PASSING, PASSAGES, AND PASSKEYS: POST-CIVIL RIGHTS SATIRISTS

UNLOCK THE MASTER’S HOUSE

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By

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ABSTRACT

In the post-civil rights era, which is marked by the eradication of legalized racial boundaries, racial passing should be unnecessary and obsolete. Yet contemporary satirists have found satiric portrayals of racial passing to be productive on two levels. On a plot-level, they use passing to interrogate contemporary racial subjectivity and to both explore racial advances and to critique persistent racial inequities. On a structural level, they write fiction that challenges the prescriptive and restrictive aesthetic criteria that they believe African American fiction is required to meet. Ultimately, this fiction offers dynamic critiques of contemporary racial identity and textual production. These authors use satire to examine how the fictional depiction of racial identities/bodies informs, depends on, and dictates the textual body and vice versa. The purpose of the study is to draw on two parallel contemporary literary theories, racial passing and satire, in order to analyze the works of five of the most important and recognized contemporary satiric writers of the post-civil rights generation: Percival Everett, Paul Beatty, Mat Johnson, Trey Ellis, and Adam Mansbach. Each author uses his satiric fiction to enact new, yet distinct, models that challenge what they see as overly prescriptive and limiting ideas of African American fiction.
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CHAPTER 1

The Contemporary Discourses of Racial Passing: Repetitions, Reverberations, Resonances, and Re-workings in Post-Civil Rights Satire

Racial passing, traditionally defined as a light-skinned African American passing for white, might be considered obsolete in the post-civil rights era. The logic of the racial pass—to conceal one’s ‘true’ identity to pass for something they were not in order to enter spaces, gain access, and to secure legal, political, and cultural rights denied to them on the basis of their racial designation—should be unnecessary in the post-civil rights era in which unprecedented civil rights have been extended to African Americans. However, for contemporary satirists, the discourses of passing illuminate the paradoxes and complexities of racial identity and textual production in the post-civil rights era. More specifically, the discourse of racial passing is a way for the satirist to both to articulate the contest over the legitimacy and power inherent in fixed racial identities and racial boundaries and to resist such fixed identities and boundaries. These contemporary African American satirists include Percival Everett, Paul Beatty, Mat Johnson, Trey Ellis, and Adam Mansbach. The purpose of the following dissertation is to investigate how

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1 Several terms have emerged to name the artists from this generation. Trey Ellis coined “new black aesthetic,” Nelson George “post-soul” and Greg Tate “post-nationalist.” Gayle Wald uses “post-civil rights” and I employ her term throughout.

2 These artists are a part of a larger generation of artists that was first identified in the late 1980s. Village Voice columnist Greg Tate and satiric novelist Trey Ellis each wrote a heady, jubilant manifesto celebrating this new generation of artists. Both Tate and Ellis champion the “new” black identity—middle class, well educated, and culturally savvy artists and intellectuals who are simultaneously influenced by a variety of cultures and, as Ellis stated, are “true to the black” (242).
these satirists draw upon passing discourses to reinvigorate and rework questions about black identity and black fictional production. 3

The Discourse of Racial Passing

For contemporary African Americans generally, and satirists more specifically, the discourse of racial passing is still significant. 4 The 2008 presidential election highlighted the contemporary relevance of racial passing as a critical concern to the satirists of the post-civil rights generation. The infamous cartoon that graced the cover of The New Yorker underscored the struggles of this generation to navigate racial identity and how the discourse of racial passing is being deployed. More specifically, the discourse of racial passing was, and is, the critical site of contests over the legitimacy and power inherent in the existence of fixed racial boundaries. This satiric cartoon, through its invocation of passing, highlights the same complexities of post-civil rights identity that interests the satirists. It is utilized herein as an extended example.

President Obama and the Cover of The New Yorker

In terms of race, The New Yorker cover (Figure 1) exemplified the post-civil rights conversations about the relevance of racial categories, the role of education in racial

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3 I use the term “black fictional production” to refer to these authors’ interest in: 1) how black identity is and should be represented in fiction; 2) how stereotypic images of blackness are circulated in mass media; 3) how the work is received by professional and lay readers.

4 This interest in passing is reflected in both an emergence of memoirs focused on familial stories of passing and in renewed scholarly interest in passing. In The Color of Water (1996) James McBride writes about his Jewish mother who passes for black. In One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life -- A Story of Race and Family Secrets (2007) Bliss Broyard, daughter of the famous critic and writer Anatole Broyard, writes about growing up white in Connecticut. In Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black (1995) by Gregory Howard Williams, Williams chronicles his journey from white to black after his father reveals he has been passing for white. For the new scholarly studies on passing, see the literature review in this chapter in the section “Triple Duty, Triple Threat: The Evolving Discourses of Passing and Satire.”
advancement, and the persistence of social, political, and class-based inequalities. The cartoon effectively illustrated how contemporary discourses of racial passing can be deployed to discredit, disempower, and disenfranchise African Americans by questioning their national, political, and cultural allegiance. Against a backdrop of an Osama Bin Laden portrait and a burning American flag, the Obamas, Barack in traditional Muslim garb, and Michelle wearing fatigues, sporting an Afro and toting an AK-47, stand in the oval office knocking victorious fists. Blitt’s cartoon, entitled *The Politics of Fear*, was intended to skewer and lampoon the political rumors surrounding the Obamas.

![Figure 1. Cover of The New Yorker](image)

The cartoon suggested that Obama’s opposition believed that Obama’s quest for the presidency was disingenuous. While the association with Islamic terrorism was new, it resonated with the persistent association between blacks and violence in general, and black liberation and violence in particular, in popular media. The cartoon intended to
show how, once the Obamas were in the White House, the inner sanctum of American power, they would reveal their agenda to undermine the United States (U.S.) politically, culturally, and economically.

The cover implies that Obama’s opponents saw Obama’s racial identity as what cultural critic Amy Robinson has identified as an “epistemological guarantee” (723). In other words, their race, as identified by their racial features (skin color, features, and hair texture) provided assurance to what they knew. More specifically, visible racial markers (skin color, hair texture, and physical shape of the lips, nose, and butt) are thought to indicate one’s intelligence, character, and most broadly, one’s worldview. In the case of President Obama, due in part to his biracial ancestry, the guarantee was bifurcated. On the one hand, his bi-racial ancestry, international travels, and Harvard education made him too cosmopolitan and too global to be authentically black; his community organizing, his association with 1960s terrorist Bill Ayers, and the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, made him too local, too provincial, and too narrowly concerned with the political agenda of American minorities.⁵

Even the proving of one’s intelligence by earning an Ivy League degree was not sufficient to erase or replace Obama’s supposedly ‘true racial nature.’ The cartoon worked by inverting ‘the truth’ that was suspected inside, to the outside to expose and ridicule the fallacy of race as an epistemological guarantee. While the specific charges of

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⁵ The national news coverage of the Jeremiah Wright-Obama controversy was extensive. This controversy was covered widely from the Los Angeles Times to the New York Times and from ABC News to CNN to BBC. For more information, see as an example: Brian Ross’ article “Obama’s Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11” on abcnews.com; Elliot McLaughlin’s article “Rev. Wright More Than a Sound Bite, Obama’s Ex-Pastor” on cnn.com; James Rainey’s article “For Obama, is the Wright Issue Over Or Just Beginning?” in the Los Angeles Times.
Black Nationalism and Islam were unique to the Obamas, the cartoon highlighted the complexities of African American identity in the post-civil rights era.

The reaction of contributing *Newsweek* editor Eleanor Clift is emblematic of the reactions to the cover and highlights the problems with reading satire: It is not unusual for a reader to read satire literally. In Clift’s case, she argued, “they're spreading images that are untrue and deepening a perception that Obama is not what he says he is” (“A Perception Problem”). Furthermore, even for those readers who understood the cover as satiric, the fact that the cover could be misread as literal representation of ‘the truth,’ especially by the ill-informed, ignorant, or racist, was what troubled them.

A second cartoon from *The Washington Post* (Figure 2) perfectly captured these overlapping issues of satire and of reading. After he indicates, “But one’s ironic,” the character deadpans, “The sophisticated reader can spot the difference.” The purpose of satire, traditionally defined by Northrop Frye as an attack on vice and a support for virtue, is accomplished by ridiculing the belief that the Obamas are passing by hiding their anti-American affiliations. However, rather than reading the cover satirically, many readers read the cover literally, and therefore the cover generated immediate outrage. The cover provoked the public, and the Obama campaign, *The New Yorker* readers, the media, and even John McCain voiced swift condemnation of the cover as offensive.
The negative responses highlighted how the problems of reading, central to both race and satire, converge to produce errant reactions.

**Overview of this Project**

This project interrogates how satirists, through the use of passing discourse and literary traditions of passing narratives, allow writers a way to speak to the new complexities of African American identity in the post-civil rights era. They utilize discourses of passing to closely examine contemporary African American identity in all its complexities for a group that has historically been considered homogeneous, but whose post-civil rights progress has been experienced unevenly. Equally importantly, contemporary satirists pay persistent attention to all aspects of literary production including the writing process, publishing industry, and audience reception. For these satirists, questions about the physical body are deeply intertwined with questions about...
the textual body. For instance, satirists forcefully interrogate both “Who is black?” and “What is a black text?”

To fully understand these works, it is crucial to contextualize the work of these satirists. The next three sections provide background. The first section provides historical context by outlining the class struggles that are central to the work of these satirists. The second section focuses on the evolution of literary theories of passing, because passing is an implicit and explicit subject of their texts. Finally, the third section traces both the developments in African American studies of humor and the evolution of satiric theory with a particular emphasis on how these theories have conceptualized satire’s role in breaking generic conventions and boundaries.

Unprecedented yet Uneven Access to Power and Privilege In the Post-Civil Rights Era

An entire generation of writers now in their late 40s have benefited from the civil rights advances of the late 1950s and 1960s. The passing of key civil rights legislation including the desegregation of public schools through Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), the outlawing of the poll tax with the 26th amendment (1964), and the Civil Rights Acts (1965) prohibiting racial discrimination ushered in an unprecedented era of access to education, employment, and voting for all African Americans. With these legislation changes, it seems that passing would be irrelevant. After all, who needs to pass from black to white, a move presumably made primarily to gain economic and legal privileges, when all are equal? Yet, the discourse of passing remains alive and pertinent

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6 Passing has long been associated with the economic privileges that it bestows the passer. See, for example, Judith Berzon, Steven Belluscio, and Elaine Ginsberg. For examples in passing literature, see
because it is a cogent shorthand for both inter- and intra-group differences.

Perplexing gaps remain. Not only do African Americans as a group lag behind educationally and economically, but also, despite a growing black middle-class, there is a large and growing urban poor. In each of these areas, education, incarceration, employment, and voting advances are uneven at best. Statistics reported in “Vital Signs: Statistics That Measure the State of Racial Inequality,” a project of the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, are illustrative. For instance, while in 1996 73.8% of African Americans 25 years and older had completed high school, the number of black men enrolled in college or graduate school (556,000) was outstripped by the number of men incarcerated in federal or state prisons, or local jails (711,600). In 1996, only 1,158 African Americans graduated from a medical school in the U.S. and only 1,315 African Americans earned doctorate degrees. So, while advances have been made for some African Americans, for many others historic inequalities persist.

Since the gains and disadvantages for African Americans are uneven it has meant that, despite the gains made by a growing black middle class, an urban poor has grown exponentially. The dilemma of the black urban poor has preoccupied historians, political scientists, sociologists, and cultural study scholars as well as prominent black public intellectuals. For instance, prominent and well-respected sociologist William Julius Wilson coined the term “urban underclass” and identified a distinct class of blacks who forgo what he considers the norms and morals of mainstream society in order to maintain a pervasive culture of poverty. Cornel West diagnosed nihilism, a reworking of the culture of poverty, which also blames black’s condition of poverty on their internal

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), George Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931), and Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1928).
psychological state. In both cases, these thinkers shift the blame of poverty from systemic and structural issues to the poor themselves.⁷

As African Americans have been integrated educationally, they have gained access to knowledge that has profoundly changed what cultural experiences African Americans may have. As African Americans are exposed to a wide variety of other cultures and integrate those cultures into their own experience, then what writers consider culturally appropriate representations of African American cultural experiences also shifted and expanded.

Exposure to Western theory, for example, has profoundly changed discussions and also highlighted some of the central issues in the debate surrounding African American theory. For some, there has been agreement that “white” or Western theories of literature have little to do with African American literature or experience, and when applied to African American texts, do a disservice to that text.⁸ Others, primarily in passing discourse itself, have highlighted the heterogeneous nature of the African American experience and their impact on the text both in terms of literary production and output. This tidal shift in the understanding of how theory and literary production function has had an impact on every aspect of theory of the last 20 years. Perhaps most importantly, it has helped created nuanced understandings of satire. Satirists have shifted away from targeting white racism, oppression, and structural inequities to critically examining internal conflicts within African American communities.

⁷ For an persuasive critique of the scholarly discourses used in the urban underclass debate, please see Madhu Dubey’s essay “Post-Modernism as Post-Nationalism? Racial Representation in US Black Cultural Studies”.

⁸ For the most famous public articulation of this debate please see the exchange between literary scholars Joyce Ann Joyce and Henry Louis Gates and Houston Baker in New Literary History. See Joyce Ann Joyce’s essay “The Black Cannon” and “Who the Cap Fit” and see Henry Louis Gates’ and Houston Baker’s response in “What’s Love Got To Do With It?”
Each of the authors in the present dissertation arose from a generation in which the access to opportunity has been unprecedented, while contemporary forms of racism, which are often subtle and nuanced, are still present. They are interested in the ways in which racial pathologies are still used to limit opportunities.

**Triple Duty, Triple Threat: The Evolving Discourses Of Passing and Satire**

I argue that, most distinctively, contemporary satiric passing novels incorporate and then shift the questions of racial subjectivity inherent in racial passing from the individual subject or main characters of the novel to the novel itself (i.e. from the physical body to the textual body). The result is a dynamic interplay between readers, text, tradition, and historical political context. While early African American fiction writers incorporated acts of passing into their plots (textual) and even wrote with hidden secondary themes (sub-textual)\(^9\), contemporary satirists have tended to incorporate outside texts (inter-textual) to comment, often pointedly, on literary production and the African American cannon (meta-textual). To fully appreciate and understand how satires of passing operate, I will first outline two parallel paradigm shifts in literary scholarship on passing and in literary scholarship on satire, respectively.

These developments are parallel and both have significantly nuanced our understanding of these terms. I should note that while each theory has evolved in important ways, they also each have significant avenues still open for critical inquiry. While passing scholarship has grown exponentially, for instance, it has been focused almost exclusively on late 19th and early 20th century texts with little examination of

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\(^9\) For the most famous example of an argument regarding a passing novel’s subtext, see Deborah McDowell’s essay “It’s Not Safe. Not Safe at All: Sexuality in Nella Larsen’s Passing” in which she argues that there is a hidden subtext of lesbian sexual desire in Larsen’s novel.
contemporary texts. Satiric theory has evolved equally significantly, but rarely focuses on or discusses African American texts.

**Literary Passing: A Paradigm Shift in Critical Understanding**

Passing from black to white or from white to black is a politically charged act, so fiction that has focused thematically on rendering the passing act into fiction has often been, until recently, primarily understood through a simplistic ideological lens. Since the late 1980s scholars have utilized feminist, queer, and cultural studies frameworks to offer an increasingly sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the passing novel as a multivalent text. In fact, satires, which purposefully distort, exaggerate, and lampoon discourse, employ both popular and scholarly understandings of passing. For this reason, it is not as important to settle on the “legitimate” interpretation of passing; instead, it is essential to understand the circulation of the discourse, since it is the satirist’s source material. Further, contemporary criticism is doubly relevant because it is informed by and reflective of contemporary theories: scholars use current theories to offer new and substantially revised interpretations of older literature. While contemporary scholarship focuses primarily on creating new understandings of late 19th and early 20th century texts, these revelations are useful to comprehending contemporary satires.

A profound critical shift in the interpretation of early passing narratives was driven largely, although not exclusively, by black feminist efforts to recover the work of early African American women writers. As these feminist scholars painstakingly argued, this work had previously been dismissed and denigrated solely on a largely unfair and

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10 Both Phillip Brian Harper and Amy Robinson argue the opposite, that passing is not a political strategy (Harper 382 and Robinson 255). However, I argue that the debates surrounding the interpretation of passing novels and their meaning are, indeed, very politically charged.
inaccurate ideological basis. More specifically, it was assumed that mulatto or passing characters were simply vehicles for a white-identified ideology.\textsuperscript{11}

**Passing Defined**

At its simplest, “literary passing” is a fictional representation of the passing act (Belluscio 11). Currently, scholars agree that the power of passing is in its meaning and its ability to disrupt racial categories. For instance, literary critic Judah Bennett in *Passing*, asserts that passing narratives are “those stories involving the dissembling of one race (usually black) as another (usually white)” (1-2). It is because passing texts involve the ‘dissembling of one race’-- that visibility -- whether or not we see someone as black or white -- is a crucial element. As Amy Robinson contends, passing “emerges as a challenge to the very notion of the visual as an epistemological guarantee” (250). To properly identify and classify a subject, viewers rely on their powers of observation to detect, classify, and categorize physical characteristics including skin color, nose shape, hair texture, and body types. The issue of an epistemological guarantee is further complicated within literary passing because it first and foremost is an act of reading that depends on the reader’s astuteness. For this reason, Amy Robinson passing as primarily a “skill of reading” (716). She concluded that this skill of reading depends largely not on what one sees, but on what one knows. In fact, she suggested that we replace “visibility and invisibility with an acknowledgement of multiple codes of intelligibility” (716).

Therefore, the power in passing is attributed to its ability to subvert the dominant societal order. For instance, Gayle Wald sees passing as creating “‘these openings’ which might also allow writers to imagine new narratives of identity, agency and

\textsuperscript{11} This development in the scholarship will be outlined further below.
subjectivity” (6-7). This sentiment is echoed by Ginsberg who noted “the positive potential of passing to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with the multiple subject positions and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress” (16). Yet, I side with Kawash, who cautioned against a purely celebratory vision. She historicizes her study within the reality of the color line. She declares: “…we as critics are confronted with the troubling discord between what we know as good antiessentialists, that culture is fundamentally heterogeneous, and what we see represented and reflected in everyday life, namely, that the color line is as intransient as ever” (Kawash 3). These multiple meanings of the passing act allow the satirists to use passing in their novels as a rich avenue of inquiry.

In fact, the primary goal of satirists is to disrupt intelligibility, so that texts defy and rupture racial expectations. To understand the paradigm shift in passing fiction, Robinson’s cultural studies analysis of the passing act is incredibly useful. In brief, Robinson identified how passing often creates a triangle between “a reader,” “a dupe,” and “the passer.” Although she employed this triangle specifically to understand the actual passing act in the real world, I see it as a highly applicable literary context. Robinson defined “reader” not as literal reader of novels, for instance, but rather used “reading” in its vernacular usage of seeing and interpreting. She contended that a passing act occurs when the passer, who is being accurately read and recognized by the reader deceives a member of the out-group, the dupe. However, the triangle can also be a means of understanding the passing act in literature. I argue the author, the text, and the reader form a triangle in which the author challenges and often frustrates the reader’s ability to
interpret the text. Therefore, a knowledgeable and sophisticated reader is required. In the scholarly paradigm shift, it is the sophistication of the scholarly reader that has shifted our understanding of passing.

**Critical Shifts in the Understanding of 20th Century Passing Narratives**

The shift in the literary understanding of passing began with the groundbreaking essay by Deborah McDowell, “No Safety, No Safety at All,” in which she forwarded her argument that although the overt textual theme of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* is race, the subtext is lesbian desire. She asserted:

Larsen envelops the subplot of Irene’s developing if unnamed and unacknowledged desire for Clare in the safe and familiar plot of racial passing. Put another way, the novel’s clever strategy derives from its surface theme and central metaphor—passing. It takes the form of the act it describes. Implying false, forged, and mistaken identities, the title functions on multiple levels: thematically, in terms of racial and sexual plots; and strategically, in terms of the narrative’s disguise (624).

McDowell deserves substantial credit for opening up new avenues of literary analysis within racial passing. In the subsequent decade, scholars focused intensely on offering new interpretations of passing in early African American literature.¹²

At the center of this critique is the challenge to the primacy of a vernacular frame with which to understand early African American texts. For instance Ann DuCille theorized:

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¹² See also David L. Blackmore’s “‘That Unreasonable Restless’: The Homosexual Subtexts of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” for a discussion of homosexuality in Larsen’s *Passing* (1929). Specifically, he focuses on Irene’s husband, Brian, and the subtext which indicates that Brian is a gay man.
…this racial litmus test has misread the aesthetics and politics of much of the early work of African American authors. These authors’ interventions at the level of form as well as content represent highly innovative, highly political and narrative strategy that African American literary history often have seen as merely imitating the white rhetorical modes of white American writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe (7).

Within the view that DuCille represents, one of the texts that has received widespread attention especially for its literary strategies, is James Weldon Johnson’s *An Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which “passes” as autobiography even though it is actually fiction.

This emphasis on textuality is also reflected in Betsy Erkilla’s *Mixed Blood and Other Crosses: Rethinking American Literature from the Revolution to the Culture Wars* (2005):

The relations among blood, purity, culture, and national representation that would continue to frame not only Dickinson studies but literary studies more generally in the post-World War II period lend credence to Toni Morrison’s observation that the passions aroused by the canon wars arise out of a fear of ‘miscegenation’ as previously marginalized groups seek to make incursions ‘into a Eurocentric stronghold.’ ‘Canon building is Empire building,’ she says; ‘Canon defense is national defense’. What Morrison’s formulation suggests is the ways contests over literature and culture—over what counts as literature and who gets to speak for or represent a given culture—get intimately bound up with questions of blood,
of consanguinity, of what bodies and texts appear to belong or not belong within an always already pure and consanguineous European or specifically national American literary tradition (31).

For Erkilla:

The authentication of Jacobs’s authorship of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) has shifted the focus away from disputes over the text’s complicated and hybrid genealogies (is it black or white, fiction or history, literature or politics?). These kinds of questions and their application to early literature demonstrate the ways that African American literature always already has addressed these complexities of ‘hybrid genealogies’. So, what becomes important in contemporary literature is the specifics about how that happens, but the general principals remain the same” (34).

Satirists wrap these issues of individual agency and the possibility of challenging the color line inextricably together confronting the critical boundaries between these poles to show how each informs and is inextricably linked up and lined up with the other. Therefore, I prefer to follow Kawash’s example, believing that “Thus, not by trying to efface or escape the limits of race but by plunging into the zone of the boundary -- the zone of the color line -- can we perhaps begin to imagine the possibilities of elsewhere” (22). I see this point reflected in satires but more crucially in the kinds of texts they are trying to imagine. These are texts with hybrid genealogies and diverse geographies that both invoke and defy what we conceptualize as canonical African American fiction.
Passing for Black in the Post-Civil Rights Era

Passing for black, or what Phillip Brian Harper has identified as the “reverse racial pass” has been, until recently, understood as a white person passing for black (382). Most famously, during the late 1950s journalist John Howard Griffin darkened his skin and traveled through the deep South as a black man. Later, he published a chronicle of his experiences *Black Like Me* (1964). Within the context of post-civil rights fiction, however, “the reverse racial pass,” I argue, seems to encompass and include blacks that are passing not for white, but for black. In fact, passing for black by blacks, mostly with substantial irony, became a central way for authors to articulate the particularities of identity within an era in which blacks have unprecedented access to education and in which many of their civil rights have been secured. Passing for black by blacks becomes a sophisticated trope to articulate the anxieties, pressures, and distances that blacks, especially those who have “made it,” feel. Passing for black becomes a means for African Americans who phenotypically are perceived or classify themselves as black, but who for other reasons do not believe they belong to what they perceive as blackness. The perception of what blackness is that these authors and/or their characters try to adhere can vary, but often it becomes a struggle with fairly narrow mainstream images of black masculinity including images of African American men as thugs and criminals. Passing for black becomes a way for these others to articulate what they perceive as differences and distances of geographic origin or location, cultural affiliation, and psychological disposition. For these authors, they see themselves as already either passing for white or

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at least passing into predominately white territory on the basis of their educations and the access it provides them to certain professions, certain neighborhoods, and certain professional and peer associations. Passing for black eases anxieties of not being grounded in or being alienated from black culture.

This affiliation, or the perception of this affiliation (either as white or black) is not necessarily articulated in a sophisticated or deep way, but rather may be made on the basis of surface cultural markers such as speech, symbols, cultural references, or class affiliation. In other words, “Do I talk white?” or “Do I talk black?” Or, as a black writer, am I allowed to write about experiences that are not necessarily seen as stereotypical or typical black experiences? Or, as a white writer, am I allowed to write about experiences beyond my own racial experience? At the same time, these same authors share an aversion for not being seen as the individuals that they perceive themselves to be and resent being grouped into black culture, especially if they perceive that the person who is grouping them in with black culture does so in a way that is negative or stereotypical. As artists they reflect the paradox of both wanting to be affiliated with African American culture while resisting this affiliation at every turn. At the same time, their writings reflect the class and educational privileges that they have been able to secure for themselves, which allows them the privilege of writing novels. These novels further reflect this privilege by highlighting their wide-ranging cultural references and the perspectives that are unique to their class and educational positions.

In the contemporary discourse, racial passing does not necessarily indicate African Americans who pass as white, but rather African Americans who have attained what traditionally has been considered markers of white culture, but feel anxiety at this
accomplishment.\textsuperscript{14} Passing may also include whites who pass for black. For the source material for these artistic renderings, satirists draw on novels, popular culture, and historical references.

**The Evolution of Theories of Humor and Satire**

In the last 30 years, the scholarly understanding of humor and satire has evolved significantly. In this section, I trace two parallel developments in the understanding of African American humor and in the understanding of primarily European and white American satire. It’s most certainly unfortunate that these two strands of criticism and theory have developed so separately, but this can be explained at least partially by the fact that scholars in African American folklore, history, and literary studies have sought to trace the origins of humor and satire to indigenous roots in Africa while Classical, British, and American literary scholars have largely traced the genesis of humor and satire to its Greek and Roman origins. Nonetheless, these two parallel developments have much information and knowledge to share with each other. Within the scholarly studies on African American humor, the focus has remained on humor within the oral tradition from humor in slave culture and more contemporarily has been on comedians. The study of humor in African American literature has been relatively limited.

**African American Humor and Satire**

Since the 1970s, scholars emerging from a diverse group of fields including folklore studies, literary studies, history, linguistics, and even sociology have sought to situate African American humor and satire within African and African American cultural

\textsuperscript{14} Both Maureen Mahon and Gayle Wald have identified a double-consciousness that is specific to the post-civil rights generation. See Mahon’s introductory chapter in her book *Right to Rock* and Wald’s article “Passing Strange: Post-Civil Rights Blackness.”
contexts. The results have been a much richer, deeper understanding of the unique attributes of African American humor and satire. Within the African American cultural context, folkloric practices of humor including animal tales, jokes, and joke-telling strategies (i.e. the dozens and signifying) are analyzed first and foremost as a strategy of resistance and rebellion against white political and social structures and the attendant oppressive practices. To root these practices of humor within the larger African Diasporic framework of resistance and to offer an origin for humor not within Europe, but within Africa, critics share a desire to connect African American satire to African folkways, beliefs, and traditions.

These approaches include William D. Piersen’s essay *Puttin’ Down Ole Massa: African American Satire in the New World*” (1977), which traces African American satire to its origin in African satires. More specifically, he traces the resistance of African slaves to their white slave masters (as performed in a variety of satiric and musical portrayals on the plantation) to the types of songs used in various African societies to vent complaints against leaders and neighbors. Moreover, he notes that in these traditional African satires, the Europeans were a frequent source of satiric fodder as well (168). According to Piersen, Africans brought these practices from home to the American plantation. He concludes the essay by giving examples of how African slaves embedded satiric critique of slave masters within their songs (170-177).

The focus on humor within the oral tradition is more fully explored by well-respected historian Lawrence Levine in his book *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* (1978). In his chapter, “The Meaning of Slave Tales,” he includes extensive analysis of the trickster tradition within slave tales. In his chapter, “Black Laughter,” he catalogues
both the function and the purpose of African American humor as a critical survival
mechanism (299). He notes that black humor emerged from a relatively unified
community sharing a common racial experience and using humor as a response of hope,
relief, and social change. He examines joke cycles and traces the target of African
American humor from the Irish to slave masters to African Americans themselves. He
identifies “comic inversion,” the process of inverting scenes and roles to humorous
effects, as a critical component of African American humor (300). He explains that this
allowed for the joke teller to ridicule white people and their oppressive systems and to
thereby foster black consciousness.

More recently, the study of oral culture within slave cultures is traced from its
inception to the present in Mel Watkins’ popular and expansive analysis of African
the book editor for The New York Times, traces the history of African American humor
from its roots within slave culture through its presence in popular culture including
music, theatre, film, and stand-up comedy. Watkins focuses primarily on comic
performances, but he does include a chapter on humor in literature. Watkins’ study
affirms the social and psychological function of humor as an essential outlet for African
American frustrations. He reifies a double-tier system of inside, authentic humor within
the African American community and inauthentic, stereotypic humor of the mainstream
community. Within this system, he notes that African Americans who engaged in satire
faced risk of bodily injury. While this inside-outside system Watkins presents is useful, in
the present-day it does not seem to adequately capture the nuance of African American
humor that has become increasingly mainstream. Therefore, mainstream comedians who
have received wide crossover popularity have struggled with the perception of their work as they deliver performances to diverse audiences. For instance, the critically acclaimed comedian Dave Chappelle emphasized this dilemma in an interview to *Time* magazine, “I want to make sure I'm dancing and not shuffling” (“On the Beach”).

The singular most important theoretical advancement in African American literary theory that is directly relevant to satire is Henry Louis Gates’ groundbreaking *Signifying Monkey* (1988). His work unifies earlier theories on oral culture and likewise grounds African American literary theory within African folk tradition. However, his work is by far the most extensive development of a literary theory within a written tradition. He roots African American literary theory in the story of the African trickster Esu. He then shows how African American literary practices utilize signifying, a complex literary device that encompasses both literary techniques and a wide variety of narrative strategies. More specifically, he develops a sophisticated theoretical lens through which to understand the “double-voiced” quality of African American literature. He identifies four strategies: (a) tropological revision (“the manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts”); (b) the speakerly text (a “narrative strategy [that] seems to concern itself with the possibilities of the representation of the speaking black voice in writing”); (c) talking texts (“how black texts ‘talk’ to other black texts”; and (d) rewriting the speakerly (“not the absence of profound intention but the absence of negative critique”) (xxv-xxvi). While not all signifying is satire, all satire includes signifying.

Since the emergence of Gates’ *Signifying Monkey*, there has been a growing body of work on African American humor and satire. The most direct and immediate book
relevant to this study is Daryl Dickson-Carr’s *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (2001), the first book-length study of African American satire. Dickson-Carr’s insightful, thoughtful analysis provided an overview of the major novels within the tradition from the Harlem Renaissance to the present. In *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*, he emphasizes the function of satire when he writes, “[satire is an]…excellent tool for wishing to speak the otherwise unspeakable…Satire can expose the fallacies within popularly accepted schools of thought to push African Americans forward to improve their liminal, physical, and economic conditions” (18). While this statement is perhaps a bit overzealous, his point is well taken. Due to the number of novels he covered, Dickson-Carr provided less information contextualizing the novels historically. Instead, he examined satire with a noted emphasis on its politics and much less, if at all, on its literary features.

More recently, Bambi Haggins’ study *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (2007) offers a compelling survey of African American comics from the Civil Rights era to the present. The first chapter grounds the comedy of post-soul comedians by focusing on the evolution of the work of Flip Wilson, Richard Pryor, Dick Gregory, and Bill Cosby. Then, Haggins devotes chapters to Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock, Whoopie Goldberg, and Dave Chappelle. Haggins’ study, while focused on stand-up comedy, and not specifically satire, is a useful complement to this study because of its focus on the post-civil rights era. The most relevant and in-depth assessment of humor in African American fiction occurred in the recently published *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008) by Glenda Carpio. Her study is noteworthy because it traces how writers from novelist William Wells Brown to
playwright Suzan-Lori Parks use humor to comment on slavery. She also includes an analysis of comedians Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle as well as visual artists Robert Colescott and Kara Walker. Carpio is interested in the ways that African American artists have interrogated the history of slavery through humor. Her study offers a refreshingly in-depth examination of the tradition of African American humor that shows how even contemporary artists draw on the folk traditions that are so vital to the African American tradition.

**Satirical Theory Evolves**

Contemporary theories of satire have argued very persuasively and consistently against more common and simplistic notions of satire. Perhaps most markedly, new satirical theories influenced heavily by Bakhtinian theories of the novel, postmodernism, and rhetorical theories, dispute the common, popular understanding of satire that defines satire as work that challenges vice and supports virtue. What emerged over the last decade was a much more complex examination of the nature and function of satire. Current satirical theories focus predominately on classical and canonical satire. Ultimately, the work of African American satirists, with the occasional exception of Ishmael Reed, is rarely included in contemporary studies of satire. This can in part be explained by the fact that many current studies of satire have emerged from scholars within classical studies. This paradigm shift focuses on challenging the common, fairly simplistic conception of satire in which satire is a moral art.

Palmeri’s *Satire in Narrative* (1990) draws on Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic in order to define the function of satire in dynamic terms. He developed a theory
specifically to explore the complexity of narrative satire by noting that satire often puts forward a position that it repeatedly undercuts. Palmeri contended that the goal of this undercutting is not to reveal the opposite, more correct position, but rather to put multiple positions in conversation with each other. Palmeri observed “Narrative satire presents a parodic antithesis to orthodoxy and then the negative antithesis; it describes a dialectic without synthesis” (4).

Griffin focused even more closely and delineated even further the various functions of satire. He focuses on satire as a rhetorical art. His introduction is particularly useful in that he outlines the history of satiric theory from classical theory to the contemporary context. Griffin’s purpose is to highlight the limitations of theories of both Juvenal and Mennipean satire in order to create a much fuller theory in which theories of each type of satire inform the other. He argues that reading satiric novels next to poetic satires provides a larger understanding of satire. In his analysis, he identifies a series of strategies that satire employs including inquiry and provocation as well as display and play. In this way, he is able to demonstrate how the understanding of satire as merely a moral art is limited and that the morality of satire is only one element amongst a much larger purpose of satire.

There are a few newer developments in satire whose authors chose to examine emerging trends in contemporary satire. For example Steven Weisenberger’s Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel (1995) focused on what he saw as the subversive, degenerative function of 20th century satire, and examined writers such as Nathanael West, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, and Ishmael Reed. Unfortunately, though these newer satirical theories have been heavily influenced by
contemporary evolutions in literary theory, the examples that both Griffin and Palmeri rely on are almost exclusively white, European, and canonical (i.e. classical Roman writers Juvenal, Horace, and Petronius, the British writers Dryden, Irish writer Swift, and French Renaissance writer Rabelais).

While most of the new scholarship focuses on canonical satires, two scholars have devoted attention to the considerable body of postcolonial satire. John Clement Ball’s *Satire and the Post-Colonial Novel* (2003) carefully compared the central tenets of post-colonial theory against those of satire to expose the convergences and gaps between those two theories. For instance, he discovered that while satire often looks back nostalgically at a golden era, post-colonial satire’s gaze back is complicated by the complexities of colonialism. His point-by-point comparison of the two theories suggests that even on points where they seemingly agree, post-colonial and satire both converge and diverge.

The study unfolds around three heavyweights of post-colonial literature, V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, and Salman Rushdie. Ball’s work is complemented by Charles Knight’s revelatory study on satire in which he devotes a chapter to exiled satirists entitled “Satiric Exile” (81-115). Knight, a specialist in 18th century British literature, broadens his scope here considerably. The strength of his study is in part the diversity of the texts and authors that he interweaves into his analysis from Ovid to Brecht to Rushdie. For his chapter on exile, he focuses on several central paradigms of satiric literature including dislocated voices, false orders, and troubled lands to examine how exiled satirists use satire to address concerns unique to exiles. His masterful interweaving of these two discourses is a useful example of how to interface two disparate theories.
Key Features of Satire

A fuller examination of the characteristics that make satire a particularly useful vehicle for exploring identity and textual production by examining several of the key goals of satire follows. These features are united by the overall goal of satire to “tell us what we do not want to know—what we may, in fact, resist knowing” (Connery and Combe 1). This viewpoint is confirmed by Daryl Dickson Carr, who has written that, “[satire is an]…excellent tool for wishing to speak the otherwise unspeakable…” (18).

Within the satiric passing novels, satirists seek to raise questions about racial identity and textual production. In the next section, I review some of the key distinctive features of satire that satirists use to accomplish the unspeakable. I adopt Connery’s and Combe’s taxonomy to explain the central features of satire.

Formlessness

Satire’s formlessness comes primarily from its use of a wide variety of genres within a single satiric text, which derives its satiric power from forcefully disordering, disassembling, and destroying the genre’s conventions. As Michael Seidel explains in his early examination of the relationship between satire and narrative genre, Satiric Inheritance, Rabelais to Sterne (1979), “Traditional narrative forms (saga, legend, tale, epic, testament, heroic romance, chronicle, romance)…natural and institutional lines are dispersed, made authoritative, and given life in time” (31). Therefore, satire purposefully thwarts genre lines, imports material and forms from across genres, and upsets traditional expectations of form.

Open-endedness and Irresolution

Closely related to formlessness, open-endedness and irresolution derive from
what Griffin calls the satirist’s motivation to “discover, to explore, to survey, to clarify” (39). Griffin further explains, “the form lends itself to open-ended inquiry rather than to steady progression toward a conclusion, either predetermined or (as in scientific discourse) predicted (39). On a more immediate scale, satire draws on a wide variety of discourses. Satirical theorist Steven Weisenburger delineates these features: “The ‘open’ ethos of carnival fosters a heterogeneous flux of discourse types: for example, of underworld slang, cant, professional jargon, popular slang, standardized English, obscenities, versions of lyric, and ethnic expletives” (25). Satire, through its purposeful clash of discourses, seeks to illustrate central conflicts and enlighten readers by raising important questions.

**Historical Specificity**

Satire refers both to elements within the text and within the “real world.” Griffin contended “We should remember that historic particulars in satire always have a curious in-between status, neither wholly fact nor wholly fiction…Satire remains a radically impure art both contaminated and energized by the world outside itself” (Griffin 123). Helpfully, he identifies that satire references the following: particular people, classes of people, specific political issues, generalized period issues, and universals… (Griffin 123).

**Attack**

Whether for the mere pleasure of giving a good what-for or “to chasten, chastise, reform, and warn” satire specializes in attack (Connery and Combe 5). These attacks often rely on exaggerating issues and lampooning central figures relevant to the issue under discussion. The satirists use humor and hyperbole in order to make their points.
The satirist emphasizes their own intelligence by targeting individuals, institutions, and/or societal ideas.

**Militant Disunity**

Satire’s militant disunity originates primarily from the fact that it is “structured or constructed on the basis of oppositions or hierarchies; in satire, these oppositions are represented in their extremes in order to achieve maximum tensions” (6). These extremes are enacted through ironies and paradoxes. Moreover, this militant disunity is created through satire’s playful inclusion of allusions, topos, invention, exaggeration, play of ‘opposing ideals,’ games, abuse of satirists, lampoons, irony and fantasy. Characters may play out the disunity with a physical brawl or the plot itself may devolve.

**Conclusion**

Contemporary satirists amplify the competing ideological, political, cultural, and literary voices to purposefully offer complex and, at times, perplexing texts. In the process, they emphasize the ways in which characterization, setting, language, and plot are all artistic choices over which African American artists have increasing artistic control. They ferociously attack any perceived limitations on artistic freedom and the popular and literary production modes that seemingly restrict this freedom. In the process, as the titles of these satires in this study make clear, they are fundamentally concerned with contemporary racial subjectivity. These satirists use characters located in a contemporary, post-civil rights context who are navigating a complex boundary between black and white identities. These characters struggle with their racial identities within this post-civil rights context by struggling with whether or not they are authentically African American.
For African American authors, the issue of fictional representation is thoroughly implicated in other questions about expectations and limitations regarding literary style, or source texts. African American satirists have been traditionally concerned with the emphasis on functionality of African American texts and have, therefore, tested imaginative ways to push against what they see as pressure to conform to realistic schools of African American fiction. To do so, they include fabulation and other imaginative modes of African American literature.

Inside the text, however, we begin to see how the epistemological and ontological questions have shifted away from purely questions of the passing subject, him or her, to the text itself. For instance, rather than looking at skin color or fingernails, for instance, as racial signifiers, we look at the text itself to see whether or not it has the proper markers of a racial text. Even the earliest African American satires or texts that have satiric modes playfully utilize genre as a mode of deception with the audience. For instance, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) is not an autobiography at all (Pfeiffer 14). Other satires such as *Black No More* (1931) allowed an African American author to expand the genres accessible to African American writers by entering science fiction, a genre that had been primarily considered a white genre, and one that has until recently been considered alien to racial subject matter.

While contemporary authors in particular protest the strictures of the racial paradigm, they simultaneously place themselves within the African American tradition by fiercely signifying on textual predecessors through parody, invective, irony, and paradox. Contemporary satirists play with genre both bysignifying heavily on certain “types” of African American texts, which are canonically centered and which may even
be considered the prototype of African American literature. There are two competing paradigms in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) as models for texts that address racial subjectivity. The exceptions, of course, are efforts to minimize the accomplishments of these authors by suggesting, through vicious reductio absurdum, that these texts are made possible only through the authors’ pandering to white audiences who mistake the stereotypic representations, especially of men, in these texts for authentic representations of African American life, and not as the fictional representations that they are intended to be.

Satirists make readers work by challenging the preconceptions of African American texts, by requiring that they be intimately familiar with both the African American tradition and with the cultural and political controversies surrounding them. Satirists who focus on passing fully engage the reader. In fact, these satirists transfer the triangle that Amy Robinson applied to real-life passing situations to the text. Thereby, readers are the potential “dupe” who can, based on his or her reading ability, decipher the text. Satire offers a dynamic interplay between readers, text, tradition, and historical context. The result is a series of textual moves that are not fully distinct from each other, but could be characterized as follows: (a) Textual, (b) Subtextual, (c) Intertextual, and (d) Meta-textual.

Although African Americans have long been celebrated and acknowledged for their humor gifts, few scholarly studies of African American humor exist. Those studies that do exist focus not
so much on African American literature as they do African American comics. However, satire is a purely literary art intended to showcase the literary skills of the satirist to read and to be read.

If passing is a question of visible epistemology (is what I am seeing white or black?) then the question of a passing satiric text is whether the text that I “see” is white or black. This question affects every element of the text including the character’s self-identification in terms of race, class, and sexual orientation. The question of passing also affects the story setting as well as the stylistic decisions of the author, including to what extent if at all, they engage vernacular themes and tropes.

The Shape of This Study

This project focuses on three satirists who first emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s: Percival Everett, Paul Beatty, Mat Johnson, Trey Ellis, and Adam Mansbach. Each author has written prolifically and is known for his inventive, unorthodox approach to African American fiction. The chapters that follow examine how each author, within his satires, raises questions about identity and textual production. Their approaches and means to satiric fiction are diverse, but they share an examination of identity through an examination of passing in the post-civil rights era. They are as equally interested in the passing figure as they are in how questions about the racial body are transferred to the textual body.
CHAPTER 2

Once You Go Black, You Can Never Go Back? Passing for Black in Paul Beatty’s *White Boy Shuffle*

[The white gaze] function(s) to objectify the Black body as an entity that is to be feared, disciplined, and relegated to those marginalized, imprisoned, and segregated spaces . . . (Yancy xvi).

. . . Suddenly, I found myself engulfed in a blinding waterfall of blue-white light...I eased down the street and the tractor beam [of the L.A. police helicopter] kept me at its center. If I moved two feet to the left, it was as if I was wearing a luminous Victorian whalebone dress that hula-hooped around my hips (Beatty 216).

The satiric gaze is nothing if not panoptic, sweeping, dominant. From this vantage point, his privileged height no less, the satirist looks down, defining, controlling, dealing out the analyses that hurt, dishing out the critical medicine, the allegedly cathartic purge . . . (Quintero 430).

**Racial Passing in the Post-Civil Rights Era**

Paul Beatty sets his satiric coming-of-age novel *White Boy Shuffle* primarily in the fictional Los Angeles neighborhood, Hillside, an enclave of African American, Latino, and Asian families in the post-civil rights era of the early 1990s. In this satiric novel, a precocious teenager, Gunnar Kaufman, relocates with his family from the predominately
white Santa Monica to Hillside. The relocation is his mother’s prompt response to his and his siblings’ vocal disdain of other black children—“they’re different from us!” (37).

Once in Los Angeles, Beatty’s satiric send-up of passing focuses on how Kaufman must pass for black as he confronts, negotiates, and comes to terms with his racial affiliation and identity. While the story focuses on Gunnar Kaufman, equally important is the secondary story of Kaufman’s main ace, Los Angeles native, Nicholas Scoby. Despite their close friendship, they represent two very different understandings of the possibilities and the limitations of racial passing in the post-civil rights era. While Gunnar Kaufman embodies a playful and open-ended understanding of passing, Scoby’s character represents the limitations of passing. Nicholas Scoby is not granted the same kinds of mobility that Kaufman has; instead, Scoby experiences escalating severe consequences for his mobility. Through contrasting Nicholas Scoby and Gunnar Kaufman, Beatty highlights the uneven distribution of rights and opportunities in the post-civil rights United States.

The historical backdrop to the satire is the well-publicized Rodney King incident in 1991. The Los Angeles police pursued King in a high-speed chase and when he was apprehended, a large group of police officers encircled him, kicked him repeatedly, and beat him with their nightsticks. A bystander recorded the incident with his video camera and the recording quickly circulated in the media. So when, despite the recorded evidence, the white police officers were acquitted of all charges, riots erupted in Los Angeles. Dennis Gates, a professor of Urban and Regional Planning, characterized the
riots after the officers were acquitted as the “worst urban riot in history”\(^\text{15}\) (7). This incident was, for African Americans, emblematic of how African Americans in the post-civil rights era are scrutinized, stereotyped, tracked, and forced under the impersonal, ever-expanding eye of surveillance. Kaufman participates in the riots, but more importantly as he more and more successfully passes as black, he, too, is watched, followed, and tracked until the day he is followed continuously by the Los Angeles Police Department.

Beatty, as the satirist, makes gazes, surveillance, and the surveilled subject the thematic, aesthetic, and political target of his satire.\(^\text{16}\) More specifically, he holds up to scrutiny and ridicule the tenets and promises of the fulfillment of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and their legacy, meaning failures, paradoxes and promises in the post-civil rights era.

For Beatty, the post-civil rights era represents a series of paradoxes: (a) an era of unprecedented freedom but a period with the largest population of African Americans in history incarcerated; b) a period with the largest African American middle class and the largest urban poor; c) and an era of integration with large areas of de facto segregation. Beatty’s satiric gaze aims itself at an ever-shifting, transmogrifying target -- white individuals and culture and the media and its spectators as well as African American people and culture. No target is left untouched in Beatty’s dizzying kaleidoscope of critique. However, Beatty’s purpose is not to “settle” on a final meaning, but rather, in

\(^{15}\) Dennis Gates provides the following statistics of the damage from the riots: “50 people died, more than 2,000 were injured, and more than 1,000 properties were damaged” (1).

\(^{16}\) For the language (thematic, aesthetic, and political), which I use in this chapter and the five following body chapters, I am indebted to Gayle Wald’s article “Passing Strange: Post-Civil Rights Blackness”.

the words of Frank Palmeri to “…put clichés, outmoded forms, and one-sided views to the test, narrative satire takes shape as an unresolved dialogue between opposed and parodied philosophical alternatives” (3). He further explains, “Fully dialogical narrative satire divides the authority that informs the text, undercutting every singular perspective. On a plot-level, Beatty primarily relies on parody, irony, and reductio absurdum. On the narrative level, the satire creates a structure of thesis—an argument the text forwards--and antithesis—the opposite viewpoint. The purpose of satire is not really to come to a conclusion, but rather the most important goal of satire is to promote debate and self-reflection. In this case, through the trope of surveillance, the novel generates critical perspectives on whether passing is an opportunity for playful exploration, and experimentation with identity, or whether legal, political, and cultural forces that are the new racism in the post-civil era curtail blacks’ rights.

**Surveillance and Souveillance**

Beatty fully exploits the concept of surveillance thematically, politically, and aesthetically. To understand how surveillance functions, recent scholarly work is particularly useful. To understand how surveillance functions as a way that a dominant group monitors a minority group, Ragsdale identifies four types of surveillance: socio-linguistic (tone, word choice, and concepts), geographic (movement in stores, schools, work, and neighborhoods), proscriptive-meaning (negative association between X and Y), and normative behavioral surveillance (37-39). To illuminate how minority cultures subvert tools of surveillance British sociologist Kinsley Dennis identifies a concept as “souveillance” or counter surveillance. He explains, “The Rodney King case can be cited as a key moment in modern social history when the civil power of the mobile recorded
image became recognized in the minds of the general public. It also gave out a message: that living in the eye of the camera meant a person, people, institutions, and organizations were no longer insular and immune. Everyone now had to watch their backs, literally, as people could learn how to play at being their own witness” (348).\(^\text{17}\) So, while the dominant culture had the power through institutions such as the government and the legal and judicial systems to surveilled minority populations, minorities have also gained access to technology and means that allows them, in some instances, to create counter surveillance to expose unjust tactics and practices.

**Passing and Passing for Black**

In the post-civil rights era, the discourse of passing is one of the ways in which satirists articulate how they are surveilled or surveille themselves as they cross back and forth across racial boundaries. Historically, passing has been defined by the fact that one is light enough to pass—i.e. one looks white, but is still black. In the post-civil rights era, however, this passing is complicated by an additional irony—one looks black, but is identified—by oneself or others, as “white.” This assessment is partially determined in the post-civil rights era by the access that members have to privileges that have historically been coded as privileges primarily allowed to whites. Beatty’s use of the passing tropes is thoroughly ironic. Rather than the conventional light-skinned character passing for white, here, a black-skinned character passes for black.

\(^\text{17}\) Kinsley Dennis names one such project, “The Witness Project” which “collects footage from a network of dispersed amateur camera men and women and use this as proof against authorities abusing rights of power and security” (349).
The primary underlying reason to pass for black is to simultaneously express one’s alienation from black culture and longing for cultural connection and inclusion. This simultaneous alienation and yet desire for inclusion are often rendered in extremely satiric and comic ways. The motivations for passing for black are varied, but they include the outsider who wishes to reestablish connection and affiliation with what they perceive as their primary racial group, the character who expresses and displays disdain for their racial group and is challenged by an insider to reconsider their disdain, and a character who is distanced due to powers out of their control, but once they have an opportunity, chooses to affiliate with black people. To pass for black also becomes a way to express either the racialized characteristics that one is anxious about or the racialized characteristics one believes are not typically associated with the black majority. Finally, passing for black is almost always infused with a wry sense of humor about one’s condition of passing, an awareness of historical stereotypes and representations of passing, and contemporary stereotypes one feels one must fit into.

Beatty’s use of the passing trope, which focuses on a black-skinned character passing for black, is thoroughly ironic and speaks to the complexities of African American identity in the post-civil rights era. More specifically, it speaks to a more heterogeneous African American population in terms of class, education, and geography. This heterogeneity is primarily a result of Civil Rights progress that meant more expansive educational opportunities at the primary and secondary levels and thereby also more opportunities for economic advancement. Yet, at the same time, there still exists a large subset of the African American population that makes up the urban poor who do not have access to equal educational opportunities and are prevented from making economic
progress. Regardless of class status, however, all African Americans still experience some of the pernicious effects of de-facto racism. Within this context, the act of passing is complex. In fact, this is what cultural theorist Gayle Wald and anthropologist Maureen Mahon have identified as a double-consciousness that is specific to the post-civil rights era. I follow and concur with their conclusions and assessments.

For these two theorists, double-consciousness in the post-civil rights era is defined as “hip to anti-essentialist critiques of race as a social construct, tuned in to the ways that blackness is lived through class, gender, embodiment, sexuality and geography, and self-conscious about the histories of black American cosmopolitanism and the contemporary social and political minefields delineated in phrases such as ‘acting black’ or ‘acting white’” (12). In the context of satire, however, this double-consciousness is perhaps more accurately described as a multiple-consciousness and a deliberate attempt to put all of these factors into play. Further, I argue that satirists do not necessarily reach a conclusion, but rather ask pointed questions about the relationships between race and social construction, race and class and gender, race and sexuality, and race and geography.

Beatty, a member of the post-civil rights, post-black-power generation shares significant biographical similarities with his main character, Gunnar Kaufman. Like Kaufman, Beatty grew up in Los Angeles, is widely and well read, went to college in Boston, and became a poet. Kaufman, although on a much smaller scale, like Beatty, is a satirist. Kaufman does not write satires, but rather offers satiric “readings” in the vernacular sense of “reading” of the majority culture. Paul Beatty is one of the most talented and prolific satirists of the post-civil rights generation. As a writer, he first

This double-consciousness is represented through Beatty’s juxtaposition of the two main characters, Kaufman and Scoby. Their different experiences of passing align with the two opposing interpretations and understandings of how passing functions. On the one hand, critics see passing as a playful, experimental, and transgressive act. For instance, cultural critic Elaine Ginsberg has noted the power of passing lies in its ability “…to create a space for creative self-determination and agency, the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress” (16). On the other hand, other critics caution against what they see as the misguided tendency to emphasize passing as a playful, disruptive, transgressive act without also including how legal, social, and cultural rules and laws have made passing necessary or the material consequences an individual’s decision to pass or not to pass (Kawash 3).

**Close Encounters in a New World: Kaufman in Los Angeles**

Kaufman functions as a satirist within the novel itself. His view of the world is satiric—almost every incident he tells is sharply humorous—often at his own expense.
Kaufman is the narrator of the story and his telling of the story reveal his perspective. He opens by skewering his own lineage and satirizing his own lack of black authenticity. He claims not to be descended from any Southern heroic model of African American manhood and instead to be from a long-line of race traitors and coons. In his pointedly humorous opening introduction to himself he clarifies he is not the “seventh son of the seventh son of the seventh son” (5).

Between them, Gunnar Kaufman and Nicolas Scoby’s mastery of entirely different linguistic spheres has broad implications for their ability to successfully navigate home, school, and contexts away from home. In Kaufman’s case, his inability to navigate initially the linguistic codes of a predominately black context are thoroughly satirized and in this way Beatty resists the concept that black culture is transparent or that the mastery of the codes is as simple as an understanding of the traditional concepts of what African American linguistic codes are. The multiple instances of how Kaufman ineffectively navigates the linguistic codes serve to underscore the complexity of the system. Moreover, these events also fulfill satire’s general aim to enact a confrontation between multiple languages, linguistic contexts, and meanings. For instance, shortly after Kaufman moves to Los Angeles, he asks for directions to the nearest store. The person he asks responds, derisively, “Damn cuz. You talk proper like a mother fucker…” To which Kaufman points out that the linguistic gaps are relatively narrow. As he reflects, “It wasn’t as if I had said, ‘Pardon me old bean, could you perchance direct a new indigene to the nearest corner emporium’” (41). The contrast between these two linguistic forms—the distance between mainstream English and the vernacular is limited, yet still significant. Moreover, Kaufman understands himself, with a note of irony, as a newly
arrived indigenous person. Even more telling, even when he attempts to enter the black neighborhood cliques by playing the quintessential linguistic signifier of African American belonging, the dozens, he is unsuccessful. As he notes after his failed attempt, “The Hillside tribe wasn’t going for no ghetto fakery. If I wanted to come correct, I’d have to complete some unspecified warrior vision quest. The gods of blackness would let me know when I was black enough to be trusted” (53). Despite his physical appearance—dark skin color and identifiably black physical features, Beatty is not able to seamlessly integrate himself into the black community.

In contrast, Nicolas Scoby, a star basketball player who has mad street credibility, is well versed in the codes of the street. As Kaufman tells it, “Carefully aligning the hems, he dug the iron into the material, putting a stiletto-sharp crease down the back, that’s the east side. No military double-creases down the front from the collar to the end of the sleeve like them buster-ass niggers XXY Chromosome Recidivists” (88). This insult, an invocation of Klinefelter’s Syndrome, smoothly signifies on the masculinity of these men who have small testicles, infertility, and mild to serious language and learning disabilities. Nicolas Scoby’s defining feature is that he is a jazzman. Not a player, but instead a devout listener and aficionado. As he explains to Kaufman, “No fool, with a. My plan is to listen to everything recorded before 1975 in alphabetical order. No white bandleaders, sidemen cool. No faux African back-to-the-bush bullshit recorded post-1965. Though I’m going to make an exception for Anita O’Day, she could pipe. What’s your name, cuz?” (67).” Yet, Scoby’s characterization is significant, too, because although he is smart, it is as if he is a walking musical symbol unable to navigate the racial codes, especially in a white context. In fact, one of the most telling early examples
of Scoby’s inability to navigate white social contexts through his ability to use language is during his performance in front of an all-white audience at the high school Shakespeare festival. As Kaufman describes, “What we weren’t prepared for was the lily-white coaksureness of the students from the valley and the ritzy L.A. County woods: Brentwood, Westwood, and Woodland hills” (70). While Scoby folds under the pressure, Kaufman rises to the occasion by confronting the white patronizing attitudes of the audience.

**The Dangers of the Spotlight: Nicolas Scoby and the Limitations of Racial Passing**

If Kaufman represents the whimsical, playful possibilities of passing, Nicolas Scoby functions to show the way in which even in a post-civil rights United States, racial lines still exist and these lines are indicative of limitations and restrictions that lead to significant economic, cultural, and social inequities for many, though not all, African Americans. Once Kaufman relocates to Los Angeles, he crosses over the defacto color line, from a predominately white community to a primarily black community. Through this new environment, Beatty uses the repeated trope of the white gaze to reinvigorate an understanding of how whiteness still exists as a potentially destructive force to African Americans. The white gaze, as philosopher George Yancy explains, “…function(s) to objectify the Black body as an entity to be feared, disciplined, and relegated to those marginalized, imprisoned, and segregated spaces that restrict Black bodies from ‘disturbing’ the tranquility of white life, white comfort, and white embodiment, and white being” (xvi). More specifically, Beatty uses the white gaze as a signifier of how stereotypes and institutional racism still exist, are pervasive, and still have a significant
impact on black bodies in the post-civil rights era. Within the text the white gaze morphs and transmogrifies—it is a free-floating signifier.

Within *White Boy Shuffle*, the white gaze includes the perception of a single black body or a group of black bodies by a single or group of white individuals, a white author’s description of a black body in a political or cultural text, or the more abstract, but no less threatening, terrifying, terrorizing governance of the black body by racist educational, political, or governmental materials and policies. In *White Boy Shuffle*, the white gaze operates as a pervasive, destructive force in the classroom, on the basketball field, and the black neighborhood. Nicholas Scoby exhibits a complete powerlessness against the white gaze. He is not able to resist or counter its ability to see him, analyze him, or dissect him. The white gaze profoundly curtails Scoby’s agency and opportunities.

**Shakespeare in the ‘Hood**

The first time Kaufman’s witnesses how the paralyzing force of the white gaze operates to render Scoby completely impotent is at the district-wide Shakespeare festival. As members of the Manschiewitz drama club, Kaufman, the new kid on the block, is paired up with Los Angeles school system veteran, Nicholas Scoby. More specifically, Scoby and Kaufman are assigned to learn and to recite Iago’s opening monologue from Shakespeare’s *Othello* in the upcoming competition at the Shakespeare festival. In the competition, the predominately African American Manschietwitz High must face off against the “lily-white cocksureness” of his competitors (70). As the white student viewers
watch the African American students perform, their solidified, unitary gaze
operates as a reflection of the contemporary dominant ideology.

Within the American school system, *Brown vs. Board of Education* ushered in a
new era of school reform with the promise of equality and educational opportunities for
all through integration. These civil rights promises have not been fully realized.
Unfortunately, in the late 20th century and early 21st century, schools, especially within
urban areas, are debilitated by scarcities in funding, experience defacto segregation and
are unable to meet their mission to educate students. Moreover, while potentially the
American educational system would be a site from which resistance against racism is
possible and racist ideologies are thoroughly critiqued, unfortunately, in *White Boy
Shuffle*, schools remain as sites within which the white gaze operates and the school
system produces, perpetuates, and reinforces dominant racist ideologies.

One such avenue of reinforcement is through the curriculum. For instance, as
Shakespeare scholar Mary Janell Metzger has pointed out, “Advanced Placement English
and Shakespeare share a kind of cult status these days: both are considered ready
prescriptions for our ‘ailing schools’ and the students who populate them” (22). Within
the context of the Shakespeare event, we see the collision of two cultures—white middle
class college bound students and black students who are ‘rehabilitated’ through
Shakespeare. In the latter case, these students are seen as using Shakespeare to gain the
rudiments of American cultural literacy with the implicit racist assumption that the
knowledge is beyond them and that college is outside of their grasp.

The racial context is further amplified by the passage of the Shakespeare text they
are reading. They are given a reading from Othello, Shakespeare’s most clearly racial
play and one that, for many scholars, continues to speak to contemporary racial conditions. The play and Scoby’s recitation of Iago’s opening monologue amplifies and magnifies the racial conditions of the contemporary context. More specifically, Scoby must recite the words of Iago, the traitorous character who incites Othello’s murder of Desdemona by invoking racial self-hatred within Othello. As Shakespeare scholar Janet Adelman argues, “…before we meet Othello, we are utterly dependent on Iago and Rodgrigo’s descriptions of him. For the first long minutes of the play, we know only that the Moor, ‘the thick lips,’ has done something…we find out what it is for the first time only through Iago’s violently eroticizing and racializing report to Brabartio…” (125).

What is notable is the ventriloquism that Scoby is called to engage in that reiterates, unchanged, an ideology that racializes him and calls the audience to be complicit in this view of him. Scoby, then, must echo the words of Iago in his monologue, and see himself in the same words as Iago describes Othello.

Scoby literally chokes on the words he is asked to deliver. Within the context of the “lily-white cocksureness” of the audience, he folds (70). The gaze operates as an insistent and persistent objectifying gaze. As the attention on him increases, Scoby begins to crack. Kaufman observes Scoby shakily introduce his monologue: “‘Othello, act one, scene three. After plotting with Cassio to kill Othello, Iago…’ Then Nicholas, choking on the patronizing sympathy, began. ‘Thus do I ever make a fool my purse…ummm…’ He froze. Gathering his wits, he waved his arm majestically across his chest. ‘Thus do I ever make my fool my purse…fuck.’ The crowd started cheering him on as if here were one of those kids stricken with cystic fibrosis taking his first baby steps on a telethon at two o’clock in the morning: ‘Come on guy, you can do it.’ Two white girls, one of whom had
just nailed Desdemona minutes earlier, boldly strode onstage and massaged Scoby’s rock-hard hypertensive shoulders and whispered honey-voiced encouragement in his ear: ‘You can do it, big boy’ (70).

This patronizing encouragement makes it impossible for Scoby to successfully complete this monologue as the club “drowned under a tidal wave of shame” (71). Implicit within the scene are the popular and contemporary stereotypes of black masculinity with their echoes in Iago’s words. Within the gaze, white students project a stereotypic image of the black students. As Adelman explains, “…we are made to understand Othello not as the ‘natural’ embodiment of Iago’s old black ram’ gone insanely jealous, but as the victim of the racist ideology everywhere visible in Venice, an ideology to which he is relentlessly subjected and which increasingly comes to define him as he internalizes it—internalizes it so fully that…Othello’s ‘discovering’ that his blackness is a stain—a stain specifically associated with his sexuality—and ‘discovering’ that stain on Desdemona are virtually simultaneous for him…(126). Similarly, Scoby’s audience, we can infer, sees him in equally racial terms.

Kaufman offers a satiric, oppositional gaze that turns the “white gaze” which threatens to eviscerate Scoby on the white population. Kaufman develops what bell hooks defines as an “oppositional gaze,” which allows the viewer to “resist the dominant ways of knowing and looking” to “…contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels” (210). Unlike Scoby, he is able to turn the textual passages from Shakespeare in a way that highlights, subverts, and exposes the racist ideology that is in operation. This encounter is pivotal not only because it emphasizes Kaufman’s ability to read and signify on white texts, but also because it cements his friendship with Scoby.
When Scoby is humiliated in front of the whole audience, Kaufman aligns himself with him by performing a parody of a Shakespearean piece, a type of dramatic ‘’fuck you to the audience for their pandering “white liberal pity” (70) towards Scoby. He says, “What does thou know me for? A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, three-suited hundred, hundred-pound filthy, worsted-stockings whoreson…one-trunk inheriting slave…beggar, Nigger…I will beat you into clamorous whining if thou deny’st the least syllable of my addition” (71). This invective against the audience utilizes the Shakespearean text (King Lear) against the audience by signifying on their popular conceptions of what African Americans are and by also utilizing categories to underscore the lack of transparency these categories allow. Kaufman rejects the possibility of passing on a linguistic level even though we know from previous information that he “speaks their language,” so to speak.

The Basketball Court

Perhaps the most significant arena of the white gaze is on the basketball court because the white gaze is destructive to Nicholas Scoby’s basketball talent, a talent that is represented as an indigenous skill. Nicholas Scoby is a basketball genius with an innate talent: he never misses a shot. He plays street ball, so this talent means that he commands the court and is given authority to dictate and lead the laws governing street ball. However, when his playing achieves broader and more mainstream attention, the central question becomes how it is that Scoby has his skill in the first place. If passing has an economic logic, it is that the more an African American is willing to pass into mainstream of American society, the more financial gains he or she has access to.
However, as Beatty illustrates through Scoby’s example, these economic gains come at a significant personal price. The downside of economic opportunity is economic exploitation. Scoby becomes a fetish. Scoby explains, “Man, I’m tired of these fanatics rubbing on me, pulling on my arms, wishing me luck. I can’t take it. People have buttons with face on ‘em. They paint their faces and stencil my number on their foreheads. One idiot showed me a tattoo on his chest that said, ‘Nick Scoby is God.’” (118). “I am no fucking Tiki doll, no fucking icon. Don’t folks have anything better to do with their lives than pay attention to what I’m doing?” The scrutiny that Scoby experiences is combined by the perception of the white viewing audience that he is a “magical negro,” a stereotype that has persisted within the post-civil rights era and which Spike Lee has highlighted.

Kaufman decides to use the stereotyping to return the gaze in a pointed way to the white audiences, to resist the stereotyping. “I was portrayed as the Golden Child, white society’s mercenary come to teach pagans a lesson. ‘Starting at guard for El Campesino Real Conquista …I stood in the outskirts, slipped on a pair of white gloves, smeared my lips with cold cream, and hid my head under my warm-up jacket…At guard, first team all-city, second team all-American, Hillside’s own Gunnar ‘Hambone, Hambone, Have You Heard’ Kaufman’ I lurched from the sideline, shuffling through the gauntlet of astonished teammates as slowly as I could, my big feet flopping in front of me, my back bent into a drooping question mark. My gloved hands slip along the floor, trailing behind like minstrel landing gear…” (163-164). Kaufman rejects the pigeonhole offered by the white audience. The allusion to Hambone is a multi-faceted reference. It refers to a form of indigenous dance that slaves perfected as a way of encoding rhythmic messages into dance during eras in which drums were not permitted because slave owners feared they
would “talk” to each other via the drums and incite discord, rebellion, and violence against the slave owners. Later this image and the dance were co-opted through minstrel performers in the early 19th century who utilized the hambone dance as part of their performances.

Ultimately, Scoby decides to follow Kaufman to Boston University. Attending college should provide him with economic and educational opportunities and a chance to achieve the American Dream. However, for Scoby the environment leads into a descent into madness. Kaufman reports, “Speaking of suffering. I think Scoby is going insane. The scrutiny he is undergoing is unbelievable, ten times worse than in high school. What seems like every sportswriter in America, the entire Boston University Philosophy, African American Studies, Religion, Biology, Mathematics, and Physics Departments, and a horde of German and Japanese scientists are following him 24 hours a day. Keeping track of his meals, sleeping habits, shit like that. Once a day, some Noble prize-winning professor has a press conference to announce a new asinine theory on Nicholas’s uncanny ability to put a ball in a basket” (192). When the school psychiatrist recommends that Scoby return to Los Angeles to recover, Kaufman reflects, “The obvious solution was for Nicholas to go home, but there was no home for him to go to…” (203). Instead, Scoby begins to see suicide as his only option. In a touch of tragic irony, he jumps from the law building, which serves as a symbol of the ways in which American law has completely circumscribed African American possibilities. Scoby’s displacement within American society leads him to consider suicide as the only real way out. Moreover, it is an understated critique of the strategy of the Civil Rights Movement that sought to gain Civil Rights primarily through legal means. The Civil Rights
Movement can neither repair nor fully restore past injustices nor can it necessarily protect from further exploitation or domination.

For Scoby, then, even access to a white public sphere and the opportunities offered in a post-civil rights world, the ones that give him access to opportunities and a world beyond the Los Angeles neighborhood within which he lives, are off-limits. The social, psychological, and economic costs are too high. The fact that he cannot return to his Los Angeles neighborhood serves to highlight the alienation that he experiences by showing how once he accesses opportunity, he cannot return to his home community. For Scoby, in the post-civil rights world, access to opportunity means the denial of the essential essences and components of the self. Together with Kaufman, he takes hope and inspiration from Japanese warriors who believed that suicide was the ultimate act of the warrior.

**Passing and Passing Away**

Scoby’s decision to pass by passing away pushes the narrative interpretation from extremely playful, to dead serious by suggesting the ways in which, restricted in every other way, passing through suicide becomes entirely literal (vs. metaphorical, for instance). In this way, the narrative possibilities of the story become foreclosed as the plot turns on the fact that Kaufman becomes the “Ebony Pied Piper” and leads the African American people to death. He ostensibly takes over Scoby’s mission and becomes this distorted and problematic leader of the African American people. Whereas in earlier narratives, the writer is held out as the possible leader of the African American people who can lead through writing, this possibility is completely thwarted in *White Boy Shuffle*. Instead, Kaufman and his family live in the park underneath the giant spotlight of
the government—this surveillance monitors Kaufman’s movement and makes it impossible for him to escape the “white gaze” as embodied by the ultimate institutional and governmental agency that regulates the movement of African American citizens. He describes his first encounter with the light: “I slowly eased down the street, and the tractor beam [of the helicopter] kept me at its center. If I moved to feet to the left, the spotlight moved to the left, as if I were wearing a luminous Victorian whalebone dress that hula-hooped around my hips. I entered the 7-11 [store] bathed in the eerie extraterrestrial light…” (216).

Scoby’s death signals for other African Americans to rise up against the petty indignities that they are still subject to. Kaufman begins to receive a slew of obituaries from fellow African Americans who have decided to commit suicide, too. These obituaries signal the ways in which the material and even artistic freedoms in the post-civil rights era are still restricted. These minor indignities occur in a man who developed a beer, and then when he went to buy said beer, he was turned away and forced out of the establishment because he was “too black to appreciate the Blue” (212). This may be an allusion to the kinds of ironies that Jazz history is riddled with. For instance, Charlie Parker, who developed be-bop, a new form of jazz based on the blues, and his legacy and contribution was honored during his lifetime with a club, “The Birdland,” named after him, and yet, he was banned from that club. The latter third of the text comments with biting acerbic wit on the unfulfilled promises of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Beatty’s “Ebony Pied Piper” is seemingly an updated parody of Huey Newton’s essay “Revolutionary Suicide” in which he makes a distinction between revolutionary and reactionary suicide. For Newton, what distinguishes the two is the
feeling and intent. Reactionary suicide is motivated by a sense of hopelessness and despair while revolutionary suicide is preceded by knowledge and understanding that any revolutionary action will make one the target of repression by the United States government.

Moreover, the “Misery Fests,” conducted by Kaufman and his followers simultaneously exploit the conditions of the urban poor for a larger viewing public, stand in direct contrast to the Civil Rights Movement collective action, provide a cathartic release for the participants, as well as put them in the national spotlight for the larger American public to view. He writes, “Every Friday night we held outdoor open mikes, called the Black Bacchanalian Misery Fests, under the LAPD’s simple but effective stage lighting” (219). As the satirist, Beatty simultaneously signifies and exploits the surveillance African Americans are under. Now that the LAPD’s surveillance of the black community, as signified by the surveillance of one of its members, is no longer secret, hidden, or underground, Kaufman utilizes it to further his own visibility within his own community, throughout L.A., and the United States. Yet, as a leader, he is further scrutinized. Beatty’s satiric eye does not allow for Kaufman to be a sincere, eloquent, heroic model.

Kaufman does not follow in the Civil Rights tradition for heroic leadership—his actions are first and foremost artistic, not civic-minded. Nonetheless, the fests serve to highlight the powerful convergence of the four types of surveillance: socio-linguistic (tone, word choice, and concepts), geographic (movement in stores, schools, work, and neighborhoods), proscriptive-meaning (negative association between X and Y), and normative behavioral surveillance (37-39). Kaufman furthers ideas that are not accepted
by the mainstream culture who consider him a fringe lunatic; the neighborhood where he holds the fests is marked by the United States government to be bombed, so he paints a large, white bull’s eye on the houses. The bull’s eye, in its unsubtle symbolism, speaks to how African Americans are a target for the government due to their race, class, and gender affiliations.

Once Kaufman ‘goes black’ and crosses over the linguistic, geographic, normative behavioral, and prescriptive meaning boundaries of American society, he decides not to go back to his more carefree, beach days as a Santa Monica surfer dude and beach bum. Instead, he channels his satiric energies on a powerfully playful assessment of his new position as a black man. At every turn, he uses pointed humor to highlight the ways in which white oppression—primarily through the white gaze—still exists and governs black bodies in a post-civil rights era.

**Transferring Questions of the Racial Body to the Textual Body**

The questions that Beatty raises in the narrative about the gaze, surveillance, passing, and boundaries also become the larger meta-textual questions that the book raises as a whole. Through extensive literary allusions and textual parodies, Beatty offers a critical examination of fiction, both on the level of an individual book, such as *White Boy Shuffle*, and across the larger literary canon. As a satirist, he targets and turns his satiric gaze on canonical European, American, and African American forms. Within satire, “the past” is less focused on specific historical experiences important to the African American experience and more so the literary historical experience. Beatty revises, and ribs, central canonical texts. As a satirist, his principle method is parody. In this way, Beatty demonstrates his literary prowess and his ability to master a wide variety
of genres. As satirical theory expert Frank Palmeri has noted, satire is often a conversation between forms. In this case, Beatty uses his fiction as a meta-fictional commentary on his relationship to fiction. The result is a complex dialogue between the racial body and the textual body and the form of African American fiction that is both homage and critique.

In passing narratives, literal and metaphorical death, loss, and erasure, are central features to signal the tremendous cost of passing. This death can be literal, such as Clare Kendry’s tragic fall from the window in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* or Scoby’s suicide in *White Boy Shuffle*. In *White Boy Shuffle*, the story, which is told in the first person, by Gunnar Kaufman, is told in a brash style of self-negation. Gunnar says things like, “I am not the seventh son of the seventh son” (5), and he comes from a line of “cowardly queue of coons” (5). He is the “number one son of a color-struck son-of-a-bitch who was the third son of an ass-kissing, sell-out house negro” (5). Additionally, this death becomes a “killing” of textual predecessors. In the opening pages of the novel, Beatty further dislodges the lineage of the African American novel and its principal character, by dislodging it/himself from the Southern folksy and bluesy tradition. In one turn, Beatty distances himself from not only the literary tradition. In this way, Beatty rejects the Southern, agrarian setting of many contemporary African American novels and disrupts the literary lineage between those stories and his own. Then, directly following this declaration, he overturns perhaps the most sacred foundation of African American literature, the slave narrative: “I told the class how the Kaufmans migrated south when Swen Kaufman and Euripides’s well-traveled grandson, left Boston, unintentionally becoming the only person ever to run away into slavery” (12). Ultimately, he “considers
himself a dancer-in-residence at the Tannenberry plantation, free room and board and plenty of rehearsal space…Didn’t a whole lot of niggers get whipped on Tom Tannenberry plantation, but Marse Tom whipped Swen Kaufman. Demi-plié—five lashes. Second position—ten lashes. Pirouette over the cotton seedlings—fifteen lashes…” (13-14). In this way, Northern manners, habits, and freedom becomes displaced onto the Southern plantation space. The resulting literary representation of this event over turns for the form in which slave narratives were often told, in the voices of the slaves themselves. 18

Additionally, Beatty sets himself up within male tradition and he both rejects and shows allegiance to these discourses. Beatty challenges his own authorial identity by making discussion multi-voiced—he writes himself into the tradition while at the same time writing against it. As Palmeri notes, satire examines genres “as interrogation of models of understanding.” (13). Beatty writes himself into the African American tradition by rewriting the powerful closing/opening scene of one of the most venerated and canonical African American texts, Invisible Man. Beatty rewrites the scene where the Invisible Man is stealing power from the Monopolated Power and Light Company by rigging up 1,369 light bulbs in his basement hideaway. In the process, Beatty simultaneously writes himself into the African American literary tradition and wunceremoniously overturns it in a one-two punch. An ironic, acerbic rewriting of the prologue of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Beatty’s prologue reverses every element of

18 For example, the Federal Writer’s project collected 2,300 slaves stories in published in a multiple volume set. Thus, Beatty rejects what Gates has identified as the speakerly text, the text that speaks, as the necessary origin of African American writing. In this way, Beatty rejects the idea that authentic African American texts must necessarily emerge from the vernacular tradition.
Invisible Man. If *Invisible Man* is defined by inaction, Gunnar Kaufman is defined by nihilistic action. If *Invisible Man* is underground, Gunnar Kaufman is above ground. If *Invisible Man* is an individual, Gunnar Kaufman is a leader. Through these literary allusions and overtones, Beatty sets Kaufman squarely within the African American cannon.

Whereas the *Invisible Man*’s dilemma is marked by his frustration over the fact that members of white society do not see him and Ellison suggests that *Invisible Man*’s salvation may, at least in part, lie in his ability to become a writer, which Ellison suggests is central to his freedom, Beatty creates a hyperbolic, nightmarish vision in which Gunnar Kaufman, at this point a street poet, becomes the Ebony Pied Piper who leads African Americans into suicide. As he explains, “On the one hand, the messiah gig is a bitch…[on the other hand,] I spoon fed them grueled futility, unveil the oblivion that is America’s existence and the hopelessness of the struggle” (1). In *White Boy Shuffle*, while the suicides seems devoid of sincere revolutionary potential, nonetheless the suicides function discursively in the same way. The opening prologue ruptures the narrative by essentially erasing the need for the ensuing narrative, the African American coming-of-age story. There is essentially no need for a story depicting the rituals of becoming an African American if there is no surviving population -- no men who will have little boys. Moreover, the rewriting of the *Invisible Man* passage purposefully erases *Invisible Man* as a literary or political antecedent.

Then, *White Boy Shuffle* derives its humor from Beatty’s desire to showcase his extensive knowledge on an eclectic range of subjects (from basketball to Japanese novels). An essential hallmark of his style is his parodies of key conventions and
narrative traditions within African American literary history. A mix of highbrow literary references and popular culture, *White Boy Shuffle* is a meditation on the distribution of knowledge in the post-civil rights era. Beatty’s references are due in part to his access to literacy, higher education, and search engines such as, for example, Google.

In *White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty intertwines the narrative arc of a passing subject, who passes from white to black alongside a character who passes from black to white in order to expose the persistent inequalities in American Society. While Kaufman is able to successfully pass into a black community and ultimately becomes fully a part of that community, Scoby is unable to successfully pass into the white community. Ultimately, though, Kaufman’s success as a passer radicalizes him and he becomes a spokesperson and leader on behalf of the black masses. In this way, Beatty’s view of the African American role in the post-civil rights movement society is cynical. While the decision by Kaufman and his followers to commit suicide is Beatty’s satiric irony at his reduction absurdum best, it still speaks to how alienated the current generation feels from American society and highlights how despite the best efforts of integration, many African Americans are not able to fully integrate within white society. Additionally, Beatty includes and riffs on central African American texts and tropes in order to expose the limitations of earlier perhaps more hopeful messages to their nightmarish and nihilistic ends while still proving that he belongs in the cannon of African American fiction. For the reader, the jokes that Beatty makes are more fully appreciated if one understands the historical experience and fictional contexts of the African American experience.

Interestingly, while Beatty’s narrative emphasizes mass suicide, Johnson’s novel highlights mass homicide. Both narratives identify with
The masses of African Americans who struggle with the racist practices of the post-civil rights era. These two satirists emphasize the way that systemic inequities persist.
CHAPTER 3

If You’re White, You’re All Right, If You’re Brown Stick Around:

Gentrification as Passing in Mat Johnson’s Hunting in Harlem

“Can I believe what you say when you say ‘I’m here to help you, brother’? Or are you simply making the rent higher?” (3).

In Mat Johnson’s dystopian satire, Hunting in Harlem, he sets his novel in the contemporary Harlem landscape. This Harlem, the cultural capital of Black America, both manifests the historical vestiges of the prestige of the early 1920s and captures the profound transition and transformation the neighborhood underwent in the 1990s as it gentrified. In this satiric novel, congressman Cyrus Marks founded Horizon Realty, a multi-dimensional community agency seeking to assist residents through welfare for work training, loan assistance, schooling, and housing. This organization segues social service assistance for the poorest residents of Harlem with class mobility for the upwardly mobile who wish to move to the city and purchase homes and set up new businesses in Harlem. Presumably, the organization is interested in community revitalization that protects the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised. Horizon Realty encompasses the Second Chance Program, which seeks to rehabilitate former inmates by offering them jobs as movers. The story focuses on three ex-convicts: the pseudo-intellectual Bobby Finley, the skeptical Cedric Snowden, and the brutish thug, Horus Manley.
What quickly becomes clear to Snowden is that the organization’s rhetoric that deftly fuses religious fervor, racial uplift, and black power ideologies, hides a sinister murder plot to kill the lowest element of the African American population to make room for the black middle class. More specifically, Johnson’s satire problematizes the class divisions within the African American community by suggesting the ways in which the black middle class, through black gentrification, are implicit in the displacement and disenfranchisement of the urban poor. The context for this novel is the actual gentrification of Harlem that has taken place over the last decade. Since Johnson’s novel focuses on gentrification, the question of how racial passing and space inform each other is crucial.

The contemporary context of this satire is the ever-more evident gentrification of Harlem. In the simplest terms, gentrification is defined as the influx of middle and high-income residents, the increase of housing and consumer goods costs, and the displacement of the working class and poor. According New York Times journalist Sam Roberts, “…the neighborhood is in the midst of a profound and accelerating shift. In greater Harlem, which runs river to river, and from East 96th Street and West 106th Street to West 155th Street, blacks are no longer a majority of the population…” (Roberts 1). As the racial and class demographics of Harlem shift, so does the commercial landscape. Gwen Walker catalogues the transformation of commercial real estate, services, and merchandise in Harlem. More upscale goods and services have replaced the services that catered to lower-income clientele. She laments, “…the Laundromat is gone. The bodegas are gone. There’s large delis now. What had been two for $1 is now one for $3… the stores have imported beers from Germany. The foods being sold – feta cheese instead of
sharp cheddar cheese. That’s a whole other world” (Williams 1). These changes mean that Harlem, which has historically been occupied by lower and working class blacks is changing by making it too expensive for those blacks to continue to reside in that area.

Johnson, who resided in Harlem while earning his M.F.A. degree at Columbia University, observed these changes first-hand. His characters are lower-income pawns in the game for real estate advancement. Johnson, as the satirist, provides a searing critique and targets the black middle-class, like him. More specifically, he scrutinizes and ridicules the way in which the generation of Black middle-class who benefit from the civil rights promises unwittingly participate in the disenfranchisement and dislocation of the urban poor while believing in the possibilities of racial uplift.

For Johnson, the post-civil rights era with its unprecedented possibilities for a smaller sub-group of African Americans deserves further scrutiny. In fact, for him, the post-civil rights era exasperates tensions between the urban poor and the urban middle-class. Johnson’s critique is purposefully one-dimensional, searing, and some might say unfair. But Johnson’s aim and gaze is steady with which to make his point. His satire fits primarily and best within the older, mostly discarded model of satire as articulated by Mary Clark Randolph. In this model, a satirist attacks (A) vice to forward (B) virtue. Moreover, he focuses his satire on intragroup dynamics that he wants to highlight. Although he does not suggest a corrective, he does not need to because the implications of buying into underclass rhetoric are so harsh and devastating. He utilizes irony, sarcasm, and historical allusions to make his point.

**Black Gentrification and the Discourse of the Urban Underclass**
For contemporary theorists of racial passing, space is an important consideration and the role of space offers differing and very conflicting theoretical assessments. For instance, several theoreticians including Elaine Ginsburg and Gayle Wald see racial passing primarily in terms of the positive opportunities it offers for play with identity and racial categories. Now, within the post-civil rights context, it seems as if racial categories do not really matter and are just an opportunity for play that might be possible. Wald, for instance, locates the site of race primarily within individuals who can “engage in practices of self-naming and self-identification even if these violate the conventions of the dominant racial discourse” (189). In this manner, individual agency is powerful enough to trump social, cultural, and legal barriers.

The demographic shifts in Harlem, however, are not just about white residents buying, renovating, and moving into the area and thereby driving up real estate prices. Middle-class black residents, too, have sought out Harlem to open up businesses and to live. These new middle-class black residents who have benefited from the education and upward mobility afforded by the Civil Rights movement have relocated to the area based on a variety of motivators. The phenomenon was coined by sociologist Kesha S. Moore as “Black Gentrification,” which she identifies as “a distinctive process of urban transformation driven by patterns of racial and class stratification” (Moore, 118-119). Furthermore, in her study of Black gentrification into a lower-class black community in Philadelphia, she records that two primary motivations include a desire to show racial affiliation and pride that transcends class divisions and a desire to help lower-income neighborhoods and residents (118).
Yet, despite these altruistic motives, the reception of this influx of the Black middle-class in Harlem, at least, has been more mixed. As New York Times journalist Trymaine Lee observes “…black gentrification has an emotional texture far different from the archetypal kind, both for residents and for newcomers” (“Harlem Pas de Deux”). He proceeds to inventory the class-based tensions that have occurred between black middle-class newcomers and longer-term, poorer residents. One of his sources, sociologist Monique M. Taylor, the author of Harlem: Between Heaven and Hell, reported: “The changes over the last two decades have deepened black-black tensions. Today, Ms. Taylor said, skeptical residents often wonder: ‘Can I believe you when you say, ‘I’m here to help you, brother’? Or are you simply making the rent higher?’ (Lee 3). These tensions are captured not just in the geographical battleground that is Harlem, but also in the discourse utilized to characterize and understand urban poor since the 1980s through the present.

Sociologist William Julius Wilson coined the term the “urban underclass” and characterized the urban poor in purely pathological terms. According to Wilson in his groundbreaking The Truly Disadvantaged (1990), due to the breakdown of more cohesive communities during the 1970s, the urban population is in profound crisis. In addition, he argues that inner-city neighborhoods have experienced the breakdown of family and community due to rampant teen pregnancy, single-parent homes, welfare, as well as drugs and violent crimes. Since then, a wide-range of scholars and popular pundits have reiterated and reinforced this, often with demeaning rhetoric.

Most famously in recent memory, perhaps, was Bill Cosby, whose words captured the tone and tenor of this rhetoric. In his diatribe given at the 50th Commemoration of
Brown vs. Board of Education, he railed, “People with their hat on backwards, pants down around the crack…and got all kinds of needles and things going through her body. What part of Africa did this come from?...With names like Shaniqua, Shaligua, Mohammed and all that crap and all of them are in jail…It can’t speak English. It doesn’t want to speak English” (“Address”). This hyperbolic and derisive social commentary railed against every social ill facing the Black community including drug abuse and imprisonment and fused it with behavioral and cultural trends including dress, speech, and naming practices. This invective blames the individual for what Cosby sees as degenerative behaviors of individuals that reflect the breakdown of the Black community as a whole.

Passing and Gentrification

In the post-civil rights era, where the more immediate need for racial passing is not necessary since racial segregation no longer exists, one can nonetheless still see the remnants of passing. In this case, passing for something one is not as an individual has an inherent relationship to traversing a boundary through trespassing. To trespass is to violate the property or personal rights of someone through a forceful or violent act. It also, interestingly, can mean to attempt to gain restitution by accessing land or property of another. Originally, the word trespass and pass would have allowed an individual the agency necessary to gain material advantage and access. Therefore, a near-white individual passing into the white community as white would be able to regain the social advantage they lost through being identified and categorized as Black. The passer becomes an insider who can report on how the other half lives and benefits from social, cultural, and economic advantages that come from mobility and access to places they
would not ordinarily be able to go. However, in Johnson’s scrutiny of trespass, he calls into question (1) who does Harlem belong to, and (2) what responsibilities do both the middle and lower classes have to themselves and to each other?

Johnson inverts every aspect of the passing novel to provide a searing critique of the values celebrated by passing novels. One person passing into the black community or out of it is generally how passing is understood: an act of individual agency. Within passing narratives, the individual traveler reports his experience of the other culture (or the other culture(s) as an insider/outsider). So, Nella Larsen, through her depiction of Irene Redfield, shares Irene’s experience of taking tea in the prestigious, white-only tearoom at the Drayton hotel. The ex-colored man, for instance, reports on his life as a migrant laborer in Georgia and Howard Griffin tells about his travels as a black man in the depth South including Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. What occurs in Johnson, however, is not the individual act, but a close examination of the mechanism, the rhetoric, and the social ideologies that facilitate social engineering.

Passing is not a hip or cool experience of individual agency, but rather is the privilege of the talented tenth whose upward class mobility affords them the opportunity and the means to leave Harlem (or to never have had a connection with Harlem in the first place) and then to “return home” as a way of reclaiming their previously disavowed and discarded racial identity. The black middle-class that benefited from integration were allowed “to pass” into the American mainstream to achieve all of the markers of the dominant culture. Rather than focus on how this may have created an “identity crisis,” as routinely conveyed in passing narratives, Johnson focuses not on the psychology of the crisis, but rather the social impact and ruptures of this return. The death of the individual
is not Johnson’s concern here, but rather the death of a group within the intragroup. The convenient rhetoric of the “untalented tenth” demonizes the lowest socio-economic stratum and passing then operates on two levels as passing out of black culture through assimilation and passing back into the culture through gentrification.

In the post-civil rights era, Johnson inverts the discourse of passing to explore not the rise of the individual passer, his agency or his psychological struggles, but rather to critically examine the impact of integration on those unable to pass as “white” in terms of class mobility. Johnson’s use of inversion of the passing trope is savagely ironic. Rather than the individual passing for white and then black again, he focuses on a group of passers, the collective action. The black middle-class reenters Harlem to ease racial anxieties and tensions by reclaiming a lost mythical, ethnic past. To now pass for black is a way to both prove and affirm one’s group identity and assuage one’s guilt by helping the poor and participating in racial uplift.

Equally importantly, Johnson takes one of the central tropes of the passing narrative and amplifies it from an individual to a group, corporeal level. In passing novels, the threat of exposure is felt by the passer as a threat to newfound identity and position. Mainly, this threat is represented either by someone the passer knows from his or her previous life who recognizes their identity and threatens to expose it. Or, it may be represented by the children that the passer (or, if the passer is man, their spouse) may have that will reveal, through genetics, that one of the parents is black. In Johnson’s Hunting in Harlem, the threat is both on an individual level—in the sense that individual Harlemites are targeted to be killed—and because it is part of a larger social program, the group as a whole is targeted.
The story’s title, *Hunting in Harlem*, signifies other stories told in the first person to attempt to give insight into the racial experience. Instead of focusing on the present, the person who passes focuses on those left behind, unable to escape racial segregation, lack of education, and reliance on underground, illegal economies. Instead of being understood as victims of systemic racism, they are further pathologized by rhetoric that blames them for their behaviors and labels it as deviant from the mainstream.

The inversion of passing is represented through Johnson’s juxtaposition of the middle and lower classes. The different experiences and interpretations of the two classes align with the varied understandings of the intersection of class and race. As Samira Kawash cautions, it is critical to understand racial boundaries and lines as real (3).

Unlike the other novels in this study, there is a less of a direct character-to-character connection between Johnson and his characters. However, Johnson, who grew up in Philadelphia as a light-skinned brother, has often written about sensitive intra-group issues. In his first novel, *Drop*, for instance, he focuses on a middle class, college-educated young man who strives to reconcile his upward mobility with his Philadelphia urban roots. The story, which shares most directly Johnson’s own experience, is his graphic novel *Incognegro*. As a young child, Johnson and his cousin, both of whom are light enough to pass for white, often fantasized that they could use this feature as an attribute to being superheroes and secret undercover agents. In the graphic novel, which is set in the South during the early 1920s, he draws on this personal wish to tell the story of a newspaper reporter who passes for white to expose the practices of lynch mobs in the

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19 In addition to his personal history, Johnson also draws on the historical experience of Walter White, the light-skinned civil rights activist and long-time head of the NAAACP, who traveled undercover to the South to investigate lynching. He detailed his experiences in his memoir, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (1948).
South. Johnson has also written several historically based novels including *The Great Negro Plot*, and the more contemporarily set graphic novel *Dark Rain*. Most recently, Johnson has written *Pym*, which draws on the work of Edgar Allen Poe. Johnson is well recognized for the ways in which he adapts and stretches traditional genre writing including the thriller and the comic.

**The Untalented Tenth: Using Humor As a Social Weapon**

Johnson’s satiric outlook is both sardonically comical and harshly critical. His characters are caricatures of neighborhood hustlers and confidence men. Johnson uses Lester Banes, the Major’s right hand man and the executive leader of *The Second Chance program* as a consistent target of Johnson’s comic ridicule. For instance, at the first meeting with the new recruits, the new workers are amused that “there was such a thing as pink corduroy and that a sane man would actually wear a three-piece suit of the fabric” (2). Equally hilariously, Johnson uses Lester’s relationship with his dog, Wendell, as a repeated source of humor. For instance, according to Johnson, Lester’s dog was made because “some sadist god had grabbed its head in one hand and ass in the other and yanked the beast like taffy” (2).

No character is spared Johnson’s derisive, comic ridicule. Johnson uses Horus Manley, a slow-witted, buffoon to comic effect simply by mocking his stereotypically criminal activity and mannish demeanor. While Bobby Finley, by contrast, is perhaps the most ambitious of the three ex-cons, he is also seemingly the most naïve and he is not spared comic ridicule. Finley is obsessed with finding his soul mate and distributing his completely incomprehensible novel, *The Great Work*. Finally, Snowden, through whom most of the events are relayed, is the least comical. While he fantasizes about being able
to do the morally right thing, he often loses his nerve or becomes almost farcical in his inability to do the right thing morally and ethically. These portrayals, which draw comically on the types of characters that traverse an urban landscape, allow Johnson to balance the comic in a novel that is fairly sinister.

Johnson’s satire targets the opportunistic rhetoric of black progress to show the degree to which it is empty of content, and to which the stated aims of the program sharply contrast with what Snowden discovers is its real goal. The program segues fanatical religious, racial uplift, and black power rhetoric into its rhetoric to disguise its actual mission. This rhetoric serves as part of the indoctrination ex-cons must experience when they arrive as outsiders to Harlem. They have been selected and lured into this “opportunity to rebuild their lives” (1), an opportunity that is riddled with ironic foreshadowing when “The recruits of the Second Chance program would have to get over the fact that their uniforms looked just like the ones they wore in prison” (3). Lester, at the initial meeting tells them: “You, my handpicked warriors, are needed. Harlem is more than a place, it’s a symbol. It’s our Mecca, our Jerusalem, the historic cradle of our culture, the ark of our covenant as Africans in the Western World. It must be protected by any means necessary” (15). This satiric pastiche of Afrocentric thought, religious fervor, and black power rhetoric is meant to galvanize the men to support Horizon’s mission. Moreover, in this rhetoric, Harlem is symbolically a place of spiritual rebirth and renewal, as well as the site for modern African American men and art, an end-point in the journey of black migration. Additionally, within literary history, Harlem is the place and genesis of several passing novels.
In this novel, Johnson resituates and revitalizes Harlem as a site for potential racial transformation for the black middle-class who otherwise are economically, geographically, and socially distanced from present-day Harlem. Their orchestrated reentry into Harlem is carefully managed through Lester’s The Second Chance Program. As he tells Snowden, “A lot of it’s PR, public perception” (39). To effectively market Harlem to those who can afford to revitalize it, the organization throws elaborate parties. To inspire its clientele, the parties are themed. At one such party, the costumes worn by the wait staff eschew the contemporary social problems that plague Harlem; instead of invoking present-day Harlem or even the Harlem Renaissance, it invokes an African past. In an ironic and funny scene, Snowden reports that Ashanti warriors are handing out Star Beer and Massai warriors are balancing appetizer trays. Through this scene, Johnson suggests that the consumption of ethnic identities is available to those able to afford it. The economic underpinnings and consumerism expose this ethnic allegiance for a clever marketing trick perpetuated by Horizon to secure new homebuyers.

Yet, the racial progress rhetoric and the opportunistic marketing strategies disguise a far more virulent rhetoric and social design. To engineer the social space to allow the black middle class to gentrify the area, the Horizon program must spur on the availability of residential properties. Lester Baines has identified what he calls “the terrible tenth” (43). This term, a sinister parody of W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of “the talented tenth,” allows the Second Chance program to justify their murder of the undesirable population in Harlem including drug dealers and criminals. Lester and his crew, themselves drug addicts and criminals, must transform themselves into social engineers. They perpetuate the word and stereotype of “niggers” as part of the untalented
tenth whom they target for social removal. Lester expresses his disgust when he sees a
to his target for social removal. He rails, “You’d think all of those books,
all that history and knowledge would keep the ignorant at bay, wouldn’t you? That it
would repeal a nigger like a church would a vampire” (94). This hyperbolic depiction of
social ills shifts the blame entirely from larger societal structures and oppressions to the
poor themselves.

Despite their goal of secrecy, however, an urban legend takes hold of the
neighborhood that suggests that something or someone is killing Harlem residents.
According to the legend, the Chupacabra, a blood-sucking monster, has stricken Harlem
repeatedly. The incorporation of the Chupacabra is based on news stories that emerged
during the mid-1990s to the early 2000s that from Puerto Rico to the Northern United
States the monster sucked the blood from goats and supposedly attacked livestock in
Texas. In the novel, the Chupacabra, as far as Snowden is concerned, personifies one man
in particular, his next-door neighbor and father of a little boy named Jifar. The little boy,
Jifar, is being abused and Snowden observes he “could see the monster’s claws on Jifar’s
arms” (67). When Snowden reports the abuse of the boy to Lester, Baines intervenes by
making the father the next victim in his series of Harlem accidents.

The rhetoric and even the urban legend in the novel personify what in the post-
civil rights generation has become a common self-criticism within the black community:
that black people themselves are responsible for their current economic and social state.
As Lester notes it is not now racism that is the problem. As he says emphatically,

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20 In the early to mid 2000s, a rumor circulated about a monster called the Chupacabra that was killing
livestock in the United States and Latin America. Johnson bases his depiction of the Chupacabra on these
news reports.
“Nowadays, black folks’ biggest problem is not white racism, it’s *ourselves*” (121). To this end, not only is it justifiable to eliminate this “untalented tenth,” but also even more importantly, the influx of the middle-class becomes essential. Rather than mass movement or civil action, which was the impetus for social and political change during the civil rights movement, new Horizon suggests that new blood is what is now needed. In this way, Harlem becomes a social and political body through which these middle-class passers will infuse the community with new, more assimilated ideals and transform the community. In fact, the urban renewal, as engineered by Lester, is recast as the “mass movement” (208) of the present generation. As Lester notes, a “lone pioneer” passing singly back into the community is going to be unsuccessful because they are “invariably mugged or otherwise discouraged” (208).

Through Snowden, the son of an embittered black activist, whom Snowden accidently kills during a drunken argument, Johnson represents the end of a black activist legacy. Although Snowden fantasizes about exposing Lester and his cronies, his interventions are completely unsuccessful. As one man, Snowden is not able to successfully oppose Lester nor is he enough a part of Harlem to be considered a credible insider with useful information to forewarn the rest of the population. When he confronts Jifar’s father, despite his heroic desire to stand up to the man, he reneges at the last moment only to be set up for his murder by Lester; he needs a Valium to recover from electrocuting Jifar’s father in the bathtub (119). Similarly, when he tries to warn the guy he has been assigned to kill, first the man does not believe him and then a series of comical mishaps prevent him from actually saving the man.
The profound hypocrisy of the movement is exposed when Lester drafts Bobby Finley, a convicted arsonist, to burn down the newly built Mumia Abu-Jamal house. He advises Bobby Finley that “those new buildings have such shoddy construction, just drywall and plywood. Like a four-story box of matches, if you ask me” (177). This act is ironic for several reasons. Not only does it mimic the firebombing of the MOVE group by a black mayor in Philadelphia in 1985, but it also burns down the house of the namesake of Mumia Abu-Jamal, a black activist and journalist and a former member of the Black Panther party who is on death row for killing a police officer. Through this act, Johnson reemphasizes the competing ideologies of the post-civil rights era.

Ultimately, Snowden, despite his initial protests and even horror at the mission of the Second Chance program, is completely brainwashed by them and continues to carry out its mission. Through the implied continued death of Harlem residents, Johnson incorporates the typical plot device of passing novels, the death of an individual, but expands it to such hyperbolic, nightmarish ends.

In reading gentrifying as a kind of passing, the subplot of the Harlem real estate market becomes crucial. One of the symbols of the successful passer in this novel that is implied is their ability to achieve the American dream by purchasing a home. Therefore, one of the battles that Johnson depicts, but does not fully name in the battle over Harlem, is the displacement of renters by those who can afford to buy. This newer history adds an interesting dimension to the history of how Harlem was created, which was when white real estate developers could not get whites to fill the housing, and in desperation, reluctantly rented out their real estate to Black renters. There is irony in the fact that now more successful African Americans are returning to Harlem to capitalize on the history
by purchasing homes and businesses to revitalize a Harlem which has fallen into disrepair and in the process will displace the current residents.

**Passing Texts: Creating a Space Through a Parody of Writers**

Less apparent, but equally important is Johnson’s satiric skewering of the current literary landscape. Within the larger plot of societal injustice, Johnson creates a series of smaller jokes, satiric commentary, and subplots focused on the nature, purpose, and goals of writing. The battle for space, residency, and ownership is relevant not just to the fight over Harlem’s real estate, but also to the arena of the space, residency, and ownership over African American literature. In fact, Johnson seems to suggest that in the literary representation of the very same conflicts apparent in the text itself, a battle over space and whose experience best represents the black experience exists. This conflict between several types of authors and styles of writing are evident as several of his minor characters are writers, including the popular urban fiction novelist, Bo Shareef, and the journalist and investigative reporter of the Holland Herald, Piper Goines, and the avant-garde writer, Bobby Finley. Each writer is ineffectual for his or her own reasons. Bo Shareef, despite his popularity, is a stereotype of the urban fiction novelist, and Piper Goines, in the process of her reporting, stumbles across The Second Chance Program and is killed for her efforts.

However, the more pointed critique is aimed at the newer emergence of African American experimental fiction that attempts to defy all expectations of genre, topic, and characterization as depicted in auteur Bobby Finley’s *Great Work*. Bobby Finley was an African American Studies major in college and he tries to resist what he sees as the only two paths to fictional success. First, he names romance novels with “flat descriptions of
every action so that the prose was invariably predictable” (49). Second, he identifies the pressure to fit in to the Wright/Ellison model of fiction “not in the sense that the works be original and energetic, but that they focus on inner-city strife and racism” (50). Instead, in an extensive spoof on African American experimental fiction, he writes *The Great Work*, a book that, due to its obscurity, has no readers.

Johnson mocks this new type of novel and the types of work produced by writers within his own generation through Bobby Finley’s *Great Work*. The description is of a work that is unintelligible partly because the spatial location of the novel is completely unfamiliar. In fact, even on a textual level, the prose is completely disorienting. As Snowden reads it, he says: “the book’s sentences seemed to make sense individually. They had verbs and adjectives and nouns, but reading one after another only created confusion” (18). This description stands in direct opposition to the caricature of Black English and slang as often depicted in writing. Further, the work has no forward narrative action or plot since the entire book takes place in Alaska in a closet. The readership of the books is incredibly sparse. As one reader comments, “There are no black people in Alaska” (49). Thus, Johnson skewers the ways in which the audience of readers and Finley expects specific types of racial representations.

In contrast, people are lining up for the popular works of Bo Shareef that include his best-selling novel *Datz What I’m Talkin’ ‘Bout*. However, there is a turning point in the novel when Piper Goines becomes Finley’s reader. She relates that she initially didn’t get past the first few pages, but “It’s the most beautiful thing, I’ve ever seen. It’s genius” (164). As Bobby Finley recognizes to his delight, “Piper Goines was his reader” (164). The novel is about a social worker who goes to work in Alaska, but he’s left there when
the biplane leaves without with him. “Amazingly—and this is really a tribute to the
mastery of the craft of one Robert M. Finley—all of this happens on the first page. The
rest of the novel is set in a closet” (167).

The Great Work embodies work that passes primarily because it is not
recognizably African American. Ironically, it’s not transparent or readable nor does it
seem to offer a productive new avenue for African American fiction. Rather, by being set
in a rural outpost (the main character arrives in the Alaska interior via bi-plane) and then,
in reductio absurdum, in a closet, the action of the novel has nowhere to go. The closet
setting recalls Ellison’s basement, but without the subverted light from the power
company or the possibilities that Ellison proposes his main character’s writing allows for
the future of the Black experience by investing in Black Writing. Rather, with no
audience it seems that Finley’s fiction may defy tradition, but it doesn’t blaze new
literary ground.

Bobby Finley uses the novel as a way of paying penance for his killing of several
people when he burned down the Mumia House. Horus, too, is working on a book
entitled People I’m Gonna Kill When I Get My Gun. As he characterizes it, “It’s not
actually a story in the traditional sense. More of a list I guess you could call it” (199). In
this way, Johnson skewers urban literature fiction with its blatant violence, stereotypes,
and lack of development.

Similarly, stereotypes are the principal reason that Piper Goines critiques the work
of Bo Shareef. In her review for the Holland Herald she writes, “a dissection of Bo
Shareef’s hit Don’t Go There, where she traced the book’s three central clichés back to
their origins in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Birth of a Nation, and Nigger Heaven (201).
Accordingly, in the writerly space that Johnson creates there is “no room”—there are tensions between several modes of fictional representation and Johnson offers no clear solutions for this dilemma.

However, true to the overall message of the novel, Johnson’s novel more than the other books in this study successfully passes as a black novel for several reasons. Most importantly, Johnson’s novel writes directly within several traditions emanating from the Harlem Renaissance era. Like Thurman, he writes a novel that discusses the role of the Black artist. Like Schuyler, his novel addresses passing. And, like Rudolph Fisher, he contributes to the mystery genre of African American fiction. Moreover, Johnson offers the most searing indictment of the black middle-class. Ultimately, any resistance or consciousness that Snowden initially displayed is undercut as he, too, decides to be fully complicit with the organization’s mission. The only possibility of an expose on the true nature of the organization’s mission is deterred when the newspaper reporter, Piper Goines, is killed. Although Horizon Reality’s name implies the dawning of a new age in Harlem, it is clear that this new age is profoundly sinister and deadly for the majority of African Americans. Johnson’s work affirms a critique of the black middle class and an astute understanding of how class politics divides the African American community.
CHAPTER 4

Textual Healing: Passing In Percival Everett’s Erasure

“I don’t want to talk about race… I just want to make art” (Blair 82)

“The novel is finely crafted with fully developed characters, rich language, and subtle play with plot, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschyle’s the Persians has to do with the African American experience” (Everett 4).

“Satire is a ‘catalytic agent’ rather than an arm of the law or an instrument of correction: it functions less to judge people for their follies and vices than to challenge their attitudes and opinions, to taunt and provoke them into doubt, and perhaps disbelief” (Elkin 201).

Everett, who won the 2002 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Fiction for Erasure, situates this roman-a-clef and satiric send-up of the American publishing industry in Washington, D.C. There, his main character, Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, who has come to D.C. to visit his family and to attend a conference, grapples with his identities as the youngest, and most favored child of his two doting parents and his career as an experimental and largely unrecognized author. Thelonious Ellison is exasperated with the lack of positive literary reception for his work. Even his own sister, Lisa, a doctor in D.C. considers his writing dense and unreadable. Even more maddeningly,
Ellison faces stiff competition from his author-peers who write urban fiction. Much to Ellison’s chagrin, their work is hailed and celebrated as the new, authentic voice of urban black America. In their renditions of the black experience, they focus on the poverty, violence, and social disintegration of the urban black family. Within the context of urban fiction, Ellison has little chance of having his own work recognized and it seems to confuse his readers that, as a black man, he does not write about what is considered the normative black experience. In his frustration, Monk assumes a penname, Stagg R. Leigh, and writes a new novel, *Fuck/My Pafology*, a satiric send-up of urban fiction. However, when the mainstream literary establishment embraces this book and hails Monk as the new, authentic voice of urban America, Everett draws attention to the ways in which black cultural productions are fetishized and commodified. By juxtaposing his own textual production, as evidenced through the novel *Erasure*, with the book-inside-a-book, *Fuck/My Pafology*, Everett brings critical attention to the dissonance between literature and mass market urban fiction.

**We Lives In the Ghetto: The Emergence of Urban Fiction**

The historical backdrop to Everett’s *Erasure* is the reemergence of a “new” genre, alternatively called Urban fiction, Street Fiction, or hip hop fiction. Although journalists and literary critics agree that this brand of fiction first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s with Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1969) and Donald Goines’ novels *Dopefiend: The Story of a Black Junkie* (1971), *Whoreson: The Story of a Ghetto Pimp* (1972), and *Black Gangster* (1972), the genre experienced a renaissance in the 1990s with the publication of the critically acclaimed *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) by Sistah
Souljah. *The Coldest Winter Ever* was first published in 1999 and, due to its popularity, reprinted in hardback in 2006. As Dr. Marc Lamont Hill, an Assistant Professor of Urban Education at Temple University explains: “…street fiction novels are also distinguishable by their subject matter, hip hop aesthetics, independent production, and authorship” (“Street Fiction: What Is It and What Does it Mean for English Teachers”). As Simone Gibson, explains, “The text is often written in nonstandard English and prominently features the use of slang and profanity” (“Critical Readings: African American Girls and Urban Fiction”). Convicts who used their incarceration time to create fictional tales infused with the raw language and experiences of the streets often pen these raw and explosive books.

The reemergence of the street literature in the 1990s first hit street stalls and black bookstores in urban centers such as Philadelphia, New York, and Los Angeles. The demand for these books has been unprecedented. Since then, however, even mainstream booksellers such as B. Dalton, Barnes and Nobles, and before it closed, Borders, are stocking these titles. Critics and fiction writers have criticized the rawness of this new fiction as not being sufficiently literary. For instance, fiction writer Nick Chiles laments in his *New York Times* opinion article, “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut,” that in a recent visit to a national bookstore chain he was “…surrounded and swallowed whole on the shelves by an overwhelming wave of titles and jackets…Hustlin Backwards. Legit Baller. A Hustler’s Wife. Chocolate Flava.” (“Their Eyes Were Reading Smut”). Chiles’ criticism echoes those of other fiction writers and critics who decry this current trend because they see it as glorifying sex, violence, and the urban experience.

Everett, as the satirist, makes literary production the aesthetic, thematic, and
political target\textsuperscript{21} of his send-up of the publishing industry. For Everett, the paradoxes of the post-civil rights era are that it offers unprecedented educational opportunities and freedom and avenues to produce creative work. However, as his main character quickly discovers, his freedoms of the post-civil rights era are continuously impinged upon by the restrictions put on his art and how he represents African American characters, life, and culture. Despite Ellison’s elite education (Harvard), he is not able to enact his unique vision without censure and without having his racial allegiance and affiliation called into question. More specifically, he challenges narrow conceptions of African Americans in fiction and the limited creativity allowed African American fiction writers. He suggests that the literary market terrain reflects inequalities by limiting the language, education, and subject matter for black writers to that of urban fiction.

**Passing and Textual Passing**

Since, according to Belluscio, “literary passing” is the act of creating a fictional character who passes, it is immediately evident that satirists who engage passing discourses must consider and call into question how their characters look, talk, and move as well as where they live, what work they do, and with whom they socialize (11). Everett purposefully chooses to exaggerate each of these aspects of the characters in *Erasure* as well as make this conversation a part of his main characters’ concerns in order to highlight the ways in which these expectations about literature in general and African American literature in particular are not natural. In this way, rather than making passing one of the “subversive”

\textsuperscript{21} For this language, which I use in this chapter and the five following body chapters, I am indebted to Gayle Wald’s article “Passing Strange: Post-Civil Rights Blackness”.
features of a text (McDowell 17), Everett’s engagement of passing is aggressive and questions every premise upon which African American literature is normally based.

Everett shares significant biographical similarities with his main character, Thelonious “Monk” Ellison. Like Monk, he is an author who publishes extensively. His fiction is also outside of the scope of what is traditionally considered African American fiction. For Everett, this has meant that he has made a career out of writing books that are stretch the boundaries of what is normally considered African American fiction. To that end, he has displayed his versatility in terms of genre, topics, discourse, geographical location, and plots. He has written Westerns, the comical and satiric God's Country and the more polemical American Desert. He has co-authored a satiric epistolary novel, The History of the African American People (Proposed) By Strom Thurmond. He has even written a novel told from the perspective of a Greek God, Frenzy. In addition to writing over eighteen novels, he has published several collections of poetry, short stories, and even a children’s book. But his creativity is not limited to writing; he has also published abstract paintings.

In his fiction, Everett’s characters, while black, defy traditional, stereotypical, or mainstream expectations of black characters. His main characters have included a baseball player, a white rancher, God’s assistant, an academic and novelist, a hydrologist, and even an infant, named Ralph. In Erasure, the main character Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, like Everett himself, is an intellectual, middle-class, professor of English and writer. Everett and Monk share an artistic philosophy. Everett has repeatedly insisted, “I

22 Literary critic Alan Cheuse, a professor of English at George Mason University, names Everett as a satirist who is “…in the front ranks of serious American satirists” (Cheuse 1).
don’t want to talk about race…I just want to make art” (Blair 82). Furthermore, he has famously claimed, “skin color has nothing to do with my stories…” (“Author Values Background in Philosophy”). Like Monk, he is clearly well aware of race, but his larger project as a writer has been to write well ‘beyond’ race in order to secure his artistic freedom. One imagines, though, that Everett draws on the critical reception of his own work to inspire his rendering of Monk’s frustration with how his work is received. Monk’s novel, for example, receives praise and puzzlement: “The novel is finely crafted with fully developed characters, rich language, and subtle play with plot, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus’ the Persians has to do with the African American experience” (Erasure, 4). In Everett’s work he plays with the very same boundaries.

In fact, in his most famous satire, Erasure, he gives a stinging send-up of the mainstream publishing industry and it seems to, at least in part, fictionalize his own experience as a novelist. Throughout Everett’s novels he focuses on broadening the definition of what African American literature is and then severs the assumptions that the author’s subjectivity necessarily informs or predetermines the subjectivity of the characters in the novel. Like all satirists, he is devoted to showing his versatility and savvy know-how through his almost encyclopedic knowledge and by challenging reader’s assumptions.

For Everett, then, his fictional goals are within the framework that Dustin Griffin, the author of Satire: A Critical Reintroduction, identifies, which include “inquiry” and “provocation” as well as “display” and “play”. More specifically, since race is, by nature, is deemed to be a transparent signifier, for a fiction writer, such as Everett, the danger of
race within fiction is that fiction ceases to be an artistic endeavor and is replaced by clichés, tropes, and pre-ordained plot lines.

Despite his consistent resistance of realism and racial identities, the book that so far has gotten the most popular and critical response is his racial satire, *Erasure*. *Publisher’s Weekly* praises *Erasure* as Everett’s “…over-the-top masterpiece about an African-American writer who ‘overcomes’ his intellectual tendency to ‘write white’ and ends up penning a parody of ghetto fiction that becomes a huge commercial and literary success” (Zaleski 283). The book has been praised and this irony of Everett’s career is by no means lost on him. In fact, ironically, one press wanted to publish *Erasure* as the first in its new imprint of African American books and Everett turned them down on principle. However, Everett is gaining increasing attention. For instance, *African American Review* honored him by dedicating an entire issue to his work. In praise of his artistic versatility, he has been categorized as “uncategorizable” (14). This characterization is fitting since one of the main goals of a satirist is to prove one’s virtuosity in terms of one’s ability to speak in a wide variety of discourses. He speaks eloquently to the point of his artistic project when he says, “I do not believe that the works we produce need to be any different; the failing is not in what we show but in how it is seen. And it is not just white readers, but African-American readers as well who seek to fit our stories into an existent model. It is not seeing with ‘white’ eyes, it is seeing with ‘American’ eyes, with brainwashed, automatic, comfortable, and ‘safe’ perceptions of reality” (Stewart 298 qtd in Everett’s *Signing to the Blind*).

Everett has been well reviewed in the popular press, but the scholarly discussion of his work, while growing, has been limited. Of the few scholarly articles available,
Erasure has received the most attention. In Ana-Maria Sanchez-Arce’s article, “‘Authenticism,’ or the Authority of Authenticity,” she situates Erasure in terms of an evolving understanding of authenticity from the 19th century to the present and zeroes in on the linguistic features of the text. As she explains, “The use of authenticity in a ‘naively mimetic’ way is clearly related to that of otherness. That which is authentic is as constructed as that which is other, in both the sense of it being a similar process and the fact that it is usually other people and their stories that are valued for their authenticity. Otherness is textualized and its representation dictates how these ‘others’ are allowed to speak…reading becomes the mechanical task of finding traits that are already considered to be ‘natural’ and valuable” (Sanchez-Arce 141). Therefore, she notes that Monk’s, purposefully ‘ghetto fiction’ utilizes features of verbal discourse inherent in stereotypes.

She draws on Toni Morrison for what she calls ‘common linguistic strategies’: ‘Economy of stereotype,’ ‘Metaphysical condensation,’ ‘Fetishization,’ ‘Dehistoricizing allegory,’ and ‘patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language (Morrison 67, 68, 69 in Sanchez-Arce 146). She explains further, “Their ‘otherness’ requires that they ventriloquize and animate the fictitious ‘literary blackness’ that their bodies signify. Thus, the black body is a marker for the imposition of pre-established notion of authenticity that is difficult to avoid” (Sanchez-Arce 147). In Kimberly Eaton’s “Deconstructing the Narrative: Language, Genre, and Experience in Erasure,” she argues that “Erasure is a constantly shifting narrative that questions the many types of form” (Eaton 220). She concludes, “Percival Everett deconstructs language, the novel, the black experience and forms of stereotypical practice in Erasure to reveal the necessity of expanding space for a greater variety of narratives to exist. Monk Ellison explores
language, proving that linguistic meaning is inconsistent because it depends on the common understanding of those practicing signification” (Eaton 231). In Margaret Russett’s essay, “Race Under Erasure: For Percival Everett, ‘a piece of fiction,’” the most sophisticated writing on *Erasure* currently available, she argues, then, that ‘race’ is not the only or even the primary concept that *Erasure* puts *sous rature*. Considered in the context of Everett’s work to date, she writes “the novel raises questions about genre, mimesis, and authorial identity which exceed as well as inform, his critique of the nouveau-racism that pervades the contemporary literary market” (Russett 358).

In this chapter, I build on the work of Sanchez-Arce, Eaton, and Russet in order to show how Everett, one of the most prolific African American novelists and satirists since Ishmael Reed, seeks to transform the African American literary landscape. Not only does he seek to prove his own literary prowess and thereby, through example, dispute popular and stereotypic misconceptions about African Americans’ inability to write unique, creative, and original fiction (rather than just being imitative), but also he widens the African American cannon. In Everett’s work, then, his satiric examination of passing becomes a way to question racial categories on the individual, literary, and canonical levels.

**Broadening the Artistic Field: Satiric Play and Inquiry**

The most recent generation of satiric criticism, which emerged in the early 1990s, reflects a significant shift in the understanding of the purpose and functions of satire. The previous model of satire as outlined most famously by Northrup Frye and Mary Clare Randolph in the 1960s can be identified as the moral model of satire in which the satirist targets a specific position in order to launch an attack on (A) and replace it with the
satirist’s own position (B). During the recent resurgence of interest in satiric theory, however, theorists have agreed that, while appropriate and relevant to some satire, this model is too limited for many satirists. Influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism, theorists have argued against the somewhat simplistic moral and political function of satire in order to highlight the artistic, cultural, and literary function of satire. In order to understand African American satire, it’s important to draw on both the most recent African American literary criticism and satiric criticism, especially since these two theories have been largely mutually exclusive.

The moral vision of satire overlaps with a dualistic understanding of black versus white culture as articulated consistently by theorists of African American humor including Lawrence Levine, Mel Watkins, and Glenda Carpio. This view, especially in an America which still has significant areas of segregation, has legitimate validity. For instance, Gates in the highly influential *Signifying Monkey* in which he writes, “What we are privileged to witness here is the (political, semantic) confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the black American linguistic circle and the white…we bear witness here to the protracted argument over the nature of the sign itself, with the black vernacular discourse proffering its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical consciousness” (Gates 45). Yet, what happens in an African American context in which education allows some African-Americans access to the white linguistic context in its most wide and diversely defined aspects? Suddenly, this view becomes not the only view possible.

A valuable way to read contemporary satire with less certainty has been articulated by newer theorists. For instance in, Dustin Griffin’s *Satire: A Critical
Reintroduction, he emphasizes a wide variety of satiric functions including provocation. He explains, “In each case the satirist raises questions; in provocation, the question is designed to expose or demolish a foolish certainty. PK Elkin argues that in modern eyes satire is ‘catalytic agent rather than an arm of the law or an instrument of correction: it functions less to judge people for their follies and vices than to challenge their attitudes and opinions, to taunt and provoke them into doubt, and perhaps into disbelief” (Augustan Defence of Satire 201). According to Griffin, the satirist agitates through the use of two primary means: difficulty and paradox. Ultimately, according to Griffin, satirists seek to “…raise questions we must then ponder” (64).

In Everett’s Erasure, he attacks the artistic and linguistic limitations of the representations of African Americans in popular culture in order to argue for artistic and economic freedom. Ultimately, however, Everett simultaneously satirizes the main character’s middle class pretensions. Everett articulates, but perhaps more importantly enacts, the paradox between group identification and artistic freedom.

Unlocking the Master’s House: Revision and Reduction

In Everett’s Erasure, he puts into productive tension the traditional goals of his character, a passer, and his own goals as the author and satirist. On the one hand, a successful racial pass requires that the passer master the mainstream conventions including body language, behavior, custom, and, of course language in order to pass successfully and undetected. On the other hand, the goals of a satirist include forceful disorder of genre and the upset of traditional narrative. From the title and opening page of Erasure, Everett skillfully signifies on the tradition of passing narratives. The title,
Erasure, both invokes and situates the novel within a lineage within African American literary history of both fiction and non-fiction which seeks to illuminate racial experience including James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Richard Wright’s Native Son, and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. Moreover, Erasure draws extensively on and rewrites portions of each of these novels. While Native Son and Invisible Man are most overtly rewritten, Everett also simultaneously inverts the narrative structure of The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. While the Ex-Colored Man, who is raised as middle-class and has extensive exposure to the white world, ultimately rejects what he sees as white values in search of an art form that is intrinsic to African Americans by studying the African American spirituals, the main character of Erasure, Thelonious Ellison, mimics a form of ‘ghetto’ fiction in order to expose it as a fraudulent genre.

Perhaps most importantly, like The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man which has been identified as “taxonomically slippery” mainly because it claims to be autobiography, but is actually fiction. Erasure claims, at least at first, to be a journal (Pfeiffer 14). The story opens with Ellison’s confidential claim, “My journal is a private affair, which echoes and reverberates within the African American tradition of the confessional novel, but as I cannot know the time of my coming death, and since I am not disposed, however unfortunately, to the serious consideration of self-termination, I am afraid that others will see these pages” (1). Yet this this claim proves immediately disingenuous because the novel makes us continuously aware of its construction by including dialogue, stories, an academic paper, a CV, and snippets of conversation between long-dead historical figures.
However, the overall construction of the novel allows us to distinguish between the points made by Thelonious Ellison, the character-author and Everett, the author of the novel as a whole. In this one-two punch, Everett enacts the argument that Ellison makes in order to expand the criteria of African American art. At the same time, there is no doubt that Ellison and his middle-class family are far from heroic or honorable characters. In fact, their social status and real desires are in constant tension, so that each family member is ultimately embroiled in and defined by a significant lie. For instance, his sister, Lisa, is an abortion Dr. who works with the people, but who hates their presence and everything they stand for. His brother has lived for fifteen years in a marriage even though he is gay and has finally come out to his parents and Monk is an author who first denies his racial heritage with ease and doesn’t ever fully fit in and then, in an elaborate ruse, writes a parody of *Native Son* that wins a National Book Award and means he has to disguise himself in order to maintain his faux author character in what is a rewrite of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. If there is authentic mimesis it is of other books. Everett restages and updates the debate between Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. However, he does so without necessarily invoking the political messages of either. *Erasure* attempts to pass as non-fiction while simultaneously being vigorously undercut by the devices of the book, which allows the reader to begin to make a distinction between Thelonious Ellison, the writer and Everett, the author. Everett undercuts the seemingly transparent journalistic approach with continuous highlighting of the book’s fiction. Moreover, his continual references to German avant-garde artists who were censored by the Nazi’s presents a meta-commentary and advocacy for artistic
freedom, particularly artistic freedom that presents itself in work that is abstract and
defies expectations of realism.

Everett invokes African American history, but he does so mainly through names
and fiction rather than through realism. In fact, the realism that he presents is profoundly
mundane. Ellison’s life is primarily one of boredom and complete non-engagement in his
life. He complains often. His life is filled with middle-class dilemmas including
preoccupation with his family. The thrust of the novel focuses on Everett’s family life
and his return to D.C. involves becoming increasingly concerned about his mother’s
deteriorating health. These kinds of mundane concerns are central to the satire—Everett’s
life is profoundly boring and the only real action in the book is the parody that he writes.

Despite his educational privilege—he graduated from Harvard—he is not
economically as well off as he would like to be. On the one hand, he has a lifestyle that
affords him certain freedoms and privileges—time to woodwork and fish—for example,
but he constantly bemoans his fate as someone who does not have the economic
privileges he would like access to. Yet the discourse of the author is profoundly savvy,
meant to display his considerable linguistic savvy. While at the same time, he reduces
African American vernacular to hyperbolic simplicity. As the narrator says, “The pain
started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I
remembered passages of Native Son and The Color Purple and Amos and Andy and my
hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground
outside, people in the street shouting dint, ax, fo, screet, and fahvre! And I was screaming
inside, complaining that I didn’t sound like that, that my mother didn’t sound like that,
that my father didn’t sound like that and I imagined myself sitting on a park bench
counting the knives in my switchblade collection and a man came up to me and he asked me what I was doing and I couldn’t help what came out, ‘Why fo you be axin?’”. Stagg R. Leigh’s title, *My Pafology*, suggests a self-conscious awareness of his condition as a problem, which is belied by the barely literate text itself.

My self-murder would not be an act of rage and despair, but of only despair and my artistic sensibility could not stand that…In my writing my instinct was to defy form, but I very much sought in defying it to affirm it, an irony that was difficult enough to articulate, much less defend it. But the wood, the feel of it, the smell of it, the weight of it. It was so much more real than words. The wood was so simple. Damnit, a table was a table was a table (139).

Everett creates a continuum of artistic expression that makes abstract expressionism and realism completely opposite from each other.

Ultimately, Everett feels pressure to pass for black because his diction, subject matter, etc. has little on the surface to do with the black experience, so he rewrites *Native Son* to both show-up the white literary establishment. They hail him as the new authentic voice of African American fiction and do not recognize the new updating because they are not readers of African American fiction. However, even more importantly, they do not recognize the implicit critique within the parody. By making fun of *Native Son*, Everett creates a double-edged parody that simultaneously lashes out at this type of fiction AND media representations across the board that endorse such representations. Everett’s parody erases the nuances and the subtleties in urban culture in order to collapse
the boundaries between them for his fiery critique. Ultimately, this category of collapse is also highlighted by his fictional representations of dialogues between various authors.

In Everett’s version of *Native Son*, however, the white Mary Dalton is replaced with a light-skinned, middle-class African American woman and her family. The main character goes to work for the family and the relationship not only highlights the underclass character’s educational and socioeconomic distance from his more privileged African American counterparts, but also emphasizes the black Mary Dalton’s fascination with his urban, gruff, and masculine persona. She invites the main character of *My Pafology*, Van Go, to take her to his neighborhood. However, for Van Go the visit exasperates the class tensions he already feels. He reports: “I be trapped. I be feelin like a little animal they found on the road some place…Mr. Dalton got all the money in the world. I ain’t got shit.” (104).

Everett draws most pointedly on the experiences of authors and artists who were working during the Nazi regime. The commentary is a pointed critique that Everett stands against censorship. Moreover, he points out the politics of image production in one of the most ironic moments of the book, when he has D.W. Griffith compliment Richard Wright on his books. “I like your book very much.” To which Richard Wright replies, “Thank you.” This simple exchanges points out how in image production, ideological context is stripped away. It also shows the way in which the fictional conventions and political context prevalent in a book such as *Native Son* can be mined and circulated as white supremacist fiction. It may even go as far as to suggest that Richard Wright, a product of such a system, has simply recycled a popular image.
Initially, Everett’s inability to pass for black is emphasized by the difficulty he has even in simple social interactions with other blacks. Everett’s main character is a nerd, a social misfit extraordinaire, incapable of even the simplest exchanges if they touch in any way on street slang. When he is greeted with “What’s up” his comical response is: “My mind raced. What the proper response to what’s up? Should I say, “Nothing’s up...I couldn’t say Several things are up...(179). He comments on this himself when he says, “The problem was the one I had always had, that I was not a regular guy and I so much wanted to be. Can you spell bourgeois?” (195).

Ultimately, the passing that occurs in this novel is the fast-handed switch of images upon images and black experience upon black experience. The novel asks what relevance passing has in the contemporary context in which knowledge production is accessible by black people—Thelonius Ellison, as an educated black man can access information, for instance about censorship in Nazi Germany. Yet, the fictional debate is always treated in the past tense with invocation of the debate between Wright and Ellison but without Monk demonstrating any awareness of current African American fiction or scholarship that might suggest a different avenue of knowledge than the one he possesses. If Monk is not psychologically in-depth, then he is also not historically in-depth either. The ultimate erasure seems to be the profound interplay of surfaces.

If Everett teases us into doubts, it’s our doubts about the construction and narrative arc of African American fiction. He successfully and constantly reveals its construction by showing the phenomenal gap between Monk’s life and the construction of his fictional Stagg R. Leigh counterpart. Through his appearance on the Oprah-esque talk show, Ellison’s authorial alter-ego, Stagg R. Lee is thrust onto the national stage and
into the national spotlight. The spotlight becomes emblematic of the scrutiny African Americans experience as they are assessed to see whether or not they and/or their work are authentic. Everett uses this moment to highlight the ironies of Ellison’s/Stagg R. Lee’s fame: made-up persona and a parody of the black experience are mistaken for the ‘real’ voice of African America. The talk show host congratulates him on being a new, authentic voice in African American fiction. Of course, unlike his fictional counterpart, Ellison has never been to prison and did not grow up in the ‘hood, but saying that he did is the only way for him to have his work taken seriously. In the post-civil rights era, rather than the eradication of racial barriers, Ellison is hemmed in by narrow stereotypes that make it nearly impossible for him to break out of what he sees as the literary ‘ghetto of African American fiction.
CHAPTER 5
Let’s Get It On: The Sexual, Textual Politics of Passing in Trey Ellis Platitudes

Trey Ellis’ *Platitudes*’ setting is the epistolary exchange between two writers, the experimental and post-modern DeWayne Wellington and the traditional popular fiction writer Isshee Ayam. In this satiric novel, therefore, the setting is truly the imaginative and creative space of the two author-protagonists. DeWayne Wellington, who resides on the Upper West Side in New York and Isshee Ayam, a Georgia native, have entirely different visions for authentic African American fiction. The initial hostility between the two writers over their literary differences evolves into mutual respect and ends in a romance. As they exchange letters and rewrite each other’s fiction in an extended literary workshop through letters, they place their characters in two, competing geographical locations, the urban North and the rural South. These geographic differences are the first of several major artistic, stylistic, and aesthetic differences between the two authors. This difference becomes clear within the first few pages of Wellington’s novel once he has introduced us to the protagonist of his novel, the horny, nerdy, Earle; however, Wellington is unsatisfied with his fledgling writing efforts and flagging storyline and pleas for help with his story. In response, Isshee Ayam rewrites the story. *Platitudes* is a satiric confrontation between two aesthetic schools of thought en vogue in the late 1980s, postmodernism and black feminism. While Trey Ellis nee, DeWayne Wellington, embodies a postmodern writer focused on literary experimentation, Isshee Ayam is a parody of the black feminist writer. Together, these authors question the degree to which a text should reflect black culture, history, and experience to be a legitimately black text.
The primary historical backdrop to the satire is the emergence during the 1970s and 1980s of black women’s fiction. During this time, Ntozake Shange, Alice, Walker, and Toni Morrison, who won critical acclaim and achieved several firsts (first play on Broadway, first Pulitzer, first Nobel) also gained incredible popularity. At the same time, due to what was seen at the time as their well-publicized, negative portrayals of African American men, they have been heavily criticized. In part, Trey Ellis’ *Platitudes* addresses these gendered politics in contemporary African American literature during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Specifically, his critique targets African American representation of black culture. Ellis contests a black identity that privileges black southern folk tradition. Moreover, he critiques women writer’s stereotypical representations of men.

African American male writers have contested the negative portrayals of black men as rapists and brutes in African American men’s fiction. As a result, African American male writers have attempted to clear a space for African American writing that asserts a broader understanding of black masculinity specifically and black identity generally. Yet this search for a broader black masculinity has been difficult. Critic James Coleman has observed, for instance, that despite these fiction writers’ use of innovative postmodern techniques, the pervasive negative representations of Black men has been hard for black male writers to fully counter or subvert. This trouble has come in part because of male writers’ seeming difficulty in positing a masculinity that does not put forward sexist

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23 Madhu Dubey in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* locates this interest in the South within a larger American trend of renewed attention on the South. She writes, ‘Of course, it is no accident that the resurgent regionalism celebrating the distinct folk culture of the South has emerged precisely as the South is making its transition to a fully industrialized and urban region (148). Joyce A. Joyce in *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests* attributes the trend of African American women’s writing to the palpability of this fiction to the white mainstream (249).
representations of Black women. Through the romance plot, Ellis explores the romantic possibilities of the two types of writing.

The secondary historical backdrop of Platitudes is Ellis’ own manifesto “The New Black Aesthetic” (1989). There, he has outlined his search for new modes of Black representation. Echoing earlier calls aimed at the black middle class, like DuBois’ conception of the talented tenth, Ellis celebrates the black middle class and the contribution its members can make to invigorate African American Arts and letters. Utilizing the term “cultural mulatto,” Ellis argues that because of their schooling in predominately white environments, black middle-class Americans under thirty have the advantage of being able to move comfortably among many groups. Ellis embraces this exposure as a tactical advantage, and blackness as a conscious choice. Most importantly, he stresses the importance of “defining blacks in black contexts” (238). Ellis’ conceptualization of black art relies on the amalgamation of two or more cultures while still staying, according to his own words, ‘true to the black’ (238). However, as his novel Platitudes reveals, in practice the degree to which a novel is white or black is still up for considerable debate. In fact, a critique of his manifesto foreshadows this difficulty.

One problem is that this aesthetic is not clearly identified. As Tera Hunter points out in response to Ellis’ list of artists embraced by the New Black Aesthetic, “But what criteria is he using to determine its adherents? I am hard-pressed to discern, for example, what aesthetic values and commitments Eddie Murphy and Wynton Marsalis share in common? Or why do Murphy’s ‘Beverly Hill Cops’ movies rank higher on the litmus test than Lionel Ritchie’s ‘Dancing on the Ceiling’ or Whitney Houston’s ‘I Wanna Dance With Somebody?’” (247). In Ellis’ zeal to identify the NBA, he seems to potentially
conflate: color and culture; class and class origins;\textsuperscript{24} class and culture. Ellis ultimately shies away from addressing the politics of literary production and how that may determine views of what Black is and what it isn’t.

Ellis, the satirist, makes textual revisions and fictional production the thematic, aesthetic, and political target of his satire. More specifically, he holds to critique and ridicule certain aesthetic qualities as a natural or inherent to the African American experience and thereby African American fiction. In the post-civil rights United States he exposes the African American experience as diverse in all aspects: geography, class, education, and romantic interests. Like Everett, Ellis’s work highlights how artistic choices are just that, \textit{choices}.

In order to satirize these artistic choices, Ellis employs an extensive parody of contemporary African American fiction. Signifying, as Henry Louis Gates has outlined in \textit{Signifying Monkey}, is a complex rhetorical act that encompasses a wide-range of speech acts. Underlying all of these speech acts is what Geneva Smitherman terms “double-voice” which allows a word to have two meanings concurrently (19). In fact, Ellis employs parody extensively as part of his textual revision. Through this technique, African Americans revise the work of literary predecessors both white and black.

Ellis shares biographical similarities between himself and his main author. Like Dorothy and Earle, Ellis attended a very prestigious private school. In his case, he attended Phillips Academy, Andover. Like Isshee Ayam, who attended Yale, Ellis attended an equally prestigious Ivy League school, Stanford, for his undergraduate

\textsuperscript{24} Tera Hunter suggests the class/class origin conflation in her article “It’s A Man’s Man’s Man’s World” Specters of the Old Re-newed in Afro-American Culture and Criticism”. 
career; he currently teaches at Columbia. Until the writing of the novel, however, Ellis was neither an experimental novelist nor a well-established popular writer. However, since then he has become a successful novelist, memoirist, and screenwriter. He won the American Book Award for *Right Here, Right Now*, also a satire. *Platitudes* is his debut, and in it he acts out the tensions he feels between the different types of representations and the varied schools of the African American aesthetic. Yet Ellis, who in his “New Black Aesthetic” manifesto identifies himself as a “cultural mulatto,” makes every effort in his on-line biography to emphasize his diverse cultural interests: yoga, surfing, and writing. Earle, then, may share nerd-like traits of Ellis himself. Additionally, both Ellis and Earle are upper middle-class.

**Textual Miscegenation: Mixed Race Textual Babies**

One of the core anxieties presented in passing texts is not only whether or not the protagonist is black or white, but if the protagonist successfully passes for white, then he or she worries that his secret will be discovered when he or she has children. In *Platitudes*, “the baby,” is not a real, living and crying baby, but a metaphorical baby, the literary product that Ayam and Wellington create. The romantic feelings that emerge between them are generated in part because they have forged a partnership in which each author begins to be influenced by the other and to create a product that is reflective of their combined artistic genes. Moreover, racial sexual politics are an essential component of the subplot when both Wellington and Ayam must decide who the romantic counterparts to their main characters will be. According to Cathy Boeckman, “Within this mythology were pseudo-scientific assumptions that biracial individuals were physically
weak and constitutionally frail, that they were flighty and effete, and that they could not reproduce beyond the third generation” (32). Whether or not a character can successfully pass is dependent on physical characteristics—are they light skinned, do they have the proper eye color and hair texture? Similarly, in order for a text to successfully pass it must have markers that allow it to fit in either as a black or white text. In the case of a text, Ellis questions whether ‘one drop’ is enough to characterize his text as black.

Ellis opens the novel with a dual narrative; two story lines that are his first and second attempts at writing a new novel. With these two protagonists, Ellis attempts to defy racial stereotypes and present characters whom, while black, their teenage interests mostly define. His first story focuses on Earle, a nerdy 13-year old who lives with his mother on the upper West side of New York and is interested in girls and computers. He feels awkward, uncool, and is embarrassed by the things that he says and does. When Wellington first presents his main character, Earle, he introduces Earle’s teenage lusts, but without an emphasis on the racial aspects or problems of Earle’s sexual desire. Earle “recklessly” eyeballs his white neighbor across the window from him, “back already from her early aerobics” (4) which gives him an erection. He quickly undresses and gets ready to shower in the hopes that no one will now know “who is the Peeping, who is the Tom” (4). In this scene, Ellis treats Earle’s lust without identifying the racial history that complicates the gaze of Black men on white women, especially if they are in an all white environment. While Ellis acknowledges this history of black male subjectivity, it does not necessarily influence his presentation of Earle. All throughout the novel, Earle is ogling women, often white women, but it is not given the racial dimensions one might suspect. As much as Ellis tries to create Earl against type, he similarly describes Earl’s mother as
the opposite of stereotype. More specifically, he defines her against a series of negatives: “She is neither fat (her breasts do not swell the lace top of the apron she never owned), nor has she any gold teeth. She cannot sing, nor is she ever called “Mama” (though that is what she calls her own mother” (4). The second narrative focuses on a teenage girl, Dorothy, who attends an elite prep school in Manhattan and lives with her mother in Harlem. Dorothy’s interests include her girlfriends, dance class, and the PSATs. When Ellis stops each narrative after a few tepid paragraphs, he is frustrated. Although he was trying to base these characters on his upper-middle class nieces and nephews, he is not satisfied with his efforts. Instead, he issues a call to his readers to intervene in his narrative with suggestions for how to improve it and a popular novelist, Isshee Ayam responds.

In Ellis’ narrative, DeWayne and Isshee each represent a school of thought. In this case, they represent the tension between more experimental and traditional approaches to black fiction. The correspondence between Wellington and Ayam presents the battle over literary representation and style and illustrates each of the schools of thought. This battle is gendered and reveals the aesthetic tensions within the African American literary community. For instance, after reading Wayne’s initial literary efforts for his stories on Earle and Dorothy, Ayam thinks so little of his efforts that she recommends, frankly, that Wellington should kill himself (19). Likewise, Wellington recoils from Ayam’s representation of Southern, Baptist, Literacy-earning culture. In Ayam’s revision of Wellington’s novel, “Rejoice” Ellis offers a hilarious parody of traditional African American fiction. Ayam presents the rural South with the obligatory themes of oppression, sexual violence, poverty, and racial uplift. One of the funniest lines she offers
parodies the cadence of a sermon. She writes, “Yes, from out of “Baptist thighs, thighs that shook with the centuries of racist of injustice and degradation, thighs that twitched with the hope of generations yet unplanted, thighs that quivered with the friction of jubilant, bed-thumping, and funky-smelling, love-making, emerged Earle” (16). These lines combine a preacher’s cadence with the material of a Black harlequin romance. This parody conflates mass-market fiction with more literary fiction to erase the distinctions between types of popular fiction. In this way, Ellis reduces the work of Walker and Morrison to the language register of mass-market paperback. Wellington sarcastically thanks her for her “glory stories” (Ellis 19). Through Ellis’ exaggeration of Ayam’s fiction, Ellis seems to hope to expose the artifice of these tropes but also intentionally conflate mass-market products with more literary representations. Ayam is no kinder on Wellington’s representations; she calls him on his misogynistic representations of women and rejects his “atavistic brand of representation” (15). Although Ellis initially challenges and belittles Ayam’s work and approach, he is equally interested in marketability and demonstrates a willingness to exploit the story that he thinks will stimulate his popularity.

Ellis’ parody of African American s fiction raises an additional interesting point regarding Ellis’ rhetorical decisions. Ellis intentionally conflates mass-market fiction and literary fiction and collapses all women’s fiction into one category. Ellis’ move highlights perhaps the arbitrariness of making distinctions between mass-market paperbacks and literary fiction. Ellis parodies Alice Walker’s and Toni Morrison’s themes including rape, incest, and other types of violence. Moreover, Ellis signifies on Morrison’s middle-class character First Corinthians from *Song of Solomon* by naming his male overseer character I. Corinthians. The conflation of these two genres raises a question regarding audience.
Who does Ellis imagine Ayam’s audience is? Does he believe her audience is white feminists or black women? One wonders partially because of the class markers Ellis gives Ayam. Raised in rural Georgia, she attends Yale and leaves academia to write fiction. If she’s writing for a black female audience, it may partially change our perceptions of Ellis’ target for his satire. Does he, for example, intend to target black mass market audiences and those readers who may read authors such as Terri McMillan over authors such as Toni Morrison? Her mainstream popularity is never fully accounted for and her motives are not fully explained. Is she merely an opportunist dumbing down her works for her audience? The only hint of Ayam’s audience comes from Wellington’s attendance at her reading towards the end of the novel. She reads an excerpt of her novel at Barnard with the requisite young, white liberal audience. Ellis never provides a clear sense of her audience. Nor does Ellis really suggest that Ayam’s representation of men is harmful to the Black community. The house is packed and Ayam admits that her work is popular at women’s colleges but Ellis does not address this issue further.

Despite Wellington’s status as an emerging serious author, and a well reviewed first book that is not selling, he is not above exploiting writing for financial gain. Ellis signifies on the literary climate when Wellington, albeit sarcastically, considers switching to writing black women’s fiction. As Wellington confesses to the reader, “Well, Earle’s story so far has degenerated pretty quickly, now hasn’t it? If you ask me it’s got “No Sale” written all over it. But girls, women? Now black women sell, according to a friend of mine who works in publishing” (10). Popular success requires meeting ideological expectations of the primarily white audiences and critical establishment even if that undermines historical reality, an ability to combat racism, or reserve one’s integrity.
In response to their conversation, a form of prolonged call and response, both Ayam and Wellington illustrate their willingness to revise and improvise on their texts. For both authors this means revising their prose in ways that integrate each other’s viewpoint and techniques. Wellington expresses his newfound viewpoint almost as a religious conversion. He apologizes for his terrible past behavior and offers a new pages that demonstrate “…My prose and my thoughts have changed, tightened” (110). For Wellington this change means that he begins to place is characters in more clearly black contexts. The change begins when Earle now regularly explores Harlem and gets a job at the NAACP as a volunteer to register voters. Moreover, he also develops a tender story of friendship between Earle and Dorothy, Wellington’s depiction of this friendship reflects his new attitudes towards women. Wellington’s depiction of Earle’s mother becomes more positive and she too begins to make choices that reflect her cultural roots. These changes include quitting her job for the South African Airline and she breaks up with her previous boyfriend, Mr. Solomon, a Jewish man. Likewise Ayam’s prose begins to reflect an appreciation of Black men not previously exhibited. For instance, she includes a scene where Earle defends Dorothy and her mother from rape. The other change for Ayam includes that “Though she has not discarded her own notions of an authentic black voice, Isshe sees the possibility of a more complex vision of African American life than she had previously admitted (Favor 701). These two authors begin to create a ‘mixed’ textual baby.

The changes in both narratives are rooted in a shift in the sexual relationships displayed by all of the characters. As the aesthetics of the narrative change, so do who they engage in romantic interests with. For instance, Earl stops pining after white/Jewish
Janie Rosenblum and develops an interest in Dorothy. As Ayam’s narrative shifts, Dorothy’s mother, Darcelle, admits her fondness for a white professor in her youth. Likewise, when the relationship between Wellington and Ayam sours temporarily, Wellington expresses a renewed contempt for her and violently destroys Earl’s relationship with Dorothy by having him walk in on her having a sexual relationship with a white man. This installment of the novel occurs after Isshee stands Wellington up at the African American book conference. Wellington reverts back to his cruder narrative themes and has Earle discover Dorothy in a compromising sexual position. After reading Wellington’s latest installment, Ayam responds, “I had no idea I had hurt you so much that you would willfully sabotage your own work (which was proceeding quite nicely, I might add) just to hurt me” (171). Interestingly, this incident does not deter Ayam from wanting to meet DeWayne and she suggests taking him out to Windows on the World in New York. It’s these closing events of the narrative, including the development of a sexual relationship between DeWayne and Isshee that most reviewers concluded were contrived. Moreover, Martin Favor believes that “the turn toward the ‘traditional’ love plot which Platitudes makes appears, on closer inspection, to be a turn toward a type of male sexual domination (703). Moreover, it’s troubling that Isshee, a feminist, would accept this type of behavior.

As Gates has identified, African American authors who signify on other texts often do so with a signal “difference,” and for Ellis this difference is considerable. Ellis’ NBA manifesto is instructive here. Ellis advocates reappropriating black culture “by black artists for black people” (Hunter 247). Yet how black people would reappropriate their art seems unclear. Ellis seems to need to claim that various activities are legitimate
for black folks to do. Ellis seems to naturally have to defend himself against charges of whiteness first and then carve out Black category in relation to that white space.

Rather than focus his novel with Afro-centric rhetoric, one which might challenge the white literary establishment or challenge African American artists to be more aware of how the media influences our understanding of African Americans, Ellis concludes the novel by focusing exclusively on the relationship between Ayam and Wellington. He makes the issue between Ayam and Wellington personal and aesthetic rather than overtly political. The fact that Ellis does not enter this debate is reflected in his manifesto as well. In his attempt to not limit the definition of who is black, he does not set any parameters. While the sentiment behind this move seems well intentioned, it does make it difficult to remember that there is naturally a separation between “real world” and television, for example. This distinction is doubly important because it helps make a distinction between representations of African Americans in mainstream media and cultural realities. It seems particularly difficult to attempt to suggest new modes of representation without awareness of the mainstream media. By the end of the novel, both DeWayne and Isshe fault personal relationships for their previous literary representations. DeWayne has been bitter because of the divorce from his wife and Isshe admits a particularly painful relationship with a former professor. Interestingly, then, literary politics or the larger literary scene and how that may inform their artistic choices never enter the discussion. This is a shame because it ultimately serves to undermine the value of their relationship and their discussion. It seems to fall back on a truism, “Can’t we all just get along?” rather than on the deeper realities that may still very well inform African American life.
The metaphor of a sexual relationship is used to create a way to conceptualize how two very different aesthetics might be merged into one. The relationships that the characters have with their communities, friends, family, work sites, etc. directly reflects the degree to which the character is perceived as black. For Ellis and Ayam, black characters who have romantic relationships within the race seem to be more representative of characters who are authentically black. Likewise, each author grapples with how much mainstream material to include in their narratives and whether or not to allow for a wide variety of genres within the novel. The more “foreign” material is allowed in the text, the more possibility there is for the text, through amalgamation to become diluted and to lose its identity as an African American text.

The power in Platiitudes is Ellis’ willingness to experiment with texts so that a reader can experience how different influences and aesthetic concerns change the content, tone, and tenor of the text. Moreover, they can see how Ayam comes to appreciate that including some experimental elements in her work does not inherently negate its racial content. Both writers grow in an appreciation of the others’ approach to African American literature. Both authors seem to struggle with conflating class with a specific racial experience. It is suggested that neither author is creating stories from a background that they themselves actually experience. Both authors ask what is needed to make a text recognizably black and under what circumstances a text might pass as black or white.
CHAPTER 6

I Have One Mind for the White Man to See; The Other One I Know Is Me:

Whites Passing for Black in Adam Mansbach’s *Angry White Black Boy*

Adam Mansbach, who won the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s best book of 2005 for *Angry Black White Boy*, places his satiric novel of the white appropriation of hip hop culture in New York City. His main character, Macon Detornay, is a freshman at Colombia University where he takes classes by day and by night moonlights as a New York City cabdriver. While he navigates his cab through the city, Detornay expresses his devotion to hip hop by listening to hip hop, mouthing lyrics, and reminiscing on various hip hop history highlights. He further establishes his connection to black people and black culture by recounting the life he left behind in his ‘hood in Boston and the urgency with which he had sought out an authentic and genuine affiliation with black culture even when he was rebuffed by blacks. He questioned, “How dare black people not see him as an ally, not recognize that he was down? He retaliated by studying their history, their culture” (17). This process of studying black history and culture has made him politically astute and culturally savvy. Therefore, when within a few hours of his first run in the cab, he overheard two white businessmen trading racially charged and insulting comments about blacks, he snaps. In a fit of fury, Detornay retaliates by slamming on the cab’s brakes, locking all of the cab’s doors, and robbing his two white customers. He has them hand over their wallets, designer neckties, and high-end phones. His aim is to invoke a gangsta’/urban Robin Hood plan for reparations for racism from his fellow white brethren. As he tells the two crying, shivering men when they ask: Why us?: “Because
you’re an ignorant white devil asshole, and you and everybody like you deserves to be robbed every day of your life” (24). These words become Macon’s new credo, his new raison d’etre, as he makes it his new mission to rob his passengers. The fact that despite his white skin he is mistaken for black by his victims seems to make his transformation from whiteboy from Beantown to race traitor complete.

**I’m Down: The Emergence of Whites Fans and Devotees in Hip hop**

When hip hop first emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, critics believed that it would be a short-lived youth fad. History has proven them wrong and hip hop has since celebrated an over 30 year reign in all aspects of popular culture from music to videos to television and movies as well as clothing, language, and ultimately a lifestyle. Naturally, as the popularity of hip hop has grown, the audience has included young white kids from both urban and white areas of the country who became equally enthralled with the music. Although these white kids have received the derogatory names of wanksters, wannabees, and wiggas, it has not stopped them from embracing black music, black culture, and, where geographically possible, black people. According to Bakari Kitwana, a former executive director of the hip hop magazine *The Source* and the author of *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, white kids are drawn to hip hop for a variety of reasons ranging from simply being consumers of the popular music to being anti-racist advocates (70). More specifically, he identifies three concentric circles of white hip hop aficionados with an evolving sense of intensity: 1) practitioners of hip hop; 2) whites immersed in black culture; 3) fans of hip hop and other popular music forms (70). The practitioners of hip hop and those immersed in black culture are most likely to be anti-racist advocates.
Mansbach, as the satirist, makes whiteness, the cultural, the political, aesthetic, and thematic target of his satire. More specifically, Mansbach questions the ongoing relevance and legitimacy of racial categories by presenting a white character who sees himself as a “race traitor”. Through Detornay’s attempts to galvanize other whites to follow his lead, he hopes to create a unified movement to create a national movement to rectify whites’ injustices against blacks. Through his novel, Mansbach satirizes whites’ attempts to confront their whiteness. He skewers both black and white characters alike as he interrogates the legacy, meaning failures, paradoxes and promises of the racial integration.

**Whites Passing for Black**

The history of whites passing for black was made most famous by Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* (1961) in which he, underneath the care of a doctor, took drugs and underwent treatment under a heat lamp to darken his skin. Once he had successfully transformed his appearance from white to black, he embarked on a tour of the deep south (Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia) to report on his experiences as a black man. He reported on his trips in a series of magazine articles and retold the whole story in his memoir. Interestingly, in her book *Near Black: White to Black Passing in American Culture* (2008), Baz Dreisinger chronicles whites who passed for black from the 1830s to the present. In the fifty years since Griffin passed for black in order to investigate racial injustices against blacks, the wide distribution and popularity of black culture has made it even more possible for whites to identify and potentially pass for black. In fact, Dreisinger identifies one of the key motivations for passing for black as simply the
proximity to black culture. This proximity has often been afforded through public space and cultural mainstays, such as music.

In the post-civil rights era, whites are in the unique position of having access to black culture—even if they live in areas without blacks—through the mainstream distribution of blacks culture through commercial media. For those whites who are not merely consumers of hip hop music, but are immersed in the hip hop lifestyle, questions of their own racial identity may come to the forefront. In fact, for those white followers of hip hop who become radicalized, they may distance themselves as much as possible from whiteness and adapt as many aspects of black culture as possible including: idioms, slang, and cultural references; mannerisms and behavior; affiliations and friendships. For whites who straddle the cultural line between blackness and whiteness, and may even pass for black when and where possible, their race may be denied or affirmed by friends and discussed and critiqued by strangers. In some cases, a white person’s disavowal may become politicized and so extreme that they become a so-called race traitor and they may believe in the rally cry of the journal *Race Traitor*: “The key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race” ("Abolish the White Race—By Any Means Necessary").

This disaffection of whites from the white race, if they take on a black identity, has been called a wide variety of derogatory names. These terms are specific to whites who acculturate to blackness through a love and emulation of black culture and hip hop culture, especially as portrayed in popular media. More neutrally phrased, whites who pass for black can be identified as performing the “reverse racial pass” (Brian Harper
Adam Mansbach, the author of several novels, a graphic novel, a children’s book, a volume of poetry, and a screenplay, shares many similarities with his main character, Macon Detornay. Most immediately, they have inhabited the same cultural and geographic terrain. Like Mansbach, Detornay attends Columbia University and grew up in Boston. Both these men came of age during the era of hip hop and were deeply influenced by hip hop culture, music, and lifestyle. Mansbach started and edited a hip hop journal *Elementary* and he was also a member of the Elvin Jones Jazz Machine. Finally, he is a well-respected cultural critic and commentator on racial issues from a white/Jewish perspective. In an interview, when he addresses the question of similarities between himself and his main character, Mansbach clarifies where the similarities between him and Macon end: “Definitely sometime before the moment Macon decides to start pulling guns on people just because they’re white. At least five minutes before” (“Interview”). However, Mansbach ultimately concludes, “In a lot of ways, however, despite all these similarities, Macon is an anti-autobiographical figure. He’s the zealot I might have been, but didn’t want to be, or lack the courage to be, or am too old now to be, or see too much grey to be, or, or something” (“Interview”). His familiarity with black culture suggests that racial affiliation can be attained through self-education and study.
Whiteboy in the ‘Hood: Navigating Racial Anxieties and Asserting Racial Justice

In order to create a historical resonance beyond contemporary hip hop and to deepen the discussion beyond potentially surface-y questions of racial identity, Mansbach creates a compelling backstory for Macon De tornay that is rooted in a real American racial politics. More specifically, he makes Macon Detornay the great grandson of Adrian Constantine Anson, who was affectionately known as “Cap,” a legendary baseball player and ultimately owner of the “White Stockings” (which would later become the Chicago Cubs). Anson was known for refusing to play against Negro players, including legendary Fleet Walker. Cap was an important agitator on behalf of segregation and he successfully advocated for the segregation of the baseball leagues. By invoking this history in a vivid manner and showcasing the hatred whites too often have had of blacks (through Anson’s and his supporters’ actions), Mansbach legitimates and historicizes the critique of whiteness he then advances through the primary narrative. He negates the notion that whiteness is neutral, blank, or passive, and instead illustrates how the entire white society, as represented by the baseball fans, the Klan, and Anson himself united into a powerful force behind legal and social segregation.

Keenly aware of his own family’s history and complicity in Jim Crow, Detornay seeks to right the racial wrongs perpetuated by his family. The Civil Rights promises are partially alluded to by the irony of the fact that Macon Detornay purposefully rooms with Andre Walker, the grandson of Fleet Walker whom Macon’s grandfather, Cap Anson discriminated against. Detornay purposefully requests Andre in a bizarre attempt at a kind of reparations. Detornay attempts to define himself against this enormous history by
being the exact opposite of his grandfather. The items that he takes are symbolic of a contemporary businessman’s knapsack—watches, phones, ties—all symbols of upward-mobility. By taking these symbols of white power, Macon hopes to arrest white privilege and white power. For Macon, these items are symbols of white oppression and yet at the same time they showcase how illusive white power is to capture. As Peggy McIntosh posits in her infamous essay, “Whiteness: The Invisible Knapsack,” whiteness is a long list of invisible privileges that most whites aren’t even aware of (3). Detornay, therefore, is an exception; he questions his whiteness and privilege in many ways. Macon can only capture the symbols of whiteness because whiteness itself still eludes him. In turn, even though his victims see him, because of his actions and his words, his victims report that a black man has robbed them.

In Detornay’s quest, once his robberies and his true identity as a white man are exposed, he becomes the quintessential representative of the ‘race traitor’. As his actions become publicized and he begins to formalize his individual actions into a mass movement, he creates the Race Traitor project. As the first action of this new movement, he calls on white Americans to come to New York City for a day of apology and atonement where they will apologize directly to black citizens for their wrongs. For Detornay, he feels some vindication at the possibilities. He reflects, “People were listening. There were kids like him out there—right here—skating along the edges of whiteness as disgusted as he was, looking for a leader…Macon Everett Detornay, as a mirror, Macon Everett Detornay, as a magnifying glass…(165). His whiteness allows him to become a witness to reflect and magnify society’s ills for the masses.
A core of the satire is Macon Detornay’s paradox between his current class standing and his future class status, both of which are middle to upper class. On the one hand, his attending Colombia University, one of the most elite universities in the country is suggestive of his class potential—with an Ivy League degree, his earning potential will be solidly upwardly mobile. So, while his geographical location near Harlem may raise his racial consciousness, he is not truly “in” or “of” the neighborhood until he begins to experience the tension between his class position and his racial consciousness.

When describing how he is able to successfully pass as black, Macon recalls how blackness has infiltrated his being through the acquisition of black male masculinity and stereotypes. Mansbach writes, “Every stereotype had rubbed off on Macon; every handshake and shoulder-bang embrace had darkened him imperceptibly, and he’d welcomed the transfer of every myth: coolness, danger, sexual superiority” (104). With this passage, Mansbach undercuts the idea that anyone could truly pass for black to instead emphasize that what he is passing as is the mainstream image and perceptions of blackness. Despite Macon’s internal confidence of his ability to pass, black characters, for instance, his roommate Andre, see him skeptically and critique his behavior, dress, and values. As the author, Mansbach does an excellent job of not just creating Macon’s perspective, but fairly accurately capturing the black response to Macon through his roommate Andre and the roommate’s friend, Nique. Andre recalls his prep school days with chagrin: “Smile, Johnny. Put your arm around the African American say cheese” (31). Andre’s reception of Macon is cool and cynical at first as their first meeting becomes a kind of testing ground. Andre notes when Macon is trying too hard and observes when he attempts to endear himself to him through alluding to his knowledge of
black culture. While Detornay’s character is depicted with sincerity, for the most part, racial tensions exist in the novel to showcase an African American perspective on Macon’s actions. Adam Mansbach does an excellent job of representing ‘black’ thoughts, perceptions, and reactions to Detornay’s presentation and dialogue. When Detornay is in the company of African-Americans he struggles at first and feels self-conscious.

In fact, in a hilarious spoof on white anxieties of their proximity to black culture, Macon tested himself by walking through the park at night. “He wanted to be able to say, People are tripping” (84). As he walks through the park, crossing the boundary from Colombia to Harlem, he faces the fears that every/most white people feel as they cross over the racial boundary. To further satirize this scene, Mansbach confronts expectations and racial stereotypes by inverting the scene. When Macon is confronted in the park by a large black man in a skullcap, he is frightened and expects the worst. Instead, it turns out that the man is part of “The People’s Cooperative Guerilla Theatre” (84). This troupe, frustrated by limitations put on their art, and unable to find a theatre house that will accept their avant garde work, performs in the park. As the actor shares with Macon: “There isn’t a whole lot of support in the community…not since we expanded our focus beyond African-American playwrights. It’s hard enough getting black folks to come see theatre to begin without do you know what it’s like trying to convince the Frederick Douglass Playhouse to let you do The Importance of Being Earnest of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead? “(84-85). When Macon questions their decision to go beyond African-American playwrights, the actor bellows: “We are not a monochromatic people!” (86). This exchange, especially at the boundaries of the geographical racial boundaries suggests the way both blacks and whites yearn for possibilities outside of these
boundaries. Although Mansbach selects a humorous example for comic effect, the point he makes is ultimately serious. Moreover, even though Macon sees himself as more educated on black culture and people than most, he too, still struggles with stereotypical thinking that unnecessarily pigeon-holes African-Americans.

As his race traitor movement attracts attention, Mansbach creates a following of well meaning but naïve and misguided followers. The new followers display a range of cultural appropriation that he finds very disturbing. On the more benign end of the continuum, are the followers who showed up in New York wearing a wide variety of African and African American artifacts. He describes the crowd: “The cluster was mottled with kente cloth suits, dashikis, and kufis, Afro wigs and scattered signs reading I’M SORRY and BLACK POWER” (225). To further highlight, the problems with Detornay’s new movement, one fan stuns Detornay by appearing in blackface. As Macon reports on his own reaction to the young kid, “What have I done?—[he] wondered if he was looking into some kind of metaphysical fun-house mirror, this motherfucker is me, this how I look, this who I am, pictured his ethos echoing through space only to be decoded wrong, misconstrued, and acted on, flags stabbing up the ground in Macon’s name, am I the captain on the ship of fools?” (225). Rather than truly representing a new clan of race traitors, these followers represent a stereotyped mockery of the type of revolutionary action Macon is attempting.

Additionally, there are tensions between his activism and the possibility of exploiting his actions for commercial interests. For instance, his two friends, Andre and Dominique, start calling him “The Franchise,” an indication of the commercial potential
of his enterprise. His friends seem more aware of the potential of his followers to be primarily interested in the ways in which the movement will be commodified. For instance, when the first followers arrive in New York City to participate in the movement and the National Day of Apology, their first question is: “Where can we buy our T-shirts?” (228). Macon meets this inquiry with exasperation that his new followers don’t seem to understand the magnitude of the call he has issued.

Andre’s character marks the progress of African Americans in the post-civil rights era in just two generations. In fact, ironically, Macon is more in touch with Andre’s history than Andre. This fact becomes essential to the story—in the contest of who’s blacker than who, Macon ultimately loses. When he is confronted in Harlem by black teens, he refuses to be robbed and instead pulls a gun on him. National Apology Day, however, does not create nearly as many problems for him as for the black population in Harlem. These deadly consequences highlight the true nature of the racial divide. Ultimately, though, Macon is not able to maintain his position and betrays his own cause when confronted with the possibility of giving his life. Although he initially declares to white people: “Power does not have the power to change, only to self-destruct. If you want to make a difference, kill yourself” (268). However, once he shoves the barrel in his own mouth, he is not able to go through with it. In resignation, he announces “The truth is I am not willing to die, for justice or for anything. Macon Detornay’s a coward and a sell out…” (268). This admission prompts Macon to desert the race traitor project.

Race for Sale
Towards the end of the story, Detornay meets Dr. Donner, who specializes in passing and has made a mint at turning white people black and black people white. As he explains, to Detornay, race is a scheme to keep people competing against each other and he has found a way to make that ultra profitable. “Sometimes I turn black people white, white people black, black people blacker, white people whiter” (292). “You understand that race means whatever we make it mean. That it’s just another commodity to be exploited. Something you can market, buy, sell, reinvent” (292). Macon surveys the wall of Doc’s clients: Colin Powell, Clarence Thomas, Vanilla Ice, Mariah Carey, Bill Bradley, Shelby Steele (295). He questions who requested to be turned into which race.

The sale of race through Dr. Donnor seems to be an extensive allusion to Black No More, a story whose plot turns on a special machine that turns blacks, white. In Mansbach’s version, the machine/process can turn whites black, blacks white, blacks blacker and whites whiter according to their wishes. The ends to the process are purely commercial and financial. Dr. Donnor’s been able to make a substantial fortune from this race-changing enterprise. When Macon pointedly says, “So you taught him to sell out.” (296). He responds, “We taught him the skills to achieve his goals… is Calvin more of a sellout than, say, his next-door neighbor there?” (296). With this statement, Dr. Donner points at Mark Walberg who he alleges has changed his race several times according to what shifts in his career track necessitated.

Donnor, as it turns out, is the great, great grandson of Anderson Donner, a member of Fleets’ baseball team who donned black face and together with the rest of the baseball team also in black face served as a decoy for the angry white crowd allowing
Fleet to safely get out of town. Donner’s enterprise is an ironic tribute to his great-great grandfather’s legacy on behalf of Fleet. Anson is killed when he is mistaken for black.

When Detornay turns down Dr. Donner’s offer, the elder Donner develops an elaborate intervention in which redneck hillbillies who attempt to turn him white by making him be violent towards a black man kidnap Detornay. But the drama turns out to be real. The white hillbilly confronts Macon for being ‘too black.’ The white hillbilly shoots him in order to get rid of him and Macon’s death closes the story. Macon dies as a hero and a martyr for his own cause.

This ending is either cynical or hopeful depending on one’s reading of it. On the one hand, Macon has, like other important race leaders before, died as a result of his involvement in an important cause to dismantle race and racism. On the other hand, there are many moments towards the last third of the novel when Macon doubts his cause and seriously questions and reconsiders his own motives. He disafficts from his own movement when violence and mayhem break out in Harlem as a direct consequence of his decision to call for whites to apologize to blacks. When he himself is asked to give up personal items and then his life, in support of his own cause, he refuses. At this point, he realizes that he is not willing to die for his beliefs and it undermines his confidence in his beliefs. He leaves the movement yearning to be a regular person and travels across country in the hopes of relocating to Los Angeles. When he encounters the racist hillbillies he is forced to confront his beliefs once again. He is hated by them because he identifies with blackness and unsure that he is going to survive his encounter with them he tries to forge a bond and disavow his previous beliefs.
White Text Or Black Text: Can White Authors Write African American Fiction?

*Angry White Black Boy* is written in the African American tradition of race novels thus immediately raising and vexing the question of whether a novel written by a white writer can be considered part of the African American tradition. Certainly, fictionally it seems to be a novel that follows in the traditions of *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*. In terms of non-fiction, it would fit in well with current memoirs of passing such as James McBride’s *The Color of Water* in which a white Jewish woman passes for black. Mansbach infuses the entire book with racial consciousness. Mansbach disputes the concept that his white body predetermines that the text will be a “white textual body. Instead, he marks the text racially in a variety of ways. First and foremost, Mansbach infuses his satire with real-world references to black culture. The cultural back-drop of hip hop culture allows for many references to lyrics, song titles, radio stations, artists, and cultural movements including graffiti, etc. Equally importantly, however, are his explicit and implicit reference to the black intellectual tradition. He alludes to the extensive history of African American literature by referencing Bigger Thomas and Mary Dalton (Wright’s *Native Son*), Clay (Baraka’s *The Dutchman*), etc. He even uses tropes, such as double-consciousness, as an integral part of the narrative. In many ways, this text passes as a black text.

One of the strongest features of the book is Mansbach’s ability to create a wide-range of characters from the serious and sensible to the lampooned and parodied. Although the main characters, Detornay, Andre, and Dominique are presented straightforwardly, other black and white characters are representations of certain “types”
and rendered to comic effect. These characters include Professor Alam, an aging public intellectual who tries to maintain his cultural relevance by being a spokesperson for the race and a representative of hip hop. Professor Alam, the professor of Introduction to Black Studies, and the author of the critically acclaimed, *Black to the Future*, declares that he is an “academic gangsta” which he defines as “Goal-Achieving Nigga Gonna Stay True Always. Nigga meaning Never-Ignorant Go-Getting Asiatic” (101). When Macon faces off against this Professor, he criticizes the professor’s uncritical praise of hip hop. For Macon, unadulterated praise without critique is foolhardy. Other stereotypes in the book that are lampooned for comic effect include white academics, white rednecks, and black urban youth.

**The Back Story, the Black Story**

Mansbach challenges the boundaries of racial stories. Mansbach balances the satiric and funny elements of the story with the narrative of Fleet Walker. This story is told in Fleet’s voice, in first person. As a white man, Mansbach embodies the legendary ball player in order to tell his story. It is through Fleet’s eyes that we experience the racism and segregation of the early 20th century. In this way, Mansbach personalized the racial history and invokes the kinds of racial subjectivity displayed in narratives of the early 20th century. This portion of the story is based on the true story of Fleet Walker and accurately reflects the historical record. In Fleet’s own time, he was a collegiate athlete (Oberlin and University of Michigan) whose career was severely impacted by racism.

The secondary story of Fleet, the black baseball player is infused throughout the primary story, providing a poignant counterpoint and always providing historical context
for the overall story. Fleet’s disappointments make it clear how much African-Americans lost through segregation and how much their talent was thwarted. Fleet is playing on an integrated league when Cap Anson, a former player, agitates for the league to be segregated. Although the other players walk off the field, Fleet refuses to leave the field until the law has actually taken affect. Fleet’s section chronicles his last game when not only the colored players, but the colored fans have left the game and he is the only black in a sea of white players and white fans including the Klan, who are there to ensure the purity of the game. Fleet’s narrative opens each of the three sections within the book.

Even within Fleet’s section, Mansbach introduces complexity. At first it seems that Fleet is simply African-American. We hear his voice as he narrates his experience as the only colored ball player and must experience the abuse of the pitcher who purposefully hits him with the ball in an intent to create excruciating pain. Mansbach does a beautiful job of creating a historical context for the kind of whiteness that Macon wants to reject and resist. The angry, jeering, hate filled crowd that Fleet Walker faces is synonymous with the iconic white masses that assembled to lynching black men and women. When Fleet looks up into the crowd he sees: “The shouting was so loud I couldn’t distinguish any words, but I knew they were saying nigger, coon, get out, go home” (9).

As the crowds grow angry and Fleet realizes he may not get out alive, the team rallies on his behalf. As Fleet slips out a side door and runs like hell to catch a passing train out of town, his team blacks up to distract and confuse the angry crowd. As Ned Donner remarks after putting on the paint “I’m blacker than Fleet Walker now,” he said,
“and those sons of bitches will have to choose which one of us to chase” (275). In the process, the question of who is really black creates a laughing to keep from crying moment. “Red’s blackness was stark, unmistakable, unlike that of a hazy shape in the distance…and then, like a fourth of July celebration, a succession of black firecrackers exploded from the stadium doorway and shot out into the Georgia sun, streaking every which way with breakneck speed. The New York Giants had become a colored ball club” (275). This scene illustrates the arbitrariness of race and the insanity created by these color lines that creates visible targets for society to aim their hatred at. The crowds’ inability to distinguish white from black and the absurdity that blacked up men are now distinguishably darker that the “real black man” is underscored in this scene.

Mansbach, through his incredible adeptness at handling multiple storylines, proves that white writers can represent black concerns and embody black voices with accuracy and sensitivity. He proves that race is not inherent but rather it is possible through exposure and immersion to grasp the complexities of another race’s experience. At the same time, he complicates his presentation of race by demonstrating that he is keenly aware of the history of black face. So, while he embodies a black voice, he clearly understands how because of the history, he must be aware and thoughtful about his representation of blacks in his work.

Mansbach’s satire is the perfect complement to the other satires and it fully displays how a satire can take a position, undermine it, and then take a different position. In the case of this satire, Mansbach offers the possibility that whites can becomes race traitors while at the same time showing whiteness in its complexities—not everyone is complicit in
racist practices. Yet, ultimately, Macon is killed by a white racist in the final irony of the novel and his cause is without a leader. Instead, he is replaced by a business man who makes his living from turning people into the race they are seeking and profits from the color line.

Mansbach’s novel in many ways shares the remarkable cynicism of all of the other satires. The dying, elimination, and/or erasure of blacks is a central component of all of the satires in this study. That death is often literal but it has also been represented metaphorically or symbolically. The novels that include leaders end with the leaders feeling alienated from their followers (who are portrayed as misguided, naïve and deluded sheep). Yet the leader, too, is often weak and not able to maintain their beliefs in the midst of substantially increasing obstacles. The result is that by the end of the novel the initial optimism has devolved as the main character struggles to find meaning in a complex world where the odds are considerably stacked against him.

At the same time, the existence of Mansbach’s novel provides some hopefulness. The hopefulness comes from the possibility that the existence of the book itself testifies to the fact that in the Post-Civil Rights era it is possible for whites to be credible hip hop artists, to found journals called *Race Traitor*, and to even write race novels that are astute, nuanced and that fit well within the African-American tradition. Even the fact that the novel has a white protagonist does not necessarily exclude it from inclusion in the African-American cannon. Mansbach troubles the perhaps artificial lines between African-American and mainstream fiction and in that way exhibits the Civil Rights
promises. Importantly, by troubling and calling attention to these artificial lines, Adam Mansbach draws renewed attention to the debates over who or what is white or black.
CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

When Barack Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States and became the first black president to take office, his supporters saw his election as a measure of racial progress and a moment of triumph. However, as I conclude this project, the Obama administration has remained embroiled in disputes over the legitimacy of his presidency. A small group of his opponents, who are called the birthers, have questioned the legitimacy of his birth certificate, suggesting that he was not born in the United States and therefore was not legally eligible to run or to hold office. This controversy insinuates that Obama is passing. So, even though Obama released the long form of his birth certificate in the spring of 2011 to prove once and for all that he was born in Hawaii, his enemies insist that his birth certificate is a forgery. In fact, these allegations of the illegitimacy of his presidency have persisted from 2008 until the present and these charges have been heard in courts from New Jersey to Pennsylvania to Georgia to California. There have even been attempts to have a case against his presidency heard by the United States Supreme Court. These repeated requests for Obama’s birth certificate and the insistence that the birth certificate is fake allege that Obama is an imposter who has been voted into office illegally and therefore has successfully duped the American public. This debate over whether or not his birth certificate is real or a fake echoes the questions raised by the satiric New Yorker cover. Within the post-civil rights context in which African Americans were previously denied citizenship and been barred from

25 This call for documentation parallels with the requirement that slaves carry identification papers and permission slips to leave the plantation during the slave period.
26 For articles on the court cases against Barack Obama alleging his birth certificate is a fake, please see: “Opponents of Barack Obama’s Presidency Claim Small Court Victory” in the L.A. Times, July 13 2009.
voting, it is difficult not to see these questions surrounding his right to the presidency through the lens of U.S. racial history. Indeed, through the persistence of this issue over the entirety of his four-year presidency, it becomes clear that the issues of passing are not nearly as transitory as one might have hoped at the outset of his presidency.

In the post-civil rights era, the trope of racial passing offers convenient and useful shorthand and allows these authors to grapple with a wide-variety of social realities. Within the larger literary landscape, novelists have chosen passing as a way to meditate on the contemporary racial condition in a post-racial world. And, memoirists have reconstructed pasts of relatives or even themselves, as passers in order to illuminate that these boundaries that we are accustomed to seeing as fixed are more fluid and flexible than we previously imagined. Or, put more precisely, that there have always already been people who, by example, show that these lines are not natural, but rather are constructed. These constructions may have been, as in the previous generation, legally created and enforced, or they may, as now, be the result of a variety of less obvious racist practices. For the contemporary satirists, their focus is on the ways in which passing allows them to articulate and interrogate persistent racial realities.

**Similarities and Differences Among Post-Civil Rights Movement Satires**

What is most notable about these most contemporary examples of passing in the post-civil rights era is that the main characters in all of these novels--regardless of whether or not they are phenotypically black--try to pass for black within black communities. The distance they feel from the black community is expressed first and foremost in geographic terms. These characters are removed from the black community
by where they live, work, and go to school and then must consciously enter the primarily black community. The entry into the black community includes a confrontation between themselves and their identities in terms of class, language, and social position. The characters vary in their self-consciousness and self-awareness of their expression of their identities before they reenter the black community. The passing characters in each satiric novel often, though not always, express his or her relationship to the black community with ambivalence, ignorance, distance, and/or disdain. These passing characters serve as ventriloquists for the authors and their middle-class counterparts by seemingly voicing the author’s own racial anxieties. The passers, as members of the middle-class, feel alienated from what they characterize as the differences between themselves and the larger urban, black community. Furthermore, the novelist may purposefully distort the way members of the urban community speak, dress, and behave. In some cases, the character comes to valorize the values that initially seemed so alien to them.

Still, each author’s life seems to serve as powerful testimony to the possibilities afforded this post-civil rights generation. Each member has been able to pursue an education and avenues for a creative life that would have been segregated or closed entirely to them in the pre-civil rights era. It is notable that each of the three authors writes in wide-range of genres and a few of them create in other art forms besides writing. For instance, Paul Beatty established himself as a poet first and won the Nuyorican Grand Slam Championship. Everett not only is a well-established novelist with over a dozen books, including several children’s books, and he also writes short stories and has published his abstract paintings. Johnson has written a historical novel, a contemporary novel, a mystery, and two graphic novels. Mansbach has formed a hip hop
magazine and performed with the legendary jazz musician Elvin Jones. In the post-civil rights era, the avenues of production have allowed African American authors a wider variety of genres to publish in and have allowed them to widen or narrow their audiences through the types of works they create.

Even with all of their similarities, along the continuum from white to black, these authors have different conceptualizations of a racialized world. For instance, Percival Everett, if his autobiographical writings and interviews reflect his viewpoints well, is the most iconoclastic of the three authors. He and Ellis are most outspoken and resistant against the idea that black people generally and black authors more specifically are pigeonholed into particular stereotypes. Ellis and Everett may also be the most textually experimental of the authors. Everett has written a book told by the Greek God Dionysus, a book of letters exchanged by a fictionalized Strom Thurman, and a cheeky book about a character who keeps getting mistaken for Sidney Portier, whose name is “Not Sidney”.

The other three authors, Beatty, Johnson, and Mansbach, seem to be writing in ways that are more empathetic to African Americans. Beatty, for example, has his main character who moves from Santa Monica to Los Angeles and, in the process his character begins to identify more as a black man and with the black community as a whole. Johnson has written several historical novels and several graphic novels that are directly situated within specific African American historical realities including post-reconstruction South, post-Katrina Louisiana, and colonial New York. Mansbach, while not African American, is deeply steeped in African American culture through his involvement with hip hop and jazz.

While the characters in the novels disavow black identity, the authors still allude
to and invoke the larger African American literary tradition. Both Johnson and Everett pointedly take aim at urban fiction and denigrate it for its stereotypic representations of the black urban experience. Everett pointedly notes that urban fiction comes to represent real black life and black authors whose depictions differ from these fictionalized accounts are deemed to not be black enough. Yet both Everett and Beatty rework aspects of Wright’s *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Through their titles, for instance, *Erasure, White Boy Shuffle*, etc. allude to the long line of fiction that addresses black identity including *Ex-Colored Man, Black No More, Native Son, and Invisible Man.*

Johnson, through his writing in the black mystery genres, writes in the tradition of satirist and mystery writer Rudolph Fisher. These authors invoke tropes of African American and passing fiction, often to satiric and comic effect. They are well versed in the literature even while they may express ambivalence or disdain for African American culture. They use the conventions of passing literature and they invoke similar debates initiated by earlier satires over the aesthetics of African American literature.

These authors use their satires to not just write about, but to enact, the new kinds of fictional representations they would like to see. In five of the six novels, the main characters are themselves writers. Both Beatty’s and Mansbach’s books include the poetry of their protagonist. The main characters of Ellis’ and Everett’s work include their fiction as part of the narrative. Several of Johnson’s minor characters are writers. To varying degrees they parody a wide variety of forms and movements essential to the African American tradition. In true satirical fashion their representations are exaggerated and some may say even largely unfair in order to make their points. They allude to the African American tradition but these references are extremely fast-paced, they do not
flesh out their opponents’ arguments fairly but instead they mock, cajole, and attack in order to more fully support their own viewpoints.

Yet true to satiric form, the constantly shifting terrain of the narrative makes the complexity of their viewpoint clear. The argument that they seem to be forwarding at the beginning of the novel often shifts several times during the novel, so that in the end multiple perspectives are advanced and no single perspective remains standing. Still, these contemporary satires are not the first satires to address these issues. In fact, there is a long history of satires in African American fiction that attempts to grapple with the paradoxes of African American fiction and uses passing as a central means to do so.

**Situating Post-Civil Rights Satires Within the Context of Earlier Satires**

The first two African American satires, George Schuyler’s science fictional *Black No More* (1931) and Wallace Thurman’s roman-a-clef *Infants of the Spring* (1932) perfectly set up two competing poles of passing. On the one hand, in *Black No More*, Schuyler focuses on passing as a central narrative theme in his story of his protagonist Max Fisher, a young African American, who takes advantage of a new American scientific invention, a machine that turns blacks white. As a newly minted white man, Max falls in love with a Southern white woman, ironically, the daughter of the central leader of a Southern white supremacist organization. In order to successfully pass as white, Max must adapt white racist ideology and rhetoric. In this way, Schuyler successfully explores and satirizes the inherent connection between skin color and epistemology in order to examine whether differences are truly skin deep. In the process, Schuyler exposes not only the temporal and genetic limits of passing for white (Max
worries that his first-born will be born black and expose his passing secret), but also the societal tolerance of equality (as an increasing number of blacks “cross over,” debates arise over two-tiers of whiteness). On the other hand, Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* explores passing on a textual level, as a textual strategy. When Paul, a young African American artistic genius who styles himself after European decadent Oscar Wilde, drowns himself in the bathtub, his manuscript gets soaked. Ironically, Paul’s text is rendered illegible, and the grey soaked pencil scribbling on the white page, visually suggests that experimental black texts can barely be imagined or read. Paul’s body and his novel become proxies for each other, neither can successfully survive. Together, these two early satires launched a tradition within African American satire and passing as important avenues of meta-fictional inquiry within African American fiction. These satires use thematic and literary passing to explore the inherent tension and paradoxical relationship between individual artistic agency and race consciousness in exceedingly provocative ways. These satires, which are situated within larger national post-Civil Rights conversations about the relevance of racial categories and the persistence of social inequalities, effectively negotiate and challenge the line between fiction, literary criticism, and political and social commentary as they question, ridicule, and challenge the central and sacred core tenants and assumptions of the African American cultural and literary traditions.

Furthermore, contemporary satirists raise questions that were also raised by satirists during the Black Arts Movement. Although the context and the goals might have varied, the questions were similar. The Black Arts Movement, the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,” helped launch the field of African American studies
as a valid field of inquiry (Neal 29). In fact, the essays in three groundbreaking anthologies *Black Fire*, *The Black Aesthetic*, and *The Black Woman*, were ultimately highly influential in the development of contemporary African American literary theories. While certainly these essays reflected a wide-range of political ideologies, aesthetic concerns, and opinions, these essays also shared an interest in defining the distinctiveness and the political efficacy of African American art. Moreover, there was a dedicated effort to establish artistic institutions including artistic workshops and collectives (Umbra Workshop), journals (*Umbra, Soulbook, Black Dialogue, Negro Digest/Black World*), theatres (Black Arts Repertory Theatre, Freedom Theatre, Concept East Theatre, and publishing houses (Third World Press, Broadside Press). As a result, this period saw an outpouring of literary works, especially poetry and drama, and the emergence of some of the most important African American writers of our time including Gayle Jones, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker as well as Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, and John Edgar Wideman. It is also the period that has generated the most satires previous to the contemporary period.

An integral component of BAM was a call for new artistic language, content, and forms to more appropriately convey the black experience. As James Stewart noted in his essay “The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist” “the existing white paradigms or models do not correspond to the realities of black existence” (3). Stewart explains further, “our model must be consistent with black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles” (3). The search for a black aesthetic, which was articulated by the wide-range of authors included in the two groundbreaking anthologies of the era, Addison Gayle’s *The Black Aesthetic* and Larry Neal’s and Amiri Baraka’s
Black Fire (1968), was tied to new forms. New forms, I will argue, are implicitly tied to a search for new modes and new genres, a search that very visibly was conducted and discussed in BAM satires. Several satires, including John Oliver Killen’s The Cotillion and Kristen Hunter’s God Bless the Child, attempted to use satire to showcase a black experience both through thematic content and through language and rhythms of the urban experience. Other writers, including Ishmael Reed and William Melvin Kelley, distanced themselves from BAM in order to use their satire to expand their particular artistic visions. Nonetheless, their work of this period is now considered part of BAM.

Such experimentation continues today in the post-civil rights era, which provides an important and conscious counterpoint to the Black Aesthetic. On the surface, the two aesthetics of the era are diametrically opposed. Whereas the Black Aesthetic championed the working class, blackness, and the connection between art and politics, the satirists of the post-civil rights era embrace the middle-class, multi-cultural hybridity, and art with less overtly pre-determined politics. However, I should clarify that the post-civil rights era differs from the Black Aesthetic movement in that it was not a formal movement. The

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27 Individual authors’ relationship to BAM was often complex, varied considerably by author, was at times contested, and may have changed over the course of the movement. To illustrate this complex relationship, one case in point would be Ishmael Reed. As Robert Elliot Fox explains, “…it is important to understand that Reed’s involvement with BAM through his membership in the Umbra Workshop, was a complex one that can be described as both participatory and adversarial. True, Reed is a vigorous promoter of African-originated modes of being and performance, which he uses to challenge established canons of judgment and achievement, but a careful assessment of his work over three decades reveals that his pro-black position never was a dogmatic one. If much of Reed’s work constitutes an intertext through which ‘the blackness of blackness’ can be read, he nevertheless insists that this ‘blackness of blackness’ cannot be categorized or prescribed” (624-625).

28 For example, both The Cotillion and dem have been republished as part of Coffee House Press’s Black Arts Movement Series.

29 Despite BAM’s official proclamation in its essays and manifestos of solidarity with the working class, the Movement was famously criticized by Harold Cruise in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (1967) as a middle-class movement.
term New Black Aesthetic which is associated with this period was a way for Trey Ellis to group together and characterize artistic developments that he was observing in the writings of such authors as playwright George Wolfe and poet Lisa Jones. Unlike BAM, the artists within the NBA did not consciously construct themselves as belonging to a movement. Therefore, for the most part, they did not create poetry collections, presses, theatrical institutions, or journals. Of course, there are exceptions. Spoken word became popular through venues such as the Nuyorican Café in New York (which had already become a popular venue for poetry during BAM) and the October Gallery in Philadelphia. Likewise, Jessica Care Moore started her own press, Moore Black Press, which has published such spoken word artists as Saul Williams and Asha Bandale. Also, poet giovanni singleton’s journal *Nocturnes* is an important venue for black experimental poetry. Still, like the artists of BAM, the artists considered proponents of the NBA are concerned with the development of a black voice, and these new writers are particularly concerned with developing black voices within their fiction that expands the notion of what blackness is by featuring, for example, middle-class, college-educated protagonists.\(^{30}\)

The so-called post-civil rights/New Black Aesthetic satires emerged, at least in part, as a response to Black feminist writing of the 1970s and 1980s. In their attempt to carve out a new literary space for themselves New Black Aestheticians offered a pointed critique of black cultural representations privileged in black women’s writing with an

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\(^{30}\) The presence of black, middle-class protagonists dates back to the inception of the African American novel. Moreover, the Harlem Renaissance was notable for its consistent presence of Black middle-class protagonists. In fact, the NBA makes several self-conscious nods towards this earlier movement. For example, Ellis sees the NBA as a reconfiguration of both the Harlem Renaissance and BAM (255). Many of the NBA satirists purposefully reinvigorate debates of the Harlem Renaissance and after by satirizing Ellison and Wright.
emphasis on Southern locations, feminist messages, and vernacular and folk culture. However, their literary critiques often extend beyond invectives against their most favored target, Alice Walker, to also include parodic rewritings of *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*. The underlying purpose of this satire is to clear a literary space for fiction that reflects the cultural, political, geographical, and linguistic diversity of the American experience. Although the majority of these satirists are men, the novelist Alice Randall has written a feminist parodic rewriting of *Gone With the Wind*, a story now told from the perspective of Scarlett’s bi-racial half-sister. And, although not satires, per se, work by playwright Suzan Lori Parks’ and novelist Danzy Senna’s work is heavily ironic. In testament to the exploration of African American author’s of identity within a postmodern context, white writer Adams Mansbach’s satire *Angry White Black Boy* (2005) adds an additional dimension to the discussion of the fluidity of racial categories during this period.

A defining feature of the post-civil rights era was a marked shift in the conditions of production for African American artists. Nelson George, a well-respected columnist for the Village Voice, who coined the term, “Post-Soul” captured this shift in the Post-Civil Rights, Post-Nationalist era when he defined “Post-Soul” as “…my short-hand to describe a time when America attempted to absorb the victories, failures, and ambiguities that resulted from the soul years” (ix). Since then, both George (Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Culture (1992) and Post Soul Nation (2004) and his *Village Voice* colleague Greg Tate (Flyboy in the Buttermilk (1992) have written several works in which they each have offered timely cultural commentary on African
American’s entry into the American stream in all media including music, writing, television, and film. Most recently, Tate has edited a thought-provoking volume *Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking From Black Culture* (2003) in which he examines the paradox of African Americans’ entry into the mainstream. In his introduction, Tate outlines how black culture has too often been appropriated by white corporate interests who profit from this appropriation. Unfortunately, he observes, this economic gain does not ultimately benefit the majority of African Americans (12). Moreover, he notes, “Nor have the gains made in the corporate suite fully dismantled the prevalent, delimiting mythologies about Black intelligence, morality, and hierarchal place in America” (12). In fact, in his discussion of conditions of cultural production since the 1960s, Lawrence Hogue goes even further when he asserts that “Within the literary establishment, institutions began to reassert their practices of appropriating Afro-American texts and assessing and defining how closely they produce normative literary values, subjects, themes, and perspectives’ (161). Yet satire attempts to question and resist these normative practices.

**Common Denominators: Raising Questions Through Satire**

Across all time periods, satires are less invested in answering questions than they are simply in raising them and forcing readers to confront their assumptions. Regardless of the time period, these satires share (to varying degrees) a questioning of the following central categories:

**Master Narratives.** Satirists, of course, deconstruct master narratives of race, and they often do this by examining the construction of race in canonical American fiction. For
example, *Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada* (1976), a post-modern neo-slave narrative challenges Harriet Beecher Stowe’s best-selling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). The basis of his criticism stems from Stowe’s appropriation of the original slave narrative of Josiah Henson. For Reed, whose satiric aesthetic is based in the Haitian spiritual practices of vodun, Stowe’s appropriation is theft. He explains, “A man’s story is his gris-gris, you know. Taking his story is like taking his gris-gris. The thing that is himself” (Reed, *Flight to Canada*, 8). Similarly, William Melvin Kelley also draws on slavery-inspired material when he rewrites Mark Twain’s classic exploration of birth-rights and skin color, *Puddin Head Wilson*. Kelley updates to the story so that it now centers on a young, unhappily married suburban white woman who through the process of superfecundation, gives birth to twins, one white, one black.

In the most recent satires, the satirists are very concerned with undermining all mainstream ideas about what black culture is. Essential to this project is to break down and destroy common understandings of the black experience as monolithic. The purpose of this breakdown is to allow for other types of characters, conflicts, settings, and plots than perhaps have been seen so far in African American literature. These satirists want the opportunity to discover new stories that do not fit in with what they see as the tired, clichéd representations of the black experience. For them, these stories are overdetermined and they seek a new kind of fiction.

**Identity.** During the 1970’s and 1980s African American fiction writing privileged fictional realism such as Alice Walker’s poignant *The Color Purple* (1982). However, satirists challenge the privileging of realism and the concept of an authentic African
American experience. For example, in Fran Ross’s *Oreo*, her main character, Christine Clark, affectionately called Oreo, is Jewish and African American. In a more recent satire, Trey Ellis’s *Platitudes* story-within-a-story features a young, nerdy character whose main preoccupations, at least at first, are girls and video games. Through these characters, the authors attempt to fundamentally challenge the range of identities available to African American protagonists. The main complaint is that characters don’t fully represent the range of professions and social classes available for African Americans. However, for some satirists, it is equally important that their work be able to reflect races, languages, and viewpoints that are not just African American. For instance, Mat Johnson’s novel *Pym* is a satire that uses Edgar Allen Poe’s work as part of its satiric thrust. Beatty’s LA landscape includes not just blacks, but also Hispanics and Asians. Mansbach proves that a white man can write sensitively about racial topics and in the process explore both white and black identity.

**Language.** In their exploration of how the African American voice should be presented (or, whether their even is such a thing as the African American voice), satirists experiment with the written representation of speech. This experimentation may include melding two known dialects, creating nonsense language, using or protesting the use of vernacular. Two early examples, of language experimentation include Fran Ross’ melding of Yiddish and black slang in her work *Oreo* and William Melvin Kelley’s rewriting of *Finnegan’s Wake* and invention of an Afro-American language in *Dunsford Travels Everywhere* (1970). When frustrated avant-garde novelist, Monk Ellison, remarks bitterly that he has never heard an African American saying, “dint, ax, fo, screet and fahvre!.” He exclaims, “I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn’t sound like
that, and that my father didn’t sound like that...” (Erasure 62). he articulates his frustration with the portrayal of the “authentic” African American voice in such realistic fiction as Sapphire’s Push (1996). But language experimentation also extends to using a range of diction and linguistic registers within a text including language from popular culture (television, radio, educational materials, etc.), using a wide variety of typefaces and layouts, and perhaps even using symbols.

**Themes/Tropes.** Satirists often take central themes and tropes important to African American fiction and rewrite them to comic effect. These tropes are wide and varied, but they make include poking fun at double-consciousness, mocking slave narratives, etc. For example, within Percival Everett’s Erasure he simultaneously rewrites Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and, through extensive parody, Richard Wright’s Native Son. Through this rewriting, he simultaneously engages the debate fictional naturalism and experimentation, and updates Native Son to the contemporary urban ‘hood. In order to fully appreciate the satire and the humor of these satires it is essential to understand all of the ways these satirists are riffing on aspects of the African American literary tradition. While the novels are funny even without this understanding, the more the reader is aware of the tradition, the more fully the reader will get all of in-jokes.

**Institutions.** The institutions that satires attack may include, but certainly aren’t limited to religious, educational, political, social and cultural institutions. Within institutions, satirists may also attack schools of thought. Or, they may attack the productions created by a particular institution. Most recently, for example, the publishing industry and the American reading audience have come under fierce attack by satirists who believe the
Americans cannot fully distinguish racist depictions from the real experiences of the African Americans. Satirists attack any institution that they believe curbs a freedom that they want preserved.

The question that these satirists require readers to ask themselves cultivates a critical reading audience and hopefully ultimately a critical reading community. In this way these satirists infuse literary criticism within their novels so that even lay audiences can grasp critical aspects of contemporary literary debates. Moreover, for regular readers of African American fiction, these satires require readers to question the fundamental assumptions they make when reading African American literature. These questions make the literature even more enjoyable to read because these books are challenging.

Equally important to the critical questions that these satires call on us to ask, these satires are also just plain side-splittingly funny. These satirists are clever, the hilarity they are able to pack into even a short novel is remarkable. These satirists create work that is light and funny and as well as dark and funny. The lampoon specific characters, they exaggerate and mock. They create hyperbolic scenarios and draw them out to absolutely absurd conclusions. So, in addition to being smart, useful, and educational, they are also, quite frankly, enjoyable. These satires are worth reading and they deserve our attention.

**Future Possibilities of Research**

African American satire is such an interesting genre and it has been understudied. Although humor has long been appreciated and valued as a part of the African American literary tradition, its formal study has been fairly limited. The studies that do exist largely
emphasize the folk aspects of humor and its role in African American survival. While this has been important role of humor, it is a fairly limited view. Assessments and studies of African American satire that examine it within the evolving contexts of newer satiric theories and/or within specific literary contexts essential to African American literary history.

Since the Black Arts Movement is currently experiencing renewed scholarly interest, understanding the satires of the Black Arts Movement would add additional dimension to comprehending the importance of that period and to understanding satire. Equally important, satire is not limited to literature so there are possibilities for studying the use of satire across different genres including film, music and television. Of course satire could also be understood within the larger context of African American humor in literature. These satires can draw in readers who appreciate Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, or other comics who perform standup.

Additionally, certain authors, like Percival Everett and Mat Johnson are deserving of an entire book devoted solely to their work because they have written so extensively. Their satires could be examined within the larger context of their other work to see what themes and techniques extend beyond their satires to their entire body of work. The sophistication and breadth of their work is deserving of in-depth study. Critical reading guides have been established for other heavy-weight writers and these two authors in particular are noteworthy simply by the amount they have published. The other authors in this study are still emerging, but it is assumed that they too will finish their careers with a large body of work.
Hopefully, expanding the boundaries in terms of the depth and breadth of the study of satire would also allow for inclusion of women. For unknown reasons, women are less likely to write satires, but certainly there are some satires by women written in fiction and a broader examination of genres may discover other important satirists. Also, novels that are not exclusively satiric but that contain satiric elements might be considered as well.

**Conclusion**

So, while these current debates are situated as “new” and as a specific contribution to the discourse on “post-black,” “post-soul,” and “new black aesthetic,” this is a conversation that has always already occurred during earlier periods within the African American literary tradition. The first two African American satires were as invested in exploring both thematically and aesthetically the boundaries and possibilities of African American fiction as the most recent fiction is. Moreover, between the first two satires and the most recent satire, satirists from the 1960s and 1970s also used satire as a means to create fiction that was daring and challenging. These satires take risks with every aspect of the text in order to force readers to closely examine the assumptions with which they approach the text. By purposefully creating narratives that are multi-voiced and that reflect the truly heterogeneous nature of the African American experience, these authors attempt to draw attention to the artistic choices that writers make as simply choices. Within the context of the post-civil rights era, it is the prerogative of each individual artist to decide for him or herself what makes good art.

Even the use of passing as a way to interrogate the questions at stake within these
Passing has been used to explore these boundaries previously. However, what is new are the contemporary context and specific nuances and meanings of the debate for the current stakeholders involved. As it turns out, passing has been revitalized as a rich way to investigate the current boundaries within and between races and how these boundaries have yielded or persist during the post-civil rights era. Surprisingly, one of the most evident examples of change in the post-civil rights era is not the text written by African Americans, but rather the novel written by a white writer. What becomes clear from Mansbach’s novel of passing is that integration has made white consciousness possible. Although that consciousness is perhaps not widely evident in the larger white society, Mansbach’s novel points out that integration may have had mixed results for African Americans, but whites’ view of the world, if influenced by a black world view, can provide the impetus to abolish race and racism.

Some critics have suggested the possibility that we are in a post-black era, but it seems that these satires prove otherwise. These satires draw our attention to the places in the world where persistent inequalities may still exist. They confirm what many African Americans know experientially which is that in the post-civil rights era, rights and resources are still distributed unevenly. To suggest that this is an era of post-ness seems historically inaccurate and divorced from the larger historical realities for African Americans. Furthermore, it is essential that this literature be seen not as entirely separate from the literature that came before it. No matter how much these satirists want to claim and/or believe that their concerns are radically separate from previous generations in fact they are critically linked to the whole tradition. No matter how much they may want to
separate themselves from the African American tradition, it is worth noting that white authors (with a few exceptions) never have to ask questions about race. The mere asking of whether or not a text is African American or to what degree makes it immediately an African American text. It is the same question that writers and critics have been asking about African American literature since the inception of the tradition—it is a question that is at the core of the entire enterprise.

Some danger exists that within the reification of middle-class values that these authors may fuel discrimination against lower class African Americans or further the circulation of images the present urban and/or lower class African Americans as pathological and confirm that the most negative stereotypes of them are accurate. Further, danger exists that middle-class African Americans will equate middle-class anxieties with the more devastating material realities experienced by lower-class African Americans. Although concerns about whether or not one can get one’s book published or whether or not one can pursue one’s academic career are valid, it can efface how persistent inequalities and differences in the experiences of different social classes. Furthermore, lower-class African Americans may be used to buttress arguments or be mocked but may not actually have their voices and concerns truly heard. Of course, this may occur in part if readers equate literature as a transparent reflection of reality.

Artistically, though, these satires are some of the most exciting work occurring in African American fiction. These satires are exciting because they are experimental and they are located within and emerge from the contemporary context. Other exciting work in African American fiction focuses on the past and while this is such critical and
important work, there is not enough fiction that speaks to the contemporary African American condition AND takes the wild risks taken by satire. These satires force readers to confront their assumption because they put the whole conversation surrounding African American fiction into the work itself.

Finally, these authors are particularly interesting because their work and careers extend so far beyond satire. Satire is only one component of their work and their careers are incredibly far-reaching, expansive, and influential throughout multiple genres. These authors are relatively young and so we have many years of substantial work from each of them that we can continue to look forward to as they write, paint, produce films, and create music. These authors showcase the possibilities available to artists and academics in the post-civil rights era to create works that reinvigorate the African American literary tradition.
REFERENCES


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My dissertation focuses on how, why, and to what end contemporary satirists employ tropes of racial passing in order to address the complexities of racial subjectivity in the post-Civil Rights era. My research draws on two emerging and parallel critical reassessments, satiric fiction and racial passing. More specifically, I examine how satirists, who by definition attack a multiplicity of literary, cultural, and political targets, alternately engage and challenge aesthetic debates about the nature and authenticity of African American fiction. Ultimately, I argue, African American satirists seek productive and purposefully self-conscious ways to expand contemporary definitions of African American fiction in order to widen what they see as prescriptions that are too creatively limiting or simply reinforce racial stereotypes. I examine Paul Beatty’s White Boy Shuffle, Percival Everett’s Erasure, Mat Johnson’s Hunting in Harlem, and Adam Mansbach’s Angry Black White Boy.

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