of pointing out that the centrality of the question of solidarity imposed an ethical perspective on the question of racial identity. This needed to be a reflection that would interrogate the purposes and expectations of one's self-identification as a black or a mixed race. In the new cosmopolitan panorama, indeed, identification with one or another human group is relevant to the extent that it represents a pre-condition for stronger forms of commitment, and it ceases to be relevant if prevailing localisms threaten or hamper actions in favor of a larger common good. Differently from a multicultural standpoint, the new cosmopolitan perspective widens the scope of one's moral duties and, at the same time, inquires the reasons and practices of belonging. Such practices include the idea of physically or spiritually self-distancing from the places in which categories of being that are felt as too narrow are produced, in search of a different self-understanding.

Going back to the case of multiracialness, the historical lack of recognition of mixedness in the U.S. social panorama, depends most of all on the numerous institutional efforts to eliminate, deny, or ignore the history of racial mixing, especially between black and white people, in defense of white privilege. However, it also has to do with issues of solidarity. In fact, when black intellectuals of mixed-race descent and appearance, such as Frederick Douglass or W.E.B. DuBois, tried to complicate simplistic racial assumptions, by questioning the color line ideology and by undermining the color-is-identity/color-is-belonging conventions, their efforts were perceived as disloyal toward the community,[9] a threat of

[9] McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 263-264.

compromising with the oppressor. Looking back at the history of multiracialness, McKibbin argues that "If Douglass, DuBois, and Toomer were expressing ideas too radical or inconvenient to be addressed appropriately in their own time, it could be argued that the time they needed has arrived".[10] Indeed, multiracialness started to be socially claimed and recognized only about fifty years ago. Gino Pellegrini recalls the role played by liberal multiculturalism, with its emphasis on the diversity of cultural experiences and its recognition of collective identities, in preparing the ground for the collectivization of multiracial experience and the creation of a "discourse" on mixedness. It occurred of course through the construction of an independent cultural/racial category:

> in the process of designating and educating individuals as members of cultural groups with a specific relationship to the history of white privilege and racism, the multicultural state has effectively multiplied the number of individuals who have become conscious of themselves not only as members of a particular cultural group or groups but also as racial and multiracial subjects.[11]

Since the 1970s, the representatives of a multiracial identity have been trying to create a new multiracial discourse, by delineating the specificity of their living in-between in a society founded on strict racial categorizations. In the 1990s, when the overall concept of identity began to blur, the biracial psychologist Maria Root wrote:

> The presence of racially mixed persons defies the social order predicated upon race, blurs racial and ethnic group boundaries, and challenges generally accepted prescription and prescription regarding intergroup relations. Furthermore, and perhaps most threatening, the existence of racially mixed person's challenges

[10] McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 164.

[11] Gino Michael Pellegrini, "Creating Multiracial Identities in the Work of Rebecca Walker and Kip Fulbeck: A Collective Critique of American Liberal Multiculturalism." *Melus*, 38.4 (2013), 171-90: 171-72.

> long held notions about the biological, moral, and social meaning of race.[12]

Root's idea was that mixed-race people occupy a liminal position which allows them to examine ideologies dominating race relations and subvert normative rules concerning race. According to her, multiracial thinking troubles the traditional concept of race based on the color line and refuses all binary systems (white/non-white; black/white; center/margins; one community or another; etc.). More in general, the supporters of multiracial thinking have always emphasized its liberating force, which aims at making the color line confused and the "one drop rule" an "option" for an expanding minority of people of color. This implies that multiracial subjects tend to self-represent as free from the burden of having to demonstrate, constantly and performatively, their belonging and loyalty to the community to which they feel closest. The multiracial thinking, hence, privileges the fluid idea of identification over that of identity. Its empowering view, imbued with theories of performativity and hybridity, undermines the possibility of conceiving of racial identity as pre-constituted, coherent, and fixed. It emphasizes the idea of the singularity and irreproducibility of human existence and the right of the individual to draw from her or his *experience* for self-determination rather from a community-based collective memory.

However, upon deeper examination, it is clear that the multiracial thinking still moves within the discursive framework of multiculturalism: it has never refused the ideas of race and identity themselves, nor has it eluded the systematic organization of human existence in racial categories. Indeed, on a social and political level, many multiracial organizations have struggled to obtain the formal recognition of multiracial identity, which finally occurred on occasion of the 2000 Census. Here, for the first time in U.S. history, citizens were allowed to check more than one category in

[12] Maria P.P. Root, *Racially Mixed People in America* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992), 3.

declaring their racial identity. As many critics have observed, the political significance of such a measure went beyond administrative purposes: it showed that the principle of hypodescent for the definition of who is colored and who is not had permeated national culture on a psychological level, turning racial categories into categories of self-definition. Thus, the U.S. citizens were indicating not so much the racial category under which they were socially discriminated, but the category/ies with which they self-identified, culturally and politically. Furthermore, for many people of mixed heritage, the creation of a multiracial option meant the possibility of self-dissociating from oppressed minorities and self-associating with other less oppressed ones including, when possible, whiteness.

The suspicion of some black critics toward multiracial movements stems from the black community's need of representational power to fight back subtle forms of racism (colorblindness/micro-oppression) and overt ones (structural racism/macro-oppression). For them, self-identification cannot be considered as an individual act, since it is a crucial political instrument for minority groups. "Not accidentally," Elam points out, "the ascension of mixed-race popularity has been enabled in the post-race, post-soul era, and in concert with the quiet dismantling of affirmative actions and the weakening of traditional civil rights lobbies."[13] If colorblind and post-race stances aim to dismantle the reparative efforts of affirmative action, identity politics fights back by reiterating the importance of maintaining existing racial models, in order to prevent a part of the black community which has access to white privileges from abandoning the anti-racist struggle. The anti-racist political line, therefore, needs to preserve the system of categories created by the dominant culture, drawing distinctions especially between privileged, white subjects and non-privileged, colored subjects. In this binary distinction, community membership, identity, color, and social condition merge completely: community belonging is

[13] Michele Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2011), xiv.

associated with a complete (self-)identification with one's group, both on a political and on an experiential level. As Daniel and Kelekay very effectively point out:

> Hypodescent also had unintended consequences for groups of color, especially Blacks. By drawing boundaries that excluded Blacks from having contact as equals with Whites, it legitimated and forged group identities among the former. Consequently, Blacks hold on tenaciously to the one-drop rule. It is considered a necessary, if originally oppressive, means of maintaining the integrity of the Black community and mobilizing in the continuing struggle against racial inequality. Yet, an African American identity is not a mindless embrace of "the Blackness that Whiteness created," and thus an indication that individuals have been duped by hypodescent. Rather, African Americans rearticulate, rather than reproduce, rules of hypodescent. This involves repetition of hypodescent with a difference in support of racial difference without hierarchy, that is, difference based on equality.[14]

For the supporters of the multiracial thinking, instead, the change in the Census orientation evidenced how the old, strict system of racial categorization had not only misrepresented millions of people of various ethnic origins but had also hindered individual movement and self-expression.[15] Public opinion was therefore split between those who feared the decrease of minorities' social power based on demographics (mostly civil rights activists) and those who defended the rights of people with multiple ancestries to be publicly recognized as multiracial individuals.[16] The simmering dispute between the supporters of either the multiracial or the

[14] Daniel, G. Reginald. Kelekay Jasmine. "From Loving V. Virginia to Barack Obama: The Symbolic Tie That Binds." *Creighton Law Review* 50 (2017), 641-668: 645.

[15] Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 28.

[16] Jenifer Bratter, "Will 'Multiracial' Survive to the Next Generation?: The Racial Classification of Children of Multiracial Parents." *Social Forces*, 86. 2 (2007), 821–49.

monoracial categories, exacerbated by several political attempts at instrumentalizing the multiracial cause to weaken affirmative action policies, has crystallized multiracial scholarship on the issue of social recognition, to the detriment of a more politically aware debate over the role of such an emerging group in the anti-racist struggle. However, Maria Root's "Multiracial Oath of Social Responsibility" (2004), stressing the theme of commitment in the struggle against racial oppression, proves that solidarity and social commitment have always occupied a place in the multiracial thinking:

> I must fight all forms of oppression as *the oppression of one is the oppression of all.*
> I recognize that oppression thrives on fear and ignorance;
> I seek to recognize my prejudices and change them;
> I know that it is neither helpful nor productive to argue over who is more oppressed;
> I recognize that my life interconnects with all other lives.[17]

Such a statement resonates with the spirit of my primary sources, especially the first line, in which the conflict between individual and community is partially resolved through an identification between the individual and a wider community of suffering others, without any specific reference to racial or ethnic communities, and the responsibility of contrasting racial oppression is entrusted to the individual. Since one of the main claims of my literary analysis is that Walker, Obama, and Johnson base their identity on politics and not the other way round, I see the conflict between monoracial and multiracial, as well as the definition of a multiracial identity, as the starting points of the authors' works and not their ultimate message to the readers. I therefore read their works as attempts at going beyond the search for recognition while laying the foundations of an ethical—rather than ontological—discourse

[17] Maria Root, "Multiracial Oath of Social Responsibility" https://www.apa.org/pubs/videos/4310742-oath.pdf qtd. in McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 238. Emphasis added.

on civil responsibility and affiliation with oppressed communities and individuals: a discourse that the national culture, so focused on identity politics, was not able to grasp when the works were published, but that today represents a stronghold in the agenda of Mixed-Race Critical Studies.[18]

1.2 *The Loving Generation Between Dominant Narratives and Counter-Narratives*

The Supreme Court sentence *Loving v. Virginia*, in 1967, stimulated a collective fantasy of national self-renovation, which recalled the American exceptionalist tradition. Twenty years later, the creation of what we may call a "Loving national narrative" turned an entire generation of biracial authors into the symbols of racial reconciliation: a "Loving Generation."[19] However, the painful experience of being black and white emerging from their narrations (which, as Molly McKibbin suggests, is different from the experience of being generically "multiracial")[20] is far from a celebration of racial hybridization. The persistence of the "one drop rule" at a social and cultural level went far beyond the Jim Crow era and was crucial for the evolution of black identity. Thus, if on the one hand, white nationalism had generated a basin of blackness capable of expanding to the point of embracing anyone with African descent (and representing, by extension, all non-white, oppressed Americans), on the other hand, black nationalism made all rela-

[18] Rudy P. Guevarra, Kelly Jackson, Alexandrina Agloro, Chinelo L. Njaka, Haley Pilgrim, "In Solidarity with BLM". *Critical Mixed Race Studies*. https://criticalmixedracestudies.com/in-solidarity-with-blm/.

[19] I draw such appellative from *The Loving Generation*. Directed and produced by Lacey Schwartz and Mehret Mandefro. Executive produced by Ezra Edelman and Anna Holmes. *Topic*, 2018. www.topic.com/the-loving-generation.

[20] McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 3. Throughout the book, I use the terms "mixed race" and "mixedness" to specifically refer to black-and-white multiracial identities and conditions.

tionship with the white world extremely challenging. Thus, in the 1970s, this "first" post-civil rights generation of biracial children saw the ideals that had inspired their parents' romantic and political projects collapse under the dividing force, on the one hand of continued white racism, and on the other, of black cultural nationalism, which excluded all connection and alliance with whiteness. *Loving v. Virginia* had a relatively weak impact in terms of identity formation among the offspring of black and white couples,[21] who continued to see themselves as simply black, although, sometimes, not black enough, on a cultural and relational level.

Whether the symbolic power of *Loving v. Virginia* was greater than its real social effects (that is, its contribution to changing the demographic composition of the American population and fighting racism by increasing the number of black-and-white unions) is still debated,[22] but its power was great enough to create what we

[21] Reginald G. Daniel, Jasmine Kelekay, "From Loving V. Virginia to Barack Obama: The Symbolic Tie That Binds.", 648.

[22] If the number of interracial relations has increased dramatically in the last fifty years, it is probably an achievement of Affirmative Action policies as well as of a series of political actions inspired by multiculturalism, which have contributed to blur community and class lines. However, black-and-white marriages still represent a small percentage of all interracial marriages. According to the Census, black-and-white marriages passed from 51,000 in 1960 to 65,000 in 1970 out of a national rate of 321,000 interracial marriages. The number of interracial marriages has increased steadily so far. According to the Census Bureau, "the percentage of married-couple households that are interracial or interethnic grew across the United States from 7.4 to 10.2 percent from 2000 to 2012-2016. This change varied across states and counties and for specific interracial/interethnic combinations. There are seven types of interracial/interethnic married-couple combinations that make up 95.1 percent of all such married couples. The largest of these is non-Hispanic whites married to Hispanics, which increased in 43.2 percent of counties." (Brittany Rico, Rose M. Kreider, and Lydia Anderson, "Growth in Interracial and Interethnic Married-Couple Households", *United States Census Bureau*, 2018, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/07/interracial-marriages.html.). According to an article in *The Guardian*, interracial and interethnic marriages in America have increased fivefold, from 3% of all weddings in 1967 to 17% in 2015. The article, however, also reports attitudes toward racism and points out that "while 72% of black respondents said it would

may call a "Loving narrative." Celebratory narratives of the Loving case depicted it as the turning point for the creation of a post-racial society based on "biological" and cultural mixing — a society that, as colorism and other forms of discrimination demonstrate, has not yet been realized, and can hardly be expected to be soon realized in the U.S. society. On a broader scale, the emergence of a multiracial culture in American public discourse has been characterized by the dialectic juxtaposition of dominant, celebratory narratives of the "new identity" (often in a post-racial or at least colorblind sense) and counter-narratives based on strategic essentialism. On the one hand, dominant narratives emphasize the mixed individual's right to self-determination; sometimes they use the rise of mixed-race identity to proclaim the end of race and racism (or at least, the ineluctability of their final defeat), and depict multiracialness as the United States' new manifest destiny.[23] On the other hand,

be fine with them if a family member chose to marry someone of another racial or ethnic group, 61% of whites and 63% of Hispanics said the same. More specifically though, Americans aren't comfortable with specific kinds of intermarriage. A Pew survey found that acceptance of out-marriage to whites (81%) was higher than is acceptance of out-marriage to Asians (75%), Hispanics (73%) or Blacks (66%)" Chalabi, Mona. "What's Behind the Rise of Interracial Marriage in the US?" *The Guardian* (February 2018) www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/feb/21/whats-behind-the-rise-of-interracial-marriage-in-the-us.

[23] We can see examples of dominant narratives in the way the 50th anniversary of *Loving vs. Virginia* was celebrated in 2017: *The New York Times* asked readers to share their experiences about being in a mixed-race relationship and announced having received "more than 2,000 stories in just a few days;" *The Huffington Post* reported on *The Loving Project*, produced by Farrah Parkes and Brad Linder, which documents the experience of mixed-race couples all over the country. *The Guardian* hailed the Lovings' story as "a marriage that changed history;" and similar articles appeared on the major American newspapers. In 2011, *The Loving Story*, a documentary by Nancy Buirski inspired the subsequent movie by Jeff Nichols, *Loving*, which, in 2016, brought the story to the attention of a larger public. That same year, Lacey Schwartz and Mehret Mandefro gathered a number of biracial influential people born from black/white parents around 1967 under the label of "The Loving Generation" and created a homonymous documentary for the magazine *Topic*. Among the contributors, we find Rebecca Walker, Mat Johnson, Erin Cloud, Jessica Green, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Melissa

counter-narratives are suspicious of these triumphalist claims about a non-new phenomenon and tend to remind that nowadays all identities are postmodern; thus all identities, including blackness, are seen as hybrid, which means that they are less interested in racial authenticity and less rigidly essentialist and normative.[24] At the basis of such a dispute there is a conflict between individual needs and community needs. The supporters of identity politics and community rights argued that racial categories, although based on old pseudo-anthropological biases, are reinforced everyday through political actions oriented to the structural subjugation of non-white groups and that the importance of keeping race alive lies in the fact that they are strongholds of political resistance for some groups to defend and improve their conditions.

In this regard, I am perfectly aware that introducing Walker's, Obama's, and Johnson's works as mixed-race or biracial literature and not, for example, as post-black literature might be taken to imply a precise political and ideological stance, one that runs the risk of representing the African American community as internally

Harris-Perry, and Panama Jackson. *The Loving Generation*. Directed by Lacey Schwartz and Mehret Mandefro (see works cited).

[24] Michele Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, xiii-xv. As I will explain in the chapter dedicated to Mat Johnson, a similar view informs the so-called "post-soul" aesthetic. As Bertram D. Ashe, in "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction", points out: "Though they do not articulate a singular, coherent argument, post-soul blaxploitation artists maintain a dogged allegiance to their communities, however non-essentialized that allegiance might be" (612). This definition of blackness shares some relevant elements with the cosmopolitan one, especially in regard to the relationship between the individual artist and her/his community: in both cases it acquires the form of an "allegiance" which usually involves activism. Another similar concept is that of "cultural mulatto," who consciously crosses the cultural boundaries of racial and ethnic expression, to embrace contamination and the derived idea of a "troubled blackness." However, the main differences with my view of a cosmopolitan black/white biracial identity are (1) the fact that it is strongly affected by foreign discursive patterns and different ways of theorizing identity outside the national confines. (2) A sense of existential dislocation which pushes the subject to form alliances with Otherness. (3) A sense of global citizenship stemming from transformative experiences.

fragmented just at a time when it needs to be as cohesive and solid as ever. At the beginning of this work, this political issue represented one of the hardest methodological challenges I had to face: how to talk about the specificity of mixed-race experience as expressed in the works of Walker, Obama, and Johnson without reiterating the idea of a separate multiracial identity? The complex relation between mixedness and blackness has been at the center of a heated debate about representation and group cohesion, and most of the existing critical essays—which can be roughly described as either celebrating mixedness or denying it altogether— approached the question in terms of a clash of identities. As is often the case, the answer was in the texts, that is, in the complex stories that these autobiographical subjects display in relation to their white/mixed relatives, the black community, and the world outside the U.S.: the polarized, culture-war attitude, with its oversimplified reiteration of the *white-vs-black* and *black-vs-white* or *multiracial-vs-monoracial* discursive binaries, simply does not suit the spirit and the ultimate message to be found in my corpus. All three authors identify the clash of identities as a social imposition and refuse to submit to the imperative of (self-)definition, turning instead to a different set of issues framed in a planetary perspective: *what to do for the people in need, especially if they are not part of our strictest communities*? Starting from the observation of the clash of identities, Barack Obama, Rebecca Walker, and Mat Johnson shift the reader's gaze first to the clash between collective identities and personal identifications and then to issues which go beyond identity and identification, focusing on solidarity and urgent action. As will be seen, it is in this last move that a cosmopolitan view supersedes the previous, multiculturalist one. At the beginning, the narrators articulate their own individual and hyper-subjective experiences as biracial young people through desired identification with an idea of blackness that is solid, monolithic, substantial, unquestionable. Later, that earlier position will evolve from the form of (an impossible) identification to the form of affiliation, that is, a chosen self-recognition into the community and a will of supporting it.

When Johnson, in *Loving Day*, states that acknowledging that he is mixed race is "like the difference between the comfort of wearing shoes that fit as opposed to bearing the blisters of shoes just one size too small",[25] he is referring more to an "adherence" oriented to the search of a balance between oneself and the Other than to a definition oriented to the social recognition of a different identity. Accordingly, my study seeks to shift the readers' attention from questions of mixed identity as opposed to or in continuity with black identity to questions of ethical concern in a transnational, or better, *human*, framework.

In conclusion, though making use of the biracial or multiracial label for analytic purposes, this study does not embrace a multiracial perspective either theoretically or politically. In fact, multiracial thinking did not even represent an option for Walker and Obama, whereas the only work in which current configurations of multiracial identity can be found is Johnson's *Loving Day*, the most recent work in my corpus, published at the apex of Obama's presidency. However, Johnson's portrait of his main character and alter-ego does not draw on multiracial thinking but is still crystallized in that black/white binarism which characterizes his whole generation. Moreover, I interpret the multiracial element in my corpus not as a "third" identity, but as a contingent condition and a social experience of in-betweenness. Finally, I propose that the aim of Obama's, Walker's, and Johnson's self-narrations is not to affirm an identity at all, but rather to force the reader to reflect about what can be done *beyond* the limits of identification.

1.3 *Early Steps of Multiracial Literature*

Literary works have surely played an important part in the social emergence of multiracialness as a "new" category. Indeed, although the "mulatto" and "mulatta" figures have always been part of the

[25] Mat Johnson, *Loving Day*, 240.

U.S. narrative tradition, it is only over the last fifty years that multiracial literature has contributed to the re-elaboration of what Jayne Ifekwunigwe has termed the "old story" of racial mixing to "reimagine new (mixed) racial identities for the new generations."[26]

The years between the mid-1990s and the 2010s saw a boom of autobiographies and biographies of lives across the color line. The fact that they were mostly stories in black-and-white proves the predominant binary orientation of the U.S. approach to issues of mixedness. Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* (1995), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998),[27] Rebecca Walker's *Black White and Jewish* (2001), Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* (2005),[28] Heidi W. Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (2010),[29] and the more recent *Loving Day* (2015) by Mat Johnson are only a few examples of how biracial experience burst into the American literary horizon and social awareness, mostly through autobiographical and, in some cases, coming-of-age narratives, which questioned the conceptual borders of blackness and whiteness and unmasked the absurdities of races and racism. Moreover, as many critics observe, these early works did not only convey a blurred representation of racial borders, but also of class, gender, national, and family ones, opening the floor to a representation of human experience which utterly complicated the concept of identity. Therefore, if mixedness has always been part of blackness, at a precise historical moment it has become the subject matter of different narratives. The three autobiographies I take into consideration in this work reflect the early stages of such a multiracial-identified literature, when black-and-white authors were still unable to find new languages and forms of expression able to convey the binarism they felt inside, as well as the peculiarity of their experiences of being emotionally

[26] McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 254.

[27] Danzy Senna, *Caucasia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999).

[28] Emily Raboteau, *The Professor's Daughter: A Novel (*New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2005).

[29] Heidi W. Durrow, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky: A Novel* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010).

tied to whiteness, thus demonstrating the inadequacy of the cultural landmarks at their disposal. These narratives were attempting to radically challenge not only the identity paradigms offered by contemporary debates on race but also the idea of identity as the primary basis for belonging and the core of anti-racist struggles. Thus, my decision to interrogate the interactions between such narratives and new cosmopolitan theories that were circulating at the time of their production or publication, is meant to avoid the trap of the above-mentioned *multiracial vs. monoracial* disputes, not because I consider them politically irrelevant, but because my study seeks to privilege the aspect of belonging and the transnational element, which were so relevant at the time, and which have been too often underestimated.

McKibbin regards this generation's narratives as an early biracial literary canon, but such a definition raises some concern. In fact, the word 'canon' implies an idea of normalization which is far from unquestionable and the term 'biracial' coerces these works into a merely racial perspective that does not fit the purposes of my study. For what concerns the word 'early,' the question is more complex.[30] As Paul Spickard argues, the newness of contemporary biracial narrations resides in the fact that the authors make open reference to their being mixed, giving voice to both their black and white ancestors.[31] This was true primarily for the early generation. In fact, since these narratives' first appearance, it was clear that the representation of mixedness that these authors provided was com-

[30] In this regard, someone might argue that Mat Johnson's *Loving Day* should not be included in such an 'early' canon, since both the date of publication (2015) and the setting of the story (the "Obama era") are far more recent, and because it includes the portrait of an emerging self-aware multiracial community. However, it seems to me that the protagonist's perspective on the evolution of the multiracial idea reflects that of his generation, more than it represents cutting edge positions on multiracialness.

[31] Paul Spickard, "The Subject Is Mixed-Race: The Boom in Biracial Biography" in David Parker, Miri Song, eds. *Rethinking "Mixed-Race"* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2001), 76-99: 77.

pletely different from anything that had emerged in the American literary landscape until then. I therefore believe that the adjective 'early' is appropriate only insofar as it serves to situate most of these works at the very beginning of (or even before) the affirmation of a structured multiracial consciousness in the American cultural discourse, when new narratives tried to fulfill the representational needs stemming from new, multicultural sensitivities, but the frame of reference available to multiracial authors was still vague and confused. The narrative and stylistic innovations introduced by this generation of authors inspired a series of deciphering attempts, either in a postmodern direction (with reference to theories of hybridization and of multiple or fluid identity, which are often cited in multiracial scholarship) or in a post-black sense (with reference to anti-essentialist and non-normative reconfigurations of the idea of Blackness). In both cases, the critical orientation was toward a future *in shades*, rather than in black and white.

1.4 *From Children of the Movement to Adults on the Move: A Generational Matter*

In my opinion, the controversial issue of the "newness" of contemporary multiracial narrative may be effectively addressed by adopting a generational approach: let us consider it in relation to Walker, Obama, and Johnson. Danzy Senna already used such an approach in 2001, when she defined contemporary biracial authors as "a whole generation of movement babies for whom the definition of 'home' was always and already up for debate".[32] Similarly, Cindy Spiegel, co-editorial director of Penguin Putnam's Riverhead Books, has pointed out:

> Biracial kids really are coming of age for the first time now as civil rights movement babies, and they're just now old enough to

[32] Danzy Senna, qtd. in Walker, 2001. No page numbers.

> even write their books. […] Something that makes great literature is when you're trying to find your place in the world. So they're creating a place for themselves in literature.[33]

This passage summarizes some key points of the critical and mass-media reception of the books according to which the term "generation" seems to be justified not only on a census basis (all the authors mentioned above were born between the sixties and early seventies), but also by a commonality of themes. Although this study is critical towards the ideology behind a so-called Loving Generation, I believe that reasoning within a generational framework can be useful to isolate these works and their authors from different narrations of the multiracial experience and to highlight the peculiarity of their historical experience in contrast with too general (or too contemporary) discourses on multiracialness.

Many critics hailed the newness of a post-civil rights' biracial identity as a sign of progress toward 'a more perfect union,' emphasizing the continuity with the civil rights movement and its strategy of reconciliation. As mentioned above, since until *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) interracial marriages and sexual intercourse were illegal in seventeen states of the union (and they were scarcely tolerated if not violently opposed even after), the unions of this generation's parents appeared more as political projects than mere acts of love and mostly crumbled under the weight of separatist social forces. Thus, the offspring of these couples, raised as biracial or black children, developed their own identities in opposition *and* continuity with their parents' political projects. This generation grows up under the opposing cultural influences of the civil rights movement and of Black Pride. The traditional character of the "tragic mulatto/a" is substituted by the figure of the "Movement Child",

[33] Cindy Spiegel qtd. in Elizabeth Atkins Bowman, "Black Like Who? Young Authors Stir Up the Melting Pot of Racial Identity." *Black Issues Book Review* 3.1 (2001), 24-27: 25.

which Ralina Joseph captures very effectively in Rebecca Walker's *Black, White and Jewish*:

> Walker paints a portrait of the Movement Child, the embodiment of both civil rights' and second-wave feminist movements' hopes and someone capable of doing anything, despite being a mixed-race black-white female, as an antithesis of the Tragic Mulatto, the historical stereotype of damned mixed-blood, someone who accomplishes little because of being a Multiracial African American woman.[34]

On the other hand, these Movement Children soon learn that this idea only makes sense within the comforting space of their parental houses or within the space of their parents' marriage. Outside of that space or after their parents' divorce, they feel tragically imprisoned between two irreconcilable worlds, nomadic and meaningless, like traditional "tragic mulattoes" and "mulattas." Soon, they will learn that the dissolution of the civil rights movement's aspirations marks the definitive impossibility of a black redemption in a white-dominated world. Thus, it is from the conflict between reconciliation and resentment that they draw that extremely complex and paradoxical sense of self which will emerge in their autobiographies.

Growing up in the hyper-diversified multicultural society of the 1980s, the authors of this generation learn that race, color, and culture are expected to be perfectly consistent with one another; that mixedness is something to be proud of, or at least acceptable, only within the colored spectrum; that white is not a color; and that you can learn how to look blacker by *performing* blackness. As mentioned above, in these self-narrations, mixedness is rarely presented as an option or as a neutral third identity deriving from the hybridization of black and white: the protagonists/narrators interpret themselves

[34] Ralina Joseph, "Performing the Twenty-First Century Tragic Mulatto: Black, White, And Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self, by Rebecca Walker." *The Black Scholar* 39. 3/4 (2009), 13-22:13.

according to a binary scheme, where blackness and whiteness are "mutually exclusive and mutually imperative."[35] The critics have often underlined that, as a consequence of their proximity to whiteness, of parental love or, more rarely, of the love of black and white relatives, this generation has developed an intimate familiarity with both worlds—with their incompatibilities, but also with those points of connection which are often invisible to others. This makes them native speakers of both languages, able to translate themselves in the words and thoughts of one or the other group. However, their attempt at filling the gap usually resolves into a sorrowful defeat. Most of the time, they refuse the burden of being considered *racial bridges*. On the contrary, they are animated by a desire of fitting a "model" blackness which clashes with the fear of being irremediably bound to whiteness, or worse, to be compromised by their love for or their connection with the *oppressor*. Thus, in contexts of blackness, they are often haunted by the secret fear that the ambivalence of their skin, moves, speech, or way of thinking will sooner or later unmask them as impostors. From the sense of placelessness derive the impossibility of self-expression through the pre-fixed categories of the American racial discourse and the need for a new language, as in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*, where the two little protagonists create the "Elemeno" tongue—a secret, mixed-race code, incomprehensible to their monoracial parents.[36]

In conclusion, the term "generation," which evokes a continuous dialogue between old and new views of identity, helps highlight the strong connection that the authors keep with the black cultural tradition and, in some cases, with the reconciliation aspirations of their white relatives, by revealing the continuities and contrasts between the authors' messages and the political projects that had brought their parents together. In fact, the reconfiguration of their being in the world through the autobiographical process passes unavoidably through a negotiation with their parents' failed aspirations. As we

[35] Emily Raboteau qtd. in McKibbin, *Shades of Gray*, 72.
[36] Danzy Senna, *Caucasia*, 7.

will see, in Walker, Obama, and Johnson, a generational element emerges also in relation to a transnational dimension, since their peregrinations are often connected to or driven by their parents' stories. Indeed, in *Black White and Jewish*, Rebecca Walker and her mother Alice visit artists and activists all around the globe to support the black and feminist causes. In *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama travels to Kenya in search of his father's traces; while at the beginning of Johnson's *Loving Day*, the protagonist has just come back from a disastrous experience of expatriation in Wales and has to reorganize his life in America after his father's death. Travelling offers them a chance of confrontation with their parents' lives, values, and mindsets in a dynamic space. Thus, the dynamic sense of themselves that they develop cannot be attributed to the mere fact of being "mixed" and living between their parents' opposed worlds. Rather, it is the result of an experience of temporary estrangement. Finally, it stems from the experience of encountering the Other in different cultural contexts and get a 'more universal' sense of themselves and of their contingent situation.

1.5 *Looking Beyond Borders: Multiracialness and the Transnational*

Movement, as a recurrent theme in the critical analysis of this generation's works, emerges in reference to the civil rights movement that they represent and by which they are influenced, as well as in reference to a condition of perpetual dynamism in their lives. This generation of authors are often identified with movement itself.

Defining people or wanting them to define themselves is, according to Walker, an American obsession. It is the most common and ordinary form of social control. However, the children of this generation—the "movement children" —express an aptitude to restlessness which urges them to search for their own self-definition beyond the cultural boundaries of the nation. Interestingly, in Senna's *Caucasia*, there is a continuous struggle between the mother's

intent of creating a new identity to escape the FBI (which represents the American preoccupation with identity) and the protagonist's constant focus on reconstructing the lost relation with her sister in Brazil. The transnational element, which appears in the form of significant experiences abroad or of affective connections with people living in foreign countries, sometimes involves turning toward places where multiracialness is contemplated and "named" for what it is. The theme of travelling abroad is also present in Raboteau's first novel, *The Professor's Daughter*, where the protagonist, Emma, expatriates to Brazil in order to find herself explicable in a new language. In Raboteau's second autobiography, she travels the world in search of the land of Zion. In Senna's *Caucasia*, the protagonist's sister flies to Brazil with her father and stepmother.

In a comparative analysis of Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* and Senna's *Symptomatic* (2003),[37] Michele Elam (2016) affirms that the protagonists' final decision to leave hinders any possible interpretation of these characters as symbols of the future of American society: "these anti-bildungsroman characters," she states, "do not come of age by coming into society. Rather, their experiences critique the racial and economic basis by which individuals are incorporated, and both to some extent abandon the social contract altogether".[38] Such a remark opens to interpretative readings of the multiracial message conveyed by this generation which are in open contrast with celebrations of multiracialness as "the new American Manifest Destiny," and represents, instead, a rejection of the ways race and mixed races are articulated in the U.S. Considering the transnational element in connection with the impossibility of self-expression at home, we can interpret it as a moment in which the protagonists embrace a different perspective on their biracial condition, imagining a new language and modes of existence which resist domestic narrations. As Ifekwunigwe reminds us, global processes of imperialism, enslavement, slave trade, and diasporas have given rise to differ-

[37] Danzy Senna, *Symptomatic: A Novel* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003).
[38] Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folks*, 127.

ent articulations of local discourses and practices of race and racial mixing.[39] Consequently, exploring different contexts provides the protagonists with a better understanding of the dynamics of racialization that oppress them at home. Racial mixing, as all phenomena related to race, is a planetary matter which has been articulated differently in different geographical contexts, but which also presents common narrations everywhere, such as the idea that mixed people are fragmented individuals, "somehow less than a whole person".[40]

In Obama's, Walker's and Johnson's autobiographies, the crossing of American borders, especially in this specific cultural moment, represents a turning point which influences not only their paths to self-understanding and the reconstruction of their internal unity, but also the kind of relation that they establish with others: primarily, with the black community and then with the oppressed, divided, homeless people of the world. The spiritual connection between their individuality as mixed-race Americans and the individualities of the people encountered both at home and in the world elicits in them the feeling of being "citizens" of that world, that is, of having responsibilities and duties to the people of the planet. But such responsibilities are filtered through the experience of feeling close to suffering black people, not only as a geographically and historically located group, but more as symbols of a wider, planetary subjugation.

1.6 *Towards a Cosmopolitan Critical Approach*

If the debate concerning the construction and social recognition of multiracial identity as the symbol of American social progress has produced dominant narratives (oriented to multiracialism) and

[39] Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, ed. *"Mixed Race" Studies: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

[40] Ifekwunigwe, *"Mixed Race" Studies: A Reader*, 9. Here, the author is quoting L. Mengel, "Triples—The Social Evolution of Multiracial Panethnicity: An Asian American Perspective" in D. Parker & M. Song, eds., *Rethinking "Mixed Race"* (London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 2001), 99–116.

counter-narratives (oriented to monoracialism), so far, the critical reception of *Black White and Jewish*, *Dreams from My Father*, and *Loving Day* has shown a similar approach. It has enhanced a *monoracial-vs-multiracial* binarism, with critics supporting either one or the other side. In general, the former has been largely supported in non-academic contexts, while the latter has been more popular among scholars. Let us see some examples.

When Walker published *Black White and Jewish* in 2001, hybridity, the multiracial emergent identity, and the threat of colorblindness were major issues on the table. Dwelling on such issues, critics have often read the memoir as the author's attempt to find a coherent meaning to her biracial, gender-fluid childhood by embracing or deconstructing symbolic identities traditionally related to multiracialness. Ralina Joseph (2009), for example, examines the ways in which Walker deconstructs the figure of the "tragic mulatto" through that of the Movement Child, both of which represent for Rebecca a burden and an obstacle to a reconciliation with her own body. In her view, the centrality of the bodily element demonstrates the impossibility of the racial ideology of colorblindness.[41] More in general, Joseph criticizes Walker's idea of hybrid identity, objecting that the memoirist misses the opportunity of being a model for black people of biracial origin. Similarly, Fu-Jen Chen (2009) argues that hybridity cannot be considered as an alternative to racial essentialism and assuming that racial mixing can present a challenge to racism is too optimistic in her view. Chen sees hybridity more as a means of individual self-assertion than as a strategy through which one can build social solidarity and challenge the system. Therefore, she also reaches the conclusion that Walker has missed an occasion to initiate a real revolution.[42] Against this view, Gino Michael Pellegrini (2013)

[41] Joseph, "Performing the Twenty-First Century Tragic Mulatto: Black, White, And Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self, by Rebecca Walker.", 15.

[42] Fu-Jen Chen, "Postmodern Hybridity and Performing Identity in Gish Jen and Rebecca Walker." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 50, issue 4 (2009), 377-400.

defends the line of multiracial identification vis-à-vis multiculturalism and strategic essentialism by pointing out that:

> They [Walker and Fulbeck] show us ways that multiracial identities can be fashioned through contingent, limited, creative, and coordinated self-agency; in so doing, they give voice, flesh, legitimacy, and psychological space to multiracial bodies and lives that would otherwise be designated in society and history as only brown, black, yellow, red, or white.[43]

Finally, in 2016, I published an article on in which I positioned right halfway between the dominant and the counter-narratives: it was a reflection on how a postethnic view (thus, a multiracial, hybrid view) of Rebecca's identity is overtly claimed on a narrative level but then challenged on a metanarrative one due to a certain ambiguity in the alternate use of the young point of view (which is rigidly dichotomized and reflects a monoracial attitude) and the adult point of view (which stages instead a multiracial, "liberated" attitude). This ambiguity, in fact, leaves the reader uncertain about the writer's intention to step out of the categories and limits to self-determination imposed by multiculturalism and racism.[44]

Paul Watkins' article published by *The New York Times* complains about the fact that, in *Dreams from My Father*, Obama has represented a world in which "people of mixed backgrounds must choose only one culture in which to make a spiritual home" and in which "it is not possible to be both black and white, Old World and New".[45] He refuses this idea in the name of a multicultural America which takes pride "in itself as a nation derived of many

[43] Gino Michael Pellegrini, "Creating Multiracial Identities in the Work of Rebecca Walker and Kip Fulbeck: A Collective Critique of American Liberal Multiculturalism." *Melus* 38.4 (2013), 171-90: 186.

[44] Agnese Marino, "Postethnicity and Ethnic Performance in Rebecca Walker's Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self." *RSA Journal* 27 (2016), 151-69.

[45] Paul Watkins, "A Promise of Redemption." *The New York Times*, 6 Aug. 1995. www.nytimes.com/1995/08/06/books/review/a-promise-of-redemption.html.

different races."[46] Similarly, in "Who is Barack Obama?" (2008) Michael Gledhill argues:

> The Obama of *Dreams* abandons his multiracial roots to forge an alienated black identity — that of a man steeped in radical ideology who views history in terms of a huge chasm separating oppressor from oppressed, white from black, and rich from poor; a man who is never more emotionally at home than when sitting in the church pew listening to Rev. Jeremiah Wright rant about white racism.[47]

Marius Jucan's academic article (2013) focuses on Obama's calls for unity in the name of the principles of the civil rights movement[48] while Paul Ruffins, in his *Washington Post* review (1995), argues that in Obama's world "everyone and everything isn't only black or white."[49] He also emphasizes the author's affection for his own community in opposition to the attitude of many other middle-class and highly educated black men who "often seem terribly angry at their brothers and sisters, lashing out at black society whenever they get the chance."[50] On the side of counter-narrative critique, Glenda Carpio (2011) includes the author among the writers of the post-soul generation and emphasizes the way Obama complicates and deconstructs blackness attributing this to the influence of Paul Beatty's satirical style:

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Michael Gledhill, "Who Is Barack Obama?" *The National Review* (1 Sept. 2018). www.nationalreview.com/2012/05/who-barack-obama-michael-gledhill/.

[48] Marius Jucan, "The Cultural Dissensions of the Promised Future: Culture Wars and Barack Obama's Autobiographies." *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 12.35 (Summer 2013), 3-38.

[49] Paul Ruffins, "Black Issues: Racism or Attitude?" *The Washington Post* (20 Aug. 1995). www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1995/08/20/black-issues-racism-or-attitude/cea3a44d-b460-4617-a01e-ab00f3d23132/?utm_term=.23213d10fa91.

[50] *Ibid.*

> Like other members of the "post-soul" generation, Obama is keen to the "changing same" (to quote LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka) of American race relations in the post–civil rights era, in which essentialist notions of race have been questioned, further exposing the fiction of race, but racism has been increasingly institutionalized and made less visible, therefore also making it harder to combat.[51]

Thus, Carpio argues against any possibility of reading the book in colorblind or post-racial terms, since the author appears obsessed by race while also being fully aware of the limits of the achievements of the civil rights movement.

Finally, most of the criticism of *Loving Day* published so far appears in non-academic journals.[52] The great majority of reviewers express a positive view of the multiracial thinking displayed in Johnson's novel, especially because it is clearly not inspired by a post-racial ideal. For instance, Michelle Dean (2015) reports:

> Mostly what Loving Day wants to say is that the very concept of race is one. But Johnson isn't "post-racial," not in the least. For all his equivocations, what Duffy [the protagonist, *ed.*] seems to resent most about his racial identity is how inescapable that absurdity is.

[51] Glenda Carpio, "Race & Inheritance in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*." *Dædalus* 140.1 (Winter 2011), 79-89: 81.

[52] *Loving Day* has received enthusiastic reviews in *The New York Times, The Guardian, The Global Mail* and in numerous other local journals. However, the number of scholarly articles is still quite small. The following reviews have inspired my reading of the text: Ashley Hope Pérez, "The Book Report: *Loving Day* Provides a Contemporary Look at Racial Identity"; Michael Schaub, "Learning to Love, And Forgive, In Brilliant's 'Day'"; Jaundréa Clay, " *'Loving Day'* delves into the gray world of black and white"; Lauren C. Barret "Review of Loving Day by Mat Johnson"; Safa Jinje, "Review: *Loving Day* proves few contemporary writers confront race like Mat Johnson."; Dwight Garner, "Review: Mat Johnson's '*Loving Day*' Takes a Satirical Slant on Racial Identities", *nytimes.com*; Terri Gross, "Mat Johnson on *'Loving Day'* and Life As A 'Black Boy' Who Looks White" (see works cited).

> He doesn't want to transcend race; he wants it to be a source of personal identity even as he can see how incoherent it is.[53]

Other critics, like Michael Schaub (2015), show a more color-blind orientation, highlighting a certain sense of humanness in the novel, which goes beyond racial identity: "It has become a cliché to describe a work of art as 'deeply human'."[54] Similarly, Safa Jinje (2015) closes her review in a rather universalist tone: "by the end, the novel's humanity finds a way to eclipse all the pain."[55] On the side of counter-narratives, we find an article by Danielle Fuentes Morgan, in which she recognizes that "Johnson forwards an argument that the binary is an insufficient frame because it is able to be traversed," but nonetheless moves along the line of a post-soul interpretation of the protagonist's identity.[56]

To conclude, critical reception of *Black White and Jewish*, *Dreams from My Father* and *Loving Day* tends to fall into one of two ideological camps: those who stress the texts' articulation of an independent multiracial identity, including those who emphasize the authors' desire to have their distinct racial experience recognized, and those who focus instead on the authors' sense of loyalty toward the black community (some of whom interpret the biracial experience as a mere problematization of the concept of

[53] Michelle Dean, "*Loving Day* by Mat Johnson. Review - A High Energy Romp on Mixed Race Matters" *The Guardian*, 10 June 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/10/loving-day-mat-johnson-review.

[54] Michael Schaub, "Learning to Love, And Forgive, In Brilliant's 'Day'. Review of *Loving Day*, by Mat Johnson." *npr.books* (26 May 2015). www.npr.org/2015/05/26/408295998/learning-to-love-and-forgive-in-brilliant-day?t=1533378068910&t=1533711479176

[55] Safa Jinje, "Review: Loving Day Proves Few Contemporary Writers Confront Race like Mat Johnson. Review of *Loving Day*, by Mat Johnson." *The Globe and Mail* (26 June 2015). www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-loving-day-proves-few-contemporary-writers-confront-race-like-mat-johnson/article25154545/.

[56] Danielle Morgan, "Post What? The Liminality of Multi-Racial Identity". *Humanities* 5.46 (2016). https://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities.

blackness, as in post-soul blackness). Noticeably, either in defense of a black identity or of a mixed one, the two ideological camps adopt a multicultural approach. In fact, multiculturalism entails the construction of an identity that is strong and fierce in the celebration of its own diversity: it defines borders, norms, language, and discursive practices for each different identity. Of course, this is a necessary operation, since multiculturalism was born to express the minorities' need for social, cultural, and psychological self-liberation and, above all, their demand for recognition. However, there is a normative implication in this reading the books in the traditional terms of *blackness vs. post-blackness*; *individualism vs. communitarianism*; *"tragic mulatto" vs. "movement child;"*, *multiracial vs. monoracial, etc.*: the critics in fact provide a definition of what is mixed-race and what is black; what belongs and what does not; what is acceptable and what is not. In reading my corpus as works inspired by the cosmopolitan idea, I propose a different approach.

CHAPTER 2
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACTS AND THE NEW COSMOPOLITAN "I"

2.1 *Autobiography As a Cosmopolitan Literary Genre*

Much of the contemporary interest in autobiographical analysis lies in its mediational role between theory and experience, which is a relevant point when vague and complex ideas like cosmopolitanism are examined. Interestingly, in the essays and books of many new cosmopolitan theorists, it is not uncommon to find fragments of personal stories, especially when the intellectual has him or herself lived a cosmopolitan experience. For example, most of Kwame Appiah's interviews and interventions on cosmopolitanism start with stories about his childhood which was divided between England and Africa and his experience of being the biracial son of an affluent and cultivated family, who had to mediate between two very different cultures. David Hollinger opens his Postethnic America recalling that, while walking through the streets of New York with his fiancée, he mistook a group of Hasidic Jewish people for Mennonites or Old Order Dunkers. Corrected by the woman, he begins his reflection on post-ethnicity by wondering how much we can know about one's identity from physical appearance: this reflection represents the center of his whole criticism of multiculturalism. Seemingly, in Against Race, Paul Gilroy tells us about his childhood, when he was unsettled by the discovery of the existence of racism in England, although

at school he had learnt that the English army (that his black father had joined) had fought against Nazism during World War Two.[1] It seems, therefore, that a cosmopolitan attitude is strictly related to the life experiences of these authors and that facts, more than words, are the best way to convey it. In this chapter, I will analyze autobiography both in relation to cosmopolitanism (as an idea, an ideal, a practice, and an attitude) and in relation to the mixed-race experience and its representations, especially with regard to Walker, Obama, and Johnson.

Autobiography is traditionally represented as a "voyage of discovery" where the writer encounters him or herself in the past and obtains self-awareness. However, it can also be intended as a journey in which the subject, after a solitary self-exploration, reconnects with a collective dimension by reaching the circles of readers who will get into contact with her or his work. In this sense, we may say that the autobiographical narrative style follows the same trajectory of expansion/contraction of the self as traced by the cosmopolitan thinking, with a movement which goes from *the personal* to *the general* and vice versa. As Martha Nussbaum explains in *Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism* (2014):

> The Stoics stress that to be a citizen of the world one does not need to give up local identifications, which can frequently be a source of great richness in life. They suggest that we think of ourselves not as devoid of local affiliations, but as surrounded by a series of concentric circles. The first one is drawn around the self; the next takes in one's immediate family; then follows the extended family; then, in order, one's neighbors or local group, one's fellow city-dwellers, one's fellow countrymen—and we can easily add to this list groupings based on ethnic, linguistic, historical, professional, gender and sexual identities. Outside all these circles is the largest one, that of humanity as a whole.

[1] Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MASS: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2001), 1002.

> Our task as citizens of the world will be to "draw the circles somehow toward the center."[2]

How is self-writing related to the crossing of human circles? And how can it produce the centripetal movement that reconnects humanity to the cosmopolitan subject? Self-writing is driven by two desires: that of (self-)exploration and that of experience-sharing. In the first case, the writing process pushes the author, like a cosmopolitan adventurer, to leave the shore of what is known and begin an exploratory journey into her or himself in conversation with future readers (centrifugal movement); in the second case, the publication (and translation) of her or his work will reconnect the furthest circles of the readers to subjective experience (centripetal movement). Crossing the boundaries of each circle, the "cosmopolitan subject" as well as the self-writer undergo a process of deep transformation through the experience of encounter with otherness: it is the confrontation with the other that shows, on the one hand, the limits and the fallacies of a prefixed, unitary, and homogenous sense of self and, on the other hand, the possibility of enriching oneself with different and overlapping identifications.[3]

The encounter between self-writer and readers first happens through the author's negotiation of the concepts of identity, memory, and truth. As a means of self-reflection, self-research, and self-construction, autobiography takes place in a private, hyper-subjective space that we cannot find in any other literary genre. This means that the author, in full autonomy and by exerting authority

[2] Martha Nussbaum, "Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism" in Mitchell Cohen, ed., *Princeton Readings in Political Thought: Essential Texts from Plato to Populism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 738-745: 741.

[3] Sometimes, the experience of encounter with the other is extraordinary and pushes the subject to share its wonders by writing. At other times, the encounter is traumatic and requires a process of self-readjustment. The latter can also produce an impulse to write as an attempt of sense-giving. This latter process is well described by: Dobrota Pucherova in her essay: "Enlightenment, Modernity and Radical Cosmopolitanism in Autobiographies by Two Somali Women". *Women: A Cultural Review* 24. 1 (2013), 1–25.

over her or his experience, establishes what is true of the story s/he tells, which memories are worth to be told, and what identity will be displayed by the narrative "I". However, the autobiographical act should not be interpreted as an act of bending upon oneself, namely, as an act that serves the writer only. In fact, the *raison d'etre* of self-narrative is being read and understood by others. Its intrinsic value resides therefore in a commitment to relational practices, and it can represent a means of solidarity with whoever feels a commonality of feelings, thoughts, and experience with the author. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest, "'[t]ell me your life story' as a readerly expectation is a bid not just for entertaining distraction but for insight and the possibility of wisdom gained […]."[4] The act of sharing one's experience creates a space where the author, by reflecting on her or himself, re-shapes her or his own identity and, at the same time, allows the readers to re-shape their own on the basis of what they have learnt. However, this space is still limited by subjectivity because the reader gains from the text a doubly mediated experience: primarily through the author's subjectivity and secondly through her or his own subjectivity. This overlapping of subjectivities can be called *intersubjectivity*: it is the space where both autobiography and cosmopolitanism imagine an encounter among subjects who share an experience that is, at the same time, individual (belonging to each) and universal (belonging to everyone). Cosmopolitanism, differently from universalism, does not regard humanity "as a whole," but approaches it individually. It regards the universalistic claim – that is, the idea that humanity as a whole shares common values based on equal rational capacities and moral status – just as *the premise* that makes intersubjectivity possible. This means that, in a cosmopolitan ideal situation, the relation between self and other is not founded only on a general idea of a commonality among humans, but also on an indispensable relationality and mutuality among individuals. If a cosmopolitan

[4] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ed. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Madison: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 18-19.

encounter, which would require a recognition of the other as peer and mutual trust in the possibility of establishing a significant communication, is not common in real life, it is not impossible in the case of autobiography, where mutual recognition and the trust in the possibility of setting a rational discursive exchange are perfectly realizable among total strangers.

In this process of intersubjective negotiation, memory and identity are intimately interrelated. Smith and Watson, quoting W.J.T. Mitchell, point out: "Memory is an intersubjective phenomenon, a practice not only of recollection of a past *by* a subject, but of recollection *for* another subject." And also: "Memory is a means of passing on, of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, thereby activating its potential for reshaping a future for other subjects. In sum, acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective."[5] As I mentioned above, in appearance, the autobiographical act is univocal: the author is the giver and the reader is the receiver. However, the author must take a distance from her or himself, constituting an objective "I" – which becomes a third person – and finally seizes back her or his selfhood through the literary process of narrative.[6] In this process, the reciprocity consists in the fact that the narrator's identity is shaped in a way that can be easily understood by the reader. So, the reader, as the addressee of the narration, plays an important role in the rational and more or less coherent re-creation of the self-writer's identity. This is especially true when the writer feels that her or his own existence "does not make sense" – as our authors do – and, in order to convey to the story a sense of veracity, tries to represent a "socially acceptable" version of her or himself, by shaping it according to prefixed social categories. In this way, the autobiographical "I" will tend to display racial, ethnic, or gender identities which the reader

[5] Smith and Watson, ed. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 26.

[6] Majeed Javed, *Autobiography, Travel, and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal*. Delhi: Primus Books, 2015, 1.

can "recognize." So sometimes, for the writer, the main struggle in the reconstruction of Self is to mediate between what would be credible or *acceptable* to the reader and what is *true* to her or him. In such a process of continuous crossing of circles, borders, and identities it is hard to understand where the author ends the reader begins: author and readers fade in the writing and yet they remain perfectly distinct individuals.

2.2 *The Ethics of (Autobiographical) Identities*

In some cases, the ethical element can represent another common aspect between cosmopolitanism and autobiography. In the act of conveying her or his past, the writer establishes a relation with the reader that Philippe Lejeune calls "the autobiographical pact,"[7] through which s/he makes assurances concerning the truthfulness of her or his identity and of the story. Nevertheless, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest, this truthfulness is problematic: on the one hand, the reader cannot know if all the narrated facts correspond to reality. On the other hand, the author cannot represent an authority, as he has to admit that memory is fallacious, and that all truth is subjective. By reading reality through the eyes of the writer, the reader is expected to enter a space of trust and believe in the author's truth, considering that everything said, even lies, will be an authentic output of the writer's identity.[8] In a relational sense, the autobiographical practice is very close to the cosmopolitan practice: in the autobiographical pact, we see a "pact of trust" that can only take place in the space of intersubjective encounter between author and reader. The issue of trust is a central, continuously debated topic in autobiography criticism: the need to

[7] Philippe Lejeune, Paul J. Eakin, and Katherine M. Leary. *On Autobiography*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

[8] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 15-17.

believe in what Roy Pascal called "the seriousness of the author"[9] is a feature of the peculiar character of autobiography and what most distinguishes it from other narrative forms. Autobiography, as a genre, establishes a unique extra-narrative relationship between the *person* of the writer and the *person* of the reader which depends on the human value of sincerity. Connected to the theme of sincerity is that of purposefulness: the reader's perception is that the author is conveying a valuable message. The reader trusts the author's truth by virtue of a sense of meaningfulness, learning, and enrichment. This raises the following questions: is there in the autobiographical genre an inherent ethical scope? An implicit sense of human solidarity that transcends the authors' intentions and narrow interests?

Referring to *Black White and Jewish*, *Dreams from My father*, and *Loving Day*, I have asked myself this question: can I consider them as ethical works by virtue of the painful condition the writers occupied when they wrote their stories, or should I consider them as part of a dominant narrative that would favor their editorial success, or even as the products of more personal projects of normalization of mixedness and constructions of a positive public image?[10] It is hard to answer this question, however, as I will explain in detail in the next chapters, I have found the ethical, cosmopolitan value of these autobiographies – especially *Dreams* – more in what they try to hide than in what they tell about the authors' stories. Yes, writers do not publish a book if they do not want it to contribute to their own public image, especially if it is their own story. And,

[9] Roy Pascal qtd. in Linda Anderson, *The New Critical Idiom: Autobiography*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2-3. I have decided not to expand the issue of the author's possible unreliability which is, in this case, secondary. I will treat the relation true/fiction later in the work, especially in the analysis of *Loving Day*. However, here I wish to stress the idea that trust is a characteristic inherent to the genre, independently from its actualization.

[10] It goes without saying that, from this point of view, *Dreams from My Father* is the more problematic text, because it belongs to a public figure, which needed to construct for himself an acceptable image.

yes, in regard to mixed-race literature, it is even harder to establish what the final message is about – if the work sets out only to expand the limits of racial identity or to utterly challenge that identity with the political aim of creating a new category. However, the kind of mixed-race cosmopolitanism that I have found in the books, especially in Walker and Obama, is, in a way, painful and unattractive. Hence, it challenges, if not contradicts, the positive, mainstream view of the mixed-race experience that many critics have discovered in these texts. In this pain, I have found the real *cosmopolitanism from below*: the place in which the process of self-transformation and self-awareness begins but is never fully accomplished. Rebecca, Barack, and Warren never become complete, self-aware, proud mixed subjects. However, these narrators can offer their final cosmopolitan self-detachment and commitment as examples of how to find some comfort in the uncomfortable situation of racial homelessness. The ethical aspect of their final messages saves their self-representations from appearing totally lost and troublesome and provides the reader with something more than a story with which to sympathize or identify.

2.3 *Ambiguities in Mixed-Race Self-Narration and the Representation of the Cosmopolitan Experience*

When self-writers describe their past, they can either use the categories of the self that informed their self-awareness in the past (that is, the way they looked at themselves at the time of narration) or the categories that they have acquired more recently (that is, their present interpretations of past experiences, their new self-awareness). The latter is more common when the subject of the story is the author's childhood.[11] In his *Fiction in Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin observes:

[11] However, as I will explain later, the authors can also choose to alternate the two points of view, creating a continuous fluctuation between present and past.

> I view the rhythms of the autobiographical act as recapitulating the fundamental rhythms of identity formation: the writing of autobiography emerges as a second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious self-consciousness.[12]

We can understand this "rhythm" as taking place in a temporal dimension. In giving a definition of the broad "life narrative" genre, Smith and Watson argue that it is a "moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present".[13] If autobiography is "the account of one's life told by oneself," the word "life" represents an elastic element that can be stretched out to include the idea of how *one* has become *who* (the development of an identity), or it can be restricted to the tale of a particular moment of one's existence (a memory). Moreover, a particular memory (or the way it is narrated) can tell us about the writer's present views, and not only about what happened in the past. The autobiographical genre can be therefore characterized by continuous shifts in perspectives on one's past. Sometimes the text alternates past and present points of view, which might overlap and become indistinguishable (this is the case in *Black White and Jewish*).

This alternation of interpretative categories and points of view can also manifest itself through changes in the use of language: the narrator can talk of her or himself through her or his own words, or through the words *of others*. Especially in mixed-race autobiographies, the narrator often uses the distinct languages of one or the other group, expressing, on a metanarrative level, the lived experi-

This happens, for example, in *Black* and *Dreams*, where the narrators' representation of themselves as children tends to reflect the way people looked at them according to the binary categories of black and white, while the representation of more recent facts (e.g. themselves as young adults) tends to reflect a new and more hybrid self-view. This creates a certain ambiguity of perspectives.

[12] Paul John Eakin qtd. in Catharine Brosman, "Autobiography and the Complications of Postmodernism and Feminism." *Sewanee Review* 113.1 (Jan. 2005), 96-107: 105.

[13] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 1.

ence of constant cultural self-translation in black and white terms (as it happens in *Dreams from My Father*). Finally, the adult author can hide behind irony and self-irony to adopt some distance from the dehumanizing ways in which s/he has been perceived by others and by her or himself in the past (as it happens in *Loving Day*). This ambiguity of language and perspectives can also be intended as the moment of negotiation between the authors' multiple identities, which will result in a more self-aware cosmopolitan identity. The process of self-narration, therefore, represents the most hidden and painful moment of the cosmopolitan experience; the moment in which one's identifications come out confused and merged, and the subject must transform this confusion into meaningful words and a coherent narrative. Obama, I argue, has an evocative expression for this moment of discomfort and dislocation out of which he, like Walker and Johnson, has to narratively reconstruct himself: it is "the rifts of race." The rift is not only a situation that the author lives, but also a narrative space in which languages, categories, and views belonging to the white and black worlds come out in a painful, uncontrolled, or confusing way or they merge in a single sentence or paragraph or page up to become undistinguishable.

2.4 *Autobiography: Postmodern and Postcolonial Perspectives*

As cultural products of the 1990s and 2000s, *Black White and Jewish*, *Dreams from My Father*, and *Loving Day* are visibly affected by the deconstructive processes that postmodern and postcolonial criticism operated in relation to the autobiographical genre and the very possibility of self-representation through narration. Indeed, in order to self-create in narration, the authors had to deal with the clash between the postmodern crisis of identity – its fragmentation and dissolution – and the indispensability of identity in support of their life and political actions as members of a minority group. The deep crisis autobiography undergoes during the second half of the twentieth century is of course connected with a broader cultural

crisis in the Western world. If we consider Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives"[14] (96), it is clear that postmodernism makes the act of autobiography impossible at its very foundation: "the autobiographical pact" between the writer and the reader collapses if every attempt of self-narration is considered as mere deception. Recalling Derrida, Catharine Brosman argues that even if men were able to access a "pure" truth, human language would be incapable of expressing it. Additionally, the deconstruction of the self in a "sum of identifications" – as in Jacque Lacan's view – makes impossible even fragmented or subjective accounts of the truth. Therefore, as James Onley argues, in these conditions, autobiography must be read as "a narrative that pretends to be written by a self-conscious self who is actually only a linguistic construction."[15] The two main larger forces that thrusted the discourse on identity (and, by consequence, on self-narrative) in the nineties were what Ryan Moore calls the "culture of deconstruction" and the "culture of authenticity." Both these cultures are a response to the postmodern crisis of meaning: the first expresses "nihilism, ironic cynicism, and the celebration of purposelessness"; while the second searches for an experience of uniqueness outside of the productive system, which often has been misinterpreted as the search for the *essence* of identity.[16] In 1992, the publication of Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction* inserted the issue of ethics within the postmodern deconstructive practice and evidenced a growing feeling of tiredness towards the sterile discursiveness provided by postmodernism, which eventually gave rise to a progressive abandonment of the movement.[17]

[14] Jean-François Lyotard qtd. in Brosman, "Autobiography and the Complications of Postmodernism and Feminism", 96.

[15] James Onley qtd. in Brosman, "Autobiography and the Complications of Postmodernism and Feminism", 98.

[16] Ryan Moore, "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction" *The Communication Review* 7.3 (2004), 305-327: 308.

[17] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Library, 1992).

2.4.1 *The Disintegration of the Autobiographical Genre*

A new conception of autobiography as possibly incoherent and amnesiac represents the main change in the perception of the genre that occurred in contemporary times. As we will see, such a deep change in form and contents has pushed the critics to recuperate and apply to it the word *memoir* in order to distinguish it from the traditional genre. Post-structuralist criticism, represented especially by Paul de Man, declares the impossibility of treating autobiography as a distinct genre: the impossibility of distinguishing between reality and fiction creates an impasse that makes pointless every approach to reality through narration.[18]

The Western "death" of autobiography[19] was contrasted by a resurgence of the genre in postcolonial literature and trauma narratives – that is, in those places of subalternity and suffering, where identity has to be urgently rebuilt rather than destroyed. However, the postcolonial interpretation of the genre by postcolonial writers also implied a revisitation of the classical rationalist Western tradition. As Dobrota Pucherova points out:

> The vast amount of post-colonial autobiography, however, shows that autobiography is central to postcolonial writing. It emerges from the need to liberate oneself from colonial definitions and recover and establish a self-defined identity. The question 'Who am I' is so urgent for post-colonial writers that autobiographical elements pervade postcolonial fiction […] While postmodernism can afford the 'luxury' to challenge what it surely possess – a coherent subjectivity that is part of the dominant order – postcolonialism and feminism 'must work first to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity' so that they can consequently undermine it.[20]

[18] Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement. " *Mln* 94.5 (1979), 919-30.
[19] Linda Anderson, *The New Critical Idiom: Autobiography*, 14.
[20] Pucherova, "Enlightenment, Modernity and Radical Cosmopolitanism in Autobiographies by Two Somali Women," 4.

The colonized self needs to be deconstructed itself and, subsequently, an independent subjectivity must be recreated. Even when identity is recognized as a multiple and transitory element, nonetheless, the post-colonial self needs to affirm its own existence as a human being, both politically and morally. Therefore, s/he can rely on a *strategic identity*: a construction that serves for political purposes. In this case, therefore, autobiography will represent not only a social act, but also a political one.

Literary exploration of subjectivity through self-reflexivity is necessary to the process of internal decolonization. However, the association of "canonic autobiography" with the Western World has produced in postcolonial self-writers a progressive distancing from this genre and the substitution of reality with fiction. As Maureen Perkins suggests, Gayatri Spivak refers to autobiography in postcolonial studies as *the impossible genre*, where the writer is a subaltern compelled to witness the experience of oppression within a Western codified genre and speak of her or his own experience on behalf of her or his people. In Spivak's view, the writer is invested by the burden of representativity, which results in losing her or his own subjectivity and being devoured by the readers' curiosity for the general conditions of all the groups she or he comes to represent.[21] As Meg Jensen points out, when self-writers imagine different scenarios where their own life could have come to existence and when the boundaries between memory and fiction blur, autobiography enters the sphere of trauma narrative. Sometimes, the only chance to tell a traumatic story is by distancing oneself from one's past:

> Autobiographical fictions that trouble the boundaries of truth, memory, and representation are perhaps the textual spaces that best reflect the long-term effects of trauma on such communication. As Holocaust historian Annette Wieviorka has written: [i]

[21] Maureen Perkins, "Resisting the Autobiographical Imperative: Anatole Broyard and Mixed Race." *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 6.2 (2011), 265-80: 273.

> t is often supposed that history is better transmitted by works of non-fiction [nevertheless] at a time when death is omnipresent, the idea arises that the work of art is eternal, that it alone can guarantee memory, that is, immortality.[22]

According to the critic, post-trauma autobiographical fiction is also generally marked by an "aesthetics that remarks on its own limitations, [and on] its inability to provide external answers and stable meaning"[23]; these limitations concern especially the possibility of providing a representation of external events or developing ideas and ideologies by offering solutions or explanations for them.

2.4.2 *Impossible Self-Narrations and the Cosmopolitan Identity*

In "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," Sidonie Smith connects the idea of a distinctive form of autobiography enacted by subaltern subjects such as women, LGBT, and postcolonial writers to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Smith draws upon the cultural theorist Michel De Certeau to criticize self-expressive theories of autobiography that view in self-writing an effect of a pre-existent selfhood. She argues, instead, that autobiography plays a role in the *construction* of identity as a coherent and unitary element responding to social norms. Thus, in line with Butler, she argues that there is no self prior to writing, but it is the act of narrating which performatively creates both the autobiographical and the existential self.[24] In this sense, narrative performativity constitutes interiority by creating *the discourse* that reproduces cultural normativity. Ac-

[22] Meg Jensen, "Post-Traumatic Memory Projects: Autobiographical Fiction and counter-Monuments." *Textual Practice* 28.4 (June 2014), 701-25: 714.

[23] Friedlander qtd. in Jensen, "Post-Traumatic Memory Projects: Autobiographical Fiction and counter-Monuments.", 705.

[24] Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance", in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998). 109.

cording to the performativity theory, autobiography is an output of social discourses and as a social act itself; it is characterized by norms which shape the autobiographical self in a coherent form, giving the illusion of an original, essential voice behind the narration: a subject who is *rediscovering* him or herself.

There is another important aspect in the performative theorization of autobiography: self-narration is seen as a transformative act. The narration of one's past shapes not only the past, but also the present of the writer and, at the same time, it indirectly affects the process of construction of the reader's self. In this passage from narrator to reader, Smith glimpses the process of reproducibility, where autobiography becomes just another instrument through which the reproduction of social norms takes place in society. What is more relevant to my argument is that, in this view, the autobiographical pact is funded on the assumption that the identity represented in the text is acceptable because it responds to readers' expectations. In other words, the communication is possible by virtue of a shared normative code made of socially acceptable categories of self, such as gender, race, class, etc. as well as a shared linguistic system which gives to every human experience (signified) a culturally marked "name" such as woman, man, black, white, etc. (signifier). Each of these categories and names is characterized by a distinct cultural legacy of representations, narrative paths, ideas, and so on, which make the subject coherent, understandable, and stable. These categories allow the readers to decode the narrator's identity and produce expectations about the genre, since a coherent narration is supposed to correspond to a coherent self. However, Smith points out, the repetition of socially acceptable discourses will, eventually, reveal failures: "for the autobiographical subject is amnesiac, incoherent, heterogeneous, interactive. It is through these necessary failures, from these variations in repetition, that the performative character of the autobiographical act becomes visible and consequently reveals the performative act of living."[25]

[25] Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance", 108-110.

Black White and Jewish, *Dreams from My Father*, and *Loving Day* convey the secret message that it was not possible to formulate a hybrid, multilayered, reconciled identity within the discursive context of the U.S., because it lacked adequate categories and terms to express my authors' sense of themselves. Our texts suggest that the only thing one can do is move away from the country, from the double conscious, colonizer/colonized-inflated experience of the self (which, according to the authors, is the only one that America knows) in order to reconnect with otherness in a space of silence and strangerhood, and finally to go back with no self-identity to claim, but with a clearer mind about the stance to take. This new view of identity does not respond to ontological/discursive norms, but only to ethical judgement; an identity based on one's *relationship* with the others, rather than on one's *identification* with the others.

Autobiography as a performative act, postcolonial autobiography as re-construction of subjectivity, and autobiographical fiction as a hybrid form of trauma narrative were part of that set of new ideas which our authors absorbed during the years of their academic formation. Ideas of performativity and multiple identities associated to autobiography, in particular, showed the same new sensitivity toward the pluralist human experience which also affected current cosmopolitan theorizations.

2.5 Intersubjectivity As a Space of Encounter

Like cosmopolitanism, autobiography does not view individuality and cultural diversity as obstacles to mutual understanding, but as modes of realization of such an understanding. Indeed, as Linda Anderson recalls, James Onley views the individual emerging from autobiography as transcending both social and historical difference,[26] while Karl Weintraub argues the following: "We are

[26] Linda Anderson, *The New Critical Idiom: Autobiography* (2nd ed). (New York: Routledge, 2011 [2001]), 4.

captivated by an uncanny sense that each one of us constitutes one irreproducible human form and we perceive a noble life task in the cultivation of individuality, our ineffable Self."[27] The perception of everyone's uniqueness poses the basis for an intersubjective relation that, exalting the singularity of the individual, transcends the differences among groups. This also creates the possibility of a certain relationality based on discursive practices, so that self-writers, even when compelled, as our three authors are, to deal with traumatic experiences and difficult existential conditions, are not obsessed by the impossibility of grasping "the Truth," or of expressing reality, or of communicating their "ineffable Self." Seemingly, the very act of self-writing reveals that the author is not concerned about the possibility of failing a connection with (or being misunderstood by) readers who come from different cultural backgrounds. This does not mean that all self-writers ignore or underestimate differences or blindly trust in everyone's ability to understand and participate in their own story. Instead, it means that the urgency of writing one's story for whatever purpose is stronger than the fear of being misunderstood. Thus, only if the authors focus on the possibility of establishing communication and believe in a certain *commonality of subjective perceptions* can they create an intersubjective space of "shared understanding of the meaning of a life."[28] This idea of transcending the issue of difference in order to preserve the message is, I argue, intrinsically cosmopolitan.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2.

2.6 Black White and Jewish, Dreams from My Father, *and* Loving Day *As New Cosmopolitan Autobiographies*

2.6.1 *Emotions As a Place of Encounter in* Black White and Jewish

The word "autobiography" appears on the cover of *Black White and Jewish* and, together with the black-and-white picture of the author as a smiling child, promises a 322-page story of growth and self-determination. Then, surprisingly, the book opens with the statement: "I don't remember things" (1). Unsettling reading expectations and throwing the reader in a liminal space between memory and amnesia, this admission suggests the presence of post-traumatic defensive mechanisms connected to difficult childhood experiences[29] and the impossibility of self-writing. The unstable "shifting self" that appears in the subtitle is therefore formally rendered through the fragmented genre of *memoir.* This brings us back to the concept of the "impossible genre" that characterizes autobiographies in postcolonial and trauma literature. In fact, Walker seems to deprive autobiography of its primary value as an instrument of self-reconstruction and sense-making: "Without a memory that invests in information retention, without a memory that can remind me at all times who I definitively am, I feel amorphous" (2). On the level of the plot, the shapelessness of self prevents Rebecca (the narrator) from fitting into the normative outline produced by the identity categories of race, ethnicity, and gender; therefore, she is unable to communicate to the people around her what she is and what she feels. Likewise, on a metanarrative level, Walker's process of self-writing seems to be hindered by the impossibility of representing herself according to the commonly used, socially constructed, ontological categories that inform the reader's concep-

[29] Hans J. Markowitsch, "Autobiographical Memory: A Biocultural Relais between Subject and Environment." *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience* 258.5 (2008), 98-103: 102.

tion of identity. This poses problems of communication with the reader that the writer has to resolve. At the time of the publication of *Black White and Jewish*, the idea of *post-identity* was popular in the academy[30] and was gaining ground on a broader level, compared to the time in which the book is set. However, even today the average reader may find it difficult to embrace Walker's disruptive discourses on identity (especially black identity).[31] In face of her difficulties of communicating in words her peculiar experience of being a "Movement Child" and a non-tragic mulatta, the author shifts toward an emotional level, creating a bond with the reader that relies more on the sharing of feelings than on rational explanations. Opposed to the principle of the "identical identity" of the autobiographical pact,[32] Walker in fact transfers the terms of discourse on memory and identity from an intellectual space to that of the heart:

> It will be my heart that will force my mind to remember her face, the way she felt lying next to me in the dark, the way she looked sitting on the sofa, telling me that Mind, to her, is everything. My heart will be registering the deepest meaning snaking and

[30] Cécile Voisset-Veysseyre, "Toward a Post-Identity Philosophy: Along a Flight Line with Gilles Deleuze?" *Trahir* (2011): 1-18.

[31] Someone may argue that today, more than in 2001, the privilege of believing in post-identity is precluded to many members of minority groups. My view is inspired by David T. Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet? Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

[32] Considering that, according to Philippe Lejeune, the first mark of recognition of autobiography is in the author's name, the idea of challenging the principle of autobiographical identity may explain the name discrepancy issue. In fact, in the text, Rebecca affirms to have officially changed her name from "Rebecca Walker Leventhal" to "Rebecca Leventhal Walker", where the father's Jewish name becomes secondary in favor of that of her mother as a sign of spiritual closeness to the black community, but it does not disappear, as a recognition of her double roots. However, on the cover of the book, "Leventhal" does not appear at all. An explanation could be the editorial choice of taking advantage of Alice's name, but this hypothesis would not fully explain why not to add at least a "L."

> elusive beneath her disparate pieces; my heart alone will allow me to remember her whole (3).

As we will see in the analysis of the book, emotional space is the only space in the *memoir* where encounters beyond cultural difference and linguistic obstacles can possibly occur, thanks to a non-verbal level of communication. So, besides establishing the terms through which the author will explain "how memory works" (186), this stance also saves the pact of trust between author and reader by establishing a different kind of allegiance. If subjective memory is the place where a memoirist encounters the reader, the amnesic Rebecca can make it possible only by redefining the very idea of memory. It is precisely in this act of redefinition of memory and, consequently, of personal reformation of the genre that her refusal to be considered a "tragic" or a traumatized subject manifests powerfully.

In the title, Walker represents herself as a *shifting* individual, subjected to external forces driving her physical and existential movements and compelling her to a state of perennial wandering. Walker's use of the genre mirrors this state through continuous shifts in narration from past to present and vice versa.

2.6.2 *Rational Self-Reconstruction in* Dreams from My Father

In *Dreams from My Father*, the idea of physical and existential motion is also present, but it is hidden behind a surface of rational coherence. As it happens to Walker, Obama's experience affects the way he approaches the genre; so the most "traditionally cosmopolitan" writer among the three shapes autobiography as "a record of a personal, *interior journey* – a boy's search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American" (xvi, emphasis added). The original idea, then abandoned, of also providing maps and trajectories of his journeys is translated to the level of narration by a coherent,

chronologically linear discourse, which maps existential experience with concrete dates and place names. Obama, who is not a professional memoirist, occasionally manifests a certain anxiety of control over his writing, and consequently, over the whole process of memory recollection and self-construction. However, for the same reason, his approach to the genre is very pragmatic: in the 2004 edition, the introductory chapter contains a metanarrative reflection about the whole book: its genesis, its aim, its evolution in time, and an anticipation of the final message. The relationship between author and reader is immediately established when he confesses the difficulties inherent in the process of self-writing and the sense of responsibility that it entails. "I originally intended a very different book" (1) is, in fact, his first sentence, as he tries to forestall possible criticism. He lists, for example, some of the "dangers" connected with self-writing: "selective lapses of memory," "certain vanities," or a "temptation to color events in ways favorable to the writer" (xvi). Obama also points out that the reason he agreed to write an autobiography at such a young age was his sense that the story of his family would speak to the "fissures of race," the "collision of cultures," and the "fluid state of identity" of American modern life (vii). He appears fully aware of the social impact of autobiography as a genre to which he gives a social scope. By virtue of his pragmatic approach to the genre, Obama considers the process of self-disclosure functional to a moral purpose. The metanarrative reflection contained in the introduction reveals that the communication Obama establishes with the reader, in contrast to Walker, is based on a particular confidence in rationality and dialogic efficacy. Further, his writing displays a strong sense of responsibility toward the reader as *his other*, which harkens back to the cosmopolitan ethical commitment. Moreover, his writing shows the political attitude of an instinctual leader, one who wishes to direct both the process of writing and the perception of his readers. It is not by chance that the first self-identification he provides in the text is a professional one: he is "the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*"

(xiii). At this point in his career, the author wishes to appear to be a fully self-aware man, and the reader intuits that it is through the very act of self-writing that he achieves this goal. I will not dwell too much on the characterization of the author's identity in this chapter; however, the aforementioned self-definition helps us to understand why his first and never accomplished draft of the book resembled a political essay more than an autobiography:

> I began to organize in my mind, with a frightening confidence, just how the book would proceed. There would be an essay on the limits of civil rights litigation in bringing about racial equality, thoughts on the meaning of community and the restoration of public life through grassroots organizing, musing on affirmative action and Afrocentrism–the list of topics filled the entire page. I'd include personal anecdotes, to be sure, and analyze the sources of certain recurring emotions (1).

In this passage, individual identity is totally absorbed by collective identity. The need for a unified and coherent self-representation responds to social expectations of consistency and, in this case, is intrinsically connected with (if not a result of) a strong commitment to identity-based political struggles. If this commitment requires the organization of one's social activity around the idea of identity, organizing one's identity around social activities guarantees more chances of social acceptance in the world of politics. After all, as the author aspires to a public role, offering a racially ambiguous self-image, which is incoherent with the figure of black lawyer and activist can constitute an obstacle to his credibility: therefore, Obama admits that he felt some internal resistance toward self-writing (xvi). Even if it remains unspoken, the reader intuits that he fears the utopian message of black-white reconciliation that his childhood represents is opposed to the current, justifiably skeptical attitude of his community (xiv). The author argues that he fears being considered naïve, but another, greater risk is that of misrepresentation. He soon makes clear that, as a child, he

did not share the same precocious "loss of innocence" (xvi) as did many among his African American brothers and sisters. On the contrary, his story reveals a privileged past of travels and atypical cultural experiences (xvi).[33]

If the act of self-writing exposes the authors to changes in self-perception, shaping their identity, the act of publishing exposes the authors' accounts to the scrutiny and criticism of others and, at the same time, makes the writer a social agent, able to transform others' minds and self-perception. Thus, *Dreams From My Father* seems to represent Obama's final self-reconstruction after a lifetime of unsuccessful attempts at mentally "rewriting" the story of his family. In his words, this book plugs up "holes in the narrative, accommodating unwelcome details […] all in the hope of extracting some granite slab of the truth upon which my unborn children can firmly stand." (xvi). As we will see, Obama often proposes ideas of reconciliation and cultural negotiation and overtly describes himself as a worldly person. In this sense, the book can be read as the perfectly coherent self-description of a cosmopolitan individual who has found a balance between his many selves. However, I will show that there are gray areas under the surface of this alleged perfect stability.

2.6.3 *Autobiography As an Ethical Act in* Loving Day

The use of autobiography in *Loving Day* is more problematic than in the works previously discussed. In fact, by writing a novel, Mat Johnson renounces "the pact" as a whole. However, the parallels between the author and the protagonist's stories are striking. In an article on *The New York Times*, Johnson reveals details of his childhood which appear in the novel in a very similar way:

[33] I refer to Obama's middle-class childhood in the less racist context of Honolulu, which I will explore later in the book.

> I grew up a black boy who looked like a white one. My parents divorced when I was 4, and I was raised mostly by my black mom, in a black neighborhood of Philadelphia, during the Black Power movement. I put my dashiki on one arm at a time like every other black boy, but I was haunted by the moments I'd be out with my mother and other black people would look at me as if I were a cuckoo egg accidentally dropped in their nest.[34]

From an interview with Terri Gross on NPR's *Fresh Air*, we learn that Johnson and Warren have much in common: both are the children of a Black woman and an Irish man who divorced when they were children; they are graphic novelists who have spent a significant period of their life in Wales; they had sexual intercourses with a Jewish girl that raised the possibility of fatherhood. In fact, recalling that dismaying experience, the author has imagined the birth of a white daughter and given birth to the character of Tal, Warren's teenage daughter (he reveals that, instead, his real children are black, as his wife is African American). We also know that both Johnson and Warren grew up near the ancient Loudoun Mansion of Germantown. Thus, at first glance, it seems that Johnson uses the autobiographical material as the starting point of an alternative life, which he entrusts to the realm of imagination:

> When I started the book and I started figuring out what it was about, I already started thinking about this moment when I was 16 and I had a pregnancy scare with a girl, one of the first - you know, probably the first girl I was with, and it changed my entire life.[35]

According to the principle of "identical identity," *Loving Day* is more fiction enriched with personal memories than an autobio-

[34] Mat Johnson, "Proving My Blackness." *The New York Times* (19 May 2015). https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/magazine/proving-my-blackness.html.

[35] Terry Gross, "Mat Johnson on 'Loving Day' And Life as A 'Black Boy' Who Looks White." *Fresh Air on NPR* (29 June 2015). http://www.npr.org/2015/06/29/418549923/mat-johnson-on-loving-day-and-life-as-a-black-boy-who-looks-white.

graphical novel. After all, the subtitle is: "*A Novel*" and the name on the cover is different from that of the narrator. In light of this, all the shared elements between the author and the main character become secondary. However, there is a place in narration where the distinction between life and narrative blurs enough to make *Loving Day* a truly autobiographical work. If the name of the protagonist is different from that of the author, and so are their lives, the *identity* between Warren and Johnson lays in the place where all human *identification* is: in their body.

The descriptions Warren provides of his white-looking body are vague and sometimes confusing. However, utterances such as "I'm an optical illusion" make shocking sense as soon as they are confronted with the photograph of the author in black and white that appears on the back cover. Actually, this confrontation occurs at the end of the reading process, since a picture of the author in black and white appears on the last page of the book and gives the reader the impression that Johnson has spoken of his own body over the whole book. Warren's body is Johnson's *alter-body*. As a consequence, the author treats the issue of physical appearance quite ambiguously during his interview on the National Public Radio:

> GROSS: The main character in Johnson's new satirical novel "Loving Day" is a comic book artist who, like Mat Johnson, is biracial but to many people looks white.
> […]
> GROSS: Now, that's Mat Johnson, reading from his new book "Loving Day." So why don't you describe how you look and how your character looks?
> JOHNSON: I look—I like to say I look white. And partly the reason I like say it is as soon as I say it, 20 people point out actually, no, you don't […]. So I look like a pale Puerto Rican. I look like a really ragged ex-Latvian rugby player. I've been told I look Egyptian. I've been told a lot of things. But really what I look is ambiguous. You know, I have skin the same color as most—or many—white people. I have an African nose. I have high cheekbones. For some reason, people always assign high cheekbones

> to some ethnicity, but apparently by their regards, everybody on earth has high cheekbones. So, I don't know if that matters […]. You can add on to the fact that I'm huge, yeah. […] I'm 6-foot-4. *It says 225 in the book, but, you know, this is a novel, so I got to cut off some pounds there.*[36]

Johnson has just finished reading a passage from his novel that goes, "What I'm saying is, *I'm Black too*" (18), and when the speaker explicitly asks him to describe himself *and* Warren, the author answers talking about himself only. I find it significant that, over the whole interview, this is the only point where Johnson does not clearly distance himself from his character. It is meaningful that this vagueness occurs while they are talking about Johnson's body, because the whole novel revolves around the experience of a continuous attempt, on the part of Warren, to provide social justification for the existence of that body. Without the author's body, I argue, *Loving Day* would have never been written, because there would have been no need for justification, nor post-identity message to convey, nor performative act of self-assertion to do. On the basis of this overlapping, I read Warren's path toward a new identity in *Loving Day* as similar to that of Johnson:

> My battle to prove my blackness ended in a truce in adulthood; I became "mixed." Or rather, like many with my background, I embraced a multiracial approach to identity. I even celebrate Loving Day, the day that commemorates the 1967 Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court ruling legalizing interracial marriage nationwide. My mixed identity isn't a rejection of my mother or of blackness — it's an integration of blackness with the rest of who I am.[37]

As we will see, this body also represents the center of the book's main characteristic: irony. Johnson's self-irony, in fact, is addressed

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] Mat Johnson, "Proving My Blackness." https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/magazine/proving-my-blackness.html.

above all to Warren's body and the use that he makes of it: the way he can performatively change his voice and attitudes in a way that make it more recognizable in terms of blackness. Were not the body so central to the discourse of mixed identity, it would occupy in the novel the same accessory place as the other real elements (that is, the mansion, the black ghetto, the Jewish girl, and so on). However, *Loving Day* opens and closes with a reflection on the body, and its presence is obsessively remarked upon throughout the book as the constant preoccupation of the author.[38] In another interview, Johnson comments:

> This whole damn book I just wrote, *Loving Day*. I spent the first decades of my life overcompensating for my whitish appearance within the black community, rejecting mixed identity as an escape plan for self-hating blacks of mixed descent. Then as an adult, I slowly began seeing the merits of self-identifying as biracial, and eventually the need for it, despite larger ambivalence to it in the larger black community.[39]

This quotation answers in part the questions that I set at the beginning of this chapter about the intrinsic ethical value of autobiography. In the experience of finally seeing advantages of being mixed, I see the ethical commitment that urges the author to write about himself.

As we have seen, Walker's intersubjective relation with the reader is based on the possibility of emotional connection, whereas Obama's depends on rational reasoning as a means of mutual transformation. Johnson instead establishes an intersubjective relation with the reader when Warren describes his own body ironically and

[38] As in *Black White and Jewish* and *Dreams from My Father*, the mixed body is openly performative. With performative body I refer to a body whose social signification (in this case, the racial identity it represents) changes accordingly to the observer and the interpretative code used "to read" it.

[39] Randa Jarrar, "The Pen Ten with Mat Johnson." *PEN America* (16 Mar. 2015). pen.org/the-pen-ten-with-mat-johnson/.

metaphorically: "I'm black with an asterisk, and the asterisk is my whole body" (18). Through this ambiguous approach, the author mediates the impossibility of conveying the absurd existence of his own appearance and asks the reader for an act of trust (that is, to believe that that "optical illusion" contains an authentic black man) and to accept irony as the only way in which he can express his existential condition. In *Loving Day*, irony produces empathy and consolidates the bond between author and reader, so it represents the means through which Johnson realizes the cosmopolitan commitment of building bridges of solidarity among people who do not necessarily live the same experience. Johnson, like Walker and Obama, does not move from the essentialist assumption that, if the readers do not share his same experience of being "black with an asterisk" (which seems to be impossible to convey through words), then they will never understand his condition and will always be estranged from him by virtue of their privileged *racial consistency.* On the contrary, the writer believes in the possibility of understanding and, in a way, participates in the effects of that particular existential condition.

If autobiography is a performative act *per se*, in the specific case of *Loving Day*, the autobiographical novel can be considered an even more performative genre. In fact, as an autobiographical work, it is an act of public self-assertion (in the *Fresh Air* interview, Johnson defines *Loving Day* as his "coming out as a mulatto"), but as a novel, it allows the author to provide his own body with an alternative identity. By associating a constructed, narrative self with his real body, Johnson reproduces the mechanisms of performativity: if Johnson's autobiographical novel stages the idea that one body can contain a multiplicity of identities, we can say the act of self-assertion he enacts is, in fact, an act of *selves-assertion*. Probably, the fictional element, the creation of an alter ego with different name and life has helped the author in the process of self-identification as a mixed race; however, this does not undermine the pact of trust with the reader, because the message he wants to convey is, let us say, "authentic."

2.7 *Some Terminological Remarks: Autobiography, Memoir, and Autobiographical Novel*

So far, I have referred to my primary sources with the term "autobiography" or "autobiographical work." However, going into a deeper analysis of their form and contents entails some terminological clarification. Here, I contrast and compare autobiography and *memoir*, and *memoir* and autobiographical novel, in order to provide a definition of each of them. A comparison between autobiography and *memoir*, must begin with the aforementioned definition of autobiography, according to Philippe Lejeune:

> Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.[40]

Given this definition, establishing a distinction between autobiography and *memoir* is not easy. On the other hand, historically, the relation between these two genres has always been intricate. In fact, not only are definitions often disagreeing, but also the hierarchical nature of the relation between autobiography and *memoir* is muddled. As Smith and Watson point out, for long time *memoir* has been considered a sub-genre of autobiography, but today, it is often used as a synonym for *life narrative*;[41] that is, a macro-category that encompasses every form of self-writing: autobiography, letter, diary, etc. As postcolonial critics remark, the canonization of the term *autobiography* that occurred in the early twentieth century by a generation of scholars such as Georges Gusdorf and Karl Weintraub excluded many types of life narrative such as slave narratives, narrative of women's domestic lives, or travel narratives. Their aim was to give autobiography the same literary dignity as

[40] Lejeune, Eakin, and Leary *On Autobiography*, 14.

[41] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 4.

that of novels, so these scholars excluded marginalized and invisible identities.[42] So, what we call *memoir* today encompasses all the leftover varieties of life writings. For this reason, *memoir* is a more malleable term than autobiography, since the latter has been historically canonized in the early twentieth century, while the *memoir* has served as a supplement for all those forms of self-writing that were not included in the canon. Yet, the word *memoir*, a derivation from the French "*les mémoires de*," anticipates the English word "autobiography" by centuries;[43] thus, calling it a subgenre would be at least ahistorical. Indeed, the history of the two genres helps us understand why providing a unique definition of *memoir* is so difficult and why it is often considered a liminal genre (or subgenre) suspended between the private and the political space, biography and autobiography, fiction and nonfiction. It is interesting to notice the relation of power that this story between the two genres entails: autobiography is associated to the colonial and patriarchal West, the only one entitled by the canon to practice self-reflexiveness, while *memoir* is associated with femininity and subalternity. In this regards, Julie Rak also mentions a whole critical tradition that associates autobiography with the idea of active self-narration, whereby the subject shapes the events and is the protagonist of his own destiny, while *memoir* is associated with a narration in which the subject is a mere observer of the facts that happen to him or her or to other people:[44] a criticism reproduces the opposition masculine/feminine, dominator/dominated, colonizer/colonized.

My use of the word *memoir* is based on an integration of two definitions: the first is provided by the publisher George Fetherling, who, in the introduction of *Vintage Book of Canadian Memoirs*, points out:

[42] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 3.

[43] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2.

[44] Julie Rak, "Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity". *Genre XXXVI* (fall/winter 2004), 305-26: 310.

> We would never call the autobiography of a politician or other professional public figure a memoir. Such books are *too formal* to fit the distinction, following as they do the straight *conventions* of non-fiction; too determined to cover the subject's entire life or career and show him or her *in the most favorable light*. A memoir is more tightly focused, more *daring in construction*, and (its author hopes) more penetrating. A memoir can be of one's self or of other people or of a particular decade—or of a particular place.[45]

This definition regards narrative style and construction as constitutive elements of the genre, which is expected to be quintessentially intimate, (self-)critical, and passionate in relating facts. Hence, it could be considered a narrative style that recalls femininity (or better, a certain kind of femininity) that merges the public and private, facts and thoughts, real people and their subjectively perceived identities, and does not spare the author's inner shadows. Truthfulness seems to be crucial and "authenticity" required, when the aim of the text is to disclose identity. The second definition is provided by Smith and Watson:

> In contemporary writing, the categorization of memoir often signals autobiographical works characterized by *density of language* and *self-reflexivity* about the writing process, yoking the author's standing as a professional writer with the work's status as an *aesthetic object*.[46]

This definition focuses more on the creative process, stressing the aspect of self-consciousness in writing. According to Smith and Watson, in *memoir*, memories as well as words are accurately selected and the author is the aware creator of a piece of art. Form and contents seem to have the same value, so the style matches the

[45] Lejeune qtd. in Rak, "Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity", 305. Emphasis added.

[46] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 4.

message that the text conveys. However, truth seems be secondary in this "artistic view", maybe substituted by a highly subjective, non-rational, representation of facts. In *memoir*, the aim and focus of narration is to disclose identity, hence the narration is not necessarily constrained to plot dynamics. This means that, differently from what happens in autobiographical novel, their narrative structure is affected by the spontaneous flood of memories due to particular conditions or situations in the present. Therefore, like raw material, real experience, albeit altered by memory, is a sufficient and self-explanatory subject. As such, it can show up scattered in independent and episodic, and, sometimes, in anti-climactic narrative units.

If *memoir*, compared to autobiography, is a hybrid genre, autobiographical fiction, compared to *memoir* is even more ambiguous. As Lejeune points out:

> This is how I will refer to all fictional texts in which the reader has reasons to suspect, from the resemblances that he thinks he sees, that there is identity between the author and the protagonist, whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least not to affirm it.[47]

According to Lejeune, what distinguishes a novel from an autobiography is primarily the name on the cover which has to correspond to that of the narrator and of the protagonist. Autobiography is therefore characterized by a strong hierarchical relation between identity and story, where the former prevails. In the autobiographical novel, this relation is inverted, since the story– and by extension the plot– prevail over the element of identity: the author's specific identity and the authenticity of her or his story are not the primary preoccupation of the reader. However, the issue of authenticity still plays a role, and if the protagonist works on the narrative level as an alter-ego of the author and the central plot mirrors, to a certain

[47] Lejeune, Eakin, Leary, *On Autobiography*, 13.

extent, the author's life, it is hard to distinguish the boundary between fictional and nonfictional. Moreover, in this genre, the focus is on the creative process more than on that of recalling memories.

As we can notice from the definition, Lejeune does not admit shades of truthfulness in his definition of autobiography, so he does not consider the autobiographical novel as autobiography at all: without the pact, there is no autobiography. The impossibility of distinguishing the confines between the person of the author and that of the narrator leads the reader to believe the narrator's every word as true or agreed on by the author himself, however it is not always true. As to say, in the autobiographical novel, the narrator can be deceptive.

In *memoirs* as in autobiographies, the "authenticity of experience" is crucial because it is intimately connected to the purpose of revealing identity. To earn their readers' trust, memoirists must be reliable narrators. It is the intimacy of the revelations that creates the bond of trust between writer and reader: nobody else can relate of the author's interior world if not the author him or herself. However, the truthfulness of the narration depends completely on the honesty of the author, as he can manipulate reality. In autobiography and *memoir*, the issue of trust is central: when a memoirist's work gets too distant from reality, the writer loses all credibility.

Differently from the former genres, autobiographical fiction concerns not so much reality for its sake, but the recreation of a paradigmatic reality which is significantly impressed by the author's life experience and conveys a message that he wishes to spread. Autobiographical fiction sets out to tell a story which is not objectively true, but the narrated experience can be true to the author and to those people who can identify with that same experiences. In a few words, the truth is its aim, not its object. In light of these considerations, let me explain my terminological choices:

1. I will use the word *autobiography* to refer to an act of linear, retrospective self-narration that covers an entire life (or part of it) of a subject; where the narrator is the main character of the story

and the subject's identity is also the subject of narration; where the revelation of the truth – a subjective but nonetheless "authentic" truth – is the aim; and, finally, where the focus of narration is more on the *facts* than on the *processes* of memory themselves. In this traditional, Western sense, I treat *Dreams from My Father* as an autobiography.[48]

2. Merging the definitions proposed by Fetherling and Smith and Watson, I will use the term *memoir* as a subcategory of autobiographical writing that privileges meta-reflection on the processes of remembrance; that is not necessarily chronologically/linearly organized; that does not necessarily present a coherent discourse with a beginning and a conclusion; and that focuses on the author's identity development process, (not necessarily recalled in a climactic way). In this sense, I consider *Black White and Jewish* as a *memoir.*

3. Finally, on the basis of the explanation above and of a set of secondary sources (such as interviews and articles published by the author) where Johnson reveals the autobiographical nature of part of his novel, I use the term *autobiographical novel* for the analysis of *Loving Day* because its focus is not on the truthfulness of the story, but on the truthfulness of the author's message about himself.

My primary sources represent three different contemporary reformulations of both the traditional cosmopolitan idea and the traditional autobiographical genre. The condition of being mixed, the privilege of spending an important moment of their life out of the American cultural system, and their insight *behind the scenes* of racial performativity make my authors/characters New Cosmopolitan figures. As I have said, the cosmopolitan idea is difficult

[48] However, I may also use the term "autobiography" in a synecdochally way, to refer to any form of self-referential writing that comprehends (at least in part) facts and characters belonging to the author's life.

to theorize, but it can be displayed through the concreteness of experience. Therefore, in order to convey their cosmopolitan view of identity Walker, Obama, and Johnson use a form of expression that focuses on the idea of the uniqueness of the individual, transcends the obvious experiential differences of culture and social dignity, and creates a bond of trust, empathy, and solidarity. In cosmopolitan words, it creates *affiliations*. On the other hand, the terms in which they have to construct this message, that is, the framework of the American identities' categories, is not suitable for their full self-expression which instead manifests in metanarrative ambiguity, self-translation, and irony and so they have to find another space of intersubjective encounter. In this sense, the cosmopolitan approach to identity displayed by the authors in their autobiographies is not to be considered the "last word" pronounced by perfectly "reconstructed" and self-aware selves, since the act of reconciliation with their own past, body, and chosen identity is never a triumphant acquisition. It is, instead, the result of a (sometimes painful) constant negotiation with external forces which push them to choose either one or the other "fixed" identity. After all, the instability of the self is perfectly expressed in a genre where contradictions, incoherence, and reticence are accepted as signs of major authenticity and reliability.

Finally, these three different forms of self-narration pursue an ethical purpose, on the levels of both genre (creating a bond with the reader) and content. As we will see, in line with cosmopolitan thinking, the three establish a relationship with the reader which embraces ideas of intercultural and intersubjective encounter, *universal brotherhood and sisterhood, free affiliation, social action, and civil responsibility*. These works show how, in face of all the deconstructive practices of the autobiographical genre, what has kept autobiography alive is probably the relational (and sometimes pedagogical) character of human self-perception, which urges the writers to share their own experience to the benefit of others. As I mentioned before, the self-writer is never bent on himself, but is in fact protracted toward the reader: as individuals more or less

engaged with their communities, humans read themselves and their own stories in relation to the stories of others. Therefore, the desire to write is stronger when underpinned by the feeling that a cultural shift is needed:

> JOHNSON: I was petrified to actually talk about this directly in my new novel. I know some old allies are not going to be happy. But art shouldn't be about making people happy, or confirming their existing ideas. I had to say this, my truth. This book is my coming out as a mulatto.
> GROSS: What is the responsibility of the writer?
> JOHNSON: To speak her or his moral truth. That's about it. Spreading ideas, notions of society and identity that the author knows to be false: that is a failure of responsibility on the part of the author.[49]

This affirmation shows how autobiography, even when reformulated in fictional ways, can be a powerful tool of knowledge and transformation.

[49] Gross, "Mat Johnson on 'Loving Day' And Life as A 'Black Boy' Who Looks White."

CHAPTER 3
REDEFINING HOME IN R. WALKER'S *BLACK WHITE AND JEWISH – AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A SHIFTING SELF*

Rebecca Walker's debut memoir is her attempt, as an adult woman, feminist, and activist, at answering the question which haunted her youth: *"Am I possible?"* Being the daughter of a generation of dreamers who never saw their project fulfilled and whose love crashed under the weight of racism and black cultural nationalism, the young Rebecca finds herself temporally and spatially dislocated. As a biracial young woman, she cannot find a place within the framework of socially accepted, supposedly "authentic" identities. Moreover, the Movement Child's symbolic identity which she inherited from her parents is completely at odds with the hyper-diversified, color-dominated society in which she grows up. Throughout the book, the protagonist is therefore represented as divided between two incompatible worlds: only being always on the move helps her to elude the burden of constant self-definition. Finally, Rebecca will learn to look beyond the boundaries of national and communitarian identities, finding a new, cosmopolitan meaning for herself. Thanks to her travels abroad, Rebecca experiments with cultural detachment from an American discursive practice that is obsessively focused on racial/ethnic categorization and opens up to a universal sense of humanness, which is almost pre-discursive or not language-based. The cultural and linguistic detachment from home and the transformative encounters that Rebecca experiences abroad

provide her with a cosmopolitan ethos, which Appiah effectively represents as "the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind."[1] Back home, Rebecca's self-relocation in society takes place through a reformulation of the current parameters of identity: home, family, culture. Above all, this cosmopolitan sensitivity results in an increased and more passionate political commitment on behalf of marginalized people, especially—but not exclusively—black people. In this chapter, I address the issues of biracial condition, homelessness, and racial performativity from a non-identity-based point of view; that is, from the point of view of Rebecca's relational self.

3.1 *Shifting Memories: Introducing Rebecca's Story*

Rebecca Walker was born in 1969 to the writer Alice Walker and the Jewish civil rights attorney, Mel Leventhal. In their house in Jackson, they lived under the Ku Klux Klan's constant threats but were supported by the people of the civil rights movement: a thick network of friends and allies from America and abroad. When, in the seventies, black nationalism starts to prevail over ideals of reconciliation, her parents are left completely alone with their transgressive dream. Mel, "once an ally, is, overnight, recast as an interloper" (60), so he decides to start over with a second wedding, this time, Jewish and traditional. Alice, on the other hand, finds shelter in radical black feminism. Bouncing between the maternal and the paternal houses, over seventeen years, Rebecca finds herself living in ten different places: Jackson, Mississippi; Brooklyn, New York; Washington DC; Atlanta, Georgia; San Francisco, California; Riverdale, New York; Phoenicia, Catskills; Larchmont, New York; Los Angeles, California. In addition to the flux created by these changing geographies, Rebecca experiences disorientation

[1] Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, xv.

concerning her racial and sexual identity; she roams the streets, experimenting with violence, drugs, and precocious sex, until she has an abortion at the age of fourteen, after which she decides to attend a private school and prepare for university. In each new context, the protagonist spends time observing and imitating her friends' behavior and speeches. For example, in San Francisco (the epicenter of the emerging black counterculture, radicalism, and political progressivism), Rebecca needs to adopt the black students' language, attitude, and fashion. Here, "performing becomes a necessity".[2] Despite her ability to play with racial identities, by performing and passing continuously, she is not able yet to call into question the alleged authenticity of races, feeling that there is a natural causal link between her friends' skins and their ways, their tastes and their being part of a community. Even when she encounters other biracial people, the issue of mixedness remains unspoken. In high school, the protagonist begins to travel around the world with her mother: they visit artists all around the world and try to absorb as much culture as they can. In particular, the author dwells on her experience in Bali and in other non-white countries, where she has the chance to reflect on the different meanings that a body acquires in different contexts. Soon after this section, the book concludes with the author's self-redefinition in a more universal horizon of suffering people, regardless of their color and culture.

Walker's prose is sharp and poignant, lyrical but also rough in the descriptions of brutal details. It is composed of brief chapters, each of which is set in a different location. Sometimes the order of the episodes does not respect a chronological linearity, at other times Walker alternates episodes about her life as a teenager and episodes devoted to her life as an adult. In this sense, the temporal references and the constant use of the present tense makes it

[2] Ginette Ba-Curry, *"Toubab la!": Literary Representations of Mixed-Race Characters in the African Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2007), 90.

difficult for the reader to tell whether the narrator's point of view reflects the writer's or the protagonist's perspective.[3]

3.2 *The Movement Child's Displacement: Family, Community, and Humanity*

At the beginning of her *memoir*, Walker reflects on the difficulty of establishing the nature of human relations: to whom are we related and why? At a family gathering, she thinks: "Who am I and why am I here? I cannot remember how we all are related" (1). So, she proclaims her radical exclusion from any ethnic or racial sense of belonging:

> I was never granted the luxury of being claimed unequivocally by any people or "race" and so when someone starts talking about "my people" I know that if we look hard enough or scratch at the surface long enough, they would have some problem with some part of my background, the part that's not included in the "my people" construction. It's not that I am not loved by friends and family, it is just that there is always the thing that sets me slightly apart […] And then there is the question of how I can feel fully identified with "my people" when I have other people, too, who are not included in the grouping. (306)

In other points of the book, she reveals that Mel's and Alice's respective families never acknowledge nor support her parents' union— "My grandmother sat shiva as if my father had died when my parents married" (319)—and outside of family circles, things are not much better: Rebecca is excluded by white schoolmates or assaulted by darker black ones, under the eye of unhelpful white friends. This makes clear that she can't count on spontaneous

[3] I will not dwell on this aspect of the book. However, I have expansively treated it in my article on *Black White and Jewish*, mentioned in the first chapter and reported in the works cited.

solidarity from both black and white communities. Thus, moving within a cosmopolitan framework, and adopting the model of concentric circles to describe her intimate trajectories, we could say that Rebecca's sense of racial dislocation moves from the "I" (rejection of her racially indeterminate body), then proceeds all the way through the nuclear family circle (failed marriage and parental negligence), reaches the extended family circle (impossible reconciliation between the white Jewish and the African American relatives, values, and respective upbringings), gets to community life (estrangement from her friends' cultures and lives), and finally involves even national history and culture, which does contemplate her being both black and white.

Moreover, as long as the narrator remains entrapped in the circle of national identity and discurses, she is not able to think of herself in "non-racial" terms and, consequently, to find a definition of herself which can include all of her multiple selves. Thus, in order to accept her own body and life experience, Rebecca will have to reach the last circle of human relations the universal humanity. To do that, she will have to encounter otherness and redefine herself in different terms and then retrace her steps back through the exercise of self-narrative.

All the dimensions of the protagonist's existence are pervaded by a tension between love and rejection, inclusion and suspicion, authenticity and mimicry, so that it is impossible for the writer to provide a well-structured and consistent self-representation. At the same time, it is this discrepancy that makes her story so profoundly "human," giving intimate access to a universe of readers, whether or not they share the multiracial condition. Rebecca's cosmopolitanism is rooted in displacement and marginalization and, although her racial indeterminacy may not be a shared experience for all her readers, her suffering can nonetheless be understood by all of them by virtue of a universal (and at the same time hyper-subjective) experience of grievance. In this sense, her cosmopolitanism is directly connected to life narration, which crosses the oceans of space and all the concentric circles until it meets every reader's imagination.

3.2.1 *A Movement Child*

> When they meet in 1965 in Jackson, my parents are idealists, they are social activists, they are "movement folk." They believe in ideas, leaders, and the power of organized people working for change. They believe in justice, and equality, and freedom. My father is a liberal Jew who believes these abstractions can be realized through the swift, clean application of the Law. My mother believes they can be cultivated through the telling of stories… (23)

Rebecca's yearning for racial reconnection may be interpreted as a product of the early civil rights movement's utopian inspiration, from which she inherits a fundamentally non-pessimistic view of human relationality and a sense of responsibility which mostly derives from her maternal heritage.[4] In an interview, the author reveals that she has always been aware of the social significance of her existence:

> I was born and I had this identity from birth of being a movement child, being the embodiment of a new vision for America […]. My parents talked a lot about how, in my body, black and white came together in love, hope and optimism as opposed to hatred, rage and despair.[5]

The utopian spirit in which Rebecca was conceived and raised reflects an attitude that, though reconciliatory, is far from color-blind: she was supposed to embody an anti-racist, progressive, and empowering view of future generations of mixed Americans. In this

[4] I will expand more on the relationship between the civil rights movement and the Loving Generation in the next chapter, but here I want to focus on the author's perception of the feelings and ideals that the movement inspired in her parents.

[5] Temii Tellis, "How Rebecca Walker Found Her Identity" *Rebecca Walker's official web site* (19 March 2001). http://www.rebeccawalker.com/v1/article_2001_how.htm.

sense, Walker's description of her childhood is very representative of the Loving Generation narrative:

> I am not a bastard, the product of rape, the child of some white devil. I am a Movement Child. My parents tell me I can do whatever I put my mind to, that I can be anything I want. They buy me Erector sets and building blocks, Tinkertoys and books, more and more books. [...] I am not tragic! (24).

According to this narrative, in fact, the singularity of these mixed babies lies in their special relationship with whiteness. The first three chapters of the memoir, which show idealized scenes from Rebecca's first house in Jackson, are crucial to the understanding of Walker's relation with her father, with whiteness, and, more broadly, with the concept of race. Rebecca's first family life memories focus on the figure of Mel, of whom the narrator provides an admiring and tender portrait: "Your daddy is a good white man!" (14), exclaims Rebecca's cousin, Linda: "Linda sits on our tiny porch for hours, in the same chair Daddy sits in sometimes with the rifle and the dog, waiting for the Klan to come." (*ibid.*) While the maternal relationship seems to be granted by color ties, Mel worries about the possibility that, in the future, Rebecca will feel unwanted or suspicious about his love. Therefore, he makes a special effort to communicate his loyalty to her. For example, he makes up a bedtime story in which, offered all of the daughters in the world, he selects her and later rescues her after a forced separation. Although conflictual, the relationship Rebecca will develop with her father—and consequently, with whiteness itself—has its roots in the promise that Mel will always find her, wherever she is, just because he is her father (21-22). Such an experience is not unique to Rebecca: another member of the Loving Generation, Anna Holmes, observes that familial love and close connection to white people, more than access to white opportunities, is what pushes many members of the Loving Generation beyond black identity: "I am a black woman. I see myself as a black woman, but I also have to be honest. I love my mother. I can't say for many of

my black friends that they deeply, intimately, without any bounds, love a white person."[6]

In the narrative economy, the divorce of Rebecca's parents marks the brutal transition from a cherished childhood (Movement Child) to an adolescence characterized by complete abandonment, marginalization, and longing for acceptance which resembles that of a *tragic mulatta*. In fact, for the rest of her youth, she will develop a deeply conflictual relationship with her parents. This means that Rebecca's Movement Child identity only functioned within the temporal span of King's movement and her parents' union, throwing her into disorientation when structural pluralism and black essentialism took over: when Mel and Alice break up, Rebecca feels she "stops making sense" (63). Although the biracial baby boomers emerged in the context of an integrationist cultural attitude, they were affected by a counter-ideology of black cultural nationalism, which established new standards of what it meant to be black and new criteria for authenticity:

> With the rise of Black power, my parents' interracial defiance, so in tune with the radicalism of Dr. King and civil rights is suddenly suspect. Black on black love is the new recipe for revolution, mulatto half-breeds are tainted with the blood of the oppressor and being down means proving how black you are […] My father, once an ally, is overnight recast as an interloper […] and then Feminism, with capital F, codified Feminism, as opposed to the feminism that had always lived under our roof telling me I can be whatever I want comes to our house. Mama joins a group of black women that call themselves the Sisterhood and takes a position at *Ms. Magazine*. It is not that my mother wasn't feminist before, but now she is surrounded by the Feminism she's helping to create. This historical moment is about options, about formulating a life defined not by male desire but by female courage. Which

[6] Anna Holmes, "Black With (Some) White Privilege" *The New York Times* (Feb. 10, 2018). http://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/opinion/sunday/black-with-some-white-privilege.html.

> is exactly what it takes to leave my father. The only problem, of course, is me. My little copper-colored body that held so many promises and broke so many rules. I no longer make sense. (60)

The fact that Walker invokes Feminism "with capital F" as one of the causes of her parents' divorce along with the disappearance of a net of activists of the civil rights movement, demonstrates an intersectional approach to her own story as a biracial person. For Rebecca, gender and race/ethnicity are deeply interconnected aspects of individual identity. The civil rights movement's thrust toward interracial allegiance is soon replaced by black nationalism and, at the same time, a black feminism rises along white feminism. As an activist and a writer, Walker will reject both these political stances: she will challenge her mother's idea of feminism by participating in the creation of Third-Wave Feminism (which openly contrasts the assumptions of the previous generations of feminists), and she will never support exclusionary forms of strategic essentialism.[7]

In the passage about her graduation day, the writer calls into question another cornerstone of identity politics: the role of collective memory as a basis for communitarian identity, emphasizing again that disconnection between individual and community which is typical of the mixed-race experience. Rebecca is represented as sitting on the sofa between her parents and realizing that the Movement Child's project is finally dead:

[7] "I Am Third Wave" is an essay by Rebecca Walker published by *Ms. Magazine* in 1992, when she was just 22 years old. Third-Wave Feminism is a form of individualized feminism that stresses the issues of diversity, sex positivity, and intersectionality. For further reading, see also: Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) and R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34.1 (2008): 175-96.

> I ask questions after questions, hoping to jog their collective memory of the time I was born and we lived our life together… making sense as a family and as an idea, […] I remember that I felt myself to be the only link between them. (316)

If collective memory is a group prerogative, thus, the impossibility of drawing upon it shifts Rebecca's gaze towards individual memory as a basis for the construction of her own identity. However, it does not seem to be enough. In the absence of a well-established cultural legacy for interraciality, the Movement Child project becomes temporally and spatially limited. It belongs to the past, being the product of an earlier generation's approach to race, while Rebecca belongs to the post-identity generation, which influences her retrospective self-representation.

3.2.2 *A Generational Matter*

If inside the Jacksons' family house reigned a harmonious, albeit fragile, racial chaos, the outside world was still structured in a cruel and absolutely stable way; it was a society characterized by explicit power relations and discursive practices which would dominate politics for many years to follow. As members of an early revolutionary generation, Alice and Mel champion a structuralist approach to racial issues. Their view of power relations is simple in its dichotomic structure; their sense of identity and belonging is, in fact, solidly rooted in those centuries of slave-based and segregated culture which they want to defy, and it is not yet affected by those postmodern complications for which they were paving the way: Rebecca's hybrid body and her transracial, transcultural, and transclass upbringing represent that turn to postmodern fluidity that her parents cannot fully understand yet. Of course, this does not mean that they do not contemplate multiethnicity and racial mixing. Alice Walker, for example, describes her racial heritage as the compound of three different but perfectly defined ethnic

groups; however, in her view, such groups merge into a consistent idea of blackness:

> Our Child has never known her mother without arrowheads, without Native American jewelry, without photographs of native Americans everywhere one could be placed… And these three spirits – African, Native American, European – I knew I was bringing to you… I do not feel strange, or a stranger, but exactly who I am, an African AmerIndian woman with Native American in her soul.[8]

Such idea of blackness comprises a sense of intimate multiplicity that does not compromise the "authenticity" of her identity: this only confirms that, as I mentioned earlier, the black community has always been a mixed community. But her own experience of non-white multiplicity is different from that of her daughter. The relationship between Rebecca and Alice is confrontational from both an experiential and a symbolic point of view. Rebecca often puts herself in relation with her mother's body and cultural life, negotiating love and admiration with rage and suffering for Alice's detachment. As Gino M. Pellegrini points out, "by 1965, Walker's mother had fully embraced what Victor Anderson refers to as 'ontological blackness […] which connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting black life and experience'".[9] Being tied to this interpretative system, Alice is not able to recognize that the complexity of Rebecca's experience goes beyond the traditional oppression of black women. Thus, for example, when Alice hands Rebecca the faded photograph of her ancestor May Poole, a slave, the result is not what she expected, as Rebecca is dazed, unable to self-identify with that image: "I look

[8] Alice Walker qtd. in Ba-Curry, *"Toubab la!": Literary Representations of Mixed-Race Characters in the African Diaspora*, 75.

[9] Victor Anderson qtd. in Pellegrini, "Creating Multiracial Identities in the Work of Rebecca Walker and Kip Fulbeck", 178.

for the thread that makes the life of this ancestor intersect with my own. I feel lost" (150).

In her literary production, Alice Walker often insists on the idea that one must look back to the past in order to interpret the present. However, Rebecca cannot rely on a well-established mixed-race cultural past. As a Movement Child, her identity is projected toward that (uncertain) future which she is supposed to represent. For this reason, the author of *Black White and Jewish* must "invent" a new identity for herself and a new language able to express it. The creation of a new identity and new discourses about identity seems to be the reason for which this memoir was written. It implies challenging the identities and discourses which she has inherited from her parents and, in particular, from Alice; the different ways in which mother and daughter talk about the significance of Alice and Mel's union are an effective example of it. This is Alice's version, reported in *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000):

> No one could believe we were there together, married, *to have our neither black nor white child. We were a major offense.* […] We were what they had been taught was an impossibility as unlikely as a two-headed calf: *a happy interracial couple*, married (and they knew it was illegal in their state), having a child, who we obviously cherished, together.[10]

Now let us compare it with Rebecca's description of her parents' marriage in *Black, White and Jewish*:

> In 1967, when my parents break all the rules and marry against laws that say they can't, they say that an individual should not be bound to the wishes of their family, race, state, or country. They say that love is the tie that binds, and not blood. In a photograph from their wedding day, they stand, *brown and pale pink*, inseparable, my mother's tiny five-foot-one-inch frame nestled birdlike

[10] Ba-Curry, *"Toubab la!": Literary Representations of Mixed-Race Characters in the African Diaspora.*, 72. Emphasis added.

> within my father's protective embrace. Fearless, naive, breathtaking, they profess their shiny, outlaw love, for all the world to see. (24, *emphasis added*)

Both authors stress the disruptive and provocative character of the interracial marriage. Alice focuses more on other people's reactions and Rebecca on the ideals and feelings which inspired her parents' choice. However, Rebecca's use of the words "brown and pale pink" has called my attention. These two qualifiers, *brown* and *pale pink*, stand out as anomalies in a book in which the terms "black" and "white" recur obsessively and are charged with many symbolic meanings (*corporeality vs. rationality*, *fullness vs. void*, etc.). Only in this passage about an illegal marriage in the segregated South – where everyone would expect a certain insistence on blackness and whiteness – does the author represent Alice and Mel's bodies in the way they *look*: as mere objects, liberated from all social interpretation. This representation is, at the same time, extremely naive and extremely revolutionary. It is naive because it seems to neglect the political value of those bodies and it is revolutionary because it refuses to draw on common language and common sense. In this courageous naivete, I see the essence of the Movement Child, but also a manifestation of the cosmopolitan condition, that is, of the need of negotiating between the different (sometimes opposed) communities, cultures, and languages to which one belongs. The fact that the author uses these alternative terms at this point of narration cannot be accidental. In fact, the description seems guided by a non-racial (not a post-racial) impulse, focused on individuals rather than on the communities they represent. Although she is perfectly aware of the political weight of her parents' marriage (as she shows at the beginning of this passage), Walker opts for a focus on love as an individual choice, rather than on politics and identity. She rewrites and re-interprets her parents' marriage in her own Movement Child's words, adding a post-structuralist view. In Alice's description, in fact, black and white are "realities" which the author simultaneously denies and

reinforces; she defines her daughter as "neither black nor white" because, in one way or another, she is expected to be either one or the other race,[11] and there is no alternative term to describe her. Rebecca Walker, instead, introduces a different way of talking by rewriting her parents' bodies in non-racial terms. I read this passage as a first, tepid attempt to introduce in her memoir the post-structuralist idea that discourse creates reality and, therefore, it is important to create a new language and discursive practices about mixedness. The *brown-and-pale-pink* language, however, seems to make sense only when she refers to her parents' brief union, while it would appear totally inadequate if applied to the rest of her self-narration. In fact, from the divorce on, Rebecca's experience of her and the others' bodies will be dominated by racial conflict, which *is not* an individual issue, but a political matter. For this reason, in *Black White and Jewish*, the utopian redefinition of identity and race relations which her childhood promised remains mostly unfulfilled—as if trapped into a discourse that, after a careful process of deconstruction, does not allow (or is not able to produce) alternative modes of representation.

The impasse that pervades the first part of Walker's memoir reflects that of the American racial discourse, which, even after having deconstructed race, has not produced any alternative discursiveness, able to go beyond races without overlooking or neglecting racism. This impasse is perfectly expressed in the question *Am I possible?*, which represents Rebecca's alienation from every definition of identity and which, going back to Patell, I interpret as a cosmopolitan condition of experiential and discursive "homelessness": that is, the condition which pushes Rebecca, just like the Whitmanian poet, to look for a transformative encounter with otherness (and so with herself), outside of the cultural borders of the U.S.

[11] In this sense, "mulatto" is not an option, because it means "a light black." While Alice and Mel – the author reveals in the *memoir* – hope to raise Rebecca as a non-white, non-black woman.

3.3 *Cosmopolitanism and the Complications of Home*

About *Black White and Jewish*, Danzy Senna argues: "This is more than just a personal narrative: it is the story of a whole generation of movement babies for whom the definition of 'home' was always and already up for debate."[12] The relationship between movement and the concept of home is one of the most interesting aspects of cosmopolitan thinking. Undoubtedly, home is a central concept in the cosmopolitan literary imagination, as cosmopolitanism is either elaborated as a way of *being at home in the world* (as in J. Waldron) or as a way of *never being at home* (as in J. Clifford and C. Patell). Conceived either as a place of origin or a destination, the concept of home comprises a fundamental interaction between locatedness and belonging. As McCluskey, quoting Avtar Brah, explains, "the question of home [...] is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances":[13] Feeling at home means feeling included, at ease, not rejected. Cosmopolitanism focuses on belonging without locatedness, that is, on a sense of belonging which is intrinsically dynamic, and involves continuous self-transformation and self-translation into ever new cultural terms.

Rebecca's relationship with the idea of home is affected by the impossibility of claiming her belonging to any place: "Growing up,"—she states—"I never felt the four walls of my room, or my house, or my town, or my culture close around me" (4); she cannot be "contained" in one space and cannot feel the comfort of belonging to any place:

[12] Review by Danzy Senna, in R. Walker, *Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. No page numbers.

[13] Alan McCluskey, "Cosmopolitanism and Subversion of 'Home' in Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore*" *Transnational Literature* 6.1 (November 2013). https://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/27126/Cosmopolitanism_and_Subversion.pdf?sequence=1.

> Houses are temporary containers. Some walls, a roof, a bathroom. I have exchanged spaces more times than I can count. I transition easily from neighborhood to neighborhood, from coast to coast. I pack and unpack my belongings, shedding some and picking up others with eas e and economy [. . .] letting go and holding on, letting go and holding on, this is the only constant. (167)

According to the author, travels are usually a constraint: Walker never refers to herself as a privileged one, instead, she tends to self-identify with the ultimate and the outcasts. For example, when her friends from San Francisco ask her about life in New York, she feels the discomfort of being a stranger, a betrayer with a double life. Walker seems to suggest that, when the privilege of possibilities becomes a necessity, travelling can become an alienating experience. Thus, the relationship Rebecca has with travelling is ambiguous: painful and liberating at the same time.

Rebecca's displacement is similar to that described in "Traveling Cultures," (1997) by James Clifford in relation to so-called *discrepant cosmopolitanism*. The anthropologist examines hotels as the quintessential chronotopes of the global era. Through the figure of the hotel (transitorial, marginal, place of a thousand encounters), he means to challenge the traditional anthropological "locus" of the village, as the privileged place of "primitive-tribes" anthropology; he hence urges the discipline toward a transnational approach, which does not focus on dwelling, located cultures, but on moving ones, as metaphorical places of cultural production. Clifford does not focus on privileged conditions of travelling, but on the subterranean culture produced by those who have been forced to abandon their birthplaces, people like servants and migrants, for example, but also global businessmen. He therefore shows attention to the phenomena of boundary-crossing and hybrid culture as a by-product of the global economy. In this regard, Viktorija Čeginskas observes:

> Three groups have been identified as cosmopolitans: (1) global business elites, (2) refugees, and (3) expatriates (Kendall et al. 2009). These groups share elements of mobility, an alleged sense

> of rootlessness and the ability to directly experience cultural differences. However, Kendall et al. did not explicitly include another group in the above list, even though it displays cosmopolitan dispositions. Members of this group do show overlapping features, but are not necessarily covered by these three categories: namely, individuals from mixed families with a multilingual and multicultural family background. These particular types of people are connected with the rise of transnational, binational families as a result of globalization and socio-economic migration. They grow up in families where different cultural heritages are passed on. Due to their backgrounds, they experience a constant encounter with the other. But they do not need to have an expatriate, migrant or diaspora status, and contrary to nomadic business travelers, they may reside in a fixed place for a long period of time.[14]

Somehow, Rebecca belongs to this last category. Being compelled to wander by a divorce agreement which forces her to move, every two years, from her father's homes on the East Coast to her maternal homes in San Francisco, the young protagonist is exposed to ever new contexts, each with its specific norms and interpretations for her ambiguous body. For this reason, she learns to interpret herself in many different ways and develops different identities, one for each situation:

> Now as I move from place to place, from Jewish to Black, from DC to San Francisco, from status quo middle-class to radical artist bohemia, it is less like jumping from station to station on the same radio dial and more like moving from planet to planet between universes that never overlap. I move through days, weeks, people, places, growing attached and then letting go, meeting people and then saying goodbye. (115)

For this reason, Rebecca prefers places of "non-locatedness," such as airports. If Clifford represents hotels as places of a moving

[14] Viktorija Čeginskas, "Experienced Multiculturalism - Experienced Cosmopolitanism?" *Ethnologia Fennica. Finnish Studies in Ethnology* 38.1 (2011), 7-24: 8.

culture and transcultural exchange, Walker represents airports as metaphors of her cross-cultural body and her nomadic life experience: airports are places where the passengers can experience transitory interactions and acquire a non-territorial identity, redefining themselves in terms which belong to no specific culture:

> I must have a ticket. I must have identification. I must not carry a weapon. Beyond these qualifications, I do not have to define this body. I do not have to belong to one camp, school, or race, one set of fixed qualifiers, adjectives based on someone else's experience. (4)

In the context of pre-9/11 airports, she is reassured by the fact that her actions are more important than her appearance. The constant concern about what should *be* is temporarily replaced by a focus on what she should *do*. Moreover, by associating the idea of home with airports, Walker subverts the idea of place-based belonging and, by consequence, challenges the idea that also memory should be built at home or in institutional places like schools:

> I am more comfortable in airports than I am in either of the houses I call, with undeserved nostalgia, Home. I am more comfortable in airports than I was in any of the eight different schools where I learned all of the things I now cannot remember. (*ibid.*)

Through the metaphor of airports, the narrator claims for herself the right to not belong to a homeland whose history, education, and culture (exemplified by school) she does not accept. She also claims the right to root her own existence in movement. The transnational/transcultural character of airports not only complicates geographical locatedness, but also affects notions of time. Airports are temporary places where Rebecca is allowed to renounce the legacy of memory: this provides her with a brief truce from racial or ethnic self-definition based on communitarian cultural legacies. By grounding her own roots in movement and distrusting everything that is static, sure, or supposedly unchangeable, the author shows

the geographical, temporal, and social implications of the idea of home: what is home, when it is not a country, a town, a family, a community, or a tribe? Culture, like a house or an extended womb, means to be reassured by cardinal points, by some directions.

As Jeremy Waldron explains, being cosmopolitan means to accept culture "as never organic, unitary, or secure, but always internally fragmented,"[15] and hard to define in a singular way. Thus, there are many cultures in the world which are already cosmopolitan (at least in part). A person who grows up in Manhattan, for example, cannot but be aware of a diversity of cultures, practices and human experiences.[16] In fact, Rebecca experiments with cultural fragmentation in the chapter dedicated to the Bronx. This mixed and subaltern environment seems to be the only place in which Rebecca feels comfortable. However, again, she cannot claim any locatedness or belongingness because, in fact, she lives in Riverdale, which "is in the Bronx, only it isn't really the Bronx" (208). Riverdale is a newly-constructed, upper-class neighborhood, largely inhabited by white Jewish people. Rebecca rejects the bourgeois life that her once revolutionary father has embraced, especially because an upper-class status reinforces the gap between herself and her colored friends, hindering her process of integration. Her schoolmates are Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Russian and Chinese, Italian-Americans, African-Americans, Irish-Americans, as well as Greek-Americans. When the protagonist compares the lifestyle of her well-off paternal family to that of her poorer and more marginalized friends, she identifies with their messy and noisy houses. Rebecca's paternal house, instead, represents her "whiteness"—the different social status and the brighter tone in her skin that make her feel an imposter and a compromised:

> [Theresa's] house … hidden behind overgrown bushes and wild Bronx trees, reflects how I feel inside much more than a calm,

[15] Jeremy Waldron, "What is Cosmopolitan?", 231.
[16] *Ibid*.

> collected, solidly middle-class world of my father and stepmother and their new baby boy. I am at home among the mess, the drama, the darkness of Theresa's house; there I find a corner to fit into, walls that contain me. (205)

Rebecca finds the same "mess" and "drama," the same lack of harmonious shapes, in her own body, which represents the primary place of her inner dislocation and homelessness:

> I have never been at home in my body, not in its color, not in its size and shape. Not in its strange, unique conglomeration of organic forms and wavy lines. In the mirror, I am always too pale, too pasty, not honey-colored, not the glamorous-sounding café au lait. My breasts are always too small, my thighs too fat, my gait inelegant, my neck too long. There is an awkwardness in my body, a lack of grace, as if the racial mix, the two sides coming together in my body, have yet to reconcile. (256)

By extending the meanings of home to the body, the author connects homelessness and the condition of being a black/white multiracial person. However, Walker distinguishes between her own "messy" body and those mixed bodies in which a *reconciliation of the parts* has been achieved. In this way, she moves away from essentialism, pointing out that *the messiness* does not stem from biological mixedness per se, but from the experience of being mixed in dichotomized, hyper-differentiated cultural contexts that lacks the categories to define one's body and experience. In describing her ideal home as an airport, Walker imagines an ideal society deprived of racial, class, and gender normativity: a place where her body does not have to *mean anything.* This crucial passage represents the premise of my elaboration of a performative cosmopolitanism: a cosmopolitanism that originates in the impossibility of relating one's body and experience to the discursive context of the place one inhabits. So, we go back to McClusky's idea of home as inclusion: at the time this memoir was written, the mixed-identified members of the Loving Generation, with their

experiences of growing up in biracial families and their mixed bodies which signified interracial love rather than violence, were excluded from any possible social interpretation. It was a homeless generation, longing for a place in American society and cultural discourse. What Walker suggests here is that this place needs to be "created" after an accurate examination of the failures of contemporary theorizations and approaches to identity and belonging. Thanks to their liminal position between two worlds, biracial individuals are able to see these fallacies, however, they need a moment of critical self-detachment to self-liberate from racial oppression and develop an alternative approach both to themselves and to the discourse. Such a process of self-detachment and self-awareness is what Rebecca, Barack, and Warren develop abroad. At home, instead, their self-perception is still tied to the way their body is perceived and codified in context.

3.4 *Performativity As Self-Relocation in Context*

Rebecca's unfulfilled identity roots dramatically in her body. When Walker argues that she stopped making sense as a Movement Child after her parents' divorce, she focuses above all on her "impossible" body:

> The only problem, of course, is me. My little copper-colored body that held so much promise and broke so many rules. I no longer make sense. I am a remnant, a throwaway, a painful reminder of a happier and more optimistic but ultimately unsustainable time. Who am I if I am not a Movement Child? (60)

Throughout the book, it is clear that Rebecca's body is a metonymy of her whole existence. Body is at the core of Rebecca's life experience and the multiplicity of meanings it acquires in narration is impressive: it represents her missing home and the place where memory is retained; touch is her primary means of

communication with the external world and the language she uses to translate herself in the black and the white worlds is mostly gestures, speeches, and body performance. The undeniable centrality of the corporeal element in this *memoir* is proved by the fact that all the aspects of her identification processes are associated with it. Even when memory is at stake, it is the narrator's body, and not her mind, the place of collection and preservation of past experiences:

> I contract my muscles with my mind, memorizing the way this feels, so I can hold it for the rest of the day and tomorrow, until I no longer need to remember with my mind because my body remembers by itself. (94)

Unspoken words and narrative voids, typical of the genre *memoir*, are also explained as a consequence of physical hurt that prevents the author from self-expressing:

> I start to remember in shards, pieces of glass that rip my skin and leave marks. I find tight little scars all over: one on my left breast, grazing the nipple, and one starts just below my left eyebrow […] Another is on my back[…]. Yet another one… is buried on my scalp. These are memories like a broken bottle, memories I can't speak because the glass gets caught in my throat, ripping it, too. (73)

Likewise, amnesia is connected to Rebecca's constant physical movement. A sense of displacement forces her body to forget what she is leaving behind. So, when she says "I don't remember things" (1), she is evoking a state of physical and emotional displacement. Sometimes, the metamorphosis of her body helps her to self-distance from what she is leaving and to endure separation:

> I'm leaving so much and I have no idea what I'm getting in return, only that moving is already the thing I'm used to, changing my face and tongue already feels like an alchemical reaction that happens

> when the seasons change, when it's time for me start a new school, or pack for summer, or pack to go to the other parent's house. (163)

Her face and tongue change every time she has to leave: the face is the primary place of identity, whereas the tongue represents the part of the body that produces discourses, and so, the place of the production of reality. More specifically, the tongue represents the speech that unavoidably changes depending on the audience and, in this way, deceives the listener about Rebecca's identity. Speech represents a fundamental part in all Rebecca's integration processes, but also the first thing that betrays her, every time she does not pay the due attention to the way she talks:

> He says my white comes out when I'm at the Urban, when I slip and say *like* every other word or when I ask him if he's heard the new Police record, he says I sound like a white girl. He tells me that he forgets sometimes that I'm not a real sister. He says this like he's joking, with a big bright white smile, but I don't hear it as a joke. I hear it as territory I'm supposed to defend. (268)

Speech is perhaps the most important part of Rebecca's racial performance. And racial performance is Rebecca's primary response to displacement; a strategy to relocate her ambiguous body within a familiar interpretative pattern through the enactment of specific attitudes, gestures, speeches, and so on. In the moment of performing, Rebecca consciously or unconsciously draws upon her multiple identities to meet the context's demand:

> I am well trained in not breaking the code, not saying something too white around black people, or too black around whites […] At the booth, being unable to integrate my experiences in one cohesive self that is flexible and unstudied and relaxed means that I am stiff and strained. (271)

The interrelation between culture and the body, or society and the body, can produce a real modification of what has always been

conceived as an immutable entity: the real, sure and knowable physical element. In *The Body Reader*, Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut point out:

> Social structures can, to greater and lesser degrees, shape the way the bodies look, feel, and are expected to act. As Pierre Bourdieu points out in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), the body is a conveyor of the symbolic value that reproduces "the universe of the social structure" […] Bourdieu acknowledges that the bodies are biological, yet he stresses that they are inherently unfinished, becoming transformed (imbued with marks of social class) within society.[17]

Color determines the subject's right to belong in the community[18] and it binds community members together through the

[17] Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut. *The Body Reader: Essential Social and Cultural Reading.* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 10-11. In Claudia Malacrida and Jacqueline Low's reading of Bourdieu's *habitus*, it is a "set of acquired dispositions, tastes or habits that are informed by our social status and that, in turn, inform others about our social position or class. Our habitus is evidenced through acquired tastes, preferences and competences, such as our use of language, our postures, and our sense of style, and these allow us to negotiate our social worlds" (xi). Bourdieu also expands Marx's idea of capital from an economic to a social level, explaining that one's social position is made of different types of capital, which are hard to quantify. In particular, he explains the ideas of "cultural capital" and "physical capital", the latter including the right skin color, body shape, age and physical competences, which represent a source of self-empowerment in society. The theories of Bourdieu and Erving Goffman are the basis of all conceptualizations of a body that is ever more performative and interpretable, so that the actions that it produces are not only an extension of one's personality, but become a constitutive aspect of human body, almost as essential and characterizing as sex and color. In fact, altogether these elements influence the way people interpret their own and the others' person. Claudia Malacrida and Jacqueline Low, *Sociology of the Body: A Reader* (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[18] Agnese Marino, "Postethnicity and Ethnic Performance in Rebecca Walker's Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self." *RSA Journal*, 27 (2016), 151-69: 156.

memory of oppression: "they don't assume that […] I don't respect them," Rebecca affirms. Color, as a basis of self-identification, is extremely "constrained by the demands and expectations of others;"[19] especially in the case of mixed subjects, who have to strengthen it through performance, in order to compensate for its lack of "authenticity." Thus, if Rebecca's body does not suit external expectations (for example, in totally white contexts like Jewish campuses or with her black family in Atlanta), she can compensate with gestures and speech that mitigate the gap and make people feel at home with her mixed body:

> Everyday around my neck, I wear my gold chains that say Rebecca and about once a week I wear Michael's football jacket, the one that has his name and embroidered above my left breast. Instead of a song being awesome and a bad situation being *beat*, at Washington it is "live" or "bunk" or some other word I pick up from my best friend Maya. Instead of tilting my head from side to side and keeping the rest of my body still, for emphasis, I swivel my neck around, push my chin out or rest my hands on my hips when I talk. Even though I still say 'like' quite a bit, at Washington, I only slip it into sentences at the beginning and maybe the end, instead of stringing it throughout." (233)

Body performativity, however, has its emotional costs: "I watch myself try to will my body into some kind of normal posture, into some semblance of ease and comfort to disguise my sense of not belonging. I watch myself perform, shift, contort, sweat" (178). Rebecca's pain does not stem from the experience of acting out a different identity but from the dissimulation of comfort when she feels out of place. In other passages of the book, however, she admits she is totally comfortable with one or the other identity. Such ambiguity recalls the cosmopolitan idea that one can, at the same

[19] Anthony K. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: An Essay on Human Misunderstanding": *Tanner Lecture on Human Values* (San Diego: University of California at San Diego, 1994), 129.

time, belong and non-belong, that the experience of belonging is always a matter of contingency. Sometimes, it is only a matter of convenience: "it is jarring to think that most of my life I have been defined by others […] it is so much easier to be an empty screen for their projections" (74). The conflict between the way one self-perceives and the way one is externally perceived entails a complex overlapping of notions about the self, which include body, culture, blood ties, education, class, upbringing. Rebecca has to negotiate both the effects of racialization and others' expectations of racial consistency.[20] The problem of racial consistency emerges in different points of narration. In a memory, the adult Rebecca is giving a lecture and is interrogated by a black mother who is worried about revealing her biracial child that she has white blood:

> She posits that black people are going to be the only ones who accept her daughter anyway, so why should she set her up for rejection by letting her think she's related to whiteness? […] It takes all I've got not to scream, "Because she is, whether they like it or not!" (291-2)

In this dispute, on the one hand, there is a black mother whose primary concern is racialization and group inclusion. On the other hand, there is a biracial daughter (Rebecca Walker) who, fighting on behalf of the child, claims a right to add discursive complexity to the mother's pragmatism:

> I maintain that there is a "real" world to be negotiated, but not fully defined by. There are parallel worlds, I say, internal and external, no less real […] People are going to question your daughter

[20] Obviously, this phenomenon entails a high degree of social conformism, with very few characters showing a distinct individuality, and continuous imitation of ethnic archetypes resulting in the creation of a myth of authenticity. Thus "the racial behavioral code" is not only an instrument of integration for the subject; it also helps a group's members, as it makes people "recognizable," controllable, and safe.

> no matter what, I say. She may as well be armed and prepared to fight back with what she *is*, rather than what those people *wish* she was. (292)

In *Black White and Jewish*, mixed-race instances begin to problematize the narrative unity of racial identity that has dominated politics and discourses up to that moment. But the biracial self-awareness that Walker displays in her *memoir* is the result of a long process of deconstructing identity categories, in fact, as a Yale graduate and a feminist, Walker is very familiar with constructivism.[21] However, she adds to the post-structural approach the reality of the *experience* of the constructed character of racial and ethnic identity. Growing up as a mixed-race individual, Rebecca develops a sharp vision and an uncommon cognizance of what it takes to be part of a system that places such an emphasis on color. Moreover, thanks to her heightened sensibility, she learns little by little to perceive hidden racial dynamics and understands how to follow the strict rules imposed by black and white "acting codes."

[21] As a graduate student from Yale, Rebecca Walker is part of a generation of thinkers whose post-structural approach to reality is modeled on the 1970s-1990s Western intellectual avantgarde, drawing upon Foucault, Butler, Bhabha, probably Gilroy, and so on. It is probable that Walker has read these thinkers and that their ideas have somehow informed her self-representation as a *Shifting Self* and her self-positioning in partial contrast with her mother's generation of thinkers. Moreover, as a Yale former student, Walker's formation certainly draws on the legacy of the Yale School of Deconstruction, which in the 1970s took up the work of Jacques Derrida and experimented with it. The major exponents of this school were Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartmann, and Harold Bloom. These intellectuals however developed their own methods which interpreted deconstruction as an erudite form of close reading, with very little interest in making either a philosophical or political point, whereas Derrida is concerned with the latter.

3.5 *Rebecca Abroad: A New, Cosmopolitan Consciousness*

The chapters about Rebecca's travels abroad are, in my opinion, the heart of her *memoir*; the place in narration where the author deals with all the main issues of the book and finally finds new perspectives and approaches. If, before the travels section, Walker has represented herself as an outcast forced into racial performance, in the last three chapters, her self-identification as a biracial woman is totally renewed: "In twelfth grade I am at the height of my power as a young woman. I am experienced. I am loved. I am excelling in my classes." – she states triumphantly (311). Firstly, she has evolved into a cosmopolitan cultural consumer, totally identified with subaltern cultures:

> Over the past three years I have evolved into a full-fledged progressive, politicized Bay Area person. I have dreadlocks down to my shoulders that I wear wrapped in multicolor strips of clothes from Guatemala, I wear long dangling earrings made by Native Americans. And above my desk hang a black and white poster of a glowing young woman holding a rifle in one hand and a nursing baby in the other, and a set of photographs of an enormous Buddha being ceremonially washed and adorned with flowers. This year Bob Marley is my favorite musician, and along with books by William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor that I read for school, I devour the work of Franz Fanon, Mahatma Gandhi, June Jordan, Angela Davis, and Andrea Dworkin. (311-2)

Secondly, the decision to change her name from Rebecca Grant Leventhal to Rebecca Leventhal Walker marks a stronger closeness to the black community and seems to be inspired by an idea of voluntary affiliation rather than on an acknowledgement of constraining blood ties:

> When I change my name, I do so because I do not feel any affinity with whiteness, with what Jewishness has become, and I do feel an affinity with blackness, with the experience of living in the world with non-white skin. (313)

As I have mentioned in the introduction, the focus on *affinity* and *individual experience* as the basis for the constitution of human communities as opposed to communities based on blood, physical appearance, shared memory, and total identification is profoundly cosmopolitan. According to this view, blackness means above all "living in a world" which is defined by exclusion from privilege. Thus, the fact that Rebecca associates herself with this world through the acquisition of her mother's name represents a political act of appropriation of identity. However, as we will see, Walker's final view of blackness does not entail necessarily a totalizing identification with an authentic model of blackness (embodied by her mother) but brings the discourse of belonging to an experiential level: she has experienced what it means to be the privileged daughter of a well-off Jewish lawyer and of an important black writer, but she has also experienced racial discrimination, violence, abandonment, and poverty. Her choice depends above all on her own experience of being the child of a former civil-right fighter who has abandoned the struggle:

> While my black friends are shuttled through mediocre schools into poorly paid jobs in the service industry and I escape only by the grace of God, my father has seemingly stopped caring about all things racial and political and has settled into a comfortable routine commuting from Westchester and going to lily-white Little League games in pristine suburban ballparks. I do not see how I fit into his life, or that I want to. (*ibid.*)

Rebecca's travels, a turning point in both her life and her narration, represent a moment of Gramscian crisis: that temporary, contingent moment in which the old is dying and the new has not yet emerged. The account of the protagonist's travels constitutes a necessary step in Walker's narrative, which makes her leap from Movement Child to a cosmopolitan woman possible. In fact, it is only when Rebecca moves away from the place where the identity speeches produce hierarchies and constructions, that she begins

to change her perspectives on identity. This state of crisis appears in narration as a linguistic and discursive phenomenon as well.

3.5.1 *The Monkeys' Council*

Rebecca visits different places and has significative encounters with local environments. At the beginning of her stay in Bali, she is curious and respectful but still unable to interact with the hosting place in an effective, transformative way. Every day, the protagonist meets a jewelry seller who teaches her a new word in Balinese. Despite her curiosity for the local language, Rebecca is still a tourist from the First World and an English native speaker. She therefore occupies a dominant position over the locals, whose trading success depends on their effort to self-express (and self-translate) into the guests' language. From a post-colonial point of view, Rebecca's learning a few words in Balinese from a seller is more a way *to buy* than *to live* an "authentic" Balinese experience. However, the next three encounters will compel her to progressively abandon the linguistic tool, which creates social unbalance, and experience a deeper, almost pre-linguistic encounter with the cultural other. The way Rebecca establishes a contact with otherness introduces us to an alternative form of cosmopolitanism: an intimate, emotional one, which is not based on a rational and dialogical dimension.

One day, Rebecca is immersed in a wild natural environment. As she carries peanuts with her, suddenly a herd of monkeys encircles her and jumps on her body. She feeds them one by one, putting herself in a position of rational dominance over beastly instincts, but she also tries to establish a connection with them. When all the monkeys are fed and sit quietly, she starts to talk to them, asking how they are doing and how do they like living in the forest:

> We are sitting in a semicircle, me and the monkeys, with me at the center, them all arced around me the way, I guess, monkeys do, like at a council meeting. They do not talk back, but they do watch

> me with big moist eyes, staring expressively as to say that talking is the most pathetic and primitive mode of communication. (297)

This assembly, or *stoà*, recalls the place of the *agora*; where Western rationalism originated and where human capacity for rational dialogue gave birth to the first forms of democracy. Of course, in this case, neither rationalism nor verbal language are reliable means of communication. The monkeys seem to know it: "Shut up and sit here! is what they say with their eyes and with the perfect stillness of their bodies" (*ibid.*). They force Rebecca to abandon the linguistic code in favor of a more primordial and intimate type of communication, based on bodily sensations: "Sit here and enjoy the wonderful feeling we now have, of being full and satisfied" (*ibid.*). This irrational and bodily-centered dimension recalls the one Walker evokes at the beginning of her autobiography, when she invites the readers to imagine memory as place of the heart, rather than of the mind, suggesting that it is in feelings, more than thoughts, that she will encounter them.

3.5.2 *The Cameroonian Soldier*

After this first encounter, Rebecca shows a whole new sensitivity towards the surrounding environment:

> I am more aware of the happenings on the road: the new concrete structures going up, the large squares of bamboo growing on the outskirts of the rice paddies […] It is like all my senses have been heightened by sitting still in the forest, and now nothing escapes my notice. (*ibid.*)

Differently from what happened at home, where Rebecca was unable to bridge over the black and white worlds, here, she embodies, at the same time, the First-World's privileged traveler and the member of an oppressed minority, who can in a way empathize with

the oppressed other. In this case, the other is Christian, a Cameroonian ex-soldier passing by on a motorcycle. In this transitory situation, Walker observes, "we recognize each other as fellow travelers, fellow foreigners, fellow young black people in Bali" (*ibid.*). The fellowship that Rebecca stresses is that of subaltern, transnational figures who again evoke Clifford's discrepant cosmopolitanism. Christian has just escaped the horrors of war in Cameroon, while Rebecca, apparently just a tourist, is in fact a girl running away from a country where "I always seem to be waiting for a bomb to drop" (304). Both are in search of a new, chosen identity to replace the ones in which they were forced by the foolish politics of their respective countries: the murderer, in Christian's case, and the tragic mulatta, in Rebecca's. This connection, so evident to the reader, remains unspoken between the two young people. Indeed, their communication is hindered by the lack of a common language: "because his English is not too good and my French is much worse" (298). The linguistic imbalance in favor of English reveals the power asymmetries that characterize encounters with the other in a linguistic framework. In this case, the balance tips in favor of the native English speaker Rebecca and against the French-speaking boy, who can hardly translate himself and his experience into a foreign language:

> He says he is trying to get his soul back. To get, "How do you say in English," he says, patting the slight hollow in the center of his chest with the flat of his palm, […] "my self back." (*ibid.*)

Speaking different languages, Rebecca and Christian adhere to two different systems of representation of reality, through which they have learned to identify themselves according to precise paradigms. On the one hand, Walker shows how cultural imperialism penetrates cultures and imposes its linguistic hierarchies, posing the non-native speaker in a condition of subjection. On the other hand, Rebecca's interpretative effort, poses her in a condition of silent listening:

> I listen to Christian, trying to understand all of his words but saying little … I am a girl on holiday, wandering, opening to this place, to warmth and emptiness. For a short time, maybe an hour, with a part of his freedom. He is someone to whom I open. We enjoy the space we make. (*ibid.*)

Abandoning her mother language, the protagonist progressively self-detaches from all the categories and constructions that this language creates and perpetuates. Thus, after this second encounter, Rebecca's perception of her counterpart has changed: if, before, Christian was "a young black," after, he is "just a boy, a traveler" (*ibid.*). The focus on body diminishes and the encounter becomes ever more a matter of souls and shared experience than of racial sameness.

3.5.3 *The Sacred Pool*

Rebecca's third encounter is with a Balinese boy; here, neither a verbal nor a gestural communication seems possible:

> He speaks Balinese and I don't and so we make a lot of hand gestures, silly sounds, drawing out vowels in a vain attempt to register meaning. I draw pictures on napkins and Ketut looks at them, nods, and doesn't draw a response. (300)

Thus, when Ketut invites the girl for a ride on his motorcycle, Rebecca is immersed in a forced silence halfway between trust and terror. However, she lets herself be transported far from her mother—and, by extension, far from the culture, identity, and certainties she represents—towards a mountain that assumes more and more a symbolic value of isolation from reality. On the top, Rebecca starts what I see as an initiation ritual, through which she acquires a new, cosmopolitan awareness:

> He has brought me to a gigantic stone bathing temple, I don't know what else to call it. […] Oasis, miracle, *a more humane culture*; I try

> to name this experience as I slowly approach splashing kids and slips of women gliding around what I can feel now is cool water, prompted by Ketut's firm hand at my back. (302, emphasis added)

The "ritual" involves two steps. First, Rebecca has to undress herself. Leaving her clothes at the edge of the pool, she is also getting rid of the symbols of her cultural heritage in order to enter the new culture with less prejudice. Secondly, she immerses herself in water, which may be interpreted as a metaphor of undiscriminated humanity, as the counterpart of blood which divides peoples. In fact, while blood represents the instrument of Law, of the "one drop rule," which determines inclusion and exclusion, water can be intended as a pre-cultural element: essential, unconstructed, a place where diversity is minimized. Immersing herself in the pool, Rebecca lives a sort of cultural baptism:

> "I want to do everything right and so I smile, bow slightly, and begin to slip off my shoes, unwrap my skirt. I look around for a place to rinse before stepping in. My biggest fear is that I will get in without doing something first, like cleaning off, and that I will contaminate the precious water with my ignorance. But the women are welcoming; they smile at me graciously, giggling at me at my almost ridiculous self-consciousness. […] I feel, literally, as if I am in a dream." (302)

The pool is both a sacred space and a stunning piece of local art, which aesthetically expresses the spirit of the culture. Thus, Rebecca's primary concern is that of being respectful of local norms and relating with the cultural identity of that place, represented by the temple and embodied by the local women. This space of welcoming womanhood may also symbolize the space of transnational feminism, which Walker championships through the Third-Wave Feminism which she contributed to elaborate and which counterbalances her mother's black feminism. On the other hand, the fact that a man decides to take Rebecca, a stranger, to one of the most symbolic places of his culture and leave her in the women zone,

suggests that Walker's idea of human relationality is able to cross ethnic and gender borders in a way that shows delicate consideration and profound respect of local cultural norms. In this, too, I see a cosmopolitan approach.

Rebecca's first connection with this place resembles what Appiah would call "a connection through identity."[22] Rebecca identifies the temple with the people to which it belongs. Consequently, her first reaction is concern about her incapability of relating with it in a proper way, and thus violating it with her inadequate behavior. Appiah introduces this concept in relation to artistic objects which are perceived as cultural patrimony of a single people. This approach is typical of a multicultural sensitivity, which responds to the principle of "defend and respect." In a simplistic way, Patell explains that "the logic goes something like this: I like my culture because it's mine, but I respect yours, and I want you to respect mine… I really don't comment on your because it's yours, and I don't belong to it."[23] This way, two cultures can coexist and interact, without ever transforming each other. The fact that Rebecca's primary concern is that of "contaminating" the purity of that cultural setting reveals an essentialist bias:

> The connection people feel to cultural objects that are symbolically theirs, because they were produced from within a world of meaning created by their ancestors—the connection to art through identity—is powerful. The cosmopolitan, though, wants to remind us of other connections. We can respond to art that is not ours; indeed, we can fully respond to "our" art only if we move beyond thinking of it as ours and start to respond to it as art. But equally important is the human connection. My people—human beings—made the Great Wall of China, the Chrysler Building, the Sistine Chapel: these things were made by creatures like me. (*ibid.*)

This humanist, universalist approach—which reminds of the famous statement by Terence, *I am human: nothing human is alien*

[22] Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, 135.
[23] Patell, *Cosmopolitanism and the Literary Imagination*, 9.

to me—represents Rebecca's final connection to the temple. She expresses the will of breaking barriers of culture and ignorance, but she also shows deep respect. After all, Appiah reminds that contamination was a positive praxis among the Latins; it was their way of approaching and being transformed by the Greek culture. It was what Salam Rushdie defined as "the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs."[24] Cyrus Patell reminds that:

> being cosmopolitan doesn't mean that you're well-travelled, eat all kinds of different cuisines, or enjoy a variety of highbrow cultural forms: it means that you aren't afraid of difference but rather see difference as an opportunity of personal growth. The cosmopolitan values the things that all human beings share by virtue of being human—what some thinkers call the "universal"—but find excitement in the difference that can be found in different cultures.[25]

From a cosmopolitan point of view, immersing oneself into another culture culminates in a self-transformation which does not entail self-subjection but, rather, dialogical negotiation. As Amanda Anderson recalls:

> Cosmopolitanism […] aims to articulate not simply intellectual programs, but ethical ideals for the cultivation of character and for negotiating the experience of otherness. […] Although cosmopolitanism has strongly individualist elements (in its advocacy of detachment from shared identities and its emphasis on affiliation as voluntary), it nonetheless often aims to foster reciprocal and transformative encounters between strangers variously construed.[26]

[24] Salman Rushdie, qtd. in Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, 112.

[25] Patell, *Cosmopolitanism and the Literary Imagination*, 10.

[26] Amanda Anderson, "Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity" in Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, 269.

As a result of her three "transformative encounters," Walker drives the reader's attention from identity issues (which have dominated Rebecca's self-research so far) to issues of human connection. Her attempts to establish connections with strangers who do not share her language lead her to the book's crucial epiphany about the discursive practices that create identity in her country and their normative, limiting action on individual self-assertion. Back in the States, this epiphany ultimately frees her to think of human relations in cosmopolitan terms, namely, in terms of affinity and shared experience, rather than biological ties and shared memory.

3.6 *Back Home: A Cosmopolitan Language*

A new emphasis on human relationality rather than on human labeling, is probably the most important achievement Rebecca acquires abroad.

> In countries of color, I feel that I am defined by my interactions with people. How open I am, how willing to truly see and be seen by another. What skills do I bring? How able am I to communicate, even when we speak a different language?" (304)

The second achievement is probably as important as the first: a better awareness of the significations that bodies acquire *in context*. Walker's experience abroad results in more conscious, less displacing detachment from her body, story, and external expectations. "At home," she says, "I feel I am always being reminded of the significance, for better or worse, of my racial inheritance. In the race-obsessed United States, my color defines me, tells a story I have not written." (*ibid.*) Beyond the deconstruction of the absurdity of racial identities, what really frees Rebecca is the *experience* of being temporarily exempted from (self-)definition within the grid of predetermined categories. This is a condition that she could have experienced only by travelling abroad, as "this kind of freedom"

(304) is possible only in contexts where bodies are not obsessively defined according to white-centered parameters. It is also true that she is "not embroiled in the racial politics" (*ibid.*) of the hosting country, so this truce lasts only as long as she enjoys, in the words of Cyrus Patell, the comfort of strangerhood. Read in light of the performativity theory, Walker's achieved cosmopolitan detachment, derived from her experiences abroad, is a result of "breaking out" of the continuity of the reiteration of U.S. racial discourses. When subjects are removed from their original cultural context, they are able to see the architecture of identity constructions at home and avoid remaining imprisoned within the constraints of external ascriptions, at least on an intimate level. The temporary abandonment of English as a tool of communication and self-representation is, more than anything, an opportunity to abandon for a moment the discursive paradigms of the American representation of identity, especially the racial ones. In fact, Walker has built her whole narrative around the idea that, in America, it is impossible to elude the constant expectancy of racial (self-)identification. A powerful example is provided by a conversation between Rebecca and her lover:

> My lover asks me late one night…what it feels like to have white inside me. What does it feel like to have white inside you, she asks, and I can hear the burning curiosity inside her voice. Physically you mean? Yeah, physically. Are you aware that there is white in you and does that whiteness feel different from blackness? What is it like to have thin curly hair and lighter skin, what does it feel like? Her question throws me, but only for a few seconds. My first response is, What is whiteness? And how can one "feel white" when race is just about the biggest cultural construct there is? She nods, she's heard me deconstruct it all a million times. Yeah, yeah, but *if you're operating within it*, come on, let yourself go, do you ever feel anything different? (304-5, emphasis added)

Rebecca's lover identifies as black "all of the time" (305). The reason why she feels black, the writer explains, is the color-coded

discursiveness that surrounds her body, especially colorism: "goodness with lighter-skinned black people and evil with those darker" (*ibid.*). She refuses deconstruction as an answer, but it is the social constructedness and self-reiteration of the meaning of blackness which oppresses her, both on an experiential and on a discursive level. When Rebecca's lover states that she has *inherited* from her mother (who "was so color-conscious") "messages to have to rewrite" (*ibid.*), she is mentioning the reproduction and reinforcement of racial categories through discursiveness. Her lover's perspective does not entail a negotiation between her external and internal perception because she looks black, and she feels black. In contrast, Rebecca's experience of identity is contingent, shifting, "unreal" in the sense of not essential or permanent. Indeed, I think that, in the case of mixed-race people, the idea of performative racial identity and a cosmopolitan detachment are complementary: adopting a "performative cosmopolitanism" means gaining a critical view of the relation between the body and its cultural significations and favoring practices of free affiliation over descent/color ties. Of course, at this point, the issue of loyalty burst into the discourse. In the text, the lover wants to know if Rebecca thinks of black people as *her* people, which she describes as a "bond in your gut" (*ibid.*). Rebecca's answer is shockingly rational and detached: "I do and I don't," she says. And then she explains:

> What I do feel is an instant affinity with beings who suffer, whether they are my own, whatever that means, or not. Do I identify with the legacy of slavery and discrimination in this country? Yes. Do I identify with the legacy of anti-Jewish sentiment and exclusion? Yes. Do I identify with the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War Two? Yes. Do I identify with the struggle against brutality and genocide waged against the Native Americans in this country? Yes. Do I feel I have to choose one of these allegiances in order to know who I am or in order to pay proper respect to my ancestors? No. Do I hope that what my ancestors love in me is my ability to muster compassion for those who suffer, including myself? Yes. (306)

Ralina Joseph, interpreting the views of most of the black criticism, sees Walker's detachment as a missed opportunity for representing an emancipatory model for black people. But for the author, any sense of loyalty is not innate: it must be construed, transmitted, and cultivated. The idea that political commitment can coexist with an idea of identity as hybrid, volatile, and changeable, is maybe the main challenge that self-identified mixed people have to face in front of the black community. In an interview, Rebecca Walker states:

> As a mixed-race person, I have often *felt like a bridge between worlds*, a *walking frontier*. For much of my life, I felt pressure to respect and respond to the external borders, to choose which side of the fence I was on–the racial fence, the spiritual fence, the ideological fence. The day I stopped choosing sides and accepted and embraced all of my complex and complicated self was the day *I became a real human being*. I let the internal borders completely dissolve and began to see the external ones as illusions.[27] (emphasis added)

This does not mean that Rebecca abandons anti-racism struggle or treats race as non-existent. Indeed, it is only after having refused to be defined in racial terms that she really engages in anti-racist struggle. Hence, no longer burdened by the fear of being inadequate to represent her black friends, Rebecca becomes a school leader and activist. Politically, she declares her closeness to colored people, but intimately, she identifies with all suffering people, regardless of their color, nation, religion, and social status: "I stand with those who stand with me," she states at the end of the book (321). Therefore, the reader infers that she will not deny her solidarity to white people's causes on the basis of racial resentment.

[27] Ba-Curry, *"Toubab la!": Literary Representations of Mixed-Race Characters in the African Diaspora*, 83-84.

3.7 *The "Bloodwater" Approach*

The last three pages of the *memoir* read like a mixed-race cosmopolitan manifesto. The point of view reflects that of the author – a transformed, self-aware Rebecca. The section starts with the image of Rebecca finally reconnecting with her father – the man with whom she cannot identify anymore – and they are walking together, arm in arm, in the same direction. The statement "I fantasize that my father and I create a glimpse of a more expansive consciousness" (320) brings us back to the initial image of the Whitmanian spider/poet, waving his net of multiple relations, and to that of the expanding circles. The expansive consciousness which Rebecca and Mel are supposed to create through their metaphorical walking together is a transformation of their relation: "We come together not as a guilty and a wronged but as two in love and in struggle with each other, each searching to know and understand the other's truth" (ibid) – says the narrator, alluding to the fact that they cannot overlook or deny the conflictual character of their relationship (just like a colorblind, post-racial approach would do). In order to explain the nature of this reconnection, which is not based on mere familial ties, Walker argues:

> I often think that blood tie is critical, the thread that forces us to stay connected, but I also believe that blood ties are less important, that all blood is basically the same […] I know it is mainly experience which binds us, memory and not blood. Now, only I hold the memories of our time together. […] It all comes to this. I stand with those who stand with me. I am tired of claiming for claiming's sake, hiding behind masks of culture, creed, religion. My blood is made from water and so *it is bloodwater that I am made of*, and so it is a constant empathic link with others which claims me, not only carefully drawn lines of relation. (321-2, emphasis added)

Experience and memory belong to the individual sphere, but the "water in her blood" alludes to a more universal humanity: it means sharing something with the others and having obligations

toward them, independently from one's biological or local ties. It also expresses an approach that combines the particular, the local, the subjective and the general, the human. The loyalty she expresses, the link with others which she feels, is based on empathy and affinity. Once again, this tie is expressed through a bodily metaphor: the combination of water and blood. The final statement represents that turn toward a new approach and a new language that sheds a different light on the whole memoir:

> "I exist somewhere between black and white, family and friend.
> I am flesh and blood, yes, but I'm also ether.
> This, too, is how memory works." (323)

It is relevant to underline that, contrarily to a colorblind or post-racial reading of this text and of Walker's representation of identity, she does not maintain that she exists "beyond" black and white, but she collocates between them: within the discourse on blackness and whiteness. However, contrarily to a reading based on identity politics and communitarian identity, she rejects "carefully drawn lines of relation" and body (with its cultural, religious, ideological masks) as a place of identification.

In consideration of what has been said so far, how does Rebecca Walker answer the question, "What am I?" That is: how can a mixed person express her or himself, without reiterating the imprisoning categories of being imposed by language and discourse? Walker's attempt is vague but, at the same time, powerful: the term *bloodwater* ties together (but does not merge) the ideas of "blood" (the one drop rule which reminds her of the brutality of her chosen community's racial oppression) and that of "water" (which reminds her that her obligations are toward all suffering humanity, that she can choose her allegiances).

Through immediate images and thoughts, *Black White and Jewish* displays the discursive paradigms that have dominated America over a two-generation period and their progressive evolution. One of the merits of this memoir is that it provides an innovative point

of view on these paradigms—a gaze from the outside, which allows the author to talk about identity categories neither in a color-blind/post-racial nor in a (strategic) essentialist way. This way, this literary work provides a glimpse of what a cosmopolitan thinking can offer to the American reader: a broadening of cultural horizons through confrontation with other systems of thought and the consequent possibility of conceiving one's identity in a cosmopolitan and performative way, that is, as the experience of a body immersed into a precise discursive context. Walker resists such discursive categories, distancing herself from the essentialist view of blackness that her mother, as a representative of the previous generation, embodies. However, she does not renounce her mother's legacy; on the contrary, she defends a non-negotiable, socially active allegiance to the black community.

We could therefore say that cosmopolitanism manifests in two ways in this *memoir*: one is hidden between the folds of self-narration and multiple identities, the other is proclaimed and expressed through a new, experimental language ("I'm ether") and discursive approach. The first cosmopolitanism is a continuous and tormented self-translation: it is the unconscious gesture of those who are accustomed to reinventing themselves according to the context, in order to avoid marginalization. The second cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, goes beyond the categories of being, refusing to conform to assimilationist or reductive logics of diversity; furthermore, it is pragmatic and political. This latter is a cosmopolitanism of citizenship: Rebecca declares openly that she will exercise her civil rights for the benefit of those with whom she shares the complaint of oppression: "I believe that if I am not part of the solution, I am part of the problem, and I am determined to be on the right side of any and all equations having to do with social justice" (312). Given the insufficient discursive system represented by American society, the only option Rebecca has to embrace a global and intimate view of humanness without completely betraying her individuality and the black community is to create the oxymoron "bloodwater." In this sense, Walker's critique appears as the embryonic stage of a new

discursive practice that has not yet been formulated. Therefore, in the impossibility of finding a proper answer to the question, *who am I?* within the discursive system at her disposal, she prefers to wonder, *where do I stand?* bringing the discussion from *the meaning of identity* to *the ethics of identity.*

CHAPTER 4

WRITING FROM THE FISSURES OF RACE: BARACK H. OBAMA'S *DREAMS FROM MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE*

Interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama explains why he chose to write an autobiography at the age of thirty-three:

> My family's story captures some of the tensions and evolution and crosscurrents of race, *both in this country and around the globe*. One of the contributions I thought I could make was to show how I came to terms with these divergent cultures—and that would speak to how *we all* can live together, finding *shared values and common stories*. Writing the book was a great exercise for me because it solidified where I'd been and set the stage for where I was going.[1]

By alluding to the story of his family, Obama introduces us into an intergenerational discourse about what it means to be a *symbolic child* of the civil rights movement, about the difficulties of negotiating racial differences and bridging over opposed cultural worlds. Thus, he mentions his personal attempts to find common ground and begin a reconciliation process: a project that looks beyond U.S. borders and invokes a broader, global sense of humanness. Out of his words emerges a cosmopolitan spirit, which he conveys in his

[1] "Oprah Talks to Barack Obama." *Oprah.com* (November 2004) www.oprah.com/omagazine/oprah-winfrey-interviews-barack-obama#ixzz4dCOn7yVA. Emphasis added.

autobiography, hoping that his own experience would become the experience of an inclusive and indiscriminate "we all."

4.1 *A Worldly, Scattered Life: Introducing Barack's Story.*

Barack is in New York, looking for a job as a community organizer, when he receives a phone call from his African aunt, Jane, who informs him that his father has died. The news he receives sets off a flow of memories and reflections on the way his own identity as a black American has somehow been influenced by this never known but always present man. These very memories build the threefold structure of his autobiography: the years of childhood and adolescence ("Origins"), the years of his work as a young community organizer ("Chicago"), and the weeks spent in Kenya in search of his father's legacy ("Kenya").

The son of Ann Dunham, from Kansas, and Barack Obama, from Kenya, Barack is raised in Hawaii by his grandparents, Gramps and Toot, up to the age of six. Meanwhile, as Barack's father has returned to Africa and started a new family, Ann has married an Indonesian man, Lolo Soetoro, and has decided to follow him to Djakarta. When Ann and Lolo divorce, Barack, who is by that time ten years old, returns to his grandparents in Honolulu.

At Punahou Academy, he is the only black boy in his class. As he was used to living in different cultural surrounds, he also feels like a stranger in his Indonesian clothes. Barack has never met his real father and all he knows about him comes from some humorous as well as unreliable stories passed down from his family. They described an extraordinary and proud African man, cultivated and intelligent; one who had never let white people mistreat him. Gramps and Toot often remind their grandson to be proud of his black heritage, in particular, for descending from the Luo tribe. However, despite all family efforts, these stories never explained the reasons of his father's abandonment.

During high school and college, as Barack gets closer to the

black community, he begins to summon and experience feelings of placelessness and disorientation. While learning from his best friends—who at this point of his life are mostly black—how "to be black" just like them, he still feels haunted by the constant fear of being "discovered" for what he is not: an *authentic* black. Apart from his best friend Roy, an old man named Frank takes on the significant role of personal guide for Barack, significantly leading him towards deeply grasping the meaning of blackness. During private conversations, Frank confidently reveals to Barack his resentful and radical thoughts about white power, the dangers of attending white institutions (i.e. colleges), and the hazard of compromising with the oppressor. Accordingly, his college years in Los Angeles are marked by feelings of bitterness and confusion. However, Los Angeles is also the place where he meets Joey, a self-declared biracial woman, who, differently from his other friends of color, refuses to renounce the legacy of her Italian father. Thanks to his girlfriend, the black activist Regina, Barack finally overcomes his self-centeredness and decides to start his social activism working as a community organizer. The second part of the book concentrates on his commitment to the black communities of South Side Chicago.

Here, he will contribute to creating connections between the people of Altgeld and a white organizer, Marty Kauffman, who is trying to pull together lower-class black and white workers. At this point, the author provides a quite detailed story of the social struggles to which he took part, expressing his disappointment with both white and black authorities, and providing deep insights into his people's worldview, in order to return with delicacy and exactitude the complexity of the issues revolving around black identity: pride and rage; victimization and subsequent reactions to the impact of victimization; the weight of the white gaze; self-hatred, self-love, community bonds and so on. In the narrative progression of the autobiography, when all these issues are treated, his voice is never judgmental, but it is hard to say if his point of view is internal or external.

In Chicago, Barack finds a highly racially polarized context; nonetheless, he understands that the deep interconnection between the two racial poles is critically informed by class. As a matter of fact, class issues divide him from the people he is helping; indeed, the experience of growing up poor and without means are life circumstances he could not share. Therefore, although his engagement earns him gratitude and love, he never achieves a sense of full belonging to the community. During his sister Auma's visit to Chicago, Barack learns about his father's rise and fall in Kenya: he was fired and declassed as a consequence of raising his voice against corruption and tribalism.[2]

The last part of the book is about his journey to Kenya. First, he has the impression of enjoying a greater freedom than in the U.S., that is the freedom of expressing himself as a human being and not as a black man. Also, in Nairobi, "family is everywhere" (319) and the sense of owing help to a large number of relatives propels the protagonist to interrogate the profound meaning of family and to reflect on the nature of human bonds. This personal act of examination leads him to the conclusion that family means, above all, responsibility. In this light, when Barack is on his father's grave, he contemplates his own life in relation to the story of his father's and grandfather's lives, and as he sees his own doubts, fears, and loneliness reflected in them, he is finally able to reconcile with his own self and his lost family by inscribing his own personal story into a collective narrative.

[2] Auma's character, who represents the post-colonial voice in the novel, would deserve analysis that I did not have room to include in this work due to the great complexity of my topic. However, such an examination may become a future article.

4.2 Dreams *and* Audacity*: Two Works, Two Narrators*

Reading *Dreams from My Father*[3] from a cosmopolitan perspective may seem obvious: if there is a fil rouge linking all of Obama's (self-)representations, it is surely that of the citizen of the world, which, as the presidency approached, mutated into that of a patriotic cosmopolite. The opening of his famous speech in Berlin on July 24, 2008, arguably constitutes the most eloquent example for the depiction of his public figure:

> Tonight, I speak to you not as a candidate for President, but as a citizen – a proud citizen of the United States, and a fellow citizen of the world. I know that I don't look like the Americans who've previously spoken in this great city. The journey that led me here is improbable…[4]

Much of the scholarship written on *Dreams from My Father* considers Obama's book a first step towards his own self-construction as a professional politician. However, I have decided to distance my reading from a critical examination of his public activity, image, or political discourse, in order to look for elements of intimate cosmopolitanism within the literary dimension of his work. The difficulty of distinguishing between Obama as a mixed-race literary author and Obama as a political figure partly stems from the fact that, as Carlos Lozada points out, as a politician, Obama has always drawn on his unique personal story to create a racially unifying self-image, and therefore address a larger community of voters located on both sides of the color line.[5] The narration is

[3] From time to time in the text, I will use the abbreviated form, *Dreams*.

[4] "Barack Obama Speech from Berlin." *Youtube* (24 July 2008). www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-9ry38AhbU.

[5] Carlos Lozada, "The Self-Referential Presidency of Barack Obama." *The Washington Post* (15 Dec. 2016). www.washingtonpost.com/news/book-party/wp/2016/12/15/the-self-referential-presidency-of-barack-obama/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3a395e174897.

therefore conspicuously punctuated with political remarks blended with personal memories and reflections. Thus, besides the complex merging of private and public spheres—a distinctive feature of all autobiographies—the difficulty of conducting a primarily literary reading of *Dreams* resides in the close attention the book dedicates to Obama's political and social activity as a community organizer in Chicago and, more generally speaking, to his adult life. Moreover, the idea of reading *Dreams from My Father* from an exclusively literary point of view is fundamentally challenged by the existence of a second autobiographical work, *The Audacity of Hope*, often considered *Dreams'* follow-up.[6]

Audacity is an autobiographical account of his life as a senator but, differently from *Dreams from My Father*, it is conceived of and structured more as a programmatic text: an autobiographical essay providing reflections on political life and remarks on many different civic issues. The publication of this second book two years after the re-release of *Dreams from My Father*, in 2004, has reinforced the belief that Obama was using the tool of autobiography in support of his campaign.[7] The undeniable continuity between the two autobiographies not only influences their content (that is, Obama's self-revelation as "a moderate, leaning slightly toward the progressive end")[8] but is also supported by the editorial choice of ending the 2004 edition of *Dreams from My Father* with a preview of *Audacity of Hope*. Hence, even if their considerable differences are acknowledged, both are usually approached in the same way.

[6] Obama's third autobiography, *A Promised Land*, was published in 2020, as I was completing the first draft of this book. However, since its structure, subject, and aims are more in tune with the politically-oriented style of *The Audacity of Hope* than the artistic and literary style of *Dreams from My Father*, I have decided not to include it in my analysis.

[7] Considering the personalization of American politics, publishing an autobiography is very common among politicians.

[8] Adam Lee, "Book Reviews: The Audacity of Hope and Dreams From My Father." *Patheos*, 24 (Jan 2009), www.patheos.com/blogs/daylightatheism/2009/01/barack-obamas-books-review/.

According to George Lewis, these two texts converged in the aim of removing every doubt about Obama's Americanness, so they were crucial to his accession to the White House.[9] More explicitly, David Mastey bases his analysis of *Dreams from My Father* on the assumption that the book was instrumental to Obama's captivation of white voters: a first step (*Audacity* would be the second) in his wider effort to construct a "racially neutral" (post-racial?) political discourse, by representing himself in juxtaposition to previous radical black political leaders.[10] Mastey accuses the author of having altered the chronology of the creation of *Dreams from My Father* in the preface of the 2004 edition, in order to "intimate that the publication of his book precedes his integration into the city's political establishment."[11] The critic also points out: "he [Obama] implies that *Dreams from My Father* is essentially prepolitical in motivation. However, it began appearing in bookstores on July 18, 1995, only two months before he announced his candidacy for Illinois Senate election" (*ibid.*). However, other critics draw attention to the chronological distance between the publication of the two texts. According to Jucan, for example, the basic structural differences between *Dreams from My Father* and *Audacity of Hope*, is that the former preserves his "freshness and ingenuity" due to the prevalence of literary elements, while the latter is didactic, expository, and oriented toward the electoral campaign. Although he recognizes the qualitative and temporal distance between the two works, Jucan underlines that both have the same aim: helping the reader "perceive the contentious issues of the promised future in America at the start of a new Millennium".[12] Another very common

[9] George Lewis, "Barack Hussein Obama: The Use of History in the Creation of an 'American' President." *Patterns of Prejudice* 45.1-2 (2011), 43-61: 48.

[10] David Mastey "Slumming and/as Self-Making in Barack Obama's *Dream from My Father*." *Journal of Black Studies* 40.3 (2010): 484-501.

[11] Mastey, "Slumming and/as Self-Making in Barack Obama's *Dream from My Father*," 489.

[12] Jucan, "The Cultural Dissensions of the Promised Future: Culture Wars and Barack Obama's Autobiographies", 5.

critical trend is that of comparing the contents of *Dreams from My Father* to non-literary texts (speeches, interviews, and so on), making the literary value of the book almost irrelevant.[13]

An alternative view is provided by Glenda R. Carpio, who maintains that, in the years since the publication of the second edition of *Dreams*, "the complex vision of race that the autobiography offers has been watered down and marketed as slogans, its starker aspects de-emphasized."[14] For Carpio, *Dreams from My Father* represents the record of an original view that *Audacity* has helped to modify. In accordance with Carpio and differently from most of the critics I have read, I defend the specificity of *Dreams from My Father* with respect to *Audacity* in terms of form and contents. Refusing to consider them as two parts of one work, I take into consideration the effects of the eleven years that separate the two publications, especially in relation to Obama's progresses in his political career.[15] The effect of this gap is evidenced by the

[13] For instance, in the above-mentioned "Black Orpheus, Barack Obama's Governmentality", Donald E. Pease puts in relation an episode of *Dreams from My Father* (the moment in which Obama discovers the orientalization of blackness at the basis of his mother's fascination with his father), and some moments of Obama's presidential campaign, in which stereotypes, mythologies and fears about black people came out of the national subconscious and took shape in the actions and speeches of both Republicans and Democrats (1-28).

[14] Carpio, "Race & Inheritance in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*", 87-88.

[15] Not only the author, but also the readers and the cultural context can change dramatically over eleven years. The two things are intrinsically interrelated. The autobiographical structure contains in itself a panoptical dimension, by virtue of which the author develops her/his own representational identity in relation to the readers' gaze, which is of course contextual and contingent. My work as a literary critic investigates the way the author interacts with, and in a way shapes, the gaze of his future readers. For a politician, or an *aspiring one* – as I think Obama was, when he wrote *Dreams from My Father* – an autobiography is a way to provide his ideas and political views with a background (a credible origin; an "authenticity") that proceeds from life experience. If this can be of value for those who use *Dreams from My Father* to read the man behind it, I argue that the literary value of *Dreams from My Father* lies in the fact that the author is not only an aspiring politician, but also a biracial man from the Loving

inclusion of a new preface to the second edition of *Dreams from My Father*, which gives the text a more overtly political purpose and more continuity with *Audacity*, where he states: "And so what was a more interior, intimate effort on my part, to understand this struggle and to find my place in it, has converged with a broader public debate, a debate in which I am personally engaged" (xvi). This second preface is imbued with a nationalistic attitude (probably mirroring the post-9/11 atmosphere) that was missing in the introduction of the first edition and that undoubtedly recalls the narrative of Obama's presidential campaign. Thus, I suggest that the Obama of *Dreams from My Father* and the Obama of *Audacity of Hope* constitute two different self-narrators from different books; I also argue that the 2004 preface works to create a point of contact between these two works. The reasons I have chosen to focus my analysis on *Dreams from My Father* rather than *Audacity of Hope*, I believe lie in the former's established greater literary value when compared with the latter. Indeed, *Dreams from My Father*'s narrative progression, which is supported by lyrical prose, symbolic elements and characters, multiple figures of speech, and a web of literary references, strongly encourages an extensively literary approach to the text; and it is precisely in this literary dimension that I found the most interesting expression of Obama's cosmopolitan spirit.

4.3 *A Double Cosmopolitanism*

Distilling the cosmopolitan elements of Obama's autobiography proved a subtle task, less obvious than one might expect. Indeed, I found more relevant traces of cosmopolitanism embedded in the literary aspects of the book than within its factual or political remarks. Out of these, two different forms of cosmopolitan-

Generation, with an extraordinary transnational and transcultural upbringing. I am therefore interested in the secret, hidden ways in which his being a mixed race and a Movement Child is expressed in words.

ism emerged. The first, which I call the *cosmopolitan rhetoric*, is a codified and well-structured thinking, which appears mostly in the forms of reflections and commentaries on personal, social, or political issues. It is inspired by a rational and confident cosmopolitanism; a universalistic spirit in constant dialogue with the specific demands of the black community.[16] These declarations create an immediate link to Obama's public image—his notorious worldly style, optimistic attitude, as well as some of the main issues of his presidential campaign (hope, change, reform from below, the need to reach a more perfect union), the salient qualities of his public persona which nonetheless remain at an embryonic stage in this text. The cosmopolitan rhetoric, which only appears in the final pages of *Black White and Jewish*, manifests in *Dreams from My Father* as a fully fleshed discursive practice, an attempt to being in control of the grey areas of his identity (his *rifts*). The cosmopolitan rhetoric has more to do with the autobiographical practice, as it helps the author to create a coherent narrative out of a very chaotic intimate experience. Thus, it can be read as an antidote to the pain deriving from his biracial heritage and transcultural upbringing (that is, the pain of being "homeless"). It is performative because it transforms the author's self-perception as a "stranger" and an "unknown" into a relational subject: someone able to see the others, recognize them, and take care of them. In such a relational dimension, not only does the author recognize the others, but he also becomes recognizable to himself, since he can clearly see the person he is (or aspires to be) impressed on the pages of his own book. In this sense, not only is this kind of cosmopolitanism present in *Dreams from My Father*, but the book, as an attempt of giving a meaning to the author's existence, is itself a form of cosmopolitan act.

The *cosmopolitan condition*, or the *rift*, affects the author's experience as a biracial individual born in the sixties and in some

[16] In this sense, the cosmopolitan rhetoric may represent an element of continuity between *Dreams* and *Audacity* as well as an evident point of connection between the literary and the political man.

way belonging to the Loving Generation. Obama's *cosmopolitan condition*, similar to that described by Walker, recalls Patell's idea of cosmopolitanism as *never feeling at home*. This condition stems from the conflict between the Movement Child's symbolism inherited by his parents and white grandparents, and his need to stand on *the right side* of the color line, namely standing up against the many forms of oppression black people live daily. The *rift* represents a painful performative condition, in which the protagonist is forced to translate himself in black and white terms continuously in order to keep the balance between his two inner worlds. This makes Barack a "shifting self" like Rebecca. This form of cosmopolitanism is never stated outright, yet it peeks through the folds of the narration, emerging from the text's continuous shifts in perspective and language, which are already part of himself. In this sense, the presence of this second form of cosmopolitanism challenges the former in its rationality and clarity.

After a brief overview of the ways in which the *cosmopolitan rhetoric* appears in the text, I will then focus on the text's articulations of the *rift*.

4.4 *A Cosmopolitan Rhetoric*

In *Dreams from My Father*, the author provides the *cosmopolitan rhetoric* as an interpretative thread for his whole experience. I have organized it in five points:

a) A rational, non-cynical approach
b) The overcoming of narrow dreams
c) Emphasis on hope
d) Emphasis on human responsibility
e) Emphasis on shared points rather than differences

About cosmopolitanism, Amanda Anderson argues:

> Its ethical values frequently result in a mood of optimism which contrasts rather sharply with the hermeneutics of suspicion dominant in much work on the cultural left. Although this optimism can appear at times to shade into cultivated naivete, it is often acutely self-conscious departure from prevailing practices of negative critique, and moreover is often offset by a sophisticated attentiveness to geopolitical and multicultural complexities.[17]

When, in the preface to the second edition, Obama declares, "I've been able to fight off cynicism, I nevertheless like to think of myself as wise to the world, careful not to expect too much" (xiv), he is fulfilling the image of the new cosmopolitan thinker described by A. Anderson: one who trusts in the possibility of self-transformation, collaboration, and rational communication, despite knowing the complexities deriving from the inevitable "the collisions of cultures" of our times (vii).

a) *A Rational, Non-Cynical Approach*

The great number of monologues and comments that populate the text is in part due to the fact that the protagonist is portrayed as a man inclined toward self-isolation and thoughtfulness; he likes moving away from crowded places in order to clear his mind, taking long walks, or simply retreating into his own thoughts. Although this meditative aspect of his character affords abundant opportunity for self-disclosure, unlike Rebecca Walker, Obama does not allow the reader to touch the depths of his soul; instead, he exerts constant control on his writing, maintaining a lucid, calm rationality with scarce space for outbursts of passion. This rational approach helps him keep the heterogeneous and fragmented character of his multiple identities and allegiances, as well as the diversity of points of view and experiences that he endorses, within a harmonious whole:

[17] Anderson, "Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity", 296.

> I couldn't really blame them for being skeptical. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, I can construct a certain logic to my decision, show how becoming an organizer was part of that larger narrative, starting with my father and his father before him, my mother and her parents, my memories of Indonesia with its beggars and farmers and the loss of Lolo to power, on through Ray, and Frank, and Marcus and Regina; my move to New York; my father's death. (133-4)[18]

Sometimes, the author's opinions are conveyed by other characters or entrusted to the dialogical form. The latter allows him to better express the dialectical character of his thought and to anticipate objections on the part of the reader. At other times, Obama uses characters as his counterparts to represent the message his *does not* want to convey. A very effective example is represented by a conversation between Barack and a British man, on their plane to Nairobi. The man is flying to South Africa as part of a degree program in geology, while Barack is going to visit his family in Kenya. In the few lines of their brief interaction, the man expresses disregard for the African nations, which he calls "these Godforsaken countries;" (300) he also states that he "tries to stay out of politics;" and finally he advises: "Best thing to do is mind your own little corner of the world" (*ibid.*). It goes without saying that the British man is Obama's antithesis, the supporter of a parochial and narrow-minded attitude that is precisely what the author sets out to challenge. Not accidentally, the communication is interrupted before the protagonist can even reply, as the man slips his headphones over his ears and starts to sleep. This interaction fails to be *transformative* because it does not leave the protagonist changed: however, it does prove highly symbolic, especially given the place that it occupies in the narrative. In fact, it opens the last part of the book ("Kenya"), which occurs in the delicate moment

[18] In this sense, Obama's prose, detached and rational, evokes Marcus Aurelius' calm stoicism or the logical-deductive method through which Appiah develops his analytical philosophy, continuously weighing pros and cons.

between the protagonist's experience as a community organizer in Chicago and the beginning of his career at the Harvard Law School. In the previous chapter, the narrator had overtly expressed his fear that this *step toward white privilege* would be misunderstood by the black community he had served (and that he is addressing in this book) as an act of abandonment. Thus, by opening the next chapter with this episode, Obama uses the literary device of dialogue to set the cornerstones of a discourse that he will develop in this section—a discourse on respect, responsibility, and political engagement.

b) *Overcoming Narrow Dreams*

The necessity of moving beyond "one's little corners of the world" (300) and beyond "narrow dreams" (294) is one of the central themes of this autobiography. This expression, "narrow dreams," recurs often in the text, continuously calling into doubt the meaning of the title. How does one distinguish narrow dreams from big ones? In the title, the word "dreams" appears in relation to the figure of the father. Actually, it stands between the father and the narrator, as the preposition "from" suggests. The idea of "dreams that *proceed from* the father" at the same time evokes and challenges the rhetoric of a typical immigrant story. On the one hand, the son of an immigrant may be somehow tied to her/his father's dreams, which s/he is supposed to fulfill. These dreams, in fact, are dynamic and move through space and time, crossing countries and generations. On the other hand, it also suggests that the son can have his own dreams, which start from the father's desires and go beyond. Otherwise, the title would have been: "Dreams *of* My Father"—the dreams of an African expat in America. Instead, the preposition "from" suggests that these dreams refer to the son, to *his* race and *his* inheritance, which is to be defined and recreated as independent from that imagined by the previous generation: "My identity could begin with the fact of my race, but it didn't, it couldn't, end there" (111): Obama says these words before leaving

for Chicago. Therefore, in my interpretation, his bigger dreams have to do with the redefinition of his whole identity in terms of solidarity and active participation in the community life, through which he hopes to fill in the gaps of his black experience, but also to go beyond race as a definition of the human.

Finally, his use of the plural in "Dreams" is also interesting. In my opinion, it helps to deviate the reader from a full-American, exceptionalist reading of the story as the accomplishment of the American Dream, even if the reader knows that the story is exceptional and very American indeed. But the word "dreams" summarizes the main characteristics of the protagonist, the ones the author sets out to convey in this self-narrative: his idealistic aspirations; his pluralist view; his capacity of putting into conversation different cultures; an idea of a dream which is not necessarily American; a transnational black identity. Expressed in this way, the "narrow dreams" recurring in the text are the antithesis of the idea Obama wants to give of himself. More specifically, they can be interpreted as: the realization of (1) an individual; (2) distinct communities/races/peoples; (3) a single nation, to the detriment of others.[19] Not unexpectedly, while reading the autobiography, one can notice how all these issues emerge from accounts of Obama's personal life, as they have played a significant role in the protagonist's growth and making of personal choices: (1) should he leave the people of Roseland for Harvard? (2) Should he consider racial loyalty the only possible basis for an effective politics of recognition? (3) Will the destiny of the "sons and daughters of Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island" and that of the "children of Africa" reconnect with a larger, universal horizon? (xv). Obama seems to suggest that the only way of avoiding political and discursive polarization is to stretch one's viewpoint and

[19] Finally, when he declares that dreams were large in the civil rights movements, he is connecting his own existence, his dreams and aspirations, to that moment in American history; in a few words, he is charging himself with a symbolic meaning.

objectives from a personal/communitarian/national context, to a more universal one, while continuously mediating one's particular needs. This, of course, entails reaching compromises as well as engaging in a continuous moral practice of self-perfection. This being said, the "cosmopolitan rhetoric" that Obama displays in *Dreams from My Father* does not provide any definitive solution to racial issues, as it is only intended as a moral orientation through which an individual can redirect her or own choices.

c) *Emphasis on Hope*

I have stated that Obama rarely indulges in sentimentalism. However, there is one passage in which the narrator acquires a very passionate tone, which recalls the sermons of the Methodist Church and the eloquence manifested in many of his future political speeches. It is likely no accident that this singular moment comes as a comment on a sermon by Reverend Wright called "The Audacity of Hope." The sermon describes a painting of a harpist dressed in tattered rags and sitting atop a mountain of despair but who nonetheless continues to play the only string of her instrument. The image is as hard as the reverend's invective against the effects of white greed and black patriarchy, which Obama calls "a meditation on a fallen world" (293). As the crowd begins to shout and clap their hands, the narrator detaches himself from the scene and withdraws into his own thoughts. He imagines biblical stories of redemption, which he overlaps with the stories of black people; stories of survival, freedom, and hope:

> Until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying *the story of a people into future generations* and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, *black and more than black* […] And if a part of me continued to feel that this Sunday communion sometimes simplified our condition, that it could sometimes disguise and suppress the very real conflicts among us and would fulfill its promise only through action, I also felt for the first time how that spirit carried

> with it, nascent, incomplete, the possibility of *moving beyond our narrow dreams.* (294, emphasis added)

This passage closes the second part of the book ("Chicago") and its long reflection on the dangers of nationalism or isolationism in black politics. Concerned about the radical drifts of such a political line, the exacerbation of tribalism, and the divisions within the black community, the author evokes the "spirit" of the Sixties[20] as a mix of faith and pragmatism, which transforms the unique mourning of black people into a universal experience. Both in style and content, the prose recalls Martin Luther King's cosmopolitanism, especially as expressed in the last chapter of *Where Do We Go from Here?* (1968): "This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men."[21] In line with this thinking, Obama's cosmopolitanism in *Dreams from My Father* appears, in Kwame Appiah's words, as a *rooted* one: the author is concerned primarily with the African American people's condition. Analyzing Obama's speeches, Linda F. Selzer points out that Obama's brown body physically embodies a "cosmopolitan blackness",[22] and I would argue that this is the meaning of the sentence "black and more than black" (*ibid.*): a blackness free from the constraints of the color/culture overlapping and from its ascriptive dimension; a blackness which is more than black, because it is able to universalize its story and embrace all stories of dehumanization as Rebecca claims at the end of *Black White and Jewish.*

[20] Here, the capitalized word "Sixties" refers to the cultural phenomenon that this decade represents in the American collective imagination.

[21] Martin Luther King III, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010 [1968]), 201.

[22] Linda F. Selzer, "Barack Obama, the 2008 Presidential Election, and the New Cosmopolitanism: Figuring the Black Body" *MELUS* 35.4 (Winter 2010), 15-37:16.

d) *Emphasis on Human Responsibility*

Like Walker, Obama takes his planetary ethical aspirations as a starting point for the construction of an ethical system which includes, when necessary, programmatic political action. The narrator evokes the cosmopolitan pattern of concentric circles to draw the path of his affiliations. It starts from his own body and then extends, circle after circle to the ethereal, universal dimension of fluid humanness:

> Instead I drew a series of circles around myself, with borders that shifted as time passed and faces changed but that nevertheless offered the illusion of control. An inner circle, where love was constant and claims unquestioned. Then a second circle, a realm of negotiated love, commitments freely chosen. And then a circle for colleagues, acquaintances; the cheerful grey-haired lady who rang up my groceries back in Chicago. Until the circle finally widened to embrace a nation or race, or a particular moral course, and the commitments were no longer tied to a face or a name but were actually commitments I'd made to myself. (327-8)

Obama's affiliations focus on love, commitment, and responsibility, but they do not contemplate similarity and identification. The way the relation between the self and the other changes, as the circles expand, recalls the distinction that Appiah—drawing upon Dworkin—makes between morality as that which we owe to others, and ethics as "the kind of life it is good for us to lead." [23]

The transnational dimension of Obama's identity (or identities) has been widely explored, so I prefer to highlight the way his self-narrative is always careful to intertwine the universality of human values and the particularity of personal experience: his life is often

[23] Anthony K. Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 230-2. Appiah also explains that ethical concerns guide one's actions toward the people with whom one has a thicker and more demanding relationship: this is the principle that inspires his idea of *rooted cosmopolitanism*.

presented as a web in which *the stories* composing global history connect and overlap. For instance, he remarks how Al Qaeda's bombs had already marked some landscapes of his life, such as Nairobi and Bali, before Manhattan, and in attempting to describe the meaning of abandonment and powerlessness, he overlaps images of the children of the ghettos of Chicago with those of the streets of Jakarta and Kenya that he has inhabited (x). He situates himself halfway between the general and the particular, a position which may be the most representative expression of his cosmopolitanism. Thus, his discourses are constellated with references to his personal experience and to the people who have crowded his wandering life and mind. In the following passage, the narrator shows us how the web is woven:

> The copper-skinned face of the Mexican maid, straining as she carries out the garbage. The face of Lolo's mother drawn with grief as she watches the Dutch burn down her house. The tight-lipped, chalked colored face of Toot as she boards the six-thirty a.m. bus that will take her to work. Only a lack of imagination, a failure of nerve, had made me think that I had to choose between them. They all asked the same thing of me, these grandmothers of mine. (11)

The idea of identity that Obama builds in this book is primarily ethical in nature. At this point, the author makes the important claim that I mentioned before: "My identity might begin with the fact of my race, but it didn't, couldn't, end there" (111). By communicating his desire to think of his identity in wider, more enriching terms, Obama claims an idea of identity not circumscribed by racial marks and, in doing so, he claims for himself a part of the privilege reserved for white people. As Hollinger reminds, only the white bloc of the ethno-racial pentagon can freely affirm or ignore their ethnic identity, because for some of them identity can really be a matter of choice.[24] Obama, however, wants to use this

[24] Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 40.

privilege to become part of the black community: in this sense, just like Walker, he is subverting the biracial stereotype which is at the base of passing practices. Hollinger reports Herbert Gans' idea of symbolic ethnicity as an identity that is undertaken voluntarily and, as such, entails a greater level of active participation in concrete community organization, mutual commitment, and a certain degree of constraint.[25] According to Obama, communities can be created only on the basis of these values:

> Communities had never been a given in this country, at least not for blacks. Communities had to be created, fought for, tended like gardens. They expanded or contracted with dreams of men—and in the civil rights movement those dreams had been large. (135)

For Obama, belonging is not a privilege but an achievement: it requires participation. This recalls the last chapter of *Black White and Jewish*, when Rebecca has become an activist in her school, and as such, she has gained a place of relevance that she had seldom enjoyed before. Organizing, becoming active, means, in a certain sense, escaping the marginality of ascription—it means acquiring the civil right to belong, to belong as a citizen rather than as a visitor. In a few words, Obama's sense of identity can be summarized in the words of Appiah, when he states: "no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other."[26]

e) *Emphasis on Shared Points Rather than Differences*

Another important issue Obama explores is that of essentialism in the black community. For people of color, the concept of authenticity is based on the intertwining of realness and loyalty – two concepts belonging to the different spheres of ontology and ethics.

[25] *Ibid*.
[26] Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, xvi.

In regard to realness, it means a certain consistency between one's physical appearance and the factual embodiment of one's culture (if I am black, I will take pride in my identity by being loyal to my culture and rejecting compromise). Of course, concept of authenticity has being largely criticized for considering non-Western cultures as fixed and immutable.[27] In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama overtly opposes the myth of authenticity, but he decides to convey the task of debunking it to another character (maybe more reliable than an American mixed-race): a Luo professor of history. Talking to Barack and his sister Auma, she gives a lesson about how disillusioned American youngsters become when they arrive in Africa only to discover that there is, in fact, nothing authentic there. She mentions several examples, including the following:

> Kenyans are very boastful about the quality of their tea, you notice. But of course we got this habit from the English. Our ancestors did not drink such a thing. Then there's the spices used to cook this fish. They originally come from India or Indonesia. So even in this simple meal you will find it very difficult to be authentic—although the meal is certainly African. (433)

Like Walker, Obama believes commitment is more important than blood, and that there is no racial authenticity that can determine one's belonging to the community. As he reflects on the meaning of loyalty, Obama shows how both the myth of authenticity and strategic essentialism often cause confusion between being loyal to one's culture (when possible) and being loyal to one's community. If the first stance is a matter of lifestyle, memory, and traditions, the second has everything to do with making political choices every day. New cosmopolitanisms, which celebrate cultural hybridization while distrusting discourses on fixed identities, emphasizes loyalty's central role in any identity acquisition.

[27] Emily S. Lee, "The Epistemology of the Question of Authenticity, in *Place of Strategic Essentialism*" *Hypatia* 26. 2 (Spring 2011), 258-79: 260.

The myth of authenticity considers loyalty as basically deriving from a commonality of experiences, such as the experience of being black in America. So, when Obama meets the black community of Chicago, he realizes that, apart from his dark skin, he has little to offer in terms of "black experience:"

> Instead, as people listened to my stories of Toot or Lolo or my mother and father, of flying kites in Djakarta, or going to school dances at Punahou, they would nod their heads or shrug or laugh, wondering how someone with my background had ended up, as Mona put it, so "country-fied," or, most puzzling to them why anyone would willingly choose to spend a winter in Chicago when he could be sunning himself on Waikiki beach. Then they'd offer a story to match or confound mine, a knot to bind our experiences together—a lost father, an adolescent brush with crime, a wandering heart, a moment of simple grace. (190)

In this passage, Obama's cosmopolitan approach to belonging is based on an intersubjective, rather than on a collective, sharing of experience. Finding it difficult to share a "collective experience of blackness" with Obama, each individual of the community chooses to isolate one prominent aspect of her or his existence (not necessarily tied to the racial issue) in order to actually create commonality with him: "As time passed," – the author points out – "I found that these stories, taken together, had helped me bind my world together, that gave me the sense of place and purpose I had been looking for. Marty was right: there was always a community there if you dug deep enough."[28] In other words, along with individual political commitment, intersubjective experience could also generate a sense of belongingness. Obama's account shows how sharing a certain class or geographical origin does not necessarily generate a feeling of belonging. Rather, what potentially creates this feeling is being given the opportunity of sharing experiential and existential statuses: here again, Patell's concept of *overlapping*

[28] *Ibid.*

of consciousness provides relevant critical support. In this sense, cosmopolitanism does not apply to "traditionally cosmopolitan" figures only, like Obama and Walker, but also for whoever is willing to intensely focus on points of contact over differences.

4.5 *The Cosmopolitan Condition: From Bridges to Rifts*

Approaching mixedness from a neo-cosmopolitan point of view also means challenging all the false identities that the racial discourse has traditionally applied to it. At the end of Chapter 3, I reported an interview in which Rebecca Walker argues that "as a mixed-race person," she had "often felt like a bridge between worlds" and that, to become "a real human being," she had to transcend the idea of bridging over different worlds and instead "embrace all of her complex self."[29] In a multicultural horizon, the idea of bridging over diversity has a positive connotation, as it fosters dialogue and cooperation among cultures. Undoubtedly, the necessity of interrelating identities, discourses, and goals is a primary preoccupation for people who come from culturally mixed background. Yet, in Walker's experience, it equates with a dehumanizing practice. Walker's self-representation as *human bridge* implies the constant effort of artificial and forceful linking, which makes her instrumental to a divisive and fixedly categorized social set up—a condition that she lives as dehumanizing. Her bridging effort only seems to reinforce the distance between the black and white worlds. In this regard, Jennifer Clancy points out:

> Frequently, mixed-race scholars and activists speak of acting as a bridge between various racial communities. However, a bridge connotes the image of a connection between two solid, unchanging forms. The potential role of mixed-race people may not be

[29] Ba-Curry, *"Toubab la!": Literary Representations of Mixed-Race Characters in the African Diaspora*, 83-84.

> only to act as connecting link, but to radically change the forms themselves in such a way that their new shapes come together as a whole.[30]

In its fundamental polarity, being a bridge implies moving from a point to another, which in this case means bouncing between whiteness and blackness. However, the image of the bridge carries in itself an inherent passivity: it is made to be crossed; to allow another person to cross pre-existing and consolidated barriers. Furthermore, a bridge does not evoke a sense of rest and home, because it cannot be inhabited, and it comes in common use as a shelter for nomads and homeless people. Some of the concepts and practices associable to the condition of being mixed-race present the same sense of fixity, polarity, artificiality, and displacement: the practice of passing (as a form of racial crossing but also as a form of false connection between two worlds) or the concept of double-double consciousness (which implies a strong polarization of identities). Therefore, the common representation of mixed subjects as *human bridges* is functional to the maintaining of existing social, political, and racial boundaries, which remain untouched in their consolidated forms.

In *Dreams from My Father*, the "coming together as whole" to which Clancy refers (and which Walker represents as *embracing all of her self*) becomes *a coming together as a hole*: a fracture, a void. In opposition to the image of the bridge, Obama designs the place betwixt and between races as the *fissures* of races (vii) – a space/non-space, a place that altogether connects and divides. He defines this space in plural terms, letting the reader understand that there is no one space, but multiple ones, as multiple are the ways in which identities and the experiences of human connection/disconnection manifest. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's terminology

[30] Stephanie Clancy, "Multiracial Identity Assertion in Primary Education" in Naomi Zack, ed., *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 211-220: 214.

as appearing in Donald E. Pease and Lea Barbisan's essays, I read these fissures as rifts cracking the ground of fixed identities, to be read in opposition to the image of "the bridge."[31]

A rift, contrarily to a bridge, is a break in the continuity of space. In seeing it, an observer conceives of the space as unitary albeit fractured; this depends on the fact that, although one cannot see the end of it, it is well known that a rift is not infinite break, in fact, its two sides are connected by a leap of ground down below, which, although invisible, is nonetheless real. Therefore, a rift implies two surfaces: one visible and broken, and the other hidden and intact. These two levels recall Walker's idea of the "external and internal worlds" (the world of external ascription and that of inner self-identification) that biracial people inhabit. These two worlds are the two levels of a mixed subject's single reality. The rift, which connects these two worlds, is a space that can be inhabited, filled and unfilled, considered as a void and, at the same time, as part of a whole. Moreover, the rift challenges the color line as it is not a real border: its duplicitous function can in fact both divide and unite, according to perspective from which one looks at it. Since the rift appears to an observer at the same time as a *natural* phenomenon and a phenomenon *produced* by a traumatic event, its image subverts that of the color line not only by deconstructing its fundamental opposition between white and non-white, but also problematizing the terms in which the color line is usually discussed: authenticity vs. cultural construction; essentialism vs. performativity; etc. In terms of the rift, distinguishing

[31] For my use of the concept of the rift, which originally appears in many of Walter Benjamin's writings (his phenomenology of history and his epistemology of embodiment, for example), I have drawn specifically on Donald E. Pease's understanding of this notion in the context of race in the USA. In his essay "Black Orpheus," Pease reads Obama's presidential campaign in light of Benjamin's philosophy of history, using the term "rift" to allude to a space that keeps two antagonistic parts at once divided and united, a fracture which does not interrupts the continuity of what it breaks. For a similar understanding of the rift see also Léa Barbisan's reading of Benjamin's phenomenology of embodiment.

between what is real and what is constructed makes no sense. It is different to say that it is a laceration that tends to self-expand, and, even though it will never end in a real discontinuity, trauma after trauma, the gap may become so deep and wide that the two sides could be perceived as totally isolated.

In a world of arbitrary external ascriptions (racialization) and limited internal identifications (interiorization of racialization), the rift represents a space in which there is no bodily transcription according to culturally located categorizations or normative self/other distinctions, such as the "one drop rule," the color line, even the oppressor/oppressed opposition, etc. The rift is not the place of the multicultural fixed identities, but that of the cosmopolitan contingencies: inhabiting the rift means inhabiting everywhere and nowhere, in a dynamic re-invention of oneself on the basis of allegiance rather than incorporation. The rift is a dynamic design, the place of that ongoing, performative self-invention or poiesis, which Walker calls the "shifting self."

In terms of self-writing, inhabiting the rift means that the narrators do not allow themselves to take a definitive stance on who they are and from where they are speaking: are they speaking as black or as white? What language and discourses are they using? As adults or as children? As extradiegetic authors or intradiegetic protagonists? When Walker, Obama, and Johnson talk from the rift, it is hard to detect a specific narrative identity, because they can use both languages at the same time, proving that there is no real separation between the two parts of them. Thus, even when they openly declare loyalty to one identity or group, this proves contradicted or problematic, on a metanarrative plan. Talking from the rift also implies a continuous self-interrogation about commitment, the meaning of community, and the impossibility of distinguishing the line between what one is and what one does.

It is important to note that this form of cosmopolitan resistance to bodily transcription according to the categories of self imposed by the society does not let the authors avoid the social, economic, and political implications of racialization itself: as people of color,

they live the reality of white oppression from inside and outside, becoming ever more aware of the dynamics that produce and reproduce power structures, and self-transforming in relation to these structures, situation by situation. In this regard, one of the issues that is conveyed most powerfully in Obama's autobiography is that of language as a means of reproducing oppressive structures. When he states that he hopes to *speak* to the fissures of race, he poses the problem of using a language that can unmask the implications of racial categorization. Obama therefore shows the impossibility, for a cosmopolitan subject, of merging the black and white experiences while reasoning in either/or terms. Let us look at the different ways in which the concept of rift emerges in *Dreams from My Father.*

4.6 *Imagined Origins*

"For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers" (v): the quotation from the Book of Chronicles opening the autobiography depicts a scenario where present generations cannot count on previous ones to know where they came from. Although this scenario is evocative of diaspora, I will nonetheless read it as a cosmopolitan one. Cosmopolitanism, differently from diaspora, besides indicating a form of dynamic belonging in the world, does not contemplate a homeland to which one hopes to go back.

Origins is the title of the first section of *Dreams from My Father*—a chronotope that proves problematic from the very beginning. Every coming-of-age story, every discovered or developed identity, begins with childhood. In the introduction, the author argues that one of the dangers of revealing himself in an autobiography is represented by the innocence of his childhood—a "running strain of innocence," he states, "an innocence that seems unimaginable, even by the measures of childhood" (xiv). Of course, he refers to the love he received from his white, middle-class family and to the fact of having been raised in Hawaii, where racial tensions were much less visible than anywhere else

in America. But he also refers to the incredible stories that he was told about his absent African father: stories which filled his mind with pride about being black (about being an Obama and a descendent of the Luo tribe) and about "the glorious burden" of being a biracial child born within the civil rights movement. The author refers to the stories that surrounded his childhood as a "mise-en-scène," (26) where the ever-absent father was "an attractive prop—the alien figure with the earth of gold, the mysterious stranger who saves the town and wins the girl–but a prop nonetheless" (*ibid.*). Thus, the narration begins with a drama which has nothing to do with the fact of being a tragic mulatto, but it stems from the fact that this *unimaginable* innocent childhood was in fact an *imagined*, unreal one. Obama defines his origins as a "useful fiction":

> I learned long ago to distrust my childhood and the stories that shaped it […] I understood that I had spent much of my life trying to rewrite these stories, plugging up holes in the narrative, accommodating unwelcome details, projecting individual choices against the blind sweep of history, all in the hope of extracting some granite slab of truth upon which my unborn children can firmly stand. (xvi)

The merging of existential and representational domains in the construction/reconstruction of his origins discloses the symbolic value that his family, especially Gramps, ascribes to the mixed boy—a self-projection in a post-racial future, the hopes of a generation of dreamers. The story of Obama's birth, as narrated in the book, folds upon itself and, in the overlapping of first- and second-hand stories, creates pleats of the imaginary. In this play, little Barack represents the element of conjunction of all the characters, the one who gave sense to an otherwise unimaginable family story:

> For an improbably short span, it seems that my father fell under the same spell as my mother and her parents; and for the first six

> years of my life, even if the spell was broken and the worlds that they thought they'd left behind reclaimed each of them, I occupied the place where their dreams had been. (27)

Not only does the book show the imaginary character of autobiography as self-creation in narration, but also the imaginary basis on which the writer has constructed his own existence—his search for a father and for a meaning as a black American (xvi).

Barack's Movement-Child identity is supported by a precise colorblind family language which deprives him of a traditionally black identity and serves as the foundation for his cosmopolitan condition (26). The interiorization of a colorblind interpretation of reality sharpens that gap between Barack's external and the internal worlds. Moreover, his disorientation grows when he moves to Indonesia, where he acquires and then loses a second father (Lolo). Back to America, the impossibility of tracing back a sure, normal past brings the teenager Barack into a state of existential dislocation that particularly affects his black body:

> Away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself as a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant. (76)

Young Barack has to learn how to be black, how to perform his own color. Lacking a point of reference, his first inspiration are the performances of black artists of a highly color-coded pop culture. The second source are his friend Ray and the basketball team, whose blackness looks however a form of performance. Ray initiates Barack to the real meaning of the black American's condition, showing him that it is not so much a matter of *how* you speak and behave, but of *why* you speak and behave in that way:

> We were playing at the white man court, Ray had told me, by the white man rules. If the principal, or the coach, or the teacher, or Kurt wanted to spit in your face, he could, because he had the

> power and you didn't. If he decided not to, if he treated you like a man or came in your defence, it was because he knew that the words you spoke, the clothes you wore, the books you read, your ambitions and desires, were already his. Whatever he decided to do, it was his decision to make, not yours, and because of that fundamental power he has over you, because it preceded and would outlast his individual motives and inclinations, any distinction between good and bad whites held negligible meaning. In fact, you couldn't even be sure that everything you had assumed to be an expression of your black, unfettered self–the humor, the song, that behind-the-back pass–had been freely chosen by you. At best, these things were a refuge; at worst a trap. Following this maddening logic, the only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat. And the final irony: Should you refuse this defeat and lash out at your captors they would have a name for that, too, a name that could cage you just as good. Paranoid. Militant, Violent, Nigger. (85)

The real meaning of the African American condition, according to Ray, is the white man. Obama seems to suggest that this was the black version of the truth that Gramps could not understand or could not accept, that is, the limits of his white liberalism. And it was in order to refuse this responsibility and to protect the child from such a doom that the family constructed for him an original storied space of innocence, hope, and idealization of blackness. The incongruence between what Barack received from white folks and what he finds in Ray's words and in the masterpieces of African American literature widens the split between the worlds in which he inhabits.

Obama's *imagined origins* are articulated by his white family in three ways, which I will illustrate in the next subsections: (a) through the reiteration of the myth of Hawaii as a non-racially defined society; (b) through the epuration of a racially coded lexicon from the family language; (c) through the idealization of blackness and the re-creation of the figure of the father as a traditional cosmopolitan figure, who is able to ignore the racist stigma.

4.6.1 *Into the Rift of Space and Time: Obama's Hawaii*

The imagined origins are set in Hawaii, which in narration acquire the character of a *place/non-place* in a *time/non-time*. From a narrative point of view, the description of Hawaii is dominated by a constant tension between the outside and the inside, with the point of view continuously shifting between internal and external, American and non-American, real and imagined perspectives. This bidirectionality represents one of the main hallmarks of Obama's approach to both reality and narration – decentered, transitory, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory. It is one of the ways in which the *rift* emerges from the text.

From a geographic, historical, and social point of view, Obama's Hawaii is a place *in America*, which is not *really* America.[32] Lost in the Pacific Ocean, the islands that make up the state are a tourist destination, an artificial paradise where mainland Americans go to escape from their lives on the continent and where they can buy a bit of the so-called *spirit of the Aloha*. On the one hand, the separation between this archipelago and the mainland is such that, at some point, Toot decides that Barack must visit continental America. On the other hand, from his grandparents' point of view, Hawaii is *the real* America; a place where one has the freedom to put in practice some of the national founding values, the ones Toot has learnt growing up in the Midwest: decency, hard work, honesty, and a sense of responsibility. On the one hand, Barack's father argues that other nations could learn from Hawaii "the willingness of races to work together toward common development, something he has found

[32] This idea of Hawaii as an American/non-American place also recalls Rebecca Walker's description of Riverdale as a *place out of place*: a place that is in the Bronx, but it is not the Bronx (208) because it is a middle-class happy island. In both books, in fact, we find that authors' sense of displacement is due to a privilege which is perceived as arbitrary and unjustified, thus, as a form of compromise. In Obama's case, the privilege of belonging to a place where the racial power arrangements are so different from those ruling the mainland becomes in fact a cause of shame when he speaks to his black friends from L.A.

whites elsewhere too often unwilling to do" (26), and, by doing so, he is clearly placing the state "outside" of America, with a certain pride.[33] In fact, in Obama's narration, the locals look scornfully at mainland Americans who do not accept that racial divisions are less pronounced on the island (for example, Obama reports, Hawaiians expect a fight if a white man refuses to drink near a black man at the bar). On the other hand, in a place that has undergone a brutal colonization, establishing who is *the local* and who is *the foreigner* is very hard, as the idea of "the Hawaiians" is continuously complicated by the silent presence of the Kanaka Maoli people.[34]

From a chronological perspective, Obama's Hawaii is a complex narrative place as well. It is characterized by a continuous overlapping of past, present, and future. From the narrator's point of view, it was a quite progressive place and his own birth in 1961 was in

[33] This idea is remarked by the fact that, according to the narrator, the Dunhams got to Hawaii running away from the bigotry and racism they had found in many other states of the Union.

[34] Stephanie Nohelani Teves offers an engaging description of the feelings that the incorporation of Hawaii in America generated among the Kanaka Maoli people, and of the erasure of any existing distinction between original Hawaiians and new Hawaiians which problematizes the concept of *the local* in places democratically annexed. The author states that if Hawaiians had become Americans in 1959, it was only with the election of President Obama that Americans became Hawaiians, as the same sense of pride and belonging spread throughout both the citizens of the 50th State of the Union and those of the mainland. What I found particularly interesting in Teves' thesis is her analysis of Obama's supposed embodiment of the "Spirit of Aloha," a spirit of love and hospitality. This is another of the many symbolic values assigned to him at the time of his presidential campaign. According to many, this association of Obama with the positive and empowering spirit of Aloha helped him, a member of a racial minority, to become President. In Teves' work, Obama embodies at once the original spirit of the Hawaiian lands and their imperialist exploitation. Once again, he is represented in an ambiguous fashion, walking along a blurred frontier. Teves therefore reflects on the implications of the slogan which reached popularity in the U.S., at the moment of Obama's election: "We are all Hawaiians now," (4) which, according to the critic, meant that Kanaka Maoli was no longer Hawaiian. (Stephanie Nohelani Teves, *We're All Hawaiians Now: Kanaka Maoli Performance and the Politics of Aloha*. PhD dissertation, The University of Michigan, 2012.)

line with this cultural atmosphere: his birth had occurred when part of the country was still haunted by the ghost of miscegenation. In this regard, he starts with a reflection on lexicon:

> *Miscegenation*: the word is humpbacked, ugly, portending a monstrous outcome: like antebellum and octoroon, it evokes images of another era, a distant world of horsewhips and flames, dead magnolias and crumbling porticos. And yet, it wasn't until 1967–the year I celebrated my sixth birthday and Jimi Hendrix performed at Monterey, three years after Dr. King received the Nobel Peace Prize, a time when America had already begun to weary of black demands for equality, the problem of discrimination presumably solved–that the Supreme Court of the United States would get around to telling Virginia that its ban on interracial marriages violated the constitution. (11-12)

Obama's imagined childhood is imbued with the progressive liberalism of the 1960s, of which he is a symbol:

> These stories gave voice to a spirit that would grip the nation for that fleeting period between Kennedy's election and the passage of the Voting Rights: the seeming triumph of universalism over parochialism and narrow-mindedness, a bright new world where differences of race or culture would instruct and amuse and perhaps even ennoble. (25-26)

In this passage, Obama retrieves certain aspects of the Sixties which, in Eli Zaretsky's opinion, were occulted by the years that came after, dominated by an ideology with a strong pluralist orientation. In "Identity Politics is Not Enough," Zaretsky states that the consciousness of the great movements of the 1960s was not one of identity politics, since it was based on the shattering of social identity, and on the building of solidarity with people utterly unlike oneself.[35]

[35] Zaretsky adds that "This was not only characteristic of the civil rights movement, whose message was universalist and social democratic, but also of the student movements of the period. These were not based on "student power"

This "universalism from below" focused on citizenship rather than on vague humanism (as the critic notes, it was *civil* rights and not *human* rights that were advocated), while also comprising, from its very beginning, a transcultural and transnational dimension, as demonstrated by the influence of Gandhi's thinking and strategies on King's action programs.[36]

By reading *Dreams from My Father*, it is clear that the "useful fiction" of Barack's childhood will affect his whole autobiography, his very sense of self, and his work as a community organizer in Chicago, which is permeated with utopian spirit (universalism), a transnational vocation (abandonment of parochialism), and a stress on civic activism as the best way to realize them. In the years of his childhood, Obama writes, there was a general sense of being on the edge of a new era: this idea is at the core of Gramps' narrative and of his personal reconstruction of his grandson's origins as a Child of the Movement – that is, *a child of the Sixties*. In fact, what had pushed Gramps to allow his only daughter to marry an African man was the idea that he was in a way participating in the nation's march of progress, with some miles of advantage: "Gramps might listen to his son-in-law sound off about politics or the economy, about far-off places like Whitehall or the Kremlin, and imagine himself seeing into the future." (22) Thus, in one of the most iconic "scenes" of this section of the book, Barack sits on his grandfather's shoulders, watching Apollo astronauts on TV, and dreams of bringing the United States into new age. Obama associates the astronaut with Gramps, describing both men as spokespersons of the future: the astronaut's external gaze from the space on Earth

or other inward-turned artifacts of the Seventies, but on the deep conviction that one could not be free while peasants in Vietnam were not free, or while black people in Mississippi were not free, or while women forced to resort to illegal abortions were not free." Eli Zaretsky, "Identity Politics Is Not Enough. Why the Left Needs Universalism to Survive?" *Tikkun* 28.4 (Jan 2013): 26-29.

[36] For the confluence between King and Gandhi's thinking, I draw on: Ramin Jahanbegloo, "Martin Luther King: The American Gandhi." *Diogenes* 61. 3–4 (Aug. 2014), 112–117.

corresponds to Gramps' external gaze from Hawaii on the rest of the country. As the narrator comments, "With his black son-in-law and his brown grandson, Gramps had entered the space age" (23). Time, space, and ideology, all converge in the sentence, "the family from Wichita had in fact moved to the forefront of Kennedy's New Frontier and Dr. King's magnificent dream" (22). This is the moment in which Barack's existence acquires the symbolic value of a Movement Child, a representative of the Loving Generation, with all the confusion and the indeterminacy that this appellative involves.

4.6.2 *Into the Rift of Languages: Performative Translations*

Inhabiting the rift also means being able to speak two languages as if they were one. Obama can understand perfectly black and liberal white modes of expression, as well as the feelings that are behind common speech of both parts: he belongs to both and yet to neither. All is reflected in the language he uses to talk about his past and the people who populate his memories.

As I have already mentioned, in Obama's familial imaginary, the figure of the African father and, by extension, of American blackness, is re-elaborated according to a white, colorblind view: "That my father looked nothing like the people around me—that he was black as pitch, my mother white as milk—barely registered in my mind" (10). This view is purported by a whole linguistic code in which, for example, the word *racism* is erased and substituted with others, such as *bigotry* or *ignorance*. A characteristic of white colorblindness is that of banalizing and reducing structural racism to a matter of intolerance: "Your grandfather and I just figured we should treat people decently, Bar. That's all"—says Toot (21). On his part, Gramps regards racism as a sort of Victorian obsession and optimistically argues that it will lose power very soon. Gramps and Toot's story is characterized by an impetus of rebellion, a radical liberal thinking which opposes especially Midwest provincialism and prejudice. This

profoundly liberal spirit pushes Gramps to endorse his daughter's unthinkable marriage with an African man and to think that he can self-exclude from the system of racial discrimination: he attends a black bar, plays poker with black men, and mocks the tourists' racial prejudices by making his grandson pass for a Kanaka Maoli.

A criticism often levelled at liberal thinking is that it overemphasizes the individual at the detriment of collectivity. In *Dreams from My Father*, the narrator approaches Gramps' "useful fiction," his confusion between the individual and the collective levels of responsibility, from a postcolonial and multicultural perspective—that is, from the collective perspective of identity politics. In fact, he soon juxtaposes Gramps' view with that of the old poet Frank, according to whom Gramps will never know the condition of the black man and is wrong to think that the people who drink and play with him are his friends or his peers. However, Barack's sense of piety for his grandfather, existing alongside sorrow for Gramps' illusions, translates into a pathos stronger than any rational criticism. The narrator seems to feel an urgent duty to defend his grandfather's well-intentioned illusions from unsympathetic attack:

> Those instincts count for something, *I think*; for many white people of my grandparents' generation and background, the instincts ran in an opposite direction, the direction of the mob … it was this desire of his to obliterate the past, this confidence in the possibility of remaking the world from the whole cloth, that proved to be his most lasting patrimony. (21-22, emphasis added)

This statement may be interpreted as Obama's attempt at defending his family's white perspective in front of his black readers. However, immediately preceding this defense, the narrator has hesitated to take a stance on the color line; in this space of indeterminacy, the narrator is able to inhabit both worlds, grasping the full truth and the inevitable falsity of both claims, but above all, retracing all to the level of the human condition, which is both universal and particular:

> After Texas, *I suspect* that the black people became a part of these fictions of his; the narrative that worked its way through his dreams. The condition of the black race, their pain, their wounds, would in his mind merge with his own. (21, emphasis added)

The Dunhams' elimination of racial categorization from the family lexicon, shows its limits, however, when a violent panhandler harasses Toot in the streets, and she and Gramps cannot find the words to communicate to their grandson that the aggressor was black. This temporary aphasia shows how confused the terms of racism can become when not overtly faced[37] but also how color-blindness is all but a neutral stance. Let me remark again that I am not supporting the idea that the Dunhams' innocence was real. Innocence here is more a mode of approach rather than an actual reality. On a factual level, their perceived innocence falls apart as soon as Barack is old enough to notice that, behind the veil of non-racialism, his grandparents are intolerant of Asians who have taken over the island and that, above all, they are afraid of black people's rage, like most of white America. Still, the Dunhams' approach to race remains deeply rooted in Barack's worldview; it belongs to the dimension of his (*Movement*) childhood. Therefore, every time the author defends it, he is both consciously and unconsciously wearing those particular lenses—an approach that he has introjected with language and that he wants to (or cannot help but) defend. Thus, Barack has already perfectly introjected the verbal and non-verbal language of his family; he has learned to interpret even its ruptures and reticences, the censored words and the unexpressed feelings.

Despite his personal fluency with his grandparents' language, Barack is unable to translate it into the world external to his family, which in Barack's case corresponds mostly to his black friends. Bringing others into his own rift is not even an option, in fact, this is what happens when he tries to use his family's language with his friend Roy who is complaining about his white coach:

[37] That is, when it is not treated as a social, political issue.

> "I'm saying that the coaches may not like you 'cause you're a smart-assed black man, but it might help if you stopped eating all them fries you eat, making you look six-month pregnant. That's what I'm saying." "Man, I don't know why you making excuses for these folks." Ray got up and crumpled his trash into a tight ball. "Let's get out of here. Your shit's getting way too complicated for me." (74)

This impossibility of translating the patrimony of values and interpretations which he has inherited from his family into the black "external world" places Barack in the condition of the stranger, that is, of one who must (re-)learn to read the world. Again, it makes him a shifting self like Rebecca:

> I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere. Still, the feeling that something wasn't quite right stayed with me, a warning that sounded whenever a white girl mentioned in the middle of conversation how much she liked Stevie Wonder; or when the school principal told me I was cool. I did like Stevie Wonder, I did love basketball, and I tried my best to be cool at all times. So why did such comments always set me on the edge? There was a trick there somewhere, although what the trick was, who was doing the tricking, and who was being tricked, eluded my conscious grasp. (82)

According to the theory of performative translation, elaborated by feminist criticism in the 1980s, translation is not only a mere repetition of meaning in another form, the mirroring of an *authentic* original; but a creative, transformative process that stems from the encounter between two different spaces of interpretation. Thus, both language and message are not only reproduced but performatively re-created in the act of translating.[38] Barack's (self-)

[38] Sandra Bermann, "Performing Translation." In Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter, eds., *A Companion to Translation Studies* (Chichester, West Sussex, Eng.: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 285-297: 289-93.

translation is not only a way to communicate and so "fit" into both his worlds, but also a means to elude forced categorizations and trapping identifications.

However, no matter how convincing, this continuous self-regeneration is painful and forced. Consider this passage:

> And that, *I suppose*, is what I was trying to tell my mother that day: that her faith in justice and rationality was misplaced, that *we couldn't overcome after all*, that all the education and good intentions in the world couldn't help plug up the holes in the universe or give you the power to change its blind, mindless course. (96, emphasis added)

Interestingly, every time he speaks on behalf of his white family he starts with "I think," "I suppose," "I suspect,"; all formulas through which the author takes on responsibility for his family's ideas, but which also express a certain insecurity. Thus, we could say that he incorporates his family's ideas and translates them in terms which are more understandable for a black audience, but he does it quite hesitantly. Again, the statement "I suppose" projects us beyond the space of rational control. At this point in the narrative, Barack is struggling to reconcile the meaning of blackness learned from Ray and Frank with that learned from his white family. The way the narrator shifts from his mother's perspective to Ray's, and vice versa, by endorsing both points of view and, at the same time, keeping them perfectly separated, demonstrates a striking intimacy shared with both languages. What he does here is translate Ray's words into his mother's language—using her own language (references to education and good intentions) against her. In doing so, he mentions the motto of the Civil Right Movement, which, although originally belonging to the black world, here appears as a white claim, passed on by his white family. Thus, that "we," usually voiced by black people to include white allies, inverts its expected course when voiced by Ann to Barack, only to find its way back to Ann, but this time enriched by all the significations that Barack, as a biracial individual, has charged it with. Such a "we" does not

belong to Ann's liberal world nor does it belong to Ray's radical black world: it is the "we" of Barack's generation, a generation that "should have overcome" racism, but in young Barack's view has already failed to do so. This is a Caliban-like passage in the sense of anti-colonialist interpretations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where Caliban is a cultural hybrid who finds his own independence using the language of his creator/oppressor. Barack uses his mother's teachings against her, to deconstruct her certainties and refuse the image that she had constructed for his child: that of a Movement Child. However, Barack, unlike Caliban, is affected by the innocence of maternal love, which pushes him to go beyond cursing.

Unless perfectly bilingual, a translator may have a primary language (of belonging) and a secondary one (of mastery). We have seen how Obama is able to perfectly inhabit the expressive and representational systems (that is, the languages) of both black and white imaginaries. However, neither can fully describe his personal experience of the world:

> *White folks.* The term itself was uncomfortable in my mouth at first; I felt like a non-native speaker tripping over a difficult phrase. Sometimes I would find myself talking to Ray about white folk this or white folk that, and I would suddenly remember my mother's smile, and the words that I spoke seemed awkward and false. (81)

The figure of the non-native speaker is powerful as it perfectly conveys the idea of one who masters a language but does not *identify* with it. Appiah reports the Asante proverb, "a stranger can never grow to perfection",[39] and the imperfections of Barack's strangerhood are manifested in the impossibility to adhere to the wholeness of the black and the white-liberal imaginaries.[40] The

[39] Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, 93.

[40] The lack of adherence to the black imaginary might be also due to the fact that the protagonist's personal experience with racial discrimination can be summarized, at least according to what is reported in the book, in four of five

effort at the basis of translation is that of transforming something perceived as strange and "other" into something more familiar:

> Later, when I was alone, I would try to untangle these difficult thoughts. It was obvious that certain whites could be exempted from the general category of our distrust: Ray was always telling me how cool my grandparents were. The term white was simply a shorthand for him, I decided, a tag for what my mother would call a bigot. (81)

With the useful fiction of color-blind language, however, Barack's family fails to protect him from existing racism. As a result, when confronted with white racism, he reacts by protecting himself by translating racism in familial terms that make him feel safe. For example, when his coach comments that "there are black people and then there are niggers" (*ibid.*), Barack replies the following: "There are white folks, and then there are ignorant motherfuckers like you" (*ibid.*). What here appears as a simple transposition of terms, I believe actually communicates his inability to translate the highly racially-marked insult "nigger" into a black term that would, if not correspond perfectly (that would be impossible, due to the intrinsic, historically-based, racial hierarchy between the parties), at least convey a similar effect. Perhaps he could have used the word "cracker," which we find in *Black White and Jewish* or any other word which conveys the legacy of white crazy violence. However, Barack does not choose them and, instead of translating the teacher's words into a violent black speech, he prefers to translate them into his mother's words, steeped in feelings of safety. I believe Barack's own conclusion of opting for a choice of words that is not racially charged resides in the fact that he *cannot* say something racially oppressive because he has interiorized and re-elaborated an interpretative model which is, after all, non-racial.

episodes, which the author concentrates in one page – from this point of view, the difference with what reported by Walker in *Black White and Jewish* is striking.

In other words, I would not say that his choice of words depends on a lack of courage from his part; in fact, the protagonist, as an adult, rejects the use of the word "nigger" as well, even when it is pronounced by black people:

> Often the word *nigger* replaced black in such remarks, a word that I'd once liked to think was spoken in jest, with a knowing irony, the inside joke that marked our resilience as a people. Until the first time I heard a mother use it on her child to tell him he wasn't worth shit, or watched teenage boys use it to draw blood in a quick round of verbal sparring. The transformation of the word's original meaning was never complete; like the other defenses we erected against possible hurt, this one too, involved striking out ourselves first (194-95)

Like Walker, also Obama provides a strong critique of language as an instrument that perpetuates racially-marked and racist interpretations of reality. No codified language seems to be able to comprehensively describe the world as Barack sees it. Refusing to employ a racially-marked word to respond to racism, Barack is not enacting a post-racial strategy: rather, through language, he is breaking the mechanism of iteration of oppressive categories. In this sense, the "translation" he produces affects reality by changing the terms in which race is usually discussed.

To conclude, the interiorization of his family's language coupled with the tensions this language creates when juxtaposed with a black view and interpretation of reality (including identity) proved to be crucial to the development of Barack's individuality, as it affects his literary production in both a conscious and an unconscious way. Returning to the question of Gramps and Toot's illusion-based idealism, which Barack contests together with his mother, we could say that the tendency to individualize racism has actually led to deflect collective responsibility away from recognizing its participation in structural racism: this, I argue, is the postracialism that, in *Dreams from My Father*, is both intimately interiorized as an inherited hermeneutics, and rationally opposed

as an impossible sociopolitical strategy. As Goldberg explains in *Are We All Postracial Yet?* (2015), embedded within the neoliberal spirit purported by a majority of white people, is a fundamental individualization of responsibility toward racism, which encourages the erosion of racial collectivity. Individuality, a white privilege in American culture, stems from the freedom of not needing "a tribe," a defensive community. Individuality often takes up the meaning of a safe space one can hide behind, without having to face one's lack of engagement, indifference, or even one's denial of brutal realities. The continuous process of self-translation makes it hard for Barack to both develop a feeling of belongingness to a tribe, and to develop a secure, fixed individuality:

> I didn't have the luxury, I suppose, the certainty of the tribe … I hadn't grown up in Compton or Watts. I had nothing to escape from except my own inner doubt. I was more like the black students who had grown up in the suburbs, kids whose parents had already paid the price of escape. You could spot them by the way they talked, the people they sat with in the cafeteria. When pressed, they would sputter and explain that they refused to be categorized. They weren't defined by the color of their skin, they would tell you. They were individuals. (99)

Again, *Dreams from My Father* reveals that Obama's stance is more complex than the postracialism usually attributed to him by unheeding critics. The book opens windows on his family's attempts to raise a non-racialized black child, an attitude that the author simultaneously incorporates, defends, rejects, and translates into his own terms. On the one hand, the ability to translate, that is, to use these languages as two perfectly separated sets of terms, manifests as the surface of Obama's interior *rift* in a linguistic dimension; on the other hand, the output of this translation, hidden behind fluent words, represents the bottom of the rift itself: the place where the encounter between two understandings of the world takes place, and where his own self-transformation is happening within language. The feminist theory of translation has a

name for this: it is, in Barbara Godard's words, a "transformance," a neologism resulting from the merging of "performance," "translation," and "transformation."[41] Such a "transformance" corresponds to the experience of inhabiting the linguistic *rift*.

4.6.3 *Into the Rift of Races: The Black/Non-Black Man*

The author's first encounter with American racism, does not occur in America, but in Djakarta, and it does not even involve his direct exposition to physical violence or marginalization. Actually, it happens in a limbic space between America and Indonesia – in the Library of the American Embassy (again, an American/non-American place), where the little protagonist is shocked by pictures in a *Life* magazine article of a black man who had lightened his skin and later regretted the choice:

> Eventually I came across a photograph of an older men in dark glasses and a raincoat walking down an empty road. I couldn't guess what this picture was about; there seemed nothing unusual about the subject. On the next page was another photograph, this one a close-up of the same man's hands. They had a strange, unnatural pallor, as if blood had been drawn from the flesh. Turning back to the first picture, I now saw that the man's crinkly hair, his heavy lips and broad, fleshy nose all had this same uneven ghostly hue.
> He *must be terribly sick, I thought. (30-31)*

There are many very interesting elements in this description which make Obama's discovery of racism not only uncommon, but also ambiguous. Firstly, he does not experience violence directly, but observes the effects of it on the body of another person. Secondly, the violence is self-perpetrated and voluntary. Thirdly, the body in question belongs to one who not only wanted to but also succeeded

[41] Bermann, "Performing Translation," 292.

(at least superficially) in becoming other from himself. Even if "there were thousands of people like him, black men and women back in America who'd undergone the same treatment in response to advertisements that promised happiness as a white person" (*ibid.*), the man is described as walking alone in an empty street, isolated from community, trying to come out of his own body. This man is now neither black nor white; he inhabits a transitional space (a racial *rift*).

At this point, Barack is completely disoriented: "I went into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror with all my senses and limbs seemingly intact, looking as I had always looked, and wondered if something was wrong with me" (52). In describing the scene, the narrator does not try to diminish his childish fears; instead, he conveys the gothic aura of a nightmare, with the man represented as a wandering ghost. At first impression, it reminds one of the stereotypical conditions of mixed-race people: the tragedy of wandering mulattoes and their foolish desire to belong to two irreconcilable worlds, which leaves them imprisoned in a limbo of racial shapelessness. After all, the author had evoked the "monstrosity" of miscegenation a few pages before (11). However, I am not reading the figure in this way, because this stereotypical condition does not belong to our author, a member of the *Loving Generation*. Rather, I read this episode as representative of the split between the mixed subject's internal and external worlds, through Walter Benjamin's theory of the eccentric body, as coming up in Léa Barbisan's essay about "On Horror."[42] Barbisan examines the vision of the body in Benjamin starting from Max Scheler's distinction between lived body (Lieb) and body-thing (Körper).[43] The

[42] Léa Barbisan, "Eccentric Bodies" *Anthropology & Materialism: A Journal of Social Research.* (2007). http://journals.openedition.org/am/803.

[43] In Benjamin's thought, a monster is a body without subjectivity and without self-awareness. With the Marxist turn of the 1920s, he identifies this (collective) body with the "masses" that, unlike the proletariat, are unwittingly driven by an ego outside of themselves, not understanding what is happening to them. In this sense, it is very simple for a fascist leader to use this shapeless body for political purposes: "The fascist method for subduing the masses on the trans-

Körper, which corresponds to our external perception of our own body, is described as "a thing belonging to the world" (2), while the *Lieb*, corresponding to our inner perception of our own body, is something closer to the ego, "independent of, and, in order of givenness, prior to [...] any special kinds of outer perception" (2). Usually, these two aspects of the body match perfectly, and this match gives rise to what we call *identity*.

In a racially dichotomized society, the split between *Lieb* and *Körper* of a multiracial subject follows the color line. This means that both the inner and external perceptions of the body are socially constructed: when Barack sees his body as from an external point of view, he relates it to black history, culture, and language; passing through the imaginary figure of his father and his moth-

figuration of their shapeless, uncontrollable body into a closed whole, i.e. into a recognizable, strictly outlined form with an unalterable identity. The fascist propaganda [...] enables the masses to 'come face to face'" (Barbisan, "Eccentric Bodies", 8). For Benjamin, the separation between Lieb and Körper occurs in the modern society through the capitalist exploitation of the working body, which is governed from the outside and reduced to a machine, because it no longer obeys the individual will but the social one (Marx). The product of this alienation is a shapeless and monstrous mass that can be easily mobilized and governed. In practice, it is a new form of slavery without chains. In the racist America of the sixties, the issue of self-representation in dehumanization processes is central: the racist propaganda that socially diminishes the oppressed body, pushes people to project themselves in a world where they can renounce their physical aspect, become similar to the dominant group and, therefore, happier. A body without self-awareness and without subjectivity is a slave body, which self-represents itself according to characteristics and parameters dictated by another. So, in the case of the article in *Life*, a monster is actually a man manipulated by racist propaganda, forced to identify himself in a historically oppressed identity and convinced that his identity was entirely erasable through the cancellation of the body. The lived body (*Lieb*) of this man is one with his individual experience, while the object-body (*Körper*) is that linked socially to a "minority" identity, that is a *racialized body*. The split between the lived body and the object-body that happens in this man after the chemical treatment, creates what both Benjamin and Obama call "horror." It is therefore a question of the disintegration of the promises made by society: the technological mutation of a non-normative body as a source of happiness.

er's idealization of blackness.[44] Instead, when he considers his own body from an inner point of view, the "narrative" about that body, its inherited symbolic and non-racial value, prevails. In the documentary *The Loving Generation*, Mat Johnson confirms such a split, explaining that his "generation" is haunted by a constant conflict between the community's gaze (one's body as immersed in a system of cultural signification such as color, gender, and so on) and the inner gaze (the lived body, which carries all the self-attributions one inherits and constructs for oneself on the basis of individual experience, including, I would add, the ideology associated with one's birth).[45]

On the one hand, the shock caused by the horrid images of the ghostly man is due to the discovery that there might be something wrong with his *Körper* (which heretofore had been entirely composed of his mother's admiring praise for black beauty— "Harry Belafonte is the best-looking man on the planet," she said once (51). On the other hand, it was shocking because it undermined that innocent "biracial identity without compromise" that his family had carefully constructed for him. In this sense, the black/non-black man could also be interpreted as a symbol of the most monstrous consequences of believing in his family's stories and therefore compromising with the white man. Thus, the fear of deluded promises, loneliness, dehumanization, regret, and alienation from the black community will haunt the narrator until adulthood and will ultimately push him to demonstrate his loyalty in Chicago.

[44] For an analysis of the episode in which Barack discovers his mother's orientalization of the black figure, while watching with her the Brazilian movie "Black Orpheus," see the above-mentioned homonymous essay by Donald E. Pease.

[45] Schwartz and Mandefro, *The Loving Generation*, part 1 (min: 04:35 - 04:58). It goes without saying that the fragmentation of the ego is not a phenomenon that belongs only to mixed-race people in America, but once again, through their "racially queer" experience, many aspects of the postmodern human become narratable, intuitive, simplified. The overcoming of certain conditions of absolute existential displacement exemplifies how the volatility of fluid identity can be embodied, somehow entangled in the concrete world, and, as such, lived fully.

The wound created by the bleached body on *Life Magazine* reopens many years later when he sees his fellow activist Ruby wearing blue lenses to feel prettier. Commenting on colorism and other esthetical issues, the author demonstrates his profound knowledge of the consequences of color-consciousness, that white-produced sense of self-hatred in which skin color, hair texture, poverty, scarce education, and hate for white people become the indistinguishable sides of a single prism: "Could Ruby love herself without hating blue eyes?" he wonders while simultaneously contemplating whether black people can give up the rage-inspiring dehumanizing word *nigger* (195):

> The anger was there, bottled up and often turned inward. And as I thought about Ruby and her blue eyes, the children calling each other "nigger" and worse, I wondered whether a black politics that suppressed rage toward whites generally, or one that failed to elevate race loyalty above all else, was a politics inadequate to the task.
> It was a painful thought to consider, as painful now as it had been years ago. It contradicted the morality my mother had taught me, a morality of subtle distinctions–between individuals of good will and those who wished me ill, between active malice and ignorance or indifference. (199)

His friend Rafiq, who in the story represents the voice of black cultural nationalism, expresses the same concerns about black obsession for the white man, but reaches the opposite conclusion, one in line with the one drop rule: "It's about blood, Barack, looking after your own. Period. Black people the only ones stupid enough to worry about the enemies" (197). Obama then attacks this view as narrow-minded, but in solitude, he finds himself interrogating the very meaning of loyalty and betrayal:

> His was a Hobbesian world where distrust was given and loyalties extended from family to mosque to the black race–whereupon notions of loyalty ceased to apply. This narrowing vision, of blood and tribe, had provided him with a clarity of sorts, a means

> of focusing his attention. […] Progress was within our grasp so long as we didn't betray ourselves. But what exactly constitutes betrayal? (*ibid*.)

There are passages in the book in which his position appears very ambiguous. One striking example is the description of an argument between a worried black mother and a white officer about the presence of asbestos in the apartments of Altgeld. Barack is there to defend the mother and listens to the excuses made by a man who is deliberately lying to her, falsely affirming that tests have been done that show no trace of asbestos. In this situation of power unbalance, the reader has no doubt about the narrator's position. Yet, totally unexpectedly, the narrator creates an empathic bond with the man, stating that the look in his eyes reminded him of Gramps—of a man who had been betrayed by life. Now, he seems to ask to reader, *does this constitute a form of betrayal?* Here again Obama produces new terms for his discourse, complicating the simplest dialectics and problematizing the simplest dichotomies. It seems that, even when he is totally committed to a cause, speaking from the bottom of the racial *rift*, he cannot avoid approaching reality with a certain embracing delicacy: a cosmopolitan sense of humanness.

4.7 *Exploring the Rift: the Great Rift Valley*

As we have seen so far, the dialectic tension between Barack's internal and external worlds is at the heart of his autobiographical reflection. This tension can also be interpreted as a tension between *the claim of innocence* inherited by his white family and the accusations of *compromise* which are always around the corner, ready to make Barack feel a traitor of the black community. In fact, throughout the first part of the book, innocence and compromise represent the only two ways in which Barack is able to interpret his biracial body and experience and the world outside him.

The narrator argues that he moves to Nairobi to discover the story of his fathers and to reconnect with his missing African half-family. Thus, it may be interpreted as another step forward the black community; a declaration of loyalty to compensate his supposed ambiguity. Contrarily to this view, I see this journey as a descent into the underworld of the narrator's fears; a moment in which Barack's ambiguities and indeterminacy come out very clearly both to the protagonist and to the reader. In this sense, it mirrors Rebecca's experience in Bali:

> I'd come to Kenya thinking that I could somehow force my many worlds into a single, harmonious whole. Instead, the divisions seemed only to have become more multiplied, popping up in the midst of even the simplest chores. (347)

Barack's identity in Africa is even more confusing and ambiguous than it is in America. Initially, he feels the relief of being in a country of color where he can feel a "glimpse of a freedom" (as Walker calls it), namely the possibility of being who one is: an individual, and not just a member of a minority or community. He finds a welcoming big family and rejoices that, thanks to this family, everyone in the street seems familiar with his family name: an experience which makes him feel less a foreigner than in America. However, he soon realizes that in Kenya he is not seen as a local one either. Firstly, he is the privileged one: everybody expects something from him. Then, when he reveals to a woman at the market that he is a Luo, the woman answers—in a language that Barack does not understand—that he does not look like a Luo at all. On the other hand, unlike the other foreigners (the white ones), who are treated by the Kenyan waiters with particular regard, he is ignored like every other local one. Moreover, he discovers that his own family is divided and full of resentments, each of them claiming to be closer to him than the others.

Thus, just like in Hawaii and everywhere else, Barack experiences the impossibility of full, unquestioned belongingness. He

falls again into the cosmopolitan condition of being a community member and a stranger at the same time. He remembers that once his aunt Zeituni told him that he could not meet all the other peoples' expectations, nor take responsibility of all the people, but he had to choose: "If everyone is family, then no one is family, your father never understood this, I think" (337) – a statement that seems to declare the impossibility of the cosmopolitan condition (*if you are at home everywhere, then you are at home nowhere*) and the necessity to define the borders of one's loyalty and belonging, by choosing among those who deserve our help and those who do not. But in Africa things are more complicated than in America:

> Now I was family, now I had responsibilities. But what did that mean exactly? Back in the States, I'd been able to translate such feelings into politics, organizing, a certain self-denial. In Kenya, these strategies seemed hopelessly and abstract, even self-indulgent. (329)

If at home discourses on identity focused on race, here they focused on family and tribe, but both tended to be exclusive of otherness and both implied a certain risk of betrayal. The definition of family—Barack decides—is very hard to find:

> Who was this woman? I wondered. My grandmother? A stranger? And what about Bernard—should my feelings for him be different now? I looked over at a bus stop, where a crowd of young men were streaming out into the road, all of them tall and black and slender, their bones pressing against their shirts. I suddenly imagine Bernard's face on all of them, multiplied across the landscape, across continents. Hungry, striving, desperate man, all of them brothers. (336)

He seems to answer to Zeituni that, if no one is family, then he does not need blood ties to empathize with the people of Africa. Here, the narrator applies a pan-African approach, identifying his family with transnational blackness, tracing a secondary circle

based on race and suffering. This can be interpreted as a rooted cosmopolitanism, which expands the borders of community to the whole black race up to embrace other and more complicated meanings of blackness and of oppression. However, this black circle is still a *safe* circle, because it does not call into question the narrator's deepest conflict—the innocence and the compromise he has inside.

4.7.1 *The Safari*

The safari in the Great Rift Valley comes, just like the journey to Bali in *Black White and Jewish*, as a harbinger of the epilogue of the story. Occurring in Chapter XVII, this episode lets all the main themes of the book emerge from the author's unconscious in the form of landscapes, symbols, characters, and dialogues. On the diegetic level, Barack's immersion in the Great Rift Valley seems to function as a ritual passage preparatory to the discovery of the truth about his father and himself.

> Toward the end of my second week in Kenya, Auma and I went on a safari.
> Auma wasn't thrilled with the idea. When I first showed her the brochure, she grimaced and shook he head. Like most Kenyans, she could draw a straight line between the game parks and colonialism. "How many Kenyans do you think can afford to go on a safari?" She asked me. "Why should all that land be set aside for tourists when it could be used for farmers? Those *wazungu* care more about one dead elephant than they do for a hundred black children (346)

In the book, Auma represents the postcolonial voice: the voice of oppressed people. But, having lived and studied in Europe, she is also a bridge. She is the one who knows perfectly the language of the oppressed and that of the oppressor, the one who rebukes Barack when his views are too *naïve* and Western-inflected. Auma is the migrant and the exile, the one who can live abroad, but she

always remembers where she comes from. In this, her character is complementary to that of Barack: she is not a cosmopolitan, but an exile, thus he sees in her a guide, because she knows where home is.

Through Auma's words, Obama warns the reader that he is about to enter a danger zone: going down to the Great Rift means compromising with the history of the white oppression. Still, Barack is determined to go. He tells Auma that she is letting other people's attitudes prevent her from knowing her own country. This time he will not let the other's gaze and judgement stop him from knowing himself. For the first time in the book, Barack refuses to run away from the idea of an eventual compromise. He seems to decide that compromise is necessary: that there is, in fact, no way to enter this story innocently because there is nothing innocent about the story, nothing innocent in any of the stories handed down by History, stories that, though stained with conflict and ambiguity and guilt, must yet be explored. His own *rift* must be scaled. In this sense, enterprising the safari with Auma is a sort of guarantee that he will not betray his loyalty to the African people. However, Auma keeps silent for nearly the whole trip, because this is not *her* story. Like in *Black White and Jewish*, the landscape is dominated by a dreaming silence: "And most of all the stillness, the silence that matches the elements" (356).

The descent into the rift is characterized by a tension, a continuous rebound between dream and history, the sentimental and the rational dimensions, utopia and deconstruction. This place is halfway between past and present, the colonial and postcolonial worlds, hope and suspicion, imaginary and real. Like Hawaii, the Great Rift is a place/non-place, Kenya/non-Kenya, because it has been turned into an attraction for Western tourists, but not completely. The rough road is full of symbolic elements which recall Barack's past life: the satellite station, which reminds the reader of the scene of the astronaut (350) or the Masai pastor, which reminds of Barack's childish infatuation with the stories of African warriors and his disappointment when he discovered that his father was not one of them. The brutal oppression of Masai people which he recalls is at

odds with the heavenly landscape and with his infantile images of those glorious warriors. Finally, he notices the perfect balance of black and white in the zebras, which are "ridiculously symmetrical in their stripes" (351) and recall his personal unbalance.

The Great Rift is above all a moment in which the author tries to explain the complexity of compromise and the impossibility of reducing it to a binary struggle between good and evil: his body, his *transformance*, and everything in his mixed experience represents this complexity. During a night camp, he listens to the stories of neocapitalist exploitation, of cultural oppression, and of transnational solidarity. Francis, the guide, complains about the difficulties of cultivating coffee in this country since the Kenyan Coffee Union controls the market and sells everything overseas. Soon after, Mr. Wilkerson, tells his story: he was born in a colonial plantation in Kenya, was raised in London, practiced at the National Health Service in Liverpool, and then returned to Africa to coordinate safety and healthcare programs. Wilkerson is a key character: he embodies a kind of cosmopolitanism which recalls Bruce Robbins' idea of "cosmopolitics" as transnational solidarity: the creation of a network of people who are not tied together by kinship or identity, but by individual experience and shared goals. Wilkerson's idea of home is transracial and complicated, but there is nothing triumphalist or utopian in his words: he is another homeless, divided between Africa and Europe, even though he was not biracial, because identity is mostly a matter of culture. Thus, when Barack asks Wilkerson why he has back to Kenya, he replies that in England he felt like a stranger, "It's my home, I suppose. The people, the land …" but then he adds that he is not sure he can call this place home, "Sins of the father, you know" (355). This leads us back to the generational issue, the only frame within which the stories and the complexities of the Loving Generation can be narrated and the place where the rift begins.

4.8 *On the Fathers' Graves: In Search of a New Language*

In Chapter 19, Barack finally discovers the stories of his father, Barack, and his grandfather, Onyango. Both had transformative encounters with the white man, which had changed their lives forever, turning them into strangers among their own people, and both had not been able to communicate the nature of this transformation to their own communities.

Onyango was a curious child. One day, he decided that he would meet the newcomer white men against his father's instruction. When he returned to the village, many months later, he was changed: he was wearing the white man's clothes. His father never accepted him back in his home. Later, he worked as a servant in the colonizers' houses. He also served on the English ships during World War II and traveled the world. When he went back to Nairobi, he was considered strange, but respected for his knowledge and his strength. Barack's first reaction to this story was in the terms of compromise, he thought that his grandfather had been an "Uncle Tom. Collaborator. House Nigger" (406). Only later he understands that things were way more complex than that: Onyango was barely able to handle the weight of the encounter with the Western world, which both fascinated and scared him. He had learnt the language of the white man and, through it, he had reinterpreted himself, thinking to deserve the violence he received. Barack's grandmother recalls his words: "'The African is thick,' he would sometimes say to me. 'For him to do anything he needs to be beaten'" (407). However, he had not absorbed everything uncritically, and in fact she adds: "I don't think he ever believed that the white man was born superior to the African" (*ibid.*). Indeed, he had rejected many of the white man's rules and norms, including the Christian religion.

Then Barack learns the story of his father, Barack Senior, who had abandoned his father's house as a child and grown up far from his real mother and his crazy father. He had received a Western education, which he used, as soon as he could, to send scholarship

requests overseas. He succeeded, but he was not able to bear the weight of the transforming American experience:

> He had almost succeeded, in a way that his father could never have hoped for. And then, after seeming to travel so far, to discover that he had not escaped after all! To discover that he remained trapped on his father's island, with its fissures of anger and doubt and defeat… (429)

The author's perspective on history is very different from the progressive stance that would later mark his speeches as a politician. Here, his vision of history follows a Benjaminian logic: it is a succession of *now-times*, a continuous superposition of past and present, rather than a continuous temporal flow. In fact, standing before the graves of his father and grandfather, Barack creates mental images of the stories he had heard and feels totally merged with them. His father and grandfather, like him, had been forced, throughout their lives, to reinvent themselves; they, too, ran away from the haunting ghost of their first communities, and sought for individual redemption. But above all, these men were often described as crazy because they lacked an accurate language capable of expressing the personal change they had underwent; they had been unable to translate themselves, and their experiences, into words that others would understand:

> Oh Father, I cried. There was no shame in your confusion. Just as there had been no shame in your father's before you. No shame in the fear, or in the fear of his father before him. There was only shame in the silence fear had produced. It was the silence that betrayed *us*. If it weren't for that silence, your grandfather might have told your father that he could never escape himself, or re-create himself alone. (*ibid*., emphasis added)

When, in Benjamin's view, history collapses on itself and a rift of *space-time* opens, inheritance is no longer a matter of receiving but, rather, a matter of re-living and re-creating old stories in new,

different terms. Just like Rebecca Walker re-writes her parents' marriage and her birth in her own terms, rejecting in part the identity of Movement Child which they had ascribed to her, Obama re-writes the stories of his fathers and his own story in his own terms. The terms he uses are focused on the individual as a human being immersed into a precise historical context, into a community and a humanity, with all the complexities that it implies. Differently from the past offered by Gramps, this re-writing of his fathers' story is neither idealized nor innocent: it is only human, and, in this profound humanness, it is both contingent and universal. Thus, not only himself, as a biracial man belonging to another continent and another generation, can empathize with it, but also the readers:

> I realized that who I was, what I cared about, was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my life in America—the black life, the white life—the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago—all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright. (430)

Drawing on the theory of performative translation again, we could say that the fathers live their lives, their struggles, their pain, and their dreams *in* their children (as Gramps did with Barack) and that those children live those same struggles, and pain, and dreams, *translated* into another time and another space. However, the children do not merely reiterate their parents' dreams (they will never live the "dreams *of* their fathers"). Rather, the children re-create themselves through the reiteration of the message and, in so doing, proceed in a direction that is different from that imagined by their fathers (they produce their own "dreams *from* their fathers"). The problem, however, is finding the words to communicate these new dreams and these new experiences: this is the big challenge of those members of the Loving Generation who wanted to self-create,

self-determine their identities, independently from ascription and constrictions deriving by pre-existing racial narratives. In fact, there cannot be any existential performative translation or progression without a proper linguistic system, a symbolic apparatus, capable of interpreting and expressing the new reality. Initially, in the Great Rift Valley, the narrator wished that humanity could go back to the times "before Babel" (356), to the first steps of men on Earth, when men were naked and silent, without culture nor language. However, the author seems to realize that, by reiterating a pre-cultural colorblind imaginary like his grandfather Gramps's utopia, he would not help his unborn children to understand their times—"the fissures of race, the fluid state of identity, the existing and undeniable collision of cultures" (vii)—which could not be ignored anymore, and which could not be interpreted according to past idealisms and ideologies. The truth, the author suggests, never belongs to one part; it must be sought in the wholeness of languages, and voices, and interpretations of reality: in the diversity within similarity, which the cosmopolitan subject always recognizes:

> "The silence killed your faith" he says to his father— "a faith that wasn't new, that wasn't black or white or Christian or Muslim, but that pulsed in the heart of the first African village and the first Kansas homestead—a faith in other people." (429)

Obama's self-writing seems to be an attempt to create a new discursive practice to overcome the narratives the author has inherited, a tool for translating himself into a more authentic form. Exploring the *rift* through self-writing enables the author to express what otherwise may have remained tacit; thoughts which he may not have wished to endorse are expressed safely through the mouths of other people. Here comes again, emphatic and mystic, all of Obama's cosmopolitanism, a universalization of his particular experience.

Obama's book ends when Barack realizes that the inheritance of his fathers is not the preformed African identity he was looking for (an identity to be added or mixed with another pre-fixed white

identity), but a mission. Barack must therefore break the silence which caused the fracture between his grandfather and his father, who had failed to organize an intergenerational dialogue about the difficulties and dangers of epochal changes. Exactly like his fathers, Barack feels the urgency of explaining to future generations that breaching of the law of the one drop rule and conceiving a biracial son went far beyond the logic of reconciliation: it approached a reformation of discourses and politics, which, according to him, demanded a different way of seeing the world.

Finally, he reintegrates a discourse on the importance of the community when he suggests that self-recreation can only happen within a collective frame. Later, under different circumstances and for other purposes, Obama will draw on the national rhetoric of the "more perfect union," which will represent his (primarily linguistic) research for a representational, political, and social space in which the universalist and the communitarian approaches engage in constant dialogue.

In conclusion, Obama's cosmopolitanism has been often reductively attributed to the fact that he is the child of an American woman and a Kenyan man, that he was raised in Hawaii and Indonesia, and has traveled the world. However, his first autobiography complicates this view by showing the intimate and sometimes hidden face of his cosmopolitan experience. The complexity of the discourse on identity and belonging we find in *Dreams from My Father* helps us to understand the nature of Obama's cosmopolitan attitude, but also new ways of conceiving cosmopolitanism and the cosmopolitan condition. Here, being a cosmopolitan subject means inhabiting the subterranean continuity between two worlds superficially divided (inhabiting the *rift*). It means being able to continuously self-recreate in different contexts by drawing on one's multiple cultural legacies (performative cosmopolitanism). It also means reacting to placelessness and pain caused by external ruptures, through the creation (or, at least, the attempt at creating) a new language and a new discursive practice on identity. Finally, it means to recreate an intergenerational discursive practice which

allows the Loving Generation to give new meaning to their parents' broken dreams and to themselves.

CHAPTER 5
COSMOPOLITAN IRONY IN MAT JOHNSON'S *LOVING DAY: A NOVEL*

Set about thirty years after *Dreams from My Father* and *Black White and Jewish*, *Loving Day* offers an overview of the implications of being biracial in a world which declares itself multicultural but remains dominated by racism; a world which pretends not to believe in the existence of races but cannot avoid invoking them when identity is at stake. In *Loving Day*, the fictional and the real merge and overlap continuously. In Chapter 2, I examined the elements of the novel related to the sphere of the real, focusing especially on the protagonist/author's body. In this chapter, instead, I focus on those fictional elements through which Johnson self-distances from his own experience and lucidly reflects on the implications of being a mixed-black person in the controversial Obama Era. The fictional components provide the author with the creative freedom to imagine situations, characters, dialogues, and symbolic elements that are highly representative of those times. For example, he imagines the Mélange Center as a new-born, multiracial community, which is determined to claim social recognition. Unsure of the path to take, however, this community is seduced by white liberal multiculturalism's emphasis on individual self-determination. At the same time, the biracial members of the Mélange seem haunted by the guilt of abandoning black communitarianism and compromise with a privileged white world. Although at the center of Johnson's reflection there is a racial discourse which, like the protagonist's

house, is "as rich and imposing as it is decaying" (3)—extremely complex and full of inconsistencies and absurdities—, Johnson never indulges in abstract criticism: instead, vivid thoughts and images speak to the heart of the readers and convey the complexity of the subject matter in a clear and immediate way. Hence, *Loving Day* accomplishes the hard task of showing how race affects the lives of colored people in everyday interactions and at all levels (the personal, the social, the political), demonstrating that the confusion between these different levels hinders the development of intercultural dialogue and obstructs real progress in social justice.

At the end of *Race, Culture, Identity*, Appiah warns against the risks of "the imperialism of identity," which comprises an uncritical endorsement of racial identification and a too complete subjugation to pre-constituted categories. As an antidote, he suggests that one "live with fractured identities; engage in identity play; find solidarity, yes, but recognize contingency, and, above all, practice irony."[1] Johnson seems to put this admonition into practice: faced with the absurdities of race and racism, he adopts a cosmopolitan irony, thereby creating a brilliantly witty, moving novel which engenders hilarity but also greater awareness in readers.

5.1 *A Neighborhood, A World: Introducing Warren's Story*

Warren Duffy finds himself back in Philadelphia because his father, an Irish American carpenter, has just died, leaving him an enormous, run-down house whose restoration is still unfinished. This house, called Loudin Mansion, is a huge colonial building set in Germantown, the black neighborhood in which Warren grew up with his black mother. After his parents' divorce, he spent his adolescence in the streets, bouncing between his parents' houses.

Having spent the last three years in a fruitless attempt to become a comic book artist in Wales and having just divorced Becky, his

[1] Appiah, *Race, Culture, Identity*, 135.

Welsh ex-wife, Warren is miserable. Moreover, he has no money and no place to stay in America. He is therefore expected to finish his father's work, find a job, and then settle down in his old neighborhood. But Warren, who self-defines as a black man who looks like a white man, has negative feelings towards the house and what it symbolizes. Thus, he resolves to set it on fire, claim the insurance money, and then leave the country again for a better place—a place where he can finally feel *at home*. In fact, despite his best efforts, he had never felt fully accepted in Germantown's black community. This painful sense of difference was exacerbated when the black girl he loved, Tosha, rejected him in favor of a darker man, thus driving him abroad to Wales in search of belonging.

In Philadelphia, the protagonist soon makes two *transformative encounters*: the first is with a beautiful, mixed-identified woman, Sunita Habersham, who invites him to attend the local mixed-race community at the Mélange charter school, where he becomes a part-time teacher. The second is with his previously unknown seventeen-year-old daughter, Tal. She is the product of a sexual encounter that Warren had with a Jewish girl as a teenager. She has lost her mother at an early age and has just learned about her real father. After she finds him at a local convention, she moves into Warren's life and into his unfinished, creepy house.

In the old mansion, Warren's nights are haunted by eerie shadows and noises: the house appears inhabited by two mysterious people, a black man and a white woman, who could either be drug addicts or ghosts – the narrator and the readers are never sure. Their presence provides the book with an increasingly surreal atmosphere. Sunita and Tal become convinced that they are the spirits of the first interracial couple, who will guide the mixed-race community toward its self-affirmation in the world; thus, they organize reunions and guided tours of the house. During these events, the black and white communities of Germantown demonstrate in front of the house, protesting the definitive establishment of the Mélange Center in the neighborhood. Confronted with this conflict, and feeling disoriented, drunk, and desperate, Warren attempts

to set the house on fire, but he fails and gets arrested. The school principal, Roselyn, then buys the house, dismantles it and moves the Mélange community to the island of Malaga, MA. When Warren finally comes back from prison, he finds out that the house is gone, but Tal and Sunita – his new family – are still there, waiting for him. The story ends with Warren sitting with Tal on the grass and thinking that the ghostly couple, the mysterious black and white lovers are "Just lovers. Just people" (287).

5.2 *Mixedness and Blackness in* Loving Day

The Mélange Center is a nomadic charter school temporarily settled in the black neighborhood of Germantown. It represents the emergence of an ever more definite mixed identity involved in a process of racial self-deconstruction and reconstruction. The school celebrates hybridity over racial authenticity and believes in multiple identities. Moreover, it leads its students to achieve a "sacred balance" (69), which entails the erosion of internal boundaries and the recognition of one's identities. Thus, at the end of the educational process, its graduates can get a tattoo in which the symbols of their different cultural identities merge into a single design.

The Mélange Center does not distinguish individuals according to racial identity, age, or any other "objective" social definition, but according to their own racial self-identification; that is, they are divided between those who consider themselves white, rejecting their black part, and those who consider themselves black, rejecting their white part. Differently from the mainstream culture, the Mélange takes identification into more consideration than color-based external ascription. Hence, it supports the idea that an individual is black or white when they feel such, and not because society perceives them that way. This is a marked shift in perspective with respect to identity politics, for which self-identification with (only one) race is firstly a byproduct of external ascription. The Mélange teaches that self-identification can be based on one's cultural upbringing rather

than on one's skin color and can differ from the race to which one is usually ascribed. Johnson emphasizes the newness of the multiracial perspective, which focuses on mixed people's black/white upbringing and on the consequent interiorization of two different racial models. If strategic essentialism tends to overshadow different cultural models in the name of community cohesion, treating the two as mutually exclusive, Johnson demonstrates that such a conception does not prevent mixed people from feeling a sense of inadequacy among monoracial individuals. As the protagonist, Warren, explains:

> Those mulattoes whose white appearance matches up with the white world they inhabit aren't coming to Mulattopia. The world already fits well enough for them. Those mulattoes who look definitively African American and are fully at home within the African American community – they aren't here either. […] But here, standing next to us, is everyone else. The human equivalent of mismatched socks. The people whose racial appearance fails to mirror the ethnicity of their inner spirits. (81)

Clearly, Warren inscribes himself in the new minority of those who cannot count on a definite color-coded identity. In order to achieve a certain balance between the way they feel and the way they look, the Mélange Center's students who self-identify exclusively as black, called "sunflowers," are enrolled in the white identity course, while the ones called "oreos" because they look black but self-identify as white, go to classes on blackness. Johnson emphasizes the distinction between external and internal perceptions, which the term "race" fails to distinguish: today, the concept of race encompasses both the external and the internal dimensions but, for political purposes, it privileges the former. In the Mélange Center's approach, focused on hybridity and centered more on culture than on racialization, we recognize postmodern and post-identitarian views and an emphasis on the role of the individual in self-determination. However, this supposedly progressive strategy ends up producing a mixed identity which is no less fixed than all

the other racial identities: an identity that is as fixed and permanent as a tattoo. Aware of such a chasm, Warren rejects the idea of being tattooed and tries to discourage his daughter too.

Warren criticizes any definition of mixed-race identity which separates mixed individuals from the black community. The protagonist's primary affiliation to the black community reflects the position of many exponents of the Loving Generation. In fact, although many proponents of black counter-narratives insist on the "special" relationship between mixed people and the white community (which uses the former to sponsor an alleged "end of race"), the Loving Generation's primary concern consists in defining the terms of their relationship with the black community and cultural legacy. In particular, as we have already seen in Obama and Walker, the process of self-construction for this generation entails coming to terms with the threat of *compromise*. Johnson puts it thus in Swartz and Mandefro's documentary:

> It's difficult to acknowledge that you are not just the descendant of the slave who was kidnapped in West Africa and brought to America, you're also the descendant of the white person who kidnapped you, so see how complicated is that![2]

In the book, the issue of compromise worries Warren's friend Tosha more than anything else. Thus, Warren finds it hard to mitigate her excessive skepticism toward the very concept of multiracialness. She compares mixedness to betrayal: "you're losing your mind over in Uncle Tom fairyland" – she tells Warren (159), referring to the fact that he attends (and teaches at) the Mélange school. In the novel, Tosha represents Warren's racial point of reference and, by extension, the African American community's objections to that strand of anti-blackness present in the mixed identity, historically

[2] *The Loving Generation*. Directed and produced by Lacey Schwartz and Mehret Mandefro. Executive produced by Ezra Edelman and Anna Holmes. *Topic*, 2018, min. 8:04.

reinforced by the stereotypical "tragic mulatto" striving to pass for white. This stereotype, which juxtaposes the individual struggle for self-emancipation with that of her or his community, clearly represents how individualism and compromise are two intertwined elements. Thus, self-identifying as mixed-race is often seen as a form of individualism, that is, as "a white behavior." Through Warren, Johnson represents the discomfort of having to choose between one's freedom of self-assertion and communitarian loyalty. Doing so, the author shows that one of the biggest impasses characterizing the American racial discourse is the overlapping of identity and belonging: the idea that if one does not fully identify with her or his community, one does not "really belong" to that group.

Another impasse is represented by the impossibility of distinguishing between race, color, and culture and between one's political identity and one's self-definition. Mixed-race individuals claim a separation among these two latter aspects, affirming the primacy of their cultural upbringing and demonstrated by the following dialogue between Warren and Tosha:

> [Tosha:] "They're not mixed," she snaps back, the word wet and viral. "I'm black. You're black. African American. Bilalian. Negro. Colored Folk, blackity-black, black. Those Oreos up there, they're black too, although I'm sure they'd cry if you told them. We're all mixed with something, no one is pure. Who cares about percentage?"
> [Warren:] "Yeah, but it's not about genes, DNA. It's about being able to express all of you are culturally. I mean, they would say that. That if you grew up connected to parents of two races, just saying, "I'm black," or whatever, negates part of who you are, culturally, as a person." (159)

Tosha responds to this last affirmation with another question: "They realize they're in America, right?" (*ibid.*). Her retort may seem to elude the discourse but it shows its core instead. It suggests that the limits of Warren's discourse coincide with the cultural and political borders of America, with the terms of a geographically

delimited discourse on races where "ethnic" or "cultural" self-definitions are relevant only for white people (who, for example, can *choose* to self-identify as partly Irish Americans and partly Italian Americans), while all the other groups are roughly defined by race (where cultural, tribal, and national differences disappear in color). If being mixed means being entitled to self-definition and being black means being deprived of this same freedom, Warren is not allowed to be mixed and black at the same time—an impasse at the core of his self-narration. *Loving Day* mocks the overall construction of racial identity in America and dismantles its foundations through sharp irony.

5.3 *A Chaos of Colors and Labels*

The first dialogue between Warren and Sunita occurs before the public of a comics convention. In the dialectic, Warren represents the experienced and skeptical voice of blackness, while Sunita represents the rising voice of mixed-race identity, immature but assertive. The lack of communication between the two stems, above all, from the biased attitudes they show toward each other:

> [Sunita:] But why do you call yourself a black artist, in this age? You're mixed. Aren't you? I mean, clearly one of your parents was white, or you wouldn't look like that. Why do you find the need to stick within the racial mold set by slavery?"
> She looks at me. My tribe. Same color, same hair color, same eye color. […]
> [Warren:] "There's nothing 'mold-y' about being black," I say, there's laughs. […] "And there is no such a thing as biracial in Black America. Race doesn't even exist. […] There's black and there's white. That's it. It doesn't matter if your sperm donor was a white man. That's the reality: Was Booker T. Washington not black? Or Frederick Douglass?" There is some applause now, not overwhelming, but building. I hear a "That's right!" pop out of the audience anonymously, so I build on that: "Or Malcolm X's

> mother? His very own mother!" The crowd has decided it's safe to show appreciation, that by clapping they may obtain freedom from racial complication. (28)

In this dialogue, Warren defensively interprets the adjective "moldy" as a racist offense against black people, rather than as an attack on the legacy of racialization. Sunita asks him to abandon a traditional, monoracial interpretation of his blackness in favor of a mixed identity that she feels is more authentic, but her words sound arrogant and slightly racist to her interlocutor, who instinctively defends blackness by pointing out that the black community is and has always been mixed, so mixed-black people do not need another identity. Applauded by the public, Warren wins the debate by drawing on a strong legacy of discourses in defense of blackness, while Sunita is unable to express herself in a respectful way and uses words that sound snobbish or offensive: the derogatory and racially connoted terms she uses, like "sunflower" and "oreos," demonstrate that the group she represents has not yet developed appropriate means of self-expression. As a result, she is perceived as a traitor by the people in the room and thereafter remains silent, inevitably falling into a state of aphasia.

If Maria Root's "A Reminder of the Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage" included the creation of a proper language among its list of mixed-race people's fundamental rights,[3] Johnson ironizes

[3] Maria P.P. Root, "A Reminder of the Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage." *Mixedremixed* (17 January 2017). www.mixedremixed.org/reminder-bill-rights-people-mixed-heritage-maria-p-p-root/. This same claim opens a document written in 2008 by the British mixed-race youth national conference, which points out: "We would like to move to a position where there is universally acceptable terminology to describe people who identify as mix-d." The most interesting aspect of such a statement, however, is the use of the expression "mix-d," which utterly eliminates the word "race." Maybe, this operation of linguistic censorship depends on the need to escape from a categorical system that imprisons the subject in a history of subjugation or, maybe, it alludes to the difficulty of replacing the word race with a more "acceptable" one. All in all, it seems that in the British context the racial issue is preferably kept unspoken.

on the words that have historically been created to distinguish different degrees of mixedness:

> The contrast between "blackness" and how I looked was so stark that I often found myself shifting through archaic, pre-20th-century African-American racial definitions to find a word that fit me. *Mulatto*, 50 percent African. *Quadroon*, 25 percent African. *Octoroon*, 12.5 percent African. The next stop down, at 6.25 percent African, was *mustefino.* I'd never heard anyone call himself *mustefino*, and I didn't want to personally relaunch that brand.[4]

The terminology used to define mixedness proves mostly archaic, confused, or uncertain. Many times, it is characterized by a devaluating irony. In *Loving Day*, Warren uses more than ten different derisive terms to describe the Mélange and its multiracial members: "mulattopia" (71), "halfros" (71), "zebras" (95), "waspafarian" (100), "mutants" (147), "mixiepixies" (180), "melungeons" (120), and so on. These words, often belonging to two different "languages" and cultural worlds, might sound like monstrous combinations of morphemes, but they are not so different from Walker's and Obama's attempts to create modes of expressions for their mixed experience. Warren, too, is entrapped in a dichotomic view of human reality and looks for the right words to describe the paradox he represents in his own eyes. Sometimes he displays a bitter self-irony, betraying his sense of deep discomfort. In this disconnect between the existential and the discursive, Warren seems to exist beyond all possible terms that can express his condition:

> I am a racial optical illusion. I am as visually duplicitous as the illustration of the young beauty that's also the illustration of the old hag. Whoever sees the beauty will always see the beauty, even if the image of the hag can be pointed out to exist in the same

Bradley Lincoln, "Mix-d Manifesto," *Mix-d.org.* www.mixd.org/files/MHP/Mix-d_Manifesto.pdf.

[4] Johnson, "Proving my Blackness", emphasis in the original text.

> etching. Whoever sees the hag will be equally resolute. The people who see me as white always will and will always think it's *madness* that anyone else could come to any other conclusion, holding to this falsehood regardless of learning my true identity. The people who see me as black cannot imagine how *a sane, intelligent person* could be so blind not to understand this, despite my pale-skinned presence. The only influence I have over this perception is the initial encounter. Here is my chance to be categorized as black, with an asterisk. *The asterisk is my whole body.* (18, emphasis added)

When Johnson compares Warren's body to an asterisk, he dematerializes and de-signifies it; he makes it a symbol without a specific meaning, since the asterisk is nothing more than a *link* between two texts. In fact, the asterisk represents a symbol which, though included in the text, does not actually belong to the text's meaning and usually links it to an extra-discursive explanation. Moreover, in linguistics, an asterisk can precede a word or a structure to indicate that it is grammatically incorrect and exceeds the established norms of a language. Thus, the metaphor may be interpreted as follows:[5] immersed in a system of racial norms that does not recognize the

[5] In common speech, the expression "black with an asterisk" can refer to a lack of authenticity, as in Melanie Coffee's "I'm Black Enough," (see works cited) where it is used to refer to black people who appreciate typically "white" cultural elements. Coffee, indeed, argues: "I hate the notion that some of us black folks come with an asterisk. I'm black, but (asterisk) I love Guns N' Roses. […]. We've all heard the code words for this asterisk mentality. Articulate. Proper. Uppity. Wannabe. Bourgie. And according to my friend's grandma: clean." Instead, in a more political context, David Blaska (see works cited) quotes an article by a blogger called "Bert" in which this same expression is used to describe a man who "reaps personal benefits from his black status for himself by perpetrating the structural disadvantages for fellow blacks." And also "sounds like a phony black, trying a little too hard to speak the way suburbanites think blacks should sound." The two examples provided, in which the same expression is used to refer both to divergent cultural tastes (private sphere/ identification) and to political stances (public sphere/identity politics), in a way demonstrate the inadequacy of a language/discourse characterized by a continuous overlapping and merging of meanings and discursive dimensions.

continuity between Warren's white body and his "black soul," he finds himself in a condition of opacity and indetermination where every possible interpretation (the beauty, the hag, false, true, black, white) proves incorrect. Thus, to understand Warren's body, one must get out of current discourses; out of the narratives, the categories, and the dichotomous structures of thought that support the way American culture sees the human being: either a beauty or a hag; either white or non-white. As a hybrid, cosmopolitan subject, Warren lives a struggle between belonging and not belonging, he is black and is white but, at the same time, exceeds such definitions and claims a broader significance. His body is like an asterisk which creates a *rift* in the discourse about him. It is a place of dynamic coexistence of blackness and whiteness; a place which cannot be defined by pre-existing words.

In addition to Johnson's poignant deconstruction of all claims of racial objectivity or authenticity, I am struck by his reference to the "insanity" that each observer of the beauty/hag ascribes to those who see the image differently. As James Baldwin affirms:

> Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos.[6]

Baldwin saw labeling and categorizing people as an American obsession: a national pathology, something on which the U.S. has founded its own identity. Similarly, Johnson, in line with Walker and Obama, sees the practice of racialization as an intrinsic part of the concept of "America:"

> I'm not white, but I can feel the eyes of the few people outside on me, people who must think that I am, because I look white, and as such what the hell am I doing here? This disconnect in my racial

[6] Valerie Melissa Babb, *A History of the African American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

> projection is one of the things I hate. *It goes in a subcategory I call "America,"* which has another subheading called "Philly." I hate it because I know I'm black. My mother was black—that counts, no matter how pale and Irish my father was. (4, emphasis added.)

Loving Day displays several surreal situations in which the mixed body is reduced to a blank page, whose racial meaning is continuously and differently inscribed, according to the observer and the context. Consider, for example, the following passage where Warren sees his daughter from a distance and does not immediately recognize her:

> There is somebody at the front gate. It's not Sirleaf Day. It's a white woman. It's a white girl. My white girl. It's my black girl who looks like a white girl with a tan and a bad hair day. (52)

Tal is a character in continuous evolution. By staying with her father and attending the Mélange Center, she abandons her Jewish, white, and monoracial self-perception in favor of a mixed identity. This evolution is anticipated by Warren's gaze, as he desires to see his daughter more aware of her own black heritage. Thus, as the father gradually approaches the girl, her figure undergoes a progressive, interpretative transformation from a white girl into a black girl who looks white (with a tan). Johnson is displaying a situation in which the symbol (the definition black/white) loses all links with the subject it describes and reveals ever more the observer's racial projections onto his daughter's body. Even though the body is the same, its "color" (with all the deriving cultural implications) changes. In this chaos of colors and labels, Tal's body, just like Warren's, is transformed into an optical illusion, an asterisk—a symbol whose multiple significations depend on the observers' desires; a link between two different texts or narrations.

5.4 *Racial Parochialism vs. Rational Cosmopolitanism*

Johnson stresses multiple implications of the fact that the discourse on race, with its categories and labels, creates the reality it describes. The white-looking Warren does not feel black just because he was raised as a black man, but by virtue of a cultural convention (the rule of hypodescent) which declares his father's "blood" irrelevant. In this sense, his daughter Tal—who has grown up as white and Jewish—is expected to *become* black, since she has known that her father is black:

> [Tal]: "I already have an identity, I didn't think I needed to get one in a new color…"
> [Warren]: "Look, you're black. I know it comes as a bit of a shock, but trust me, it's pretty damn amazing. You've inherited a great cultural tradition – think of it that way. But you're not white anymore. You never were. Sorry." (240)

Excessive categorization favors the creation and spread of cultural myths and stereotypes. Tal, for example, thinks that her new black identity entails dressing "ghetto style" and using hot sauce on her food, while Warren finds a certain difficulty in explaining to his daughter what "real blackness" is. He looks confused about what makes a person an "authentic" black. Thus, if in the passage above, he defines race in terms of blood and inheritance, in the following one, he passes to define it in terms of power relations:

> [Tal:] "It's like you think there's a race war, and you want me to choose sides."
> [Warren:] "Not a war … a cold war. And yes, there are sides."
> […] "There's Team White and there's Team Black, okay? You probably didn't even know you were in team white before. Most of Team White's members never do. They just think they're normal. But if you're black, and you go with Team White, that makes you a sellout. A traitor. And plus, you'll never be accepted as a full member if they know the truth about you. It's all good though.

> Because there's a Team Black where, okay, you may have to work sometimes to be accepted if you look like us, but your membership is clearly stated. In the bylaws."
> [Tal:] "Oh, great. Well, as long as I have a choice." (58)

In *Loving Day*, like in the other two texts analyzed, the relations between black and white people are evoked through the image of the war. However, in the so-called "post-racial era," it looks more like a cold war: an endless circle of unspoken fears and resentment, an illusory stillness hiding bombs ready to explode at any moment. Coming home after his long stay in Wales, Warren self-identifies with the feelings of rage and ressentiment that Philadelphia has always produced in him: "I am rage. I am anger. All the fear has been recycled. […] I. Am back. In Philly. […] Landing in the airport does not count. Sitting in a taxi can be done anywhere. This, this feeling, this, is Philly" (12). Nothing binds Warren to Germantown more than the feeling of outrage; thus, when he identifies with his neighborhood, he is experimenting with what Bryan S. Turner calls the "geographies of emotion:" those relations between humans and places which are defined by emotional ties.[7] Such emotional ties bring him to cultivate a sort of "reverse parochialism:" a form of affection/disaffection toward his birthplace that prevents him from developing a balanced perception of the surrounding reality and of himself, instead driving him into a state of deep disorientation. This affection/disaffection has to do with the ambiguous feelings of affection and rejection that he feels not only towards Germantown's poor and violent life, but toward the whole black experience.

[7] Bryan S. Turner, "Cosmopolitan Virtue. Globalization and Patriotism." *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19.1-2 (2002), 45-63: 45.

5.5 *Between Subjective and Universal, Attachment and Detachment: Towards a Cosmopolitan Irony*

According to Bryan S. Turner, irony is a cosmopolitan virtue in the Socratic sense of self-doubt or self-reflexivity. It is that capacity to distance oneself from one's culture which preludes to the achievement of a state of real appreciation for others. But for Turner, cosmopolitan ironic distance is possible only when one *has* a commitment to a place and knows how to cultivate attachment and detachment at once. Multiple perspectives and the capacity to switch from the white to the black cultural background (and vice versa) are just two examples of how Johnson creates this ironic style. As he states:

> Like, my humor—my sense of humor, I have an African-American influenced sense of humor—probably comes from watching Eddie Murphy tapes and Redd Foxx and tapes like that, listening to Bill Cosby tapes. But I also have an Irish-American sense of humor that's dry and self-deprecating and probably fairly bleak (laughter) that I get from my father.[8]

The difficulty of clearly distinguishing among ironic elements deriving from each of Johnson's cultural heritages, highlights the universal character of humor as a survival practice. Johnson in fact, points out that both Irish people and African American people came up with humor as a coping mechanism for oppression: "[…] to me, that was the universal language. And it was also like, you know, the way I can actually express myself in all those worlds and be heard."[9] Irony is therefore not only a way of dealing with rage and resentment, but a cosmopolitan practice able to hold both the particular and the universal. African/Irish irony is Johnson's way of overcoming not only Warren's rage but also the impera-

[8] Mat Johnson qtd. in Gross, "Mat Johnson on 'Loving Day' and Life as a 'Black Boy' Who Looks White."

[9] *Ibid.*

tive to choose only one of his heritages. Instead, it enables him to celebrate the specificities of each. It is also a liberating force: a way to overcome the state of aphasia which affects him as a mixed subject when he cannot find a proper way to articulate his own transcultural existence.

From the narrative point of view, irony is the dimension in which the distance between author and narrator emerges most clearly. When Warren makes fun of himself, the author is self-distancing from his alter-ego and, at the same time, anticipating the protagonist's process of self-liberation, so that the reader does not remain entrapped in Warren's self-humiliating view. Through self-humor, the author/narrator is also able to deconstruct myths and mythologies of the black and white cultural worlds, highlighting the absurdities of both, but also evidencing how much they have in common:

> I am a big guy, six four, weigh 225 naked, and I decide to act like I am a big man and I shoot upright, head for the room my father's work materials are in, go to grab the biggest thing I can find. This turns out to be a long wooden spear, an extension for a foam paint roller. I hold it with two hands. I am an African warrior! Who looks like a Celtic one. I grip it so hard that my hands become even more white […] (11)

According to a cosmopolitan reading, in this passage, Warren is again dominated by a profound fracture between the way his body is perceived from the outside (the surface of the *rift*) and the way he self-perceives it (the bottom of the *rift*). The inability to conciliate these two levels brings him to live an experience of racial performativity deriving from a process of continuous identification and disidentification with two different racial models of masculinity. However, through the parodic description of a racially ambiguous and frightened warrior, with the extension for a foam paint roller in his hand, Johnson mocks both the black and the white mythologies surrounding masculinity. Furthermore, he mocks one of the tropes of mixed-race literary tradition (the passing) which, in turn,

should have served to mock racial authenticity. In times when the black masculine body is continuously threatened and violated by white systemic oppression, the de(con)struction of the black male body (especially if in favor of the white one) may prove outrageous and counterproductive for the author, who supports the cause of black pride. In this passage, however, self-irony seems to overcome all racial rivalry as it reveals the absurdity of racial models. Thus, by mocking Warren—who mocks himself for trying to pass for an African warrior when he looks white—the author effectively mocks racial authenticity, racial mythologies, racial performance, his own alter-ego, and himself all at once. The result is so absurd and hilarious that it leaves no room for outrage!

Warren continues to amuse and move the reader with his constant failures; he is a deeply human character—not very brave, riddled with some egotisms, but basically good-hearted. The deep humanity of the protagonist has been emphasized by most reviewers. For example, Michael Schaub affirms that, although "it has become a cliché to describe a work of art as deeply human, it's tempting to call *Loving Day* exactly that, because Johnson gets at the heart of what it means to be a person."[10] However, if, on the one hand, Warren's profound humanity leads the reader to identify with him, on the other hand, the identification is never complete. No "sane" person, in fact, would share his obstinate determination to burn down a house for which he was offered a million dollars, especially when such an act could land him in jail versus affording him a legitimate means to pay for his newly found daughter's college education. But Warren, though very intelligent, is never completely rational and thus always becomes a victim of himself, according to the most classic picaresque tradition. Hence, the moment of laughter is also the moment of rational detachment, so that the reader—engaged in a cosmopolitan move—

[10] Michael Schaub, "Learning to Love, And Forgive, In Brilliant's 'Day'." Review of *Loving Day*, by Mat Johnson. *npr.books* (26 May 2015), www.npr.org/2015/05/26/408295998/learning-to-love-and-forgive-in-brilliant-day?t=1533378068910&t=1533711479176.

gets in and out of the story, continuously gaining the right distance to be critical without losing human touch. Moreover, as the author mocks his protagonist, irony represents a fracture between author and narrator, as the latter, exaggerating situations, challenges the autobiographical pact of truth.

Loving Day often proposes episodes where an excess of emotionality deriving from an inherited and everyday-experienced racial resentment (social level) obstacles the communication between the characters (individual level) and where the overlapping of the individual and the collective levels lets rage emerge. The following passage is an example: Warren, entering the rich building in which Tal's grandfather lives, encounters a black man working as a guard. Immediately, in Warren's mind, racial dynamics take over, and the meeting between the two men becomes tense:

> They got this brother dressed up like a general in the Protect White People Army [...] It's dark blue with a flippant sky-blue trim, a nice silly color to remind you that, while the bearer of these clothes has authority, he is also subservient and nonthreatening. I go to the desk, ask for a pen.
> "You ain't got one?" he asks. It's then that I realize we are enemies. [...] Does he think I'm white? No, a black man his age, and his position, would instinctively know not to show such disdain for a Caucasian. So he knows I'm black. When I remove a pen from my pocket and I sign my name in, he says, "I knew you was holding out." No way he would talk to a white boy like that. When I'm done filling out the time, he even says, "You going to let me see some ID or what?" I want to argue. But what I don't want to know is what it must be like to be a black man working up in here in this monkey suit for decades for these wealthy folks. I never want to know that, and this man has intimate knowledge of all that must entail. So I show my ID. He looks at it, intently, then says, "So, you the one that turned out to be Ms. Karp's father, huh?" When I don't say anything, he adds, "I remember her mum. Sweet girl. It's a damn shame what happened to her." (219)

This passage ironizes on many aspects of the racialized condi-

tion at the same time: (1) the black obsession with the external gaze, (2) the mulatto obsession with being misrecognized, and (3) the whole American society's obsession with racial categorization. Most importantly, it shows the negative consequences of an overlap between the individual and the social levels in human relations. Warren tends to feel an intrinsic solidarity with the guard in the name of resistance to white oppression (social level), while the guard expresses a trans-racial solidarity with Tal's mother who was seduced and then abandoned by Warren (subjective level). Warren immediately notices (and persistently points out to the readers) the state of subjugation to which the guard is subjected in his work, reflected in his ridiculous Disney-style suit which reveals his false authority. To the protagonist's eyes the guard is not a subject, but the object of the white society's duplicitousness, which invests some black citizens with authority and dignity while still structurally marginalizing and oppressing his community (the post-racial paradox). Although this reality should create an immediate empathy between the two, it does not; thus, Warren thinks that the only possible reason for this conflict is that the guard has mistaken him for white. All these considerations bring us to notice that, in Warren's mind, the guard's individuality disappears in the collective dimension of race and produces a double-double-consciousness. Warren never wonders whether the reason for the guard's hostility depends on something *he has done*, but instead he takes for granted that it depends on something *he is*: a white-looking man. Through such a misunderstanding, Johnson mocks the black DuBoisian obsession for the external gaze, of which he gives the mulatto version, which consists in the anxiety of passing for white or black. For the protagonist, racial identity is the primary and unique cause of human hostility or solidarity. As soon as the mystery is unveiled, we understand that the hostility stems instead from an interpersonal level: the affection of a black person (the guard) for a white pregnant teenager who was left alone. It is human compassion, and not racial issues, at stake this time. This human compassion, Johnson suggests, is what binds people who carry on their everyday lives

side by side, regardless of social difference. However, it is important to underline that the guard's affirmation of solidarity toward Tal's mother does not disclaim or minimize the fact that that black man objectively occupies a place of social and economic subjugation. Had Johnson not insisted so much on this, the passage could have been mistaken for a colorblind narrative, aimed at dismissing social difference in the name of a generic invocation of human brotherhood. But his insistence produces a deep reflection on race in the reader. Thus, there is nothing colorblind or post-racial in Johnson's claims against that radicalization of racial concerns or the unnecessary racialization of human conflicts, which hinder the creation of intersubjective, transracial solidarities. And there is nothing colorblind in his mockery of Warren's excessive racial concerns, which prevent him from focusing on all the other aspects of human coexistence, because he knows that social justice is a crucial factor in support of interracial cooperation. However, what is at stake here is individual responsibility—an issue belonging to the sphere of agency in a transracial, trans-communitarian dimension.

Johnson's irony takes the discourse to an intersubjective level (the cosmopolitan level), considering and putting into dialogue both the individual and social aspects of human identity, as well as focusing on the transformative potential of encounters between subjects. The way Johnson treats the racial issue in his novel rebalances the social and the individual levels, distinguishing them, and showing how their overlap and confusion (which occurs both in colorblind discourses and identity politics) can produce resentment, misunderstandings, and useless conflicts that negatively affect human encounters. Hence, Johnson's irony is cosmopolitan in its continuous negotiation of different dimensions—the individual and the communitarian, the subjective and the universal—but also in its decentering of race in favor of the individual and vice versa: a negotiation which, if avoided, creates a dialogic impasse (as seen in the aforementioned dialogue between Tosha and Warren).

5.6 *A Hallucinated Reality: The Absurd in* Loving Day

As part of its critique of dominant racial discourse, *Loving Day* brims with absurd examples of racial categories applied to various, unrelated aspects of human life. For example, Mr. Karp, introducing his granddaughter Tal to Warren, argues, "This girl, I can't handle her anymore. And Tal's like you. She's your people" (38). With this sentence, he suggests that the girl's wild behavior is not due to the fact she has just lost her mother and has never known her father, but rather to some essential wildness derived from her father's black blood. Following Mr. Karp's hypodescent logics, Warren agrees that "she's been passing for white" without even knowing it (39). The reader has the impression that the social function of racial categories is giving a certain sense of order to the chaos of social relations. Thus, as we have seen in the previous section, every inexplicable social behavior can be attributed to racial issues, because race functions as an endless source of vague answers to cultural, political, and economic issues. Embodying the spirit and views of the Obama era, Johnson's story emphasizes the paradox of race: that although races are a white-centered pseudo-anthropological social construct; although they vary according to needs of the dominant group, which has historically extended and narrowed its borders in order to include some groups and reject others; and although they are a consequence of racism and not vice versa; nobody seems disposed to abandon them or to use them only in service of anti-racist discourses. I agree with Fuentes Morgan who affirms:

> Johnson describes a society that, even as it asserts the presumed value of expanding traditional racial parameters, still views racial malleability askance and with great hesitation. It may be, then, that even in the claims that race may no longer matter—or that it does not matter in the ways that it used to matter—there is still a desire for the traditional and comforting racial categories, for the reification of that racial hierarchy. […] Despite claims to the contrary, the United States does indeed not only use race as

> shorthand for class and mobility but is profoundly desirous of race as it is the frame within which we understand identity. In it resides a focus that deeply shapes our understanding of the self as defined in opposition to the other.[11]

The author of *Loving Day* points to the difficulty of reasoning not merely "beyond" races (as colorblind discourses do) but against them, against their illogical logics, given that every discourse is dominated by the terms imposed by racism. The critics have always stressed that all discourses about race—even those that celebrate the richness of a race—are compromised by a white-centered, hierarchical view of the human. Thus, in the fictional world that Johnson has created to represent his own perception of the American society, consolidated racial hierarchies reassure the dominant group and, at the same time, provide a purpose and a pride (and sometimes also an excuse, as Obama criticizes) to the oppressed. In a few words, they provide a sense of order that the individualist American society is not able to offer. The clash between the chaos of reality and the human need to approach such disorder logically as well as the paradox of organizing society in systematized racial categories in order to defy the phenomenon which created them, constitute what I, drawing on Albert Camus, see as *the absurd* in *Loving Day*:

> What is absurd, however, is not the world *per se*, but the confrontation between its irrational character and the desire for clarity that clings incessantly in the human soul. Because the absurd is neither in man nor in the world, but in their common presence; stems from their antinomy and represents their only link. At the moment when the individual becomes aware of this, he lives only with what he knows, that is, with the awareness of the hopeless contrast between being and the world. With strangeness and detachment man reaches freedom, since having discovered that? the

[11] Fuentes Morgan, "Post What? The Liminality of Multi-Racial Identity".

> absurd is itself an act of revolt against it and represents a positive response to the senselessness of life.[12]

Warren's irony, which includes stand-up comedy, social satire, and puns, tries to make the absurd manifest, creating a moment of rational reflection upon the irrational character of the American public discourse of his age. *Loving Day* reflects the hallucinated post-9/11 era and, in particular, the period of Obama's presidency, in which America had to openly face its racial past. In the words of national reconciliation pronounced by Obama, the absurd appeared to rise to the surface of public discourse, but simultaneously, circumstances became ever more confusing. The more that affirmative action policies displayed the purported advancement of minorities, the more racist violence grew, and the more real equality seemed to be hindered.

5.7 *Cosmopolitan Irony As a Reaction to the Absurd*

According to Donald E. Pease's essay "Black Orpheus," what is usually triumphantly labeled the "post-racial era" (which we may consider as another achievement of American exceptionalism) was in fact one of the most turbulent eras in the country's history.[13] The America of Obama's presidency was supposed to reflect the calm rationalism of its president, but instead it hosted an incredible wave of racist violence. Pease argues that the atmosphere which reigned during Obama's presidential campaign revealed the feelings that animated public opinion in response to the black candidate's image:

> Trans-generational haunting might be the appropriate term to describe the strands of fantasy these [dialectical] images effected. […] Obama settled trans-historical ghosts haunting the relations

[12] Marzia Figliola, "Albert Camus e l'Assurdo" *L'indipendente* (25 May 2013). www.lindiependente.it/mdl-albert-camus-e-lassurdo/. My translation.

[13] Pease, "Black Orpheus", 1-28.

between generations by giving historical substance to American dreams and nightmares.[14]

Reading *Loving Day* according to Pease's interpretation, the ghosts of miscegenation who infest Warren's mansion and make his nights infernal may represent the world of the American subconscious, imprisoning the country into an oneiric condition, suspended between sleep and wakefulness, reason and fear, rationalism and the absurd. So, it is not by chance that as Warren approaches the Mélange Center's thought, the ghosts' visits (and their alleged sexual intercourse in Warren's house) intensify. Moreover, the moment when the protagonist is able to say, "I'm mixed" coincides with the moment in which Tal posts the video of the lovers/ghosts online and they become a national phenomenon. This corresponds to the creation of a new mythology—the First Couple mythology—which again confounds the terms of the real with those of the unreal.

To Warren's great disappointment, the people around him need to believe in something exceptional: in an interracial dream. Tal needs to believe in the First Couple's love and presence to handle the changes she is undergoing after meeting her real father and, above all, after the death of her grandfather Irv. These two events have led the girl to an existential crisis, which implies a re-configuration of her own identity in the conflicting terms of black and white. Hence, the video of a trembling shadow reflected in a window becomes, in her mind, a message of a reconciliation between the black and white peoples that she now sees in herself: the clash between the chaos of her new identity and her need to re-organize it according to two fictional and antithetical categories produces *the absurd*, the ghosts, the invention of social mythologies. The creation and visual reproduction of the First Couple's story is supposed to provide interracial love and sex with the officiality and sacredness of History, by extrapolating it from the realm of personal stories and sub-narratives to which it has been long relegated by the dominant

[14] Pease, "Black Orpheus", 13.

culture. In fact, when Roselyn (the school's principal) understands that she can use this ghost story to strengthen the movement and her authority in the community, the ghosts of interracial love exit from Warren's domestic space and become a public issue, a national issue: "What if they were the first?"—Roselyn asks, aiming to take possession of the mansion— "This is a historic area, you never know" (211). In the intergenerational passage, Johnson makes Tal the spokesperson of a hallucinated future reality, in which ghosts are the only possible manifestation of the real, but, through the figure of Roselyn, he also warns about the risk that this revelation becomes another contribution to the construction of a dominant, post-racial, and exceptionalist narrative. After all, it is American exceptionalism—in all its forms, even the most multicultural and progressive ones—which a transnational approach like cosmopolitanism wants to unmask.

In *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Ernst Behler argues that the ironic manner of expression can be described as an implicit critique of reason and rationality.[15] The more Warren develops a detachment from all forms of absurdity he sees in the society as well as in the school's community, the more his irony turns into a reaction strategy. Therefore, irony becomes more and more the tool through which Warren distances himself from those categories of being that oppressed him and that are now losing their coercive force. Self-detachment does not leave the protagonist indifferent but, rather, pushes him toward a greater awareness and a more critical participation in the domestic debate on race, taking up a definite cosmopolitan stance. Thus, on a metanarrative level, this is exactly what *Loving Day* does for its readers: it does not produce detachment or indifference but, rather, awareness. Thus, if cosmopolitan criticism of racial categories has often been under attack for attempting to defy an irrational issue with the tool of reasoning, irony represents Johnson's valuable alternative.

[15] Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 111.

5.8 *Redefinitions of Home and the Rift in* Loving Day

The themes of home and homelessness recur in *Loving Day* as in many other mixed-race texts of the Loving Generation. Here, I connect it to the critique of discourse developed so far as well as to the themes of the Movement Child, the mixed-race aphasia, the post-travel narrative which I treated in the previous chapters.

Looking back on his own birth, Warren is unsure whether he is the "by-product of a racialized eroticism or a romantic rebellion to social norms" (180), but we know that his parents were somehow involved in the civil rights movement. Although they have not paid special attention in raising their child as a biracial person, and we have no evidence that they considered him a political or social symbol, Warren perfectly suits the Movement Child stereotype by virtue of his nomadic status, his projection toward the future, his lack of a home in the world, and his need to find a new language into which to translate himself. Warren's living in the *rift* of races clearly emerges in the many passages where he complains that he is not black enough, where his laugh sounds bitter and his loneliness great:

> There is a "we," and I am included. I revel in the conspiracy. When the mandatory light-skinned joke is made, dismissing a prominent illustrator for not being black enough, I laugh loudest. Aha, those light-skinned folks, with their moderately less stigmatized lives. I don't care because I haven't been around black Americans in a group in a while and I miss the camaraderie. I miss my family. I want to belong in my family. I want acknowledgement of shared experience, worldview, ancestry. I have no more real family, I realize within my fragile bliss. My father's gone, Becks is gone, but in this moment it's less painful for me. I fit in and I don't fit in, but it feels so good not to be thrown out. (24)

Like Rebecca, Warren does not feel nostalgia for his past and the places where it took place. This makes him a cosmopolitan subject who is stuck in a dystopian present: lonely, broke, and disoriented.

However, the encounter with Becky in Wales provided him with a sense of home that he had never felt at home. It was transformative in the sense that he had a glimpse of what it means to be part of a family, to be accepted, but it was as ephemeral as a dream:

> Home. I go to my desk, try to draw it without pretending what the image will be. I find myself starting with a street, and then that street becomes Germantown avenue. I know its cobblestones better than any surface on earth. I know the story, that they were carried from England as ballast on the first ships, and then used to pave the road that stretches from here to downtown. Yet it offers no comfort in connection. Halfway into this image is about leaving this place, not loving it. That road for me is about getting the hell out, which has always been the central dynamic in my relationship to Germantown. So I scrap it, and think of Swansea. You made me feel like I have a home in this world. That if a great hand shook the planet, I wouldn't fall off. I wrote this at the bottom of an illustration I did for Becks, around the time I asked her to marry me. … I can fall off now. I can finally disappear into nothing. But Tal is here, and now I can't anymore. (174-5)

Johnson rewrites the concept of home in a cosmopolitan sense. After all, being "at home in the world" can also mean finding one's home in a community of people with whom you share objectives and expectations, regardless of the place this community is set. As an adult Movement Child, Warren lives suspended between childhood and adulthood, in an ever-lasting present: "Our fathers are dead," he says, "Tal and mine. We are all alone, together. Now we are completely in the present, the past having dissolved" (221). Again, we can interpret this sentence metaphorically as referring to the death of an entire generation of "Loving parents," who believed in a never-fulfilled future of reconciliation. But differently from what happens in Walker's and Obama's autobiographies, now Warren is the father, and this projects the reader right into a time in which mixed-race people are not the people of the future, but the present of U.S. society. These people are building, in a way, the national future.

The presence of Tal is not the only reason for Warren staying in Germantown. There is Sunita, whom he recognizes as "my tribe," that is, people who have decided to claim a right to self-identification regardless of appearance or hypodescent. Warren seems to prefer the concept of "tribe" to that of community or racial identity, as it represents a different form of affiliation. The distinction between tribe and community involves a reflection on community-based politics and other forms of aggregation which involve solidarity. In dialogue with Warren, Tosha accuses her friend of betraying the black cause by allying with mixed-race people; in fact, she interprets Warren's change in self-perception as a form of denying or betraying blackness as a whole:

> [Tosha] "We have a crisis. Right now. Not in the eighteenth century, not in the civil rights era. But right now. How does them quitting blackness help the Trayvon Martins out there? How does it help the Michael Browns? The Renisha McBrides, and all the black women out there struggling to hold it down? How does this running away from blackness not make it worse?"
> [Warren] "That's false equivalence. Having people acknowledge all of their ethnic heritage doesn't mean they're abandoning social justice."
> [Tosha] "But they're not just 'acknowledging.' They're trying to challenge the basic fiber of the African American identity. These people, these sellouts you have living up in your house, they're forming their own exclusive community—That's not 'acknowledging,' that's a cult." (239)

The author invites the reader to reflect again on the relationship between individual and community. Indeed, Tosha's concerns evoke the ethical question that underlies our whole discourse: how to preserve individual freedom without undermining the community's power and cohesion? What does it mean to belong to a community? Tosha's view of the Mélange school as a cult is not completely wrong: it uses a progressivist rhetoric and takes advantage of the creation of false mythologies, such as the "First Couple,"

to enhance an exceptionalist and celebratory view of mixedness which devalues blackness.

Although Warren is not convinced by the idea of a mixed "exclusive community," in the dialogue, the question of the social struggle remains unresolved: are the Mélange members willing to participate in the advancement of black people or are they just looking for recognition and visibility? Social struggle does not seem to be among the main points of their agenda, while asserting a socially recognizable identity is a priority. Thus, again, the text proposes two different approaches to the racial matter, the multicultural one and the cosmopolitan one, suggesting a possible conflict between recognition and participation. Warren, however, opts for a third way: introducing the idea of the tribe, he avoids presenting mixed-race people as a new identity to add to pre-existing ones, which would leave the whole system of racial categorization untouched. Thinking of himself as part of a mixed tribe allows Warren not to feel in conflict with his belonging to the black community, because the two affiliations are based on different bases. According to Fuentes Morgan, the value of the tribe is in its claim to free choice,; in its rebellion against the logics of racial ascription: "[i]n Warren's estimation, the tribal connection is marked by the choosing—by finding some connectivity with the other members outside of what is easily identifiable to outsiders." Claiming to be black and mixed (and not a mixed-black), Warren appropriates the very terms of racial identification by evading the logic of racialization, and he thereby preserves both his individual freedom and his ethical commitment: "Having people acknowledge all of their ethnic heritage doesn't mean they're abandoning social justice." Thus, it is not an incongruence that, at the of the book, the narrator refuses to take a definitive stance. He decides not to decide if he identifies as a mixed or a black person. He does not even mention the question, so as to eliminate any possible social conflict or separation.

5.9 *A Post-Travel Narrative*

Black White and Jewish and *Dreams from My Father* treat the events that immediately follow the protagonists' travels abroad in a quite hasty and superficial way. In the first, just a few pages sum up years of Rebecca's post-travel life, and the cosmopolitan conclusion, the "more expansive consciousness" (320) which Walker mentions in the last pages of the book, seems to come too early and unexpectedly, lacking the strength derived from a well-supported, longer discussion. Similarly, in *Dreams*, the chapters following Barack's experience in Kenya read too quickly and hurriedly: one must go back to the preface and the introduction to understand how different the author's current views are from those he had as a young man. But again, the imbalance of length is preponderant: the result is an entire book written from the black-or-white point of view of the young narrator, with just a few and not always distinguishable interventions by the adult Obama, versus a few pages of clearly cosmopolitan statements at the beginning and at the end of the book. As I have observed in relation to *Black White and Jewish*, it seems that both authors are impatient to reveal their changed mindsets and also reluctant to disclose the real impact that this change exerted on their everyday lives. In contrast, *Loving Day* provides just a glimpse of what happened during Warren's stay in Wales but details the process through which Warren, back in the States, re-elaborates the terms of his own racial identity with an awareness that he has certainly earned abroad: little by little, he begins to negotiate his young worldview with a new attitude informed by both his encounter with Becky and the following encounters with Tal and the Mélange. We discover, then, that he was in love with Tosha, but felt rejected for being too white and that Tosha felt betrayed by Warren's decision to marry Becky:

> "You married a white woman, let's talk about that."
> "What?"
> "Yeah, what were you thinking?"

> "I was just thinking. I'm marrying Becks. I'm moving on with my life."
> "Moving on? Don't you mean, running away?"
> "No, just moving on." *Past you*, I don't say. "Trust me, I've never felt blacker than in the streets of Swansea, Wales." *Or in my own bed with her*, I will not say either.
> "I'm serious, wasn't that part of it? You fleeing to Europe and into the arms of a white woman? The abandonment of blackness. Abandoning black women. Did it have to do with your mom?"
> "No! Look, people see mixed couples, they project their own issues onto them. Race traitors. Progressive heroes. Whatever. I saw people do this to my parents' marriage, and with mine. Me being with Becks was not about my mom, okay? It was not about black women." *It was Tosha abandoning me*, but I can't say this. (115, emphasis in the text)

The dialogue starts with an accusation, "You married a white woman." From Tosha's point of view, marriage is not an individual choice but a political act; not an encounter among individuals, but between groups: Tosha says that the act of marrying a white woman is like abandoning black "women" as a group, while Warren answers that it was about one woman, his beloved woman, who had abandoned him (for a darker man). The battle is fought on two different discursive levels: that of the individual dimension (Warren) and that of the collective, political dimension (Tosha). Again, the missed encounter between these two levels produces a state of aphasia similar to that evoked by Obama: the silence of what cannot be understood ("but this I can't say"). Tosha's inability to exist apart from the identity politics perspective is rooted in that above-mentioned circle of fear and resentment, which always leads the discourse to essentialist extremisms and which, Johnson seems to suggest, is sometimes justified, but not always. Tosha is so afraid of betrayal, that she never calls into question her relationship with Warren. Totally neglecting the level of human *individuality*, she never sees Becky as the woman with whom Warren fell in love for any reason other than being white (she does not even pronounce

her name) and, neglecting the level of *culture*, Tosha never pays attention to the fact that Becky is a *foreign woman* (a detail which could have been significant for Warren). In a few words, in Tosha's imaginary, Becky becomes the representative of a concept (whiteness), regardless of any kind of social, political, cultural, and human contextualization: in fact, she contraposes her (a European woman) to African American women.

This demonstrates not only a race-centeredness, but also an America-centeredness in the counter-narratives which Tosha represents; one that, to the eyes of a non-American reader, does not sound so very unlike white nationalist stances. Johnson, instead, shows another perspective on race: a non-American one, and he does it not from an external, but from an internal, point of view. Warren mildly rejects Tosha's accusations, having no real argumentation to offer. Actually, his denials may even sound a little dismissive of Tosha's racial preoccupations, in a colorblind sense. However, scraping the surface, we find "the rift" (the hidden connection) in his, "I never felt blacker than in Swansea, Wales." This affirmation may be interpreted as an attestation of the fact that Warren's mixed body was more recognizable in a predominantly white domain like Wales, but it is also possible that in Wales he was not required *to perform* his blackness in order to compensate for his bodily and cultural whiteness, while in the U.S. his blackness had to be continuously proven. Johnson, like Obama and Walker, describes the performative character of race:

> The words don't really matter. What I'm really doing is letting my black voice come out, to compensate for my ambiguous appearance. Let the bass take over my tongue. Let the South of Mom's ancestry inform the rhythm of my words in a way that few white men could pull off. It's conscious but not unnatural. I sometimes revert to this native tongue even when I have nothing to prove. (35).

Performing blackness comes naturally to Warren because it stems from an introjected *cultural* model. Hence, race is not essentialized, while culture is what counts most. Presumably, Warren

had fallen in love with Becky because she offered him a temporary shelter from the unresolved problems he had at home, but she left him when she realized that he did not want to grow up and take on the responsibility of having a family. In fact, he was still incomplete, confused, and displaced like a Movement Child. Despite all his integrational efforts, the protagonist did not undergo a real progression in Wales, living instead as suspended, unable to speak of himself: "And maybe I will follow her [Tal] to whatever city she escapes to, far away from the charred ruins. Maybe to London. Forget Team Black, Team White, just join Team Not from Here again" (61). Of course, the United Kingdom is not devoid of racial issues but, as Suki Ali points out, there, racism is something that is never overtly spoken, and maybe this provided Warren with an illusion of freedom.[16] Or, more probably, it was the status of stranger.

There is a moment in which the protagonist self-positions between Tosha and the Mélange community, by accepting a mixed-race definition only so long as it is conceived of as a "minor identity alteration" (61), and not another totalizing, fixed definition with which to substitute the black one:

> And it is a little thing, saying "I'm mixed" instead of "I'm black," yet it's like the difference between the comfort of wearing shoes that fit as opposed to bearing the blisters of shoes just one size too small." I might have said. It does feel like a relief, an actual relief of pain, just acknowledging—yes, I use the word *acknowledging*—all of who I am, to myself. (240, emphasis in the text)

By comparing the relief of finally self-declaring as mixed to the sensation of wearing shoes that fit, Warren claims that he has derived comfort out of the discomfort of not being represented by any community or any definition. This moment of cosmopolitan awareness, however, is not a definitive achievement but a glimpse of comfort, a temporary relief from a painful life. Warren will remain

[16] Ali, *Mixed Race, Post-Race*, 1-3.

confused and sad till the end of the book, when he gets drunk and tries to burn the house down.

In *Loving Day*, we could say, cosmopolitanism is not a solution, but a temporary change in perspective, an acquisition of awareness. Thus, although the book does not provide easy answers to the issues raised by mixedness, it nonetheless represents a step forward with respect to the impasse of American discourse on identity—an effort at changing the approach and the terms of discussion. Amused by Warren's endless ineptitude and incapacity to read the surrounding reality (obsessed as he is by the inflexibility of his own categories), the reader both identifies with his failures and develops a distance from them. This means that irony produces, at the same time, identification and disidentification in the reader.

5.10 *Centrifugal Forces*

The transnational element appears in *Loving Day* not only in relation to Warren, but also as a utopia for the whole Mélange community, which openly cultivates foreign languages and dreams to leave the country. Indeed, Warren's friend, Spider, points out:

> Come on, you know how mixies are. Every one of us has some place they heard about, where people look like us, where we could totally fit in. Morocco. Cape Verde. Trinidad. Man, I pretended to be Puerto Rican all through high school. *It's that dream: home.* To finally go fit somewhere. Isn't that what everyone here wants? To feel what it's like to be in the majority? To be home? (174, emphasis added)

It goes without saying that the Mélange's desire to leave the country is different from the African American dream of going back to Africa, because they do not imagine a place in the world to which they will *return*. According to Warren's view, in America they are strangers without being such: they are the strangers of social discourses, the ones whose presence is not even contemplated.

However, this does not mean that there is no place where they may get comfort out of the discomfort of being strangers. Indeed, this mixed community has developed a planetary outlook and a detachment from U.S.-centrism, which is manifested in the way the students continuously deconstruct American mythologies and challenge every form of nationalism. For this community, there seems to be no comfort at home, not even in the historical moments of greater unity. Warren is caustic about that:

> They play "God bless the U.S.A." by Lee Greenwood to make us leave. I've always found its corny country-infused paleo-patriotism comforting in a post-9/11 way, but few in the crowd agree with me. (190)

To conclude this analysis, we may say that *Loving Day* provides a brilliant representation of the complexity of racial issues today, especially when seen from the point of view of an "aspirational authentic black," mixed race man. In approaching mixedness, Johnson's criticism is specifically black and black-concerned, but it is not addressed to just one community. Johnson's irony belongs, in a very subjective way, to all the peoples who have felt the oppression of the external gaze, regardless of whether it occurred on a social or individual level. His irony is neatly anti-systemic without being colorblind. But, differently from most counter-narrative voices, the author is not skeptical and suspicious of those discourses which doubt the need to maintain races to fight back against racism. On the contrary, his autobiographical novel mocks over-suspicion and encourages the construction of transracial forms of solidarity. Finally, the novel shows how a cosmopolitan approach can be applied to non-privileged and non-sophisticated characters and discourses.

CONCLUSIONS
A LOOK BACKWARD (AND FORWARD)

With regard to the ethical question that opened this book, *What can I do for others?*, the analyses of Walker's, Obama's, and Johnson's autobiographies have shown how complex the implications of the issue of solidarity are and, more specifically, how difficult it was for the young authors to determine who these others were, what to do for them, and whether their agency in support of the others would in a way substitute identity in the pursuit of membership.

Certainly, their three autobiographies extend the idea of membership to the entire world, responding to a planetary impulse that was animating the country at the time of their production and publication. Thus, although the authors remark their main allegiance with the American black community, through the transnational element, they also develop an apperception (and narration) of themselves capable of transcending racial binaries and community boundaries and attaining the universal community of oppressed and outcast people. The foreign countries they have visited or sojourned in represent, therefore, a more intimate space rather than a geopolitical one. Here, the condition of strangerhood offers them a truce from identification constraints and, more importantly, allows them to rethink the terms of belonging to any community as reciprocal recognition, commitment, and responsibility. At the end of these travels, they will be perfectly conscious that, whereas the distinction between what is white and what is

black can become blurred at the level of identity, the political distinction between oppressed and oppressor persists and cannot be avoided or overcome by post-racial fantasies (*Loving Day*) or racial fluidities of any kind. This, as we have seen, means that the three authors base their racial identity on political identity and not vice versa, overturning the perspective of identity politics and adopting a neo-cosmopolitan mindset.

The confluences between the mixed-race and the neo-cosmopolitan conditions have emerged more and more clearly from the texts. New cosmopolitanism's post-colonial and anti-imperialist calling (which distinguishes it from classic and modern cosmopolitanisms) offered effective interpretative keys for the main phases of self-development described by the three authors: the transition from a state of constant non-belonging to a state of in-betweenness (characterized by the ability to inhabit more than one place and use more than one language at once) and the maturation of an identity based not on recognition and identification, but on the sense of affiliation with a human community of oppressed individuals. Another aspect of the cosmopolitan idea which suited the authors' positions more than the multiculturalist one is that, while the latter focuses on collective identities, cosmopolitanism deals with that intermediate space between the universal (*cosmos*) and the particular (*polis*) and investigates subjectivity in both its individual and relational dimensions. This study suggests that such an approach is useful when examining hybrid situations, in which the subject cannot (or will not) fully identify with the group (a *leitmotif* in mixed-race literary studies). In fact, what emerges from my research about the so-called Loving Generation is that their choice of a monoracial-black or multiracial-black identity revolves around the relationship that each author/character has developed with blackness both as a concept (an interiorized ontological category) and as a social and political reality (a collective experience). In some cases, the authors' views are strongly affected by the ideals of the early civil rights movement which inspired their parents, although they struggle with the previous generation and

its aspirations. Within such a cultural framework, whiteness works for them in three different ways: as a cultural background through which they articulate their criticism toward a too restrictive view of blackness; as an emotional connection which pushes them to become cultural mediators (in Walker's words, "walking bridges"), and as special access to different means of social and economic emancipation. However, rarely is whiteness presented as a valuable or aspirational identity: most of the time it represents the threat of a compromise with the dominant group.

Walker's, Obama's, and Johnson's approaches to race and racial struggle display three traditional cosmopolitan elements: (1) *individuality* as a form of self-assertion vis-à-vis excessive forms of communitarianism: "I," as an independent, not-fully-identified social agent. (2) *Citizenship* as the utmost place of social struggle: "I am a citizen," that is, a view of identity as a form of voluntary affiliation or political activism. (3) *A global, transnational view of identity* that liberates the authors from the constraints of national symbolic identities: "I am a citizen of the world" is for the authors an affirmation of loyalty to universal humanness prior to all communitarian ones. As the authors demonstrate, this neocosmopolitan identity is a matter of pragmatism, performed day by day through individual choices. In this sense, we can speak of a performative cosmopolitan experience. On the level of narration, mixed-race performative cosmopolitanism is hard to express since it cannot rely on a given language or pre-existent discursive practice. Therefore, the authors are unable to express their existential experiences without falling into the usual symbolic identities attributed to mixed subjects (especially black/white ones). This inability produces a painful process of continuous and endless self-translation into the languages of both whiteness and blackness, the three authors' only effective strategy for eluding categorization. On a metafictional level, such lack of words sounds like a sharp criticism of the American discourse on race. Hence, through their self-narrations, Obama, Walker, and Johnson overcome the limits of the debate surrounding the Loving Generation, subvert racial

clichés of the "tragic mulatto," and reconfigure the image of the Movement Child. Their approach exceeds the borders of all discursive practices around mixed-race identity enacted so far and brings the attention back to the individual right to claim an identity based on experience and a sense of communitarian responsibility, rather than founded on inherited, essentialized, and externally ascribed categories. Thus, Walker and Obama find their identity in political activism on behalf of the black community, without renouncing their other bonds, while Johnson, at the end of *Loving*, suggests an exit from the constraints of the national discourse in favor of a universal, ethical approach to human life, which is neither color-blind nor color-coded.

Looking backward, the case studies of *Black White and Jewish*, *Dreams from My Father*, and *Loving Day* challenge the interpretative approaches adopted so far by the majority of literary critics about the mixed-race narratives of that time, revealing that the multiculturalist categories of identity and representation do not capture the overall message of this generation, whose self-narratives seem aimed at self-affirmation as well as at the affirmation of a chosen membership in the black community earned by loyalty and solidarity. However, looking forward, it would be interesting to investigate whether (or to what extent) a neo-cosmopolitan approach to mixed-race issues would also suit more recent mixed-race writings and the agenda of today's mixed-race studies. Let us consider, for example, the statement that the Critical Mixed-Race Studies Association published on its website after the murder of George Floyd, in 2020. The title is "In Solidarity with BLM" and it presents a very pragmatic research/action program oriented to the dismantling of anti-black racism:

> We the board of the Critical Mixed Race Studies Association appreciate the statements of solidarity in support of Black Lives Matter, yet we also acknowledge that many of those do not come with substantiated action behind them. To address this within our association, we are clear where we stand and will do more

> than just acknowledge systemic problems of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and racial injustice.[1]

The points emerging from the rest of the statement define the unequivocal position of the mixed-race community toward the black communities' global struggle against white supremacy. The transnational orientation of this statement reflects the current attitude of a number of organizations in defense of black lives and rights, like BLM, which defines itself as an "expansive" movement that must "move beyond the narrow nationalism that is all too prevalent in Black communities" and "ensure we are building a movement that brings all of us to the front."[2]

Once involved in the struggle, "In Solidarity of BLM" warns that mixed-race support cannot be just declared but must be actualized through social, financial, and political action, through the education of new generations and "necessary conversations" in private contexts.[3] Finally, from its appeal to non-black identified mixed people to consider "how mixed-race/multiracial has been wielded or framed in ways that perpetuate anti-Blackness,"[4] we deduce that the political appears disconnected from identity issues: the stress is on what the readers will *do* rather than what they *are*, and the urgency of representation/recognition that has marked the last ten to fifteen years of the mixed-race debate has left some room for reflections of relational issues, both on the local and the global levels. In short, although pro-black commitment is not new to the mixed-race community, now it seems more urgent.

[1] Rudy P. Guevarra, Kelly Jackson, Alexandrina Agloro, Chinelo L. Njaka, Haley Pilgrim,

Sarah Yang Mumma, Naliyah Kaya, Alma Villanueva (eds). "In Solidarity with BLM," *Critical Mixed Race Studies*. https://criticalmixedracestudies.com/in-solidarity-with-blm/.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Ibid*.

In conclusion, in addition to offering a critical contribution on hitherto unexplored aspects of the works analyzed, this volume proposes an original approach to the relationship between study areas that have been rarely brought together so far. The use of new cosmopolitanism as an interpretative framework for self-writing of the Loving Generation may contribute to mixed-race literary criticism and further studies on transracial solidarity.

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