

AGNESE MARINO

Postethnicity and Ethnic Performance in Rebecca Walker's *Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*

During the nineties, part of the American public debate shifted from a multiculturalist framework to a new, post-identity attitude: a broad approach stemming from the spread of post-racial theories, the rapid affirmation of the philosophical and sociological concepts of hybridity and liminality, and the deconstruction of the concept of identity as unique and immutable. Trust in multiculturalism as the best framework for the theorization of ethno-racial relations and the promotion of equality was in decline. In particular, a heterogeneous group of intellectuals identified as “new cosmopolitans” had voiced their distrust of this system of categories and its political application. Much of the criticism leveled at multiculturalism had to do with the normative character of its organization of difference and with its blending of the cultural (ethnicity) and the political (race).¹ As Homi Bhabha explained in 1990, “Multiculturalism celebrates cultural diversity, but differences are always located in the grid of a dominant culture. The most eloquent manifestation of the supremacy of one culture over the others is the fact that racism is still rampant” (qtd. in Rutherford 208).

The American academy started to look for new ideological frameworks capable of responding, as David Hollinger states, to the challenges of an ever more multiethnic society (*Postethnic America* 173-74). This new generation of intellectuals openly opposed collectivist theories about ethnicity which prevailed during the seventies; they also expressed growing disbelief in the praxis of positive discrimination and warned of the dangerous effects of color supremacy in (self-)identification. Other relevant issues on the table were the misleading ideal of racial authenticity and the unresolved conflict between individuality and community membership. As Eric Lott explains, new cosmopolitans were inspired by early cosmopolitanism (in particular,

by Randolph Bourne's trans-nationalism); they echoed the words of Alain LeRoy Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Werner Sollors and criticized radical pluralism, claiming that the universal commitment of the nation had been betrayed in the last decades by an emergent cultural parochialism (108-10).² Hollinger (*Postethnic America*), in particular, defended the idea that human communities do not necessarily share cultural traditions, biological ties, experiences of discrimination based on physical traits, or the collective memory of them. This cultural atmosphere and deep sense of change are clearly reflected in *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*³.

This is Rebecca Walker's first autobiographical work. Published in January 2001, it gathers the wishes and fears of a nation that was redefining itself in a new post-multicultural and transnational formulation. In her autobiography, Walker represents the effects of pre-constructed and exclusionary ethnic (self-)identification, the clash between racial models and individual experience, and the gap between collective and personal memory. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, I introduce the concept of *ethnic performance* to highlight the intimate consequences of the reaction to ethnoracial categorization. I will also try to establish to what extent Rebecca Walker succeeds in conveying her post-identity message in the memoir. In this respect, I provide two levels of reading of the work. First, by reading it as a cross section of American multicultural life in the 1980s and 1990s, I show how the protagonist's experience seems to be in line with contemporary post-ethnic critique and realizes an ideal of ethnic performance. In the second part, through a formal analysis of the work, I show a few but essential unresolved ambiguities that reveal the intimate fragility of Walker's discourse.

Rebecca's Life: From "Movement Child" To Woman On The Move

BWJ is above all the story of a mixed-race young woman, whose birth in the Civil Rights Era should have symbolized a promise of racial reconciliation. However, with the spread of racial separatism and her parents' divorce, she spends her adolescence in relentless search for an

authentic, coherent, and socially accepted identity. Thanks to her insight into different racial contexts, Rebecca is able to give a lucid critical analysis of the racial categories and power relations that were predominant during the eighties and nineties. In the end, one of the great contributions of literature to social studies is to offer a chance to observe the effects of social phenomena from an intimate point of view. In this sense, the divorce between Rebecca's white Jewish father, the civil rights lawyer Mel Leventhal, and her black mother, the activist and writer Alice Walker, is represented as an eloquent example of how structural pluralism, with its idea of social and political separation of racial communities, tangibly affected the young woman's life. Rebecca perceives this event as the victory of loyalty to the racial community over individual will, as blood law against free affiliation rights, or as the final victory of racism over love:

Like any normal couple, I suppose, my parents change... but also the real world begins to bleed into the margins of their idealistic love... they are no longer held together by a web of folk committed to the transgressive nature of their union.
 ... Black-on-black love is the new recipe for revolution, mulatto half-breeds are tainted with the blood of the oppressor... my father, once an ally, is, overnight, recast as an interloper (59-60).

As Fu-Jen Chen recalls, the effects of the split between two persons who once believed in racial reconciliation to the point of defying apartheid with an illegal marriage are catastrophic. From that moment on, not only is the family destroyed, but Rebecca's first identification as a "child of the Movement" – the one she had inherited from her parents – ceases to exist (378). As a modern Don Quixote, she becomes the melancholy emissary of a message of reconciliation that society is unwilling or unable to decode. As a result, she feels desperately lonely and worthless. From the outside world, she has inherited the multicultural idea of an ethnicity based on blood ties and a shared past; therefore, it is not surprising that she seeks a trace of herself in those negative or positive icons that crowd the Black popular imagery. In fact, as Ralina Joseph explains, Rebecca needs to free her self-perception from two inherited identities: that of "Movement Child," inherited from her parents, and that of "Tragic Mulatto," a legacy of black popular culture (22).

Rebecca is now physically and metaphorically displaced: she is compelled to live between both maternal and paternal houses, bouncing every two years between the East and West Coasts, forced to change cities, schools, friends, and social status. Above all, she is forced to cross the “colored/white line,” a practice that entails self-renovation and the actuation of what I call a ethnic performance. Therefore, in each new context, she desperately attempts to become part of a whole with the people around her – no matter their race – because she perceives the others as perfectly defined, fully authentic ethnic models, and through them she hopes to overcome her physical ambiguity and psychic uncertainty.

Feeling neglected by her parents and rejecting the love of her Jewish, and moreover middle-class stepmother, Rebecca experiments with street life, drugs, and precocious bisexuality, including having an abortion at the age of fourteen, an event that will change her life forever.

Therefore, not only for biological reasons,⁴ but also due to her peculiar life experience, Rebecca becomes a symbol of a hybrid, liminal, and displaced existence, lost in the non-space of physical, social, and psychic uncertainty. This displacement makes her feel at home only in *non-places* such as airports: *transitional spaces* described as “blank, undemanding, neutral” (3).

By talking about “difference” from a position of liminality, Walker emphasizes the idea of alterity and otherness and, in Homi Bhabha’s words,⁵ unmasks the imposture of essentialist authority (Rutherford 211).

Rebecca’s World, the Ethno-Racial Pentagon, And The New Cosmopolitan Critique To Multiculturalism

Rebecca’s search for identity is entrapped in a system apparently based on the juxtaposition of skin color and ethnic culture and in which ethnicity (a multicultural concern) and race are treated as if they were the same thing:

Colleen... [is] a real black girl and I’m not. When someone... makes a joke about what I have on or the way I talk, I answer straight, directly. I’m too serious, too stiff to hit the ball back, to bounce some words across the pavement. They say, I’m more like a white girl (126).

In 1995, Hollinger described the American social system as dominated by the consequences of a “cultural translation” of what he calls the “ethno-racial pentagon” – the Census Bureau framework of reference for racial difference, which divides the entire population into five blocs: European Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. Such categorization represents, according to him, the lines of color discrimination consolidated over centuries of dominant Anglo-conformism (23-27), and it derives from 19th-century pseudo-anthropological categorizations of human beings. As he points out, the five blocs “get their integrity not from biology, nor even from culture, but from the dynamics of prejudice and oppression in the U.S.” (38). This pentagon reiterates a white-centric point of view on race, and the bloc distinctions correspond to *color* distinctions. Of course, states Hollinger, the pentagon itself is not damaging, since it does not ask about individuals’ ethnic or cultural origins, but its function is to determine the sort of racial discrimination people suffer on the basis of external racial attributes. This means that the pentagon does not induce people to enact self-racialization processes. But, as Denise Lacorne and other historians have underlined, obsessive returns to the pentagon in discourses about difference and its constant presence in so many practical aspects of citizens’ social lives have turned it into an identification guideline (206-12). Hence, according to Hollinger, a majority of Americans have constructed their own identities and defined themselves according to color-based classification with a history of racial persecution. Another important consequence he warns against is the illusion that there are “five American cultures” connected to five American communities (25): this dangerous belief implies a complete identification between color and cultural categories – a betrayal of the original intent of multiculturalism.

Strikingly, *BWJ* stages exactly the dynamics outlined above: Rebecca’s and her friends’ self-expression and self-recognition as part of their community appears to be intimately permeated with this pentagonal logic. Their discourses are full of racial archetypes and color mythologies. Thus, the individuals Rebecca observes are hopelessly trying to define the indefinable: their identity, their very existence. Ever since the age of six, when a classmate labeled Rebecca “a black girl” for the first time, she felt that she was expected to adhere to that precise identity model.

From this discussion, the reader gathers the impression that, in the United States, this system is so dominant that skin-color and cultural identity have become utterly conflated. Apparently, in this discursive framework, it is not blood, nor even culture, but only the body (and in particular, its color) that can determine one's identity.

Color Absolutism

Walker provides an exhaustive representation of how color affects self-perception in terms of self-identification, community membership, an inherited past, and behavior. With this terse statement, Rebecca summarizes two important concepts that are part of the pentagonal logic Hollinger exposes, "In the race-obsessed United States, my color defines me, tells a story I have not written" (304). First, nothing defines a person more than color, and second, color has both synchronic and diachronic functions: it both marks and regulates one's present and writes a past that is independent from subjective experience, binding community members together through the legacy of shared memory. Other examples of pentagonal logic in the text help us understand how the characters of *BWJ* experience ethnicity and race.

To begin with, color is so full of meaning that it does not represent a mere "category," but a concrete and tangible part of one's self; it is a physical reality, substantial and significant, and living almost independently within bodies:

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

The implications of color overshadow blood ties, as skin counts for more than genetic make-up when community membership is at stake. Genetic inheritance does not necessarily imply inclusion, whereas color does. Therefore, when Rebecca and her white father walk through the Bronx, a space where Mel is the only white man, she feels an upsetting “gap” between them:

I think to myself that *I* am going to be fine, but will he? I belong because my skin says I do, because people don't question me... they don't assume I have money and I don't respect them... I can cock my head and look at someone like they better step off, but my father? (202-3; emphasis in original text).

Pentagonal logic is not concerned with shades. When commenting on the book in 2010, the author explained to a Jewish magazine: “When I was a kid... I was raised in such a dichotomist's world. One was *so* this and one was *so* that” (Tolsky n.p.). Most of all, in *BWJ*, the world is organized according to the binary system of white/colored, so that the only *raison d'être* of other ethnicities is that of being *non-white*:

I pull back cautiously and feel, even as I laugh and play with my cousins, as if some part of me is alien to others, as if I am in the family through some kind of affirmative-action plan and don't entirely belong (47).

We find an intimate conceptual fusion between *color* and *culture*. In fact, even though Walker opts for a split between the racial binomial “black and white” and the cultural element “Jewish” in the title, we find almost no distinction between *white* and *Jewish* in the text. In Rebecca's eyes, her paternal family is merely white and middle-class; no one is really interested in Hebrew rituals and culture. As Hollinger has similarly argued, every distinction is lost in the white melting pot of the mainstream bloc. Moreover, when there is a discrepancy between heritage and color, people are shocked to the point of disbelief. For example, at Yale, a Jewish boy bursts into Rebecca's room screaming, “Are you really black and Jewish?... How can that be possible?” He echoes the question that has obsessed Rebecca for her entire life: “Am I possible?” (25).

Consequently, the people who are identified as (or identify themselves with) a specific ethno-racial bloc are seen as perfectly adhering to a pre-determined, specific cultural outline, as well as to what I define an ethnic *performance*: a set of stereotypical behaviors recalling a particular ethnic – not merely racial – archetype. Walker shows how color creates a social expectation of consistency, which young Rebecca perceives as a form of psychic violence. The reader is provided with a clear demonstration of it, especially in the context of the ghetto, where black identity appears “acted out” through the stagnant reiteration of symbolic elements: African names and nicknames, clothes and jewels, gesturing, words, and expressions which echo a worn-out ethnicism typical of the eighties’ fading multiculturalism. In 1994, W.J.T. Mitchell also depicted the ghetto as riddled with a dominant self-referential symbolism, proudly celebrated by black culture alone and manifesting itself through an empty imitation of racial icons. He mentions athletes and artists belonging to a white-dominated system, whose performance, despite giving a sense of self-gratification, does not imply that such fame results in any real improvement for the black community as a whole (390-1). Seemingly, in Rebecca’s experience, self-recognition as a “brother” or “sister” revolves, above all, around a formal code. Observing the black communities in New York, Washington, and San Francisco, Rebecca realizes that there cannot be any real distinction between color, self-identification as black, and a codified daily performance. That is, there can be no incongruity between one’s *body* and one’s *ways*. In *BWJ*, appearance, language, movements, and discourses are organized in an inflexible way:

He starts to call me half-breed... because he says my white comes out... when I slip and say like every other word or when I ask him if he’s heard the last Police record, or if I analyze a movie for too long or with too much intensity. He tells me I sound like a white girl. He tells me that he forgets sometimes that I am not a real sister. He says this like he is joking, with a big bright white smile, but I don’t hear it as a joke. I hear it as territory I’m supposed to defend (268).

Obviously, this phenomenon entails a high degree of homogeneity and conformism, with very few characters showing a distinct individuality, and continuous imitation of ethnic archetypes resulting in the creation of a myth of authenticity. Thus, “the code” is not only an instrument of

integration for the subject, but also helps the members of a group, as it makes people “recognizable,” controllable, and safe:

I am well trained in not breaking the code, not saying something too white around black people, or too black around whites. It's easier to get quiet, aloof, removed than it is to slip and be made fun of for liking the wrong thing, talking the wrong way, being the wrong person, the half-breed oreo freak. At the booth, being unable to integrate my experiences into one relatively cohesive self that is flexible and unstudied and relaxed means that I am stiff and strained, nervous and sweating (271).

BWJ's color absolutism results in a complete loss of individuality (one's body, one's story, one's memory, and one's behaviors and attitudes), in favor of group perspectives.

Body Absolutism: A Feminist Matter

In *BWJ* self-perception is modeled on external judgment. Here, ethnicity (which affects the sphere of *cultural roots* and *self-identification*) is commingled with race (which is concerned with *prejudice* and *ascription*), and discourses on culture become inseparable from discourses on the body. In this section of the essay, I show how multiculturalism and Judith Butler's theories on gender approach the body/identity relationship, and then move on to introduce the concept of ethnic performance as a possible tool to deconstruct pentagonal logics.

The complex relationship between body and identity has always been central to the feminist debate, but since the publication of Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990, the terms in which it is discussed have changed radically. As is well known, Butler deconstructs the category of sex by asserting that every meaning attributed to bodily features is utterly conventional and arbitrary, since the body cannot be considered to *signify* anything in itself. As Butler notes, “the body’ is itself a construction. . . Bodies cannot be said to have a *signifiable* existence prior to the mark of their gender” (Butler 13). Released from all biological ties, gender, in Butler's view, is something that

people construct rather than inherit – a matter of *performance*, the reiterated and more or less conscious imitation of social models.

Diana Fuss observes that this phenomenon does not affect only the gender sphere:

Racial identity, like gender identity, is intimately inflected by – indeed, defined by – ideas about how the body signifies, and both operate in a contemporary social context that privileges certain kinds of bodies over others (48).

It is reasonable to suppose that Rebecca Walker was directly affected by Judith Butler's idea and that she makes use of a theoretical deconstructionist framework when she provides insights into her adolescence. From what emerges at a first reading of the book, late multiculturalism, with its celebration of differences, has come to treat skin color (or better, a white-centered, binary interpretation of color) the same way that Second Wave Feminism has treated sex (or better, the heterosexual binary interpretation of sex). Multiculturalism has conceived of color as a significant element, an objective point of reference for the categorization of human differences. As a consequence – as evidenced in the book – popular culture has produced the illusion of authentic, immutable ontological categories of being, distinguished only on the basis of those allegedly objective physical differences. Moreover, through the repetition of social practices of signification, the multicultural thinking has reiterated codified cultural interpretations, which ultimately appear authentic and inseparable from the body (Butler 176). Finally, as we can see in the following passage, it has also created the illusion of a close connection between color and culture:

I love... the way I feel close to Lisa and not alone, the way her toughness, how she always seems to know what she wants, makes it easier for me to lope along at her side, pretending to move in ways that come natural to her, to Lisa Green, a half-Spanish girl living with her mother and sisters in a run-down house in Hunter's Point, but not to me... From Lisa I learn to move like I know where I'm going, like I could be dangerous if talked to the wrong way, like I have brothers or uncles who would come out of nowhere to protect me if something should go down (159).

Breaking the essential link between body and identity means no longer thinking of ethnicity and color as categories of substance (Butler 27-28). Thus, if, on the one hand, Butler invokes the idea of performance as the only way of conceiving of such an undetermined, layered, and fragmentary concept as human identity, Hollinger, on the other hand, invokes the principle of free affiliation. Both authors reject the “biology-is-destiny formulation” (Butler 9) and, even though proceeding from different backgrounds and toward different ends, they both conclude that identity is a constructed concept having more to do with *doing* than *being*, a representation that could help undermine any bias and discrimination based on the body or biology.

Forms of Resistance to Body-is-Culture Determinism: Ethnic Performance and Free Affiliation

Walker's memoir develops a discourse that deconstructs the idea of a deterministic link between biology and color, demonstrating, in line with Butler, that color is – despite the alleged objectivity of the body – a construction, and not a signifying entity.

Growing up as a mixed-race individual, Rebecca develops a deep understanding of what it takes to be part of a system that places such an emphasis on color. Moreover, thanks to her heightened sensibility, she gradually learns to perceive hidden racial dynamics and understands how to follow the strict rules imposed by black and white “acting codes.” By the age of 16, she is already surprisingly capable of playing with these rules: when she is asked “What are you?” (207), a question that clearly entails a process of objectification, she answers: “I'm Spanish. Like from Spain” (208). In another passage, she affirms:

The Bronx... means walking around with my friends Sam and Jesús and Theresa and Melissa and being seen as I feel I truly am: a Puertorriqueña, a mulatta, breathed out with all that Spanish flavor. A girl of color, with attitude (200).

Now, Rebecca's genetic heritage ranges from white to black, from Eastern Europe to Africa, including her great-grandfather's native blood but,

paradoxically, the Latino component is missing. Therefore, when Rebecca chooses to self-identify as Latina, she is favoring skin factor over blood heritage. After all, for her, being Latina is only a matter of “attitude,” as she can benefit from the ambiguous signals sent by her body (almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, “caramel-colored” skin, etc.). Claiming Latina as her true nature also means demonstrating that there can be no identification without external acceptance; it is the Other who defines the Subject. Thus, identification and self-identification are solidly linked. Walker lies for integration purposes, but also with the purpose of constructing a certain consistency for herself between who she is and what she looks like. It is also interesting to observe that the Others (in this context, her friends) seem to perform their ethnic roles perfectly, conforming more or less to the ethno-racial outline of the collective imagination. In them, Walker finds the unity and harmony that she feels to be completely lacking in herself, and she consequently transforms her friends into objects of desire: she loves them, mirrors herself in them, and desires to be them, while also longing for physical contact in order to fill the void left by her negligent parents.

Sometimes, ethnicity is something she feels forced to perform, but at other times it is a voluntary, radical act of mystification. Through it, Rebecca enters the hidden architecture of social categories, she plays with them to reveal the flaws of a system that is too rigid, reductionist, and indifferent to the peculiarity of the individual. In describing the different ways she tries to conform to pre-existing ethno-racial patterns (that is, to look like a “real” black girl, white Jew, or Latina by imitating each group’s attitudes – by fitting into their norms), Walker displays various examples of performative acts, proving that social practices are also crucial when acceptance and recognition are at issue.

There is something paradoxical in the fact that, on the one hand, Walker recognizes a core ethnic authenticity that can be pursued by imitation, while on the other she realizes that the cultural process at the base of every categorical construction is – to use the words of gender theory – an “imitation of imitation.” Concerning gender performance, Judith Butler writes:

As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself. . . . gender identity must be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative

practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction (176).

Starting from Butler and Fanon, Diana Fuss refers to identification as the path that each individual must walk in order to reach his/her own identity. A Subject can achieve self-recognition only in relation with the Other. This view of identity is described as performative, because it consists in a process of alternated identifications and misidentifications, whereby the Subject, yearning to be like the Object, unconsciously imitates him/her. Therefore, Fuss does not consider one's search for identity as a linear path, but one that is mutable and often self-contradictory, a process that multiplies identities and makes them highly unstable:

Identifications are movable, elastic and volatile... open to the sway of fantasy, the meaning of a particular identification critically exceeds the limits of its social, historical and political determinations (8).

Seemingly, Rebecca claims her right to be undetermined, polyethnic, and performative when she affirms, "I am transitional space" (4). According to Namaste, the idea of identity as "a destroyable building" was brought to extremes in the nineties by the Queer movement, which called binary dialectics such as homosexuality/heterosexuality; inside/outside; normality/deviance; and centrality/marginality into question. The performative identity that is central to this view never opposes elements: it overlaps them (220-25) so that boundaries begin to fade and identities multiply until they are stratified and, finally, become hybrid.

This is the representation of the Self that we find in *BWJ*: it resembles a blurred Cubist painting, where the different, overlapping points of view that are represented are not clearly separated. The protagonist engages in a constant fight to find a balance between her body and her fragmented and indeterminate interior space. The result is – in Fuss's words – a "nomadic existence," that is, movement as a permanent condition with no final destination.

Walker provides the key for reading the book in the subtitle, where the expression "Shifting Self," which overcomes the ethno-racial aspects of the

title, suggests that constant physical and spiritual movement can (or must) be the way out of social constraints.

When she asserts the natural capacity of the human being to merge opposite categories and overcome arbitrary labels to elude social determinism, Walker also foregrounds the importance of empathy over blood ties. In fact, her idea of a multiple, dynamic identity culminates, at the end of the book, in a complete rejection of any community-centered discourse:

I stand with those who stand with me. I am tired of claiming for claiming's sake, hiding behind masks of culture, creed, religion. My blood is made from water and so it is bloodwater that I am made of, and so it is a constant empathic link with others which claims me, not only carefully drawn lines of relation. I exist somewhere between black and white, family and friend. I am flesh and blood, yes, but I am also ether (322).

This stress on the right to choose is in line with Hollinger's postethnic theory: "Postethnicity prefers voluntary to prescribed affiliations, appreciates multiple identities, pushes for communities of wide scope, recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as part of the normal life of a democratic society" (116). At the same time, Walker's position appears more concerned with the importance of distinguishing the different parts that compose her identity and more conscious of the pain that such a shift entails. Walker replaces blood (the symbol of the "old law," and of the "One Drop Rule" that once held non-white communities together in mutual exclusivity) with water, and racial community with empathy-based communities (Hollinger 2005).

Other points where Walker's stance seemingly converges with Hollinger's are provided by the fact that for both collective memory seems not to be a suitable cohesive force and by their particular emphasis on the creation of new communities. In the chapter about her graduation, Rebecca describes how she sits on the sofa between her silent parents and desperately tries to evoke memories of past times, when they were together, "making sense as a group and as an idea" (315), but all effort is fruitless. Thus, the negation of a reliable common past results in an *élan vital* toward the future: "I stand with those who stand with me" (322) sounds almost like a vindication and draws the reader's attention to a concept of identity that is ultimately based on affinity and common needs. Hollinger states:

The communities that are the primary sites for the formation of our identities, for the working out of our politics, and for the clarification of our moral and cognitive standards can have very different structures, shapes and purposes. These communities come into being under a great variety of circumstances, are perpetuated for many distinctive ends, and are driven by very different distributions of power. Determining who is “us” and who is “them” can be a very different matter from case to case depending on the kind of “we” at issue (105).

By using the water rather than blood metaphor, Walker extends this new community to humankind, at the vanguard of which she has positioned herself: a person of mixed race in the form of “ether” – incorporeal, inconsistent, changeable, performative, indefinable, and perhaps a bit lost in the “in-between” of existence. In the future perspective proposed at the end of the book, the author combines then individualism and a cosmopolitan spirit without denying the importance of ethnic differences.

The Limits of Walker's Discourse

In this last section, I examine the memoir from a literary point of view, as narratological analysis allows to get to the depths of this layered text, where the dynamics of the transition from “young Rebecca” to “Rebecca as woman and writer” emerge more clearly. Some stylistic ambiguities ultimately reveal that the maturation process which seems to be accomplished in the last chapters is, indeed, incomplete and that there are events with which the author/protagonist seems not to have come to terms. Thus, the question of overcoming racial structures through a rational deconstructive analysis clashes with the cultural imprints that these structures have left on a psychic level during her childhood. This discovery makes the memoir a more complex and labyrinthine text than it has been previously argued.

The book is constructed from two different narratives: one is from the point of view of the teen age, the other from that of adult Rebecca. Therefore, in childhood episodes, the prevailing feeling is fear for marginalization, and thus, as explained so far, her considerations about reality are totally subjected to pentagonal logics and to the quest for ethnoracial authenticity. On the other hand, in recent past episodes, she is

already a successful writer and self-confident activist, and she is thus able to deconstruct false identities and ready to embrace post-racial views and a political black identity – hence, there is a post-racial spirit pervading these chapters. Yet, even in her adult life, sometimes she catches herself physically overreacting, with sweat, shivering, etc., when she perceives racism in the air, and her overreaction is – she affirms – the evidence of “how memory works” beyond rationality, by drawing upon the sensations and fears inscribed in her body since childhood. What she seems to assert is that our body records and preserves the past that we try to rationalize and overcome. However, Walker’s narrative strategy is also to some extent problematic. As Rebecca both takes part in and reflects on events from her past and the present, and as she uses the present tense to describe both immediate sensations and wiser hindsight reflections, sometimes it is hard to distinguish when the author is affirming and when she is denying ethnoracial categorization of reality. In other words, young Rebecca filters reality through the very categories that the adult Rebecca wants to deconstruct, but the author, who should be the mediator between past and present, seems not to maintain sufficient emotional distance from the impressions she received during childhood. Therefore, this frequent reiteration of the power of ethno-racial categories (childhood episodes constitute almost all of the memoir) and the extraordinary expressive strength of young Rebecca’s voice, seem to impress the reader more than the adult Rebecca’s post-racial considerations do. This is a rhetorical move that ultimately produces disorientation.

Another example that supports the thesis of Walker’s ultimate uncertainty is in a chapter relating to Rebecca’s recent past, where, after a public lecture, the author has a discussion with the black mother of a mixed-race child. The woman is concerned about whether or not telling her daughter the truth about her father’s race is the right thing to do. Rebecca says:

She posits that black people are going to be the only ones who accept her daughter anyway, so why should she set her up for rejection by letting her think she’s related to whiteness? It takes all I’ve got not to scream “Because she is, whether they like it or not!”... People are going to question your daughter no matter what, I say. She may as well be armed and prepared to fight back with

what she *is*, rather than what those people *wish* she was. (291-92; emphasis in original text).

In contrast with what she has mentioned so far, the author shifts her discourse from the concreteness of *doing* to the ontology of *being*.⁶ She seems to talk about identity in terms of something you inherit (which binds you to the people in your family), or something that is attributed to you from the outside (which binds you to the people who share your skin color). She thus suggests that deconstructions do not work in the “real” world, where the subject is compelled to operate within the conventional system when “real” life is at stake.

My second concern is whether ethnic performance, as depicted in *BWJ*, serves as a universal and effective means against racial discrimination. What should appear as something natural is most often represented as stressful and unnatural. Rebecca may mock the system, but her conception of identity is too heavily influenced by external pressure. Hence, her performative practices cause her burning pain: “I watch myself try to will my body into some kind of normal posture, into some semblance of ease and comfort... I watch myself perform, shift, contort, sweat” (178). Furthermore, in spite of all the author’s claims, it is clear that a discourse on ethnicity cannot ignore the racial factor. Racism is, in fact, central to Rebecca’s story, which constantly shows how crossing the color line is not a suitable option for whoever is perceived as being black. In the book, we find many examples of racial bias preventing black people from behaving without restrictions. For example, when Rebecca takes part in a summer camp for Jewish teenagers (whom she perceives as being rich and spoiled), even though she is perfectly able to perform the role of a “JAP” (Jewish American Princess), she is told that she looks weird and is “intimidating” (181).

Although the discourse analyzed so far seems to be a straightforward defense of postethnic and pro-affiliation positions, I believe that, in this work, the author does not completely abandon the racial or ethnocentric logic that had characterized her adolescent worldview and which she hopes to deconstruct.

Conclusion

In *BWJ*, performativity seems to be proposed as a possible response of multiracial people to color absolutism and to the excessive strength of communitarian ethnic ties, an attempt that crashes against the impermeability of the white community's boundaries. Nevertheless, the perspective Walker offered in 2001 denotes a clear, steady impulse to overcome the triadic system of colored/white/mixed in favor of a more flexible, indefinite and cosmopolitan idea of human identity. Was the time ripe for change, then? Not yet, it seems.

Walker seems to support a postethnic view when she depicts a social context in which color counts for more than anything else, and when she describes the negative effects of the total conflation between color and culture that still takes place within racially-defined communities, and the black community in particular, after years of multiculturalism. Like Hollinger, she seems not to believe in blood-based communities, nor in the necessity to identify completely with the history of a people. She also calls for a future in which people are not defined by anything other than their subjectivity; where individuals need not utterly conform to one accepted behavior code in order to obtain membership within a group. In order to deconstruct the false mythology of ethnic authenticity and unmask the conventional, stereotypical character of multicultural categories, the author demonstrates that performance, when associated with an ambiguous, mixed-race body, can deceive the system. Thus, she expresses a certain need for estrangement from the traditional approach to ethnicity provided by current belief systems.

A fundamental ambiguity pervades the book, which is reinforced by the interplay, overlapping and conflict between the younger and older narrator's voices, and the occasional merging of their respective points of view. Therefore, for most of the book, the reader is never sure whether the author really intends to step out of that categorical system. On the one hand, Walker defends the idea of hybridity and performativity and refuses to accept any definition of bodily appearance offered until now. On the other hand, the ethnic performance she enacts remains a weak response to external racism because it is not supported by a strong, widely shared, conceptual basis for the indefinable characteristics of human identity.

The protagonist and author of *BWJ* ultimately provides a clear example of how a mixed-race perspective can lead America toward unmasking false authenticities and overcome the limits posed by multiculturalism. The text's ambiguity can therefore be read as representative of the needs and limits of a historical moment in American history, when the public was craving change, but perhaps they were not yet ready to accept its consequences.

Notes

¹ For the distinction between ethnicity and race, see: Hraba 27; Hollinger, *Postethnic America* 27, 33-37; Sollors 36-40.

² For further reading on the new cosmopolitanism, see Hollinger, Appadurai, Robbins, Appiah, Clifford, Waldron, Vertovec, Patell, and Gilroy.

³ Further references to the memoir, will be abbreviated as *BWJ*.

⁴ The stress on biology is crucial in American racial discourse and, in her memoir, young Rebecca and her friends seem to openly embrace this approach. Therefore, I will use expressions like "genetic inheritance" and "genetic make-up" in the paragraphs that refer to Rebecca's life as a teenager, in order to provide a description of a reality that is consistent with their former view. However, it is important to point out that Walker rejects this assumption – describing it as "my people construction" (306) – in her interventions as an adult, especially in the final chapters.

⁵ Rutherford, Jonathan. "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. 207-21.

⁶ It should be specified that Hollinger's postethnicism does not reject the existence of an ethnic identity per se, but instead allows it to become a choice, the result of a deliberate "act." I consider this concept very close to the idea of performance.

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