

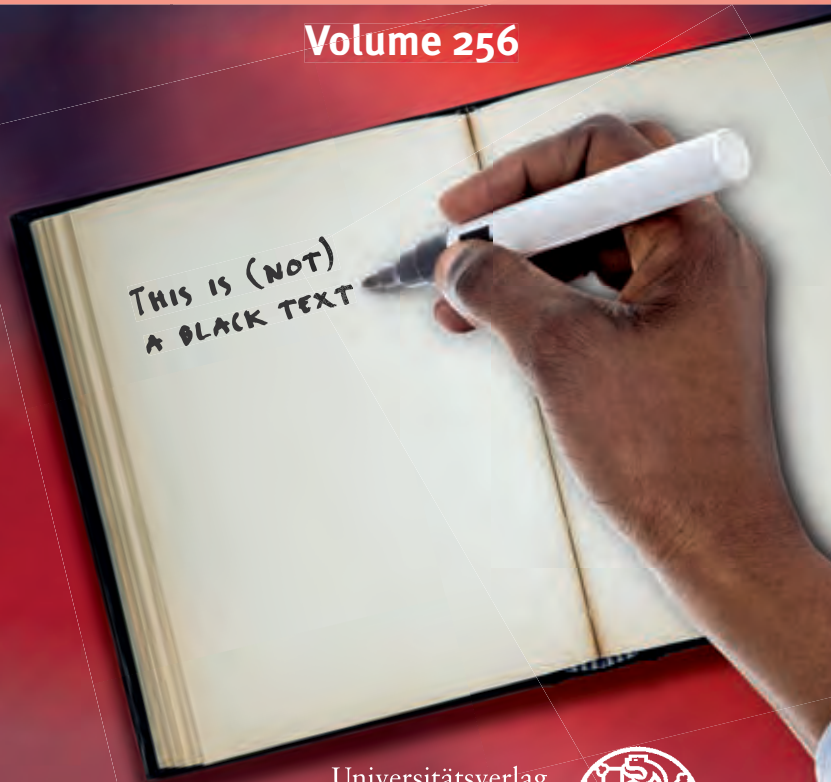
CHRISTIAN SCHMIDT

# Postblack Aesthetics

The Freedom  
to Be Black  
in Contemporary African American Fiction

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

Volume 256



Universitätsverlag  
WINTER  
Heidelberg



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ALFRED HORNUNG  
ANKE ORTLEPP  
HEIKE PAUL





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# 1 Introduction: Race and Postblack Literature

On July 13, 2013, an all-white jury acquitted George Zimmerman in the trial over the shooting death of black teenager Trayvon Martin. If anybody anywhere really needed a reminder that race is still an ever-present, if sometimes slightly less visible, force in American lives, both this verdict and the outbreak of public outrage in its wake serve as exactly that.<sup>1</sup> In an essay in *The Root*, Lawrence Bobo begins his discussion of this case with the opening statement that “America is racist at its core” only to add that, until recently, he “used to doubt this simplistic claim.” This case is only the latest in a long line of incidents (from the Rodney King case in 1992, to the shooting of Amadou Diallo in 1999 and the overturned verdict of the Central Park Five in 2002, to the controversy over the indictment of the Jena Six in 2006–2007, and the current debate over the constitutional appeal to the NYPD’s racially discriminatory “Stop and Frisk”-policy) in which race continues to play an important role. No matter whether we believe racism was the root cause for either the shooting of Martin or the acquittal in the subsequent second-degree murder trial, the very fact that race determined the discussions surrounding both incidents is enough to make one thing very clear: race continues to exert tremendous influence on and violently impacts American public life. Despite the election of the first African American president and all its accompanying hopes for a *postracial* American future, the perspicacity of race is a daily fact of American life—and, by all accounts, will continue to be so for a long time in the future. As Bobo also states in this essay: “This country still has a

<sup>1</sup> This book was finished before the horrific fatal attacks on Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, and innumerable others, and the ensuing violence in Ferguson, MO, and Baltimore, MD. Its completion thus also precedes the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the spread of slogans such as “I Can’t Breathe” or “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot.” As I will argue in the following, the increasing antiblack hostility in American society, however, does not render moot my points about a postblack aesthetics.

serious problem with racism. Let's stop pretending this isn't case [sic] or that it is all somehow healing itself." Both race and, unfortunately, racism are part and parcel of American life to this very day and need to be dealt with as openly, directly, honestly, and critically as possible. Everybody needs to acknowledge this fact and, importantly, try their best to work toward the improvement of the racial status quo.

What this does *not* mean, however, is that each and every African American writer—since literature is what I am concerned with here—should be required always and single-mindedly to write in protest against this long-standing racism. Yet this is what many expectations of and discourses about African American literature seem to imply, as James Baldwin already observed in 1949. Noting that “literature and sociology are not one and the same,” “Everybody’s Protest Novel” argues that mere protest fiction is “far from disturbing, [...] an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene” (53). Moreover, “in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, [and] in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real” (55), it fails as literature that has to transcend strictly realistic ‘reporting’ of reality. At least in part, the postblack discourse takes up Baldwin’s challenge as it writes against the reductive view that a black writer always only is a *black* writer. Concomitantly, it rejects the expectation of always having to write only about black issues and refutes the assumption that black literature serves as social reporting from the frontlines of the raging race wars in the United States. This does not imply “pretending [racism] is somehow healing itself” (Bobo). On the one hand, the postblack literature with which I am dealing in this book is well aware of the persistence of racism and acknowledges its presence. On the other hand, however, it refuses to be tied *artistically* by this very tenacity of race-based mistreatment. To state an important distinction right up front: *postblack does not mean postracial*. As it were, postblackness neither aims at the abolition of race nor is it a refusal to be black. Much rather, it calls for a loosening of the yoke of expectations levied on black artists. For the most part, postblackness thus is a call for artistic liberation, the freedom to be read as something more than a black artist writing about ‘black stuff.’ As Trey Ellis phrased it in his New Black Aesthetic manifesto of 1989, a text that served as a kind of bugle call for the postblack art to follow: “For us, racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither surprises nor enrages” (“New Black Aesthetic” 197). What this means is that racism

continues to exist but that postblack art will not let itself be reduced to being a mere reaction to this very racism. As a matter of fact, the postblack aesthetics stakes a claim to freeing itself from the grip race has on cultural productions by so-called minority artists: namely, that they have to react to race in everything they do.

Yet, ultimately, this leads into a paradox: in its very refusal to be read as either social protest or anthropological reporting, postblack art always also revolves around issues of race. In fact, postblack art consciously deals with re-negotiations of blackness in post-civil rights United States. As art curator Thelma Golden, who first publically used the term postblack, has described this ambivalent stance: It is “characterized by artists who [are] adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work [is] steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness” (Introduction 14). I will return to this quote repeatedly, most thoroughly in my discussion of postblack aesthetics in chapter 2. For now, suffice it to say that postblack art inhabits an intermediate or interstitial space. It neither wants to do away with blackness, nor does it engage in clearly demarcated race art for political purposes. Most importantly, it is art that is very aware of its own position in-between and takes this ambiguous location head-on in highly self-reflexive ways. In what follows, then, I will read a number of contemporary African American fictional texts—by Paul Beatty, Trey Ellis, Percival Everett, and Charles Johnson—as postblack narratives that attempt such a “redefinit[ion of] complex notions of blackness.”

As Thelonious ‘Monk’ Ellison, the first-person narrator of Percival Everett’s 2001-novel *Erasure*, succinctly puts it in what can serve as a condensed description of the ambiguities of postblackness:

The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of ‘black’ writers, I ended up on the very distant and very ‘other’ side of a line that is imaginary at best. I didn’t write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some way is just that) and I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of *my* people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint. Perhaps if I had written in the time immediately following Reconstruction, I would have written to elevate the station of my fellow oppressed. But the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference

and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be. I had already talked on the phone with my editor as the infamous Stagg Leigh and now I would meet with Wiley Morgenstein. I could do it. The game was becoming fun. And it was nice to get a check.

*Jelly, Jelly  
Jelly  
All night long*

Behold the Invisible! (*Erasure* 212)

Even though I will have much more to say about this particular novel in chapter 4, it is important to pick apart this passage sentence by sentence now, since it allows me to cast a few glances at some of the most important elements of the postblack aesthetics. The first sentence already indicates that Ellison questions in how far the very category of a black writer makes sense and ponders the consequences of refusing to play along with these racially generic markers. Furthermore, by putting the ‘black’ in scare quotes, Everett’s narrator brackets the category, similar to Henry Louis Gates’s scare-quoting of ‘race’ in the 1980s. Then, in the second sentence, the narrator rejects the stereotypical assumption about black art that it is either a form of social protest or evidence of a communal experience in a predominantly oral culture. Granted, these are two important elements of African American literary history, yet, at least for contemporary authors, they loom large and heavy over the heads of writers who may want to do things differently. As a next step, Monk ironically undermines the very notion of “my people” and, with it, the idea of an integrated collective identity of all black people, for whom every black author at least implicitly is asked to speak.<sup>2</sup> In this, the passage is also quite representative of postblack art more generally in that it criticizes the idea that every black text has to speak for and to the experiences of an entire race, all the while acknowledging that social

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting, albeit quite different, reading of the importance of “black cultural representation in America,” cf. the aptly titled “‘If You See Robert Penn Warren, Ask Him: Who *Does* Speak For the Negro?’ Reflections on Monk, Black Writing, and Percival Everett’s *Erasure*” by Houston A. Baker (133).

protest and a social function of art *do* have their time and place. Given today's world of at least relative freedom, however, *now* is not the time to expect all black art to be socially responsible. Spotting the ambiguity of today's black writers right on, Ellison then points to the difficult position in which they find themselves, having their refusal to be defined solely in terms of race held against them in a racist gesture of rejection and the literary market's disapproval. Postblack artists, thus, find themselves stuck between the Scylla of meeting the race-based, at times racist expectations of an audience that wants them to sound like the 'real thing' of blackness and the Charybdis of writing their individual art and being shunned by the market.

What this passage also indicates is the fact that postblack artists consider racial identity a malleable thing, something that can be used for their own purposes. Within a postblack paradigm, 'race' clearly is a social construction and thus at least potentially open to human intervention. As Appiah phrases such a social constructionist view of race: "To say that race is socially constructed, that an African American is, in Hacking's sense, a 'kind of person,' is, in part, to say that there are no African Americans independent of social practices associated with the racial label" (*Ethics* 23). And just as much as "African Americans" come into being only by being labeled in such a way, "black authors" as well only come to exist by being labeled as such. In this particular case, Monk is no black author by nature, if you will, but becomes one by putting on the 'mask' of the black author in order to make some dearly needed money. Of course, and this is the crux of the postblack aesthetics, it is not the choice of the black author alone to embrace the label but it is a label with which they are being stamped by others. In an attempt to counter this, however, postblack texts, as Monk's word choice "game" indicates, want to turn this contentious ground into a playground of racial identities that can indeed also be that, a "fun" place where money can be made. In order to play this game, Monk invokes important literary predecessors and topoi from African American literary history, such as the trope of the "mask," the mythical gangster figure of Stagger Lee, who serves as his pseudonymous pen name, his entire name, which references both Ralph Ellison and Thelonious Monk, and the direct quotation from his namesake's novel *Invisible Man*. Rather than simply getting rid of blackness, thus, postblack texts actively engage with existing narratives

of blackness and the literary history in the footsteps of which they travel.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, postblack novels take a somewhat irreverent stand toward all of these elements and critically interrogate rather than merely celebrate these traditions. In fact, on the page immediately preceding this passage, Everett's novel prints the title page of Monk Ellison's novel-within-the-novel, now entitled "*Fuck, A Novel*, Stagg R. Leigh" (21). This embedded novella gives the metaphorical finger not only to the literary market, which refuses to see the text's parody and reads it as the 'real thing' of blackness, but also to the major intertext of the parody, namely Richard Wright's *Native Son*. In this, postblack art, both in its tone and its critical stance, is highly ironic, irreverent, humorous, and, at times, outrageously direct and in your face. Finally, this passage, like so many others to be analyzed in what follows, presents a strongly individualist perspective, also but not entirely due to its first-person point of view. What unites these novels under the rubric postblack art, then, is that they share a certain amount of discomfort about the collective identity and the generic marker 'black,' while at the same time being confronted with the all-pervasive influence of race. Thus, trying to swim free from the overwhelming influence of being a *black* artist, these writers add their highly individual voices to the existing canon of black texts, yet not without questioning this very term *black* art in the process. The *post* of postblackness thus mirrors the *post* of postcolonial in that it does not refer to a time in which all vestiges of colonialism have been abolished. Much rather, the colonial continues to infest and plague the postcolonial in much the same way as blackness continues to be an ever-present aspect of and influence on postblackness. Therefore, postblackness is neither a refusal to deal with issues of race nor is it a naïve position that acts as if race no longer were an issue. Yet, most importantly, it also denies that everything a black author ever does, exists only as a— and in—response to race or racism.

What postblack literature—and postblack art more generally—wants, is the freedom of the artistic realm; this freedom does not mean that the authors do not care or worry about the racism of the Zimmerman-acquittal or the ubiquity of everyday racism. Rather, it entails the freedom of not having their art held responsible for or accountable to these social realities; the freedom, that is, of not automatically being read as social

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my "The Parody of Postblackness" for an extended explanation of the ways in which postblack texts signify on and parody their black pre-texts.

protest. In the final analysis, these authors claim the freedom of writing about other things than racism, racial ascriptions and the like. In contrast to what I would call color-blind literature, which simply refuses to deal with race at all, their texts, however, cannot but also deal with race. Postblack, thus, exists in this ambivalent middle ground: refusing to be ‘merely’ black social realist protest fiction but at the same time inevitably always dealing with the racially tinged realities rendered in their fictional universes. In much of postblack art, this stance is mirrored in the textual devices used, which similarly question a straightforward relationship between (black) text and (black) world. Importantly and self-consciously, the diegeses of postblack fiction do not neatly map onto existing American realities as they insist on the distinctness of their status as fictional worlds. That is also to say that they *do* participate in the American racial discourse, albeit only—or, better, intentionally—obliquely. This leads to a first distinction: if race does not register at all in a fictional text, I will not call it a postblack text. Thus, the fact that an African American author writes un-raced fiction, fiction in which race can nowhere be found, does not make the text postblack. This is an important difference to Ramón Saldívar’s recent definition of a postrace aesthetics (cf. “Speculative Realism”; “Historical Fantasy”; “The Second Elevation”), which focuses on the disjunction between author’s race and the text’s postracial character. Against this, my approach insists that a text needs to operate within the tension-filled and contradictory realm of race in order to be classified as postblack.<sup>4</sup> This is also why I eventually decided against entitling this book “The Freedom (Not) to Be Black,” and thus echo Percival Everett’s *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, since even such a parenthetical “not” potentially contains an evasion of race that, ultimately, does not fit into the postblack ‘canon.’

While I very clearly distinguish postblack from postracial literature as defined by Saldívar, a related discussion needs to be addressed here, and that is the question whether a postblack aesthetics is still *black* art. To put this differently, how does postblack aesthetics relate to the recently proclaimed ‘end’ of African American literature? In his highly

<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif” is a good case in point here, as the text refuses to name the specific race of either of its two protagonists, yet in withholding this important information participates in the dialogue about race in truly postblack fashion.



controversial and intensely debated book *What Was African American Literature?*, Kenneth Warren argues that African American Literature existed only in and as a reaction to the system of Jim Crow segregation. After the legal abolition of this heinous system, so the argument goes, it no longer makes sense to speak of African American literature as a clearly defined and demarcated literary genre, as the legal institution which united this corpus no longer exists. From a certain angle, this is an argument quite closely related to postblackness in that postblack texts refuse to be categorized only via their blackness or as a response to it. In a sense, postblackness responds to the readerly expectations made explicit in Warren's argument, namely that African American literature exists only in connection to, and if it protests against, the social reality of racism, racial discrimination, and segregation. As Warren explains in his "A Reply to My Critics": "Jim Crow established the conditions in which literature produced by black Americans *could performatively be African American literature* by making the production of literature matter in relation to the status and condition of black Americans as a whole" (405–406, my italics). Yet while Warren calls on us to stop using the label "African American" for literature written today by black authors, my solution is less drastic (and potentially less controversial, too). As many critics have argued in their responses to Warren's thesis, African American literature existed long before—and has continued to do so after the legal abolition of—the institution of Jim Crow segregation.<sup>5</sup> Agreeing with the critics in this respect, I do not follow Warren's suggestion to restrict usage of the term "African American literature" to this particular, historical sub-category of black writing. Rather, I continue to believe that—given the historically pervasive influence of race—using the term African American literature for any text written by an African American author is an appropriate choice of terms, just as much as using an author's gender continues to be a relevant generic marker.

Yet while I do not agree with Warren's conclusions, postblack literature reacts to something astonishingly similar: postblack art shares

<sup>5</sup> In the wake of the publication of Warren's book, numerous roundtables and symposia were convened, which critically discussed the implications of this publication about (the end of) African American literature. Most of the commentators were very uncomfortable with Warren's conclusions. Cf. "What Was African American Literature?"; "Assessing *What Was African American Literature?*"; "What Is African American Literature?"

Warren's observation that texts by black authors of a certain era reacted against social injustices and were (and are) read as just such social protest fictions. Yet rather than calling for the abolition of this generic label—and thus looking backward—postblack art looks at the present. Thus, postblack artists share Warren's belief that they are doing things differently than their literary forebears under very much changed social, political, and cultural circumstances. Possibly more importantly, they do not want their texts to be read *solely* through the very critical lens which Warren has singled out in his definition of African American literature: namely, the response to and protest against Jim Crow. In contradistinction to Warren, however, postblack writers do not focus on what is over—i.e., what *was* African American literature—but rather on what *is*, by which I mean something strikingly similar to the subtitle of Touré's recent book on post-blackness: *What It Means to Be Black Now*. Perhaps not surprisingly, the answer to this question will be manifold rather than one 'real thing' of blackness. Therefore, my question in this study is not what *was* African American literature but rather what *is* postblack<sup>6</sup> literature, and how does it react to the inquiry what it means to be black *now*? My approach further differs from Warren's question—and, indeed, from Saldivar's—in that postblack art, at least potentially, is open to include non-black authors and thus defines a form of art not exclusively via its practitioners' race but according to its aesthetics. In this, postblack art is a generic term that lies orthogonal to the term African American art in that it focuses less on authors' races and more on textual stylistics.

Hence, I will analyze a range of contemporary novels (and a few short stories) under the generic rubric postblack art in an attempt to clarify my definition of postblack literature and in the hopes of teasing out nuanced

<sup>6</sup> I do not make a clear distinction between black and African American and, thus, could have used the term post-African American just the same had not Thelma Golden coined the term postblack already. Of course, postblack is also a handier term than post-African American. In addition, the term postblack has an additional advantage: it focuses on the mere fact of a shared visual appearance (a similar outer surface, if you will) that makes a group of people appear visually similar and thus subject to potentially being treated by others in a certain way. African American, on the other hand, focuses on a presumably shared ethnic identity (like Italian-American or German-American) and thus implies a shared culture, an assumption that postblack art questions. Cf. my discussion of Hollinger's idea of postethnicity in chapter 2 for a more elaborate discussion of this distinction.

readings of these texts in the process. Before I get there, however, a few words are in order as to what makes a text postblack and, thus, to delineate my corpus. For the most part, I will deal with contemporary narrative texts written by African Americans that deal with complex re-negotiations of blackness. In my final text-analytic chapter, however, I will also discuss Adam Mansbach's novel *Angry Black White Boy: Or, The Miscegenation of Macon Detornay* (2005), a text written by a white author. In a sense, this explodes Golden's definition of postblack art, rendered in a nutshell as art by black artists who refuse to be restricted to limiting notions of blackness. On two levels, Mansbach's novel allows me to complicate this definition: First, on a thematic level, the novel presents a white protagonist who is culturally well-versed in blackness and whose crimes are mistaken for those of a black person due to existing stereotypes. In the process, the novel thematizes questions of racial and cultural authenticity, racial reconciliation, and the ways in which being black (and white) in today's America is a changed thing, yet one that continues to be important. Second, the novel more generally problematizes the idea of a black text, which enables me to discuss the very complicated question if a white author can write postblack literature. More abstractly put, is the 'canon' of postblack art defined by the people who produce the art (i.e. black folk) or by the thing that is being produced (i.e. texts that share a certain agenda of questioning existing narratives of blackness)? I will return to these complex questions in my discussion of Mansbach's novel in chapter 6 and, again, in my epilogue, in which I will weigh the consequences my analyses potentially have on the possible end of African American literature. For now, I will only say this: if postblack art refuses to define a master narrative of blackness, the 'real thing' to which one has to be true, and which can be authentically told; and if postblack art rejects a proprietary understanding of culture in the sense that certain cultural products belong to certain racially defined groups; and if postblack art, furthermore, breaks open the boundaries of a black collective identity in the United States; and, lastly, if postblack literature does not want to be weighed down by the all-dominating idea of having been produced by a *black* author; then, we at least need to be open to the possibility of questioning our practice of grouping authors according to their race (for the most part irrespective of what they actually write about).

In a nutshell, what unites the texts in my corpus are several features: interestingly—and at times disturbingly—enough, all texts are written by

male authors and participate in a very similar gender politics. They also share an irreverent stance toward blackness, the African American literary tradition, and its major tropes, which manifests itself textually through the use of satire, irony, and humor. Sharing a more or less postmodern sentiment, these texts brim with metafictional devices and show off a (literary) technical virtuosity and a play with and on forms. More precisely, they indulge in the self-referential use of narrative devices within their complex narrative constructions. Lastly, they all complicate mimetic epistemologies in that they question the ways in which literary texts can point at, refer to, and represent extra-textual realities. This short list of textual features already leads to several methodological caveats and guiding questions for the interpretations to come: I will have to pay close attention to the gender politics unraveling in the texts and the gender bias within them; more particularly, how and why is it that almost all of these texts that “unsettle[e] blackness” (Baker) and ridicule racial pigeonholing are written by men, and what does this mean for the imbrication of race and gender? What kinds of, and whose, voices are heard in the texts, and how do they relate to the supposed racial (and gender) identities of the respective speakers? Furthermore, narratological analysis will make up a big part of the reading of the individual texts, which make use of complex devices such as the *mise en abyme* and often stage a clash of competing, heteroglossic black voices. By employing such self-referential and metafictional devices, all texts under discussion continuously point to their own status *as* fictional texts. Doing so, they also make a statement about the constructedness of literary fictions and racial representation as well as complicate the ways in which literature mimetically points at the world outside. In a related aspect, these texts’ non-representational use of humor and satire serves as an important reminder that they are better at tumbling over existing discourses than setting up new ideals or utopias in their places. Moreover, the (mostly humorous) invocation of tropes from the African American literary tradition necessitates that I pay close attention to how these texts situate themselves in relation to it.

Finally, postblack literature self-consciously invokes questions of authorship, authorial voice, and—more precisely—*black* authorship, suggesting questions such as: Are these texts *black* texts? What is a black text, after all? Is there a thing called ‘African American fiction’? If so, how does one’s text become part of this tradition? Common to all texts is a double movement of trying to take a hold of and retaining blackness as

a central theme while at the same time gesturing toward all that lies beyond blackness. In their attempts to negotiate this ambiguity, many of these texts deliberately enunciate their blackness—or, rather, the end thereof, as is the case in Paul Beatty's *Slumberland*—only to encounter its endless and simultaneously violent and humorous, often even farcical return. The male protagonists—for there are almost no female ones in these texts—all fall into the category of what Trey Ellis has termed “cultural mulattoes” (“The New Black Aesthetic” 189), by which he characterizes people for whom living in a multi-racial environment of cultural mixture has become the norm rather than the exception.

In chapter 2, I will unfold the theoretical framework of the project as “Postblack Aesthetics.” The central analytical term will be Thelma Golden's description of “postblack” art, which can be summarized as follows: “[It is] characterized by artists who [are] adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work [is] steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness” (Golden 14). In other words, black becomes simultaneously an artistic option—one among many others—yet continues to be an inescapable lived reality. Thus, postblack is distinctively different from simplistic notions of transcending race and is *not* to be mistaken for the post-racial, which has been bandied around quite loosely in the wake of the election of President Obama. Rather, postblack widens available options of blackness without neglecting the dire reality constructions of race still bring with them. In terms of literary postblackness, this entails a liberation or an extension of suitable artistic topics in that ‘black’ texts no longer claim to speak for a collective black subject—that on such a view does not exist. It also entails a refusal of having their texts read as nothing but sociological reports about blackness. What postblack art, thus, strives for is the freedom to be perceived as art, rather than *black* art. This refusal to be tied down to the label ‘black’ art and the countervailing tendency to re-investigate and “redefine[e] complex notions of blackness” is central to the postblack project. By way of analogy, I will link this artistic strategy to David Hollinger's notion of the postethnic as something that attempts to acknowledge the reality of race while at the same time trying to straddle the dividing lines between existing ethnoracial blocs. While I remain somewhat skeptical as to the viability of a politics of postethnicity—at least for the time being and the near future—postblack art attempts to do something quite similar in the fictional realm: Focusing on the

constructed character of racial ascriptions, yet without disregarding their very much real consequences, postblackness attempts to bracket the omnipotent and ubiquitous epithet 'black' as the be-all and end-all of art by African Americans.

In my analysis, I draw on a number of related critical paradigms in order to read the postblack identities rendered in these literary texts: (1) I make use of Appiah's theory of (black) identity as a negotiation between the personal dimension of freedom and the collective dimension, which is influenced by "scripts" that determine the ways in which individual life-narratives can be formulated. This will be the central frame of reference for the discussion of the texts in chapter 4, which showcase an exchange between competing voices of blackness. In both Ellis's and Everett's novels, we encounter the same character constellation of a black male writer, who does not really believe in race, set against a black female writer, who serves as the target of satirical attacks against essentialist versions of communal black female identities. As I argue in my reading of these texts, they use this strategy in order to question the idea of black authorship and present alternative, postblack identities in the face of narrow scripts of blackness. (2) I also employ Tommie Shelby's definition of "thin blackness," which refuses to believe in a pre-socially shared black identity yet offers an argument that makes it possible to re-define black collective identities in a pragmatic way as viable, even necessary political solidarities in order to fight for social, economic, and cultural equality of all people. This will be the guiding framework for chapter 5, in which I deal with texts that ask questions about black political activism, black leadership, and black economic and cultural exploitation. (3) Throughout this study, I draw on the descriptive tool of *transdifference*, which provides me with the lens through which I can focus on two things at once: the persistence of racial difference on the one hand, and the bracketing, decentering, and destabilization of this difference on the other. In a nutshell, the

term *transdifference* refers to phenomena of a co-presence of different or even oppositional properties, affiliations or elements of semantic and epistemological meaning construction, where this co-presence is regarded or experienced as cognitively or affectively dissonant, full of tension, and undissolvable. (Breinig and Lösche, "Transdifference" 105)

This critical tool allows me to focus on the individual who navigates his

or her way through the vagaries of identity construction. (4) As a final dimension, my project contains a very strong ethical impetus that focuses on the individual and his or her freedom to affiliate across and beyond existing lines of racial difference. I will formulate these ethics in two directions: On the one hand, this implies an increase in personal freedoms from restrictions of collective identity. Using the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ in the formulations suggested by Appiah, Paul Gilroy, and Hollinger, I focus on the new solidarities that can come into existence by bracketing collective racial identity. Most notably, these accounts will influence my reading of the novels in chapter 6. On the other hand, this increase in personal freedom, however, entails an increasing insistence on individual responsibility for the Other, now that the guarantees of coherent and stable collective identities have been taken away. In order to do justice to this, I draw on the impossibly demanding ethical philosophy of responsibility offered by Emmanuel Levinas, which links the individual in a network of responsibility to all Others. This will undergird my reading of Charles Johnson’s similarly demanding and complex ethical fiction in chapter 3. Of course, there is considerable overlap between these four theories in my analytical framework and they will not be used mutually exclusively. All four dimensions, for example, highlight the need for solidarities uniting individuals above, beyond, and transversally to existing identity groups.

After having demarcated the analytical framework in the second chapter, I turn to my first literary examples in chapter 3. In an analysis of three texts by Charles Johnson—“China,” *Oxherding Tale*, and “Executive Decision”—I read him as one of the most important precursors to the postblack aesthetics in that he questions traditional understandings of what a black author and a black text are and can be. First, I discuss how “China” depicts a liberation of perception that yields new insights into the capabilities of a black body and that allows for a deeper understanding of blackness beyond narrow restrictions. Then, I focus on Johnson’s re-formulation of the classical locus of African American literature, that is, the slave narrative, and the ways in which his critical engagement with the very foundations of black literature allows him to re-formulate contemporary ideas about black literature in *Oxherding Tale*. Finally, a close reading of the short story “Executive Decision” will show how a brief moment of transdifferent destabilization of binary difference leads to a liberation of perception akin to the one described in “China.” This new way of seeing beyond the (black) skin of

a literary character allows Johnson's narrator-protagonist, and with him the readers, to embrace his responsibility for the Other. In this instance, seeing beyond difference leads to an embrace of Levinasian responsibility for another person that transcends racial justice. In addition to these themes, my readings discuss the ways in which Johnson's fiction complicates the form of the slave narrative and how his intricate use of narrative voice "manumits" first-person voice, as the protagonist of *Oxherding Tale* himself states. In many ways, Johnson thus marks the beginning of the postblack aesthetics analyzed in this study, even if he, ultimately, is of an older generation than the other authors. As a child of the civil rights movement and the Black Nationalist/Arts Movement, Johnson—having been born in 1948—is 'too old' to be a part of the post-soul generation, as I explain in chapter 2, drawing on the ground-breaking studies of Mark Anthony Neal and Nelson George, who coined the term.<sup>7</sup> In his persistent questioning of restrictive understandings of blackness, however, I read Johnson as a founding figure of the postblack.

Chapter 4, then, turns to two paradigmatic postblack fictional texts, Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* (1988) and Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001). Both novels revolve self-consciously (and metafictionally) around the question of what it means to be a black author and stage a conflict about the nature of black literature. In this chapter, I analyze the narrative structure of these texts, which both play with embedded narratives, multiple narrative layers and voices, all revolving around the question: who speaks in and for black literature. More precisely, this chapter takes on the complicated issue of authenticity and what it means to write 'authentic' black literature. Both novels playfully parody the trope of 'keepin' it real' and, eventually, disassemble this topos as misleading. Complicating any notion of what true black literature should look and sound like, Ellis's and Everett's novels play with existing 'scripts' of blackness, as Appiah has called these blueprints of identity construction, and open up the text of blackness to newer, more open variations. Following Appiah's analysis of the dilemma of both being dependent on

<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, all of the major authors to be treated in this study are 'too old' for a strict interpretation of Neal's temporal boundaries of the post-soul years: Johnson (b. 1948), Everett (b. 1956), Ellis (b. 1962), and Beatty (b. 1962) were all born before the March on Washington in 1963 and thus before the watershed from soul to post-soul. The only one who meets the strict criterion is Adam Mansbach (b. 1976), yet as a white author he also does not fully 'belong.'



and yearning to be free from these very scripts, this chapter argues that these novels strive for the “not too tightly scripted” (Appiah, “Identity” 163) and a “more recreational conception of racial identity” (“Race, Culture, Identity” 103). In this, these novels take issue with the existing script of acceptable literary blackness and show the ways in which such expectations influence the writing of black authors. Yet while both novels are quite successful at opening space for less tightly scripted narratives of blackness, they do so by invoking very tightly scripted gender narratives. Both create highly problematic gender constellations in that they present female author figures as the other against which the texts unfold their postblack responses. This chapter, thus, also gives me the chance to shed light on the gender politics of postblack literature, which, for the time being, seems to be a literary category almost entirely made up of male authors.<sup>8</sup>

After having opened the scripts of blackness, the following chapter 5 leaves the terrain of individual identity constructions and moves to the field of collective identity and the public domain of political action. Similar to the novels discussed in the preceding chapter, Paul Beatty’s satirical novel *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) plays with existing stereotypes of black identity, such as black people’s supposedly inherent athletic and musical abilities (hence the sardonic title of the novel, which refers to the protagonist’s lacking chops on the dance floor). Yet this novel moves these related issues to a different level as well, namely the field of political agitation and thus takes on the question of black political leadership. Doing so, the novel addresses issues of the highest current relevance, such as the question of what the changes of social roles mean

<sup>8</sup> This holds at least for narrative literature. In different media, for example the visual arts, drama, or poetry, the gender gap is not nearly as big, as the work of artists such as Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, dramatists like Suzan-Lori Parks and Lynn Nottage, and poets such as Evie Shockley, Wanda Coleman, and Harryette Mullen easily proves (cf. Derek Conrad Murray 13). I will return to this gender disparity and restrict myself here to two references to Darryl Dickson-Carr’s work on black satire. Not only does he observe a dearth of satires by black women writers (cf. *African-American Satire* 5–6); in his critique of male satires, he consciously employs the “myth of Scylla and Charybdis” as these mythical figures “are also female” and argues that, in these satires, “women become emasculating forces that deprive the writer of his ability to be his true self or to create what *he* will” (“The Historical Burden” 48).

in concrete terms for the racial make-up of the United States. How can black and white live together today? Different from a black aesthetic text of, say, the 1960s, however, this novel presents this political agitation in a highly ironic and humorous manner. As a contrastive foil, I read Beatty's text against Charles Johnson's novel *Dreamer* (1998), which deals with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, 1966 Chicago campaign, thus also engaging with questions of social and political relevance. In this novel, King has a mysterious doppelganger, who takes on the job of subbing for King in dangerous situations. Thus, the novel duplicates and multiplies questions of black identity and political leadership, ultimately asking the reader to question their ideas about black identity and the role of charismatic black leaders. Through its extended play with the doppelganger, the novel also renegotiates the classical trope of the mirror scene and the ways in which original and copy, life and literary representation, are much more complexly entangled with one another than simplistic mimetic understandings would imply. In this chapter, I also deal with questions of political and ethical import, as both texts describe real and fictional, past and contemporary grassroots political movements that openly criticize the persistence of racialized and racist politics. In this context, I will deal with questions such as "what are blacks to do?"; "what should whites contribute to this battle?"; "who is fighting with whom for what?" that also allow for cross-references to my discussion of the white apology movement described in Mansbach's novel in chapter 6. In my analyses, I make extensive use of Shelby's framework of pragmatic black nationalism based on his concept of thin black identity, a non-essentialist view of identity that enables blacks to unite for political purposes without grounding this on anything more substantial than shared political interests. Furthermore, I link Johnson's idea of the "inescapable network of mutuality" (*Dreamer* 103), adopted from Martin Luther King, Jr., to the ways in which postblack art explodes the boundaries of black identity and forces on us the high ethical demand actively to engage in solidarities beyond our perceived collective identity.

The final thematic chapter 6 further widens the scope of textual analysis by focusing on Adam Mansbach's *Angry Black White Boy: Or, The Miscegenation of Macon Detornay* (2005) and Beatty's *Slumberland* (2008). In many respects, these two texts go beyond the preceding discussions: Beatty's novel is set in re-unification Germany and thus relocates its engagements with issues of race outside of the United States

in an explicitly cosmopolitan setting. The text, as it were, has left behind U.S. racial discourses (almost) altogether and broaches issues of borders and how these dividing lines circumscribe notions of blackness. By attempting to transcend musical, racial, and generic boundaries, Beatty's novel offers a cosmopolitan rendering of postblackness that transcends tight pigeonholes and at least glimpses at postraciality without being able to get there. Yet as it turns out, the novel's very attempt to abolish race only effects its reconstruction, symbolized in the invisible sonic wall of Berlin that its protagonists reconstruct. Taking on the trope of invisibility, this text also negotiates its own—somewhat uncomfortable—place within the canon of African American fiction. In this, it speaks to postblackness's central dilemma that every attempt to de-essentialize, de-center, and reformulate blackness at the same time reiterates blackness and is thus never able entirely to do away with blackness. While Mansbach's text remains firmly situated within the spatial and ideological domain of American racial discourse, it, too, explodes the boundaries of these very domains. His novel confronts us with a white protagonist, whose political cachet derives from his 'cultural' blackness as a long-time hip hop aficionado and expert. After a string of racial misidentifications, he starts a political grassroots movement of mass apologies for slavery. Thus, the novel discusses the need for and the viability of racial reconciliation and reminds us of the ultimate mixture of American culture, possibly dislocating 'authentic' blackness in the process. Furthermore, it is a text written by a white author, and this fact allows me to ask difficult questions about the importance of a text's author's race vis-à-vis the text itself.

Drawing on Paul Gilroy's turn away from race in *Against Race* (2000), this chapter also deals with the "end of the charade of blackness" (*Slumberland* 3) and has a look at postblackness from a 'white' point of view. The major theoretical lens, through which I read the novels in this chapter, is a notion of cosmopolitanism suggested by both Gilroy and Hollinger. Such an understanding of the cosmopolitan centers on the individual—rather than a pre-determined collective—, who, more or less freely, affiliates with whomever he or she sees fit. Beatty's novel situates this re-negotiation of cosmopolitan identity in Germany and thus links up national, racial, and cultural identities beyond the restrictions of the American color line. Mansbach, on the other hand, remains within the domains of the American racial regime but, similarly, expands notions of possible political solidarities beyond and across the black-white color

line. What both novels do is that they collapse notions of the cultural ownership of musical and/or political cultures in order to expand the range of available options for postblack, postethnic, and, possibly even, postracial solidarities. In so doing, they follow the general postblack impetus to question prescriptive collective identities and thus turn toward what Hollinger, in a riff on Du Bois's famous declaration about the color line as *the* central problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has described as "one of the central challenges of the twenty-first century": the "problem of solidarity" (Preface ix). For Gilroy, the "only *ethical* response to the conspicuous wrongs that racilogies continue to solicit and sanction" (*Against Race* 41) is to give up on race. While I think Gilroy's argument against race is simply not feasible, both novels represent intriguing thought experiments about the potential ranges of solidarity for individual protagonists in their respective attempts to do away with race.

In the concluding Epilogue, I finally revisit the discussion begun in this introduction about the possible end to (and ends of) African American literature. It concludes the book with an interrogation of the question what a postblack aesthetics does to the idea of African American fiction and how this relates to Warren's claim about the end of African American literature. Casting glances at a few more, quite different contemporary texts, these final pages also offer some thoughts concerning additional contemporary "black texts." After having discussed in detail a small sample of texts, these concluding remarks also shift the terrain of the discussion and add new nuances to the contested terrain of contemporary African American literature. This epilogue thus rounds out my framework of postblack literature as a continuation of, rather than end to, African American literary history.



## 2 Postblack Aesthetics

Many a dirge has been sung concerning the ultimate, in fact inevitable demise of American multiculturalism. Critics from the right have criticized it for its focus on group rights over individual excellence, whereas commentators of the left have tended to attack multiculturalism's culturalist misreading of what, after all, turns out to be an economist or class-based misshaping of society.<sup>1</sup> Others have focused on its insistence on coherent group identities and cultures, adding that this conceptually warps the ultimately individual and personal slant of identity formation. Yet others have criticized it for entrenching an identity politics that creates nothing but strife, standing in the way of actual reconciliation. The legal, social, socioeconomic, and political successes of multiculturalism notwithstanding, the question with which we are faced today is this: Beyond multiculturalism, then, lies what? In his review of Thelma Golden's exhibition *Freesyle* in 2001, art critic Holland Cotter hesitantly suggests "Beyond Multiculturalism, Freedom?" as one potential answer that links the discourse of postblackness to the idea of freedom, even if he ends with a question mark rather than an affirmative response.

In his 1995 (2000, 2005 new editions) book *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, David Hollinger suggests postethnicity as an empirical description of our contemporary post-multicultural age. Moreover, he offers a normative paradigm of "affiliation by revocable consent" (*Postethnic* 13–14; 21, 118, 188) that provides individuals with the freedom to affiliate across existing ethno-racial lines of difference. In this historical study, he describes American multiculturalism as a reaction against (mainly) color-based discrimination. The story told also is one

<sup>1</sup> As one paradigmatic example over the correct interpretation of what is wrong with multiculturalism, the reader may turn her attention to the debates between Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, in which they argue about the benefits of (culturalist) recognition and (economic) re-distribution, respectively.

relating numerous successes, among them the important fact that, eventually, color and culture no longer can be viewed as oxymoronic.<sup>2</sup> As part of this history, Hollinger coins the term “ethno-racial pentagon” (8; cf. 23–50) to refer to the five-part<sup>3</sup> (African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, Caucasian) governmental structure that was invented in order to remedy the corresponding color-coded (black, brown, red, yellow, white) discrimination, historical disadvantage, and continuing systematic exclusion of people of color from positions of power, influence, and symbolic capital. Taking as his starting point the “*nonethnic* ideology of the [American] nation” and her “predominantly *ethnic* history,” Hollinger describes the “ethno-racial pentagon” as an “historical artifact” assigning people to categories based on “their perceived communities of descent” (*Postethnic* 19, 23, 24). According to Hollinger, this framing of the problem had become necessary to generate reliable numbers and statistics—especially through the Federal Census—in order to redistribute public funds, social recognition, and educational and economic prospects. Programs such as affirmative action<sup>4</sup> simply could not do without any quantitative grounding in the empirical reality of maltreatment. It is paramount to note, however, that on this reading the ethno-racial pentagon was the reaction to perceived and perceivable difference and, connected with this, people’s proneness to being discriminated against *because* of this very difference. More particularly, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was successful in pointing attention to the fact that the U.S. did not live up to the promise of equality and liberty when it came to her black brethren. Only after the civil rights legislation of the 1960s had been enacted, did the establishment of the five Census categories gain momentum because only

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed historic argument on this count, see Posnock’s magisterial *Color and Culture*, in which he coins the phrase “anti-race race men” to describe those intellectuals of color (*and* culture) who managed to destroy the seeming contradiction between color and culture.

<sup>3</sup> By the 2000–Census, a sixth category, viz. Native Hawaiians, has been added to this structure (cf. Prewitt).

<sup>4</sup> Shortness of space prohibits me from giving a nuanced reading of affirmative action both concerning its empirical and historical setting and the grounds on which defenses and/or critiques of it have been launched—e.g. group preference (Hollinger, “Group Preferences”) or redistribution and recompense, i.e., “racial modifications” (Dyson, “Debating” 71).

then the numbers garnered through it were used for antidiscrimination measures, such as racial quotas, affirmative action, re-districting, and so forth. In short, a political apparatus was set in place with the agenda of righting historically entrenched social wrongs.

With this system more or less firmly—and successfully—in place for a few decades, the experiences of the identity politics-influenced 1980s and 1990s more and more convinced Hollinger of the flawed nature of the conceptualizations of cultural difference that were offered at the time. Classical multiculturalism conceived of cultural groups as integrated wholes possessing a shared culture that is defined in contradistinction to different, competing cultures. Thus, America was supposed to consist of numerous, more or less stable descent-based, ethnic cultures vying for influence and power. As Werner Sollors has convincingly argued, though, the constant conflict between *consent* and *descent* is overlooked in such a strong reading of historically stable and unchanging ethnic groups. African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, Italian-Americans, Sicilian-Americans—and all the way down to more and more micro-groupings—called for the recognition of their ‘indigenous,’ authentic cultural character and the preservation of cultural products emanating from their respective group. As a result, the 1980s became the decade of the “Multicultural Wars” (Carby) and the “Canon Wars/Debates” (Gates, “Beyond the Culture Wars”), in which the equal importance of these various ‘cultural’ contributions to the American cultural landscape were discussed and claimed. The victories won in these wars were tremendous: So-called minority literatures became widely accepted as valid fields of study, degree programs in these fields sprouted up all over the country, the publication of hefty anthologies with renowned publishers, such as *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, cemented their status as canonized literatures, and researching and writing about ‘ethnic’ literatures became perhaps not the norm, but at least stopped being the exception. However, the more successfully this ‘war’ was waged, the more the wages for the artists involved changed, and, arguably, became even higher. Whereas earlier on the problem for black artists had been to become visible *as* artists at all (and not just anthropological curiosities), now the cultural terrain on which they were expected to move was more and more well-lit yet at the same time consistently narrowed down. The more public recognition black art received, the more difficult it became for black artists to be perceived as just artists—rather than *black* artists.