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Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction

one. The End of the Beginning of the Post-Soul Aesthetic

It's time. Clearly, it's time. As I begin this introduction, in the spring of 2006, landmark anniversaries press in on me from every side: 20 years ago, Greg Tate wrote "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke: the Return of the Black Aesthetic" for the *Village Voice* in the fall of 1986. And Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*—that totemic post-soul anthem—was released in the summer of 1986, as well. More personally, I first taught Trey Ellis's essay "The New Black Aesthetic" in 1991, 15 years ago, and I inaugurated my post-soul aesthetic course in the Spring semester of 1996—exactly 10 years ago. Over the course of those 20 years, I have obsessively observed this peculiar, post-Civil Rights movement aesthetic: inhaled and analyzed its various manifestos as they appeared in the early years, watched it on screens in darkened movie theaters, listened to it pounding out of my speakers, attended and sponsored its various readings, concerts, lectures, and symposia, gazed on it in galleries and museums and turned its pages from books—all the while debating its very existence with friends, students, and colleagues. Twenty years. And now it's time for African Americanists to weigh in, *en masse*.

Twenty years, it seems to me, is the proper scholarly distance from which scholars can and should begin in earnest to critique, explore, and seek to understand this aesthetic. It's time for African Americanists to construct—or, at least, begin the process of constructing—a more or less coherent critical conversation about the art of this "post" era. Editing this special issue is the latest in a series of steps I have taken toward attempting to establish a critical framework for the study of post-Civil Rights movement art in general and the post-soul aesthetic in particular.¹ After all, at this point, there is little consensus on anything regarding the fledgling scholarship on the era: names, for instance, range from "The New Black Aesthetic" to "postliberated" to "post-soul" to "post-black" to "NewBlack"—and beyond.² There is disagreement over whether the era should be restricted, as I believe it should be, to artists and writers who were born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement, and there is disagreement on when the era begins and whether or not it has ended (regrettably, some scholars already see sub-generational breaks such as the post-post-soul, for instance).³ The primary reason I sought to participate in this special issue on the post-soul aesthetic (which is, obviously, my own preferred term) was in the hope that some of these issues might begin to be addressed, implicitly if not explicit-

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ly. If this special number issue moves us closer to critical understanding, if it clears some critical space within which we can argue about the post-soul aesthetic (PSA) in ways that are more clearly defined than they have been up to now, I will consider the effort a success.

Obviously, though, with all this scholarly disagreement, when I say "It's time," it is not as if we are beginning from a standing start. Commentary on the PSA began, as I suggest above, with Tate's stage-whisper of an article in the *Voice*, and then emerged with Ellis's full-throated essay, "The New Black Aesthetic." Ellis has referred to his essay as "much maligned," and I would say he is not too far off in that description (Senna and Wazow 21). But the essay is also extremely valuable in that it provides a jumping-off point for discussion of the aesthetic. The term "seminal" often precedes references to "The New Black Aesthetic," and that is an appropriate description as well. Along with "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke," "The New Black Aesthetic" signaled the emergence of the aesthetic, identifying and loosely organizing it for interested parties, myself included. The essay is, however, at the same time confusing, diffuse, contradictory—and partisan. Both Ellis and Tate were eagerly trumpeting the arrival of this new aesthetic, and they were followed, chiefly, by Nelson George with his 1992 *Buppies, B-boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (the book that coined the term and that features an introduction less eager and more skeptical than Tate's and Ellis's essays). Along the way, David Nicholson wrote "Painting It Black: African American Artists, In Search of a New Aesthetic," in the book section of the *Washington Post* in 1989; Terry McMillan wrote of a "new breed, free to write as we please, in part because of our predecessors, and because of the way life has changed" (xx) in her introduction to *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction* (1990); Paul Beatty wrote the hilarious "What set you from, fool?" in *Next* (1992); and Lisa Jones contributed *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex and Hair* in 1994. Each of these articulations, in one way or another, announce the discovery of an artistic "break," of post-Civil Rights movement artistic difference. More recent statements such as Kevin Powell's introduction to *Step into a World* (2000) and Thelma Golden's "post-black" introduction to the *Freestyle* catalogue to the 2001 Studio Museum in Harlem exhibition are interesting and provocative, but they essentially do the same work as earlier statements: they introduce this "new" aesthetic that, in the latter cases, had been revealed some years before.

My sense is that with this 20-years-later moment, when more PSA texts are among us than ever before,⁴ we have reached the end of the beginning of this post-soul aesthetic, if for no other reason than the "introductions" seem to have stopped. And yet, while this 20-years-in assessment does allow for some perspective, by no means does it mark any sort of sub-break or -shift—nor does the arrival of a succeeding generation of post-Civil Rights movement black artists (particularly since the "under thirty only" [234], "new black artists" Trey Ellis describes in his "New Black Aesthetic" essay are currently staring 50 years old in the face). There has been no fundamental, sociocultural paradigm shift akin to the Civil Rights movement to alter the post-soul aesthetic focus. The post-integration experiences today's twentysomething PSA artists endure as they mature into adulthood—as they negotiate contemporary America's confused and complicated racial terrain—are not at all different from the inaugural generation of PSA artists' experiences, and the resultant art of the present day reflects that similarity. The themes discussed in Touré's *The Portable Promised Land* (2002) and *Soul City* (2004) are not that far from Darius James's *Negrophobia* (1992) or Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996); Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* (2005) is not radically different from Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998). Surely, explicit critiques of the Black Arts Movement will likely fade over time (as these

newer-generation artists' connection to the BAM is through grandparents rather than parents or older siblings), but the core issues that PSA artists address—the peculiar pains, pleasures, and problems of race in the post-Civil Rights movement United States; the use of nontraditionally black cultural influences in their work; and the resultant exploration of the boundaries of blackness—these issues will remain as long as there are discrete cultural categories such as “black” and “white” and as long as there are Americans who live their lives believing separate and distinct cultural practices can be assigned to each. For there, in the unstable, wobbly interstices of those two categories, is where the post-soul aesthetic lives.

two.

Blaxploration, Free-Style: Towards an Identifiable Post-Soul Aesthetic

Our role, then, as interested scholars of African American cultures, is to examine, explore, and explain these PSA artists and texts. To accomplish that goal I have, over the years, developed a critical apparatus for reading post-soul aesthetic art. But first, a definition: the term “post-soul,” as I understand it, generally refers to art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement. I limit the post-soul aesthetic to artists or writers of the post-Civil Rights movement generation for one crucial reason: these artists were not adults during the civil rights movement. Mark Anthony Neal, in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, sums it up this way: “the generations(s) of black youth born after the early successes of the traditional civil rights movement are in fact divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes and thus positioned to critically engage the movement’s legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing” (103). Many post-soul writers critique the events or mindset of the Civil Rights movement in their fictions, and I believe it is important to this sense of African Americans’ being “post” that these artists have no lived, adult experience with that movement.

The overriding question that students of the PSA find so compelling is this: how are African American artists who were born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement responding to the sociocultural realities of this “post” era? Or, to put it another way, *What type* of art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement constitutes a post-soul aesthetic? An aesthetic needs identifying features, or else it cannot credibly be grouped in the first place. It needs some form of thematic continuity, if not some sort of loose, formal coherence. Some brackets, some “shorelines” need to be placed around this ocean-wide post-soul aesthetic, even though it is understandable and even admirable that Ellis and Tate made such a concerted attempt to keep post-soul waves from crashing on any specific shore.

Each apparently thought description more vital than prescription. Their manifestos are far more in the tradition of Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), in which Hughes explains to his *Nation* readership what Harlem Renaissance artists are up to, than, say, Richard Wright’s 1937 “Blueprint for Negro Writing” or Larry Neal’s “The Black Arts Movement” (1968). Both of the latter essays direct the black artist as to how—and about what—black art should be created. To the contrary, Ellis remembers thinking, “Well, I’ll be damned” upon *discovering* Vernon Reid playing “funked-out heavy metal” at New York’s CBGB in the mid-1980s (“New Black Aesthetic” 242).

Ellis's "New Black Aesthetic" essay uses the phrase, "What I'm noticing most nowadays . . ." (243); it does not insist what the PSA must entail. Tate, for his part, is also pointedly, tellingly descriptive as he notices that "black artists have opened up the entire 'text of blackness' for fun and games" (200), and that "the present generation of black artists is cross-breeding aesthetic references like nobody is even talking about yet" (207). Less didactic scolds dictating aesthetic preferences to a generation of black artists, Ellis and Tate are more like cultural reporters who share with their readers what they see black artists doing in the

Though they do not articulate a singular, coherent argument, post-soul blaxploitation artists maintain dogged allegiance to their communities, however non-essentialized that allegiance might be.

era Tate refers to as "postliberated" (200).

So, yes, it is completely understandable why neither Tate nor Ellis—nor any other of the cultural reporters who, early on, spread the word about this bourgeoning, apparently self-starting aesthetic—wanted to limit it in any way; doing so would sound a bit too much like the Black Aestheticians' efforts to define a restrictive Black Aesthetic in the '60s. As Lisa Jones, in *Bulletproof Diva*, puts it, "There was talk in 1986 of the arrival of a new way of looking at the world by young black artists," an aesthetic that was

described as being wide enough to contain everything from Spike Lee's Hollywood-financed dramedies, to Lorna Simpson's photo-text and its landscape of female symbols, to the revamping of the classics by Armani-clad jazzbos who had no use for the avant-garde [sic], to hip-hop's deification of Malcolm. It was said to embrace, among other things, irreverence, profit-making, an elastic view of "black" art, ideas of integration and nationalism, a yen for tradition (or at least the apparel), and the usual questions about who we are and where is our home. (134)

As Ellis puts it in his "Response to NBA Critiques": "It is important to remember that the New Black Aesthetic I try to define is really an anti-aesthetic that defies definition. The NBA is an attitude of liberalism rather than a restrictive code" (251). Central to the post-soul aesthetic is the idea that no one—no white establishment, no black identity police, and, certainly, no peer pressure—can limit the imagination of the black artist. Golden, in the significantly titled "Freestyle" catalog, muses about post-Civil Rights movement black artistic freedom as a "post-black" phenomenon:

"Post-black" was shorthand for post-black art, which was shorthand for a discourse that could fill volumes. For me, to approach a conversation about "black art," ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time. . . . It was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as "black" artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness. (14)

This tension makes the post-soul aesthetic an intriguing subgenre of African American art. This short quotation from Golden's *Freestyle* catalogue makes the conundrum evident: Golden asserts that these artists dislike their art being labeled "black," even though both they and their subject matter center on just that. These artists regard any sort of labeling—let alone the inherent labeling involved in defining an aesthetic—as severely limiting the freedom they demand. Ultimately, however, the net effect, intentional or not, of the reluctance to offer any sort of "restrictive code" for this "post" generation's black art is to

somehow suggest that *anything* a black artist who was born or came of age in this post-Civil Rights movement era creates is post-soul. And that is a problem. An observer should be able to recognize participants in an aesthetic, even an aesthetic that takes its vastness and unpredictability as a point of pride.

So what follows is what I believe constitutes, nevertheless, a credible post-soul aesthetic context. By no means, however, do I assert that each post-soul text *must* contain *each* of these criteria to belong. A text might contain all, or some, or one of them. It might contain a combination, or it might not. These tenets are not designed specifically to exclude artists and their texts, even though I know that any criteria I erect will inevitably produce that result. At any rate, I see the post-soul aesthetic existing in the form of a “matrix,” a “web,” or a “net.” The idea is that this interpretive “net” could be hung on the following points, as if they are hooks, and that whenever a post-Civil Rights movement text is “thrown” at this post-soul matrix, said text will either *stick* where the text “fits,” or, based on the post-soul criteria I discuss below, said text will “bounce off” the net because it *does not* “fit,” because it has no place in the post-soul aesthetic. Post-soul texts will certainly not be “required” to have a certain number of the following precepts; that sort of uncompromisingly prescriptive language does not belong in a discussion of an aesthetic based on an ideal of artistic freedom. But if for no other reason than identification purposes, post-soul art will, indeed, have to “stick” somewhere in the post-soul matrix to be credibly seen as post-soul. The three “points” of my triangular post-soul matrix are the cultural mulatto archetype; the execution of an exploration of blackness; and, lastly, the signal allusion-disruption gestures that many of these texts perform.

First, post-soul artists often grapple with the “cultural mulatto” archetype. Here is Ellis’s definition in “The New Black Aesthetic”:

Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing crop of cultural mulattoes that fuels the NBA. We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. The culturally mulatto *Cosby* girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother. Neither side of the tracks should forget that. (235)

While Ellis’s unabashed enthusiasm for his conception of the cultural mulatto is understandable, Ellis’s upbeat view of this post-Civil Rights movement era must be balanced with Reginald McKnight’s use of the term “cultural mulatto” in his short story “The Honey Boys,” published a year before Ellis’s essay. The story concerns the fledgling friendship between two Colorado Springs high school boys, one a boorish white outcast, the other a thoughtful, rootless black teen who has recently moved to the area. At one point, McKnight’s black character considers talking to his friend about why he converted to Judaism:

I wanted to tell him how it gave me roots in a way that my blackness could not. Black was nothing more than a color to me. I was a cultural mulatto. Born and raised without the benefit of Watts chop shops, Motown street corners, or deepdown Smithville fishing holes and Chinaberry trees, I was only as black as derision or casual observation would carry. My color was a nuisance. I was too black to be white, too white to be black. For the first few years of my conversion I had a sense of self I’d never known before. And the derision hardly mattered at all. (86)

McKnight’s literary photograph of the “cultural mulatto” seems to have had no flashbulb: it is a much darker portrait of this post-Civil Rights movement phenomenon than Ellis’s. As Madhu Dubey writes in *The Black Scholar*, “For McKnight, ‘mulatto’ signifies the tragic plight of ‘victims’ of the Civil Rights movement, caught between two worlds and burdened by anxieties about their racially ambivalent status” (11). Ellis, on the other hand, embraces the healthy,

self-aware cultural mulatto who could be typified by Jones, the daughter, coincidentally enough, of LeRoi Jones, now known as Amiri Baraka.

In *Bulletproof Diva*, Jones employs the phrase “difference as pleasure.” Not, she explains, “as something feared or exotic, but difference as one of the rich facts of one’s life, a truism that gives you more data, more power, and more flavor” (33). Jones articulates a critically-informed stance that is, indeed, shared by other artists and writers of the post-soul aesthetic. Certainly, not all post-soul artists possess biracial identities like Jones’s, but many do self-consciously adopt a view toward African American cultures much like the one Jones describes in *Bulletproof Diva*. As she puts it, “By claiming African-American and black, I also inherit a right to ask questions about what this identity means. And chances are this identity will never be static, which is fine by me” (31). If there is one idea that appears to define the post-soul aesthetic, this one is it. A hybrid, fluid, elastic, cultural mulattoesque sense of black identity marks the work of many post-soul artists. And yet, as McKnight makes clear—and he is by no means alone—there are also post-soul artists whose “questions” do not necessarily flow from a “difference as pleasure” perspective. Of course, all African Americans are, to one extent or another, naturalized “cultural mulattos,” as are all white Americans, and any other Americans, of any race or ethnicity, who grew up in this country. But these artists—and their characters, their music, their filmic and painterly representations—are consciously crossing the traditionally separated racial lines in US popular culture in a way that, although it did indeed exist, was either unlikely or unseemly in earlier black artistic eras.

I see the *cultural mulatto* archetype, then, in all its messy, hazy, difficult manifestations, as one crucial “point” in the triangular post-soul matrix. But merely identifying authors—and their characters—as cultural mulattos does not go nearly far enough. The question becomes, then, what do these cultural mulattos do? What is their cultural work? These artists and texts trouble blackness, they worry blackness; they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity. Still, from my vantage point, this “troubling” of blackness by post-soul writers is ultimately done in service to black people. I am consciously signifyin(g) on black films of the ’70s that were referred to as “blaxploitation” when I refer to these novels and films and music and art as “blaxploration” texts. These artists do not have a singular, coherent political stance from which to articulate a specific political argument, but post-soul “blaxploration” acts as much on behalf of black people as traditional explorers acted on behalf of whatever nation or people they represented. As such, these post-soul artists maintain a dogged allegiance to their communities, however non-essentialized and gorged with critiques said allegiance might be. This bedrock connection with community on the part of most post-soul artists, given their stance on personal artistic freedom, sustains into the twenty-first century an argument about black artistic freedom, one I will address in more depth below, which lasted throughout the twentieth century.

Before I address ways that these artists execute their explorations, let me underscore the various dimensions to the idea of “troubling” blackness. Some artists provoke with particularly edgy and confrontational art, others explore in far less noisy ways, but, indeed, the core of what post-soul novelists do—and a second “point” of the post-soul matrix I am proposing—is *blaxploration*, or the propensity to trouble blackness. Trey Ellis’s third novel *Right Here, Right Now*, like his first, *Platitudes*, interrogates the idea of a fixed black identity in its very structure. *Right Here, Right Now* is, of course, written by a black man. But in the

fictional world of the novel, the narrative is an edited collection of transcripts of the culturally mulatto central character, Ashton Robinson, obsessively talking into a micro-cassette recorder. And that collection of transcriptions is edited by a white man. This unnamed white editor, who frames the narrative with an introduction and “appears” throughout the text with periodic bracketed editorial explanations and pointed, authoritarian footnotes, is squished in-between the black novelist and the black narrator in a way that, again, question the very idea of black authenticity. *Is this Ashton Robinson’s narrative? Or is it the editor’s self-conscious, skeptical construction of Robinson’s narrative?* If a black vernacular, Africanist foundation undergirds the novel—and it does—does it exist in spite of the editor? or solely because of Ashton Robinson’s experiences? The editor selects no more than 40 tapes from a total of “135 microcassette tapes, logged and labeled” (8), so the musings of this black narrator are effectively *mediated* through the editor’s frame. Ellis, with this post-soul blaxplorative gesture, appears to adopt this narrative structure to complicate and destabilize concrete racist assumptions on the part of his readership: the narrative structure of *Right Here, Right Now* implicitly questions Robinson’s “black” identity.

For another example, in Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, an intriguing set of sentences appear in the last paragraph of the 413-page novel: “One face toward the back of the bus caught my eye, and I halted in my tracks, catching my breath. It was a cinnamon-skinned girl with her hair in braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl, and she was watching me from behind the dirty glass” (413). On its own, free from a specific context, the phrase “black like me, a mixed girl,” would seem unintelligible, as the traditional US cultural assumptions that accompany the word *black* would seem to oppose the traditional US cultural assumptions that accompany the word *mixed* in the same sentence. But *Caucasia*, for 413 pages, takes blackness on a journey, “passing” through different cities and spaces and identities. As we meet other cultural mulattoes like the protagonist’s sister Cole, or Stuart Langley, or the tragic cultural/mulatto Samantha Taper, the novel cracks open binary assumptions about blackness and explores it in ways that, ultimately, culminate with our readerly understanding of that curious phrase, “black like me, a mixed girl.”

Explicit post-soul blaxploration argues that blackness is constantly in flux, and in that way the post-soul aesthetic “responds” to the 1960’s “call” for a fixed, iron-clad black aesthetic. Perhaps it is not surprising that artists who trouble blackness often, but not always, do so with characters who could be considered cultural mulattos.

How do these artists accomplish this blaxploration? They execute a trope that I refer to as an *allusion-disruption* strategy. At more than one point in *Bulletproof Diva*, Jones seems to deploy this strategy, one that I see operative in many post-soul aesthetic texts. Back in the late ‘60s, Jones writes, she would stay, along with her cousins, at the Jersey shore with her Aunt Cora. “Every morning us recruits fell in line for inspection by Sergeant Cora,” writes Jones. “The day began with her marching orders: ‘Look alive, *tafadali!*’ By using the Swahili word for ‘please’ in such a context,” Jones suggests, “my aunt both endorsed and poked fun at the nationalism of the day” (24). In another essay, Jones refers to interracial couples as “‘Debbies curled up with Sam,’ [in order] to allude to the lady-stud legend that burdens them and, at the same time, to pry it apart” (30).

The chief, but by no means only, target for post-soul allusion-disruption gestures is the Black Power movement. As Jones put it early in Ellis’s “New Black Aesthetic” essay, “the works and protests of the nationalists ‘made us possible.’” She continues, “Though we make fun of them, if it wasn’t for . . . Larry Neal and my father, we wouldn’t have the freedom now to be so nonchalant” (236-27). And while that is likely true, part of what accomplishes post-soul blaxploration

is, indeed, the way these writers “make fun” of their nationalist elders in ways that demonstrate allusion-disruption strategies. For example, in *Caucasia*, the protagonist, a young girl named Birdie Lee, the daughter of a black father and a white mother in the setting of the mid-to-late 1970s, goes on a long journey in which she tries on various identities in pursuit of some form of emotional equilibrium. Early in the novel she rides in a car with her father, Deck, and a black friend of his named Ronnie. “My father always spoke differently around Ronnie,” narrates Birdie. “He would switch into slang, peppering his sentences with words like ‘cat’ and ‘man’ and ‘cool.’ Whenever my mother heard him talking that way, she would laugh and say it was his ‘jive turkey act.’ In the past year, he had discovered Black Pride (just a few years later than everybody else), and my mother said he was trying to purge himself of his ‘honkified past’ ” (10). As they continue to ride, Deck grumbles about his sister’s interracial relationships, saying, “She sleeps with these white boys, then acts surprised when they don’t take her home for dinner. I told her, these ofays just want their thirty minutes of difference.” When Birdie, “without really thinking” about it, “pipe[s] from the backseat, ‘Isn’t Mum ofay?,’ ” Deck “threw [her] a sharp look. ‘Yeah, but that’s different.’ ” “How?” Birdie asks. Just then Ronnie makes a joke about Birdie’s relentless inquisitiveness. Deck laughs, and forgets to answer Birdie’s question (10-11). This scene, from early in *Caucasia*, is exactly the sort of lingering question—purposely left unanswered—that post-soul writers are both asking about (and of) the previous generation and pondering about their own.

Allusion-disruption moments, the third “point” in this post-soul matrix, emerge with regularity in post-soul aesthetic texts. Many of these texts signify on Black Power and the Civil Rights movement, but other post-soul texts signify on earlier eras in African American history as well. Paul Beatty’s novel *The White Boy Shuffle* has an extended early section in which one of his central character’s ancestors runs away *into* slavery. Colson Whitehead’s *John Henry Days* compares a cultural mulatto protagonist to the folkloric legend John Henry, and in the process asks difficult questions about heroism in this post-Civil Rights movement era. Through the allusion-disruption process, post-soul authors use characters that I read as cultural mulattos to trouble blackness, to oppose reductive iterations of blackness in ways that mark this post-Civil Rights movement African American literary subgenre as compellingly different from those of earlier literary periods.

Now, stop here, if you will, and carefully read that last clause again: “this post-Civil Rights movement African American literary subgenre [i]s compellingly different from those of earlier literary periods.” I can almost *hear* synapses firing in the brains of some of my readers, as you demand: “What’s *new* . . . about *this*?”

three.

Dr. Jerry Ward, Reporting from Cyberspace

It’s a fair question. And I addressed it, along with several other fair and wonderful questions in an electronic conversation with one Jerry W. Ward, Jr., eminent professor of English and African World Studies at Dillard University. For while it is, indeed, high time for the post-soul aesthetic to emerge as a legitimate subject of inquiry for African Americanists, there are . . . “issues” attendant to that emergence. In late April of 2005, an e-mail from Dr. Ward appeared in my “in”-box:

Dear Professor Ashe:

Given that I am now pondering some very difficult issues in African American literary historiography, the AAR "special issue on the post-soul aesthetic to be published in 2007" may be noteworthy for what it will illustrate about affixing "post" to multiple cultural forms and processes. My thinking is influenced by Kwame Appiah's brilliant critique of the "post" in Chapter Seven of *In My Father's House* (1992). Does the word "soul," which is usually associated in African American cultural discourses with "music," "food," "man," "brother," and "sister," mean something very different when it is associated with "aesthetic"? . . . Is a "Soul aesthetic" different in form or degree from a "Black aesthetic"? Does one represent opposition to cultural hegemony and the other an embrace of the hegemony of commodities? I raise these questions because the working definition in the call for papers was tantalizing but not enlightening. I would greatly appreciate knowing what meaning(s) of "Soul" you have in mind when one is discussing literature rather than all forms of culture.

Sincerely,
Jerry W. Ward, Jr.
Professor of English and African World Studies
Dillard University

Excellent questions, all. To some, *soul* describes the African American cultural environment that produced the 1960's-70's Black Aesthetic/Black Arts Movement, the era when the term became prominent. Personally, I take a rather more expansive view. The generation of black artists and writers who were born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement were born or raised into a far more complicated African American milieu than earlier generations—at least in terms of the way blackness was addressed and practiced. *Soul*, for me, refers to a centuries-old, historical black tradition that post-soul artists somehow both extend and staunchly critique. As Robin D. G. Kelley wrote about the 1990s, "it was the age of diversity within black politics, representations, sexualities; the age when NBA referred to basketball and the New Black Aesthetic; the age of black snap queens and Clarence Thomas. . . . It was an age when intellectuals and artists really exploded the cultural straitjacket that blackness had been in the past" (9).

So yes, then, for me "soul," encompasses a set of traditional black expectations that have been, since long before the 1960s, "associated in African American cultural discourses with 'music,' 'food,' 'man,' 'brother,' and 'sister,'" as Professor Ward puts it. But the post-soul aesthetic explores and addresses a set of *non*traditional black expectations on the part of the generation(s) who are now aging into their maturity. (The aesthetic tension between Dewayne Wellington and Isshee Ayam in Trey Ellis's *Platitudes*—and, in particular, the cultural preferences that Earle Tyner and Dorothy Lamont, Dewayne's central characters, displays within the novel—are good examples of just the sort of non-traditional cultural practices I mean here.)

I said as much in my return e-mail to Professor Ward, to which he responded:

Post-soul discourse directs attention to multiple items of culture, presenting the literary historian with the hard task of identifying how literature exists in the bricolage. At the moment, I am focusing on what is problematic in describing a late 20th-century literary period, a gesture that forces me to hold at some distance the possibility that social construction questions and deconstructs the very idea of "period." I agree with your suggestion [stated in the "Foreword" to *Platitudes*] about "a fundamental break between *Platitudes*, which appeared in 1988 and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s" (ix). Clearly some rupture involving assumptions, attitudes, and purposes occurred in concert with other cultural and political changes. We have a moment of ideological change, and I have to make some definite choice in writing about its location in history. In this regard, I think you and I might agree to disagree about the matter of naming.

For you, post-soul literature is that which “explores and addresses a set of *non-traditional* black expectations” and thereby, it may be fair to say, constitutes itself as a non-traditional cultural practice. In opposition, I see that same body of literature as one that continues and increases the ambiguities of *non-traditional expectations* already addressed in the work of Adrienne Kennedy and Clarence Major. For me, it is convergent (in the sense of globalization) and in the tradition of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s declaring the “myth” of a Negro literature. Given my intention to find language that can embrace the diverse literary works of a given time period, a language that does not privilege the “urban,” I have some reservations about accepting the term “post-soul.” It strikes me as language that is valid for cultural description but of limited value in trying to establish literary order.

While Professor Ward and I did “agree to disagree” about naming, it does seem to me that one of the advantages of, say, referring to the period beginning around the 1920s through roughly 1940 as the “Harlem Renaissance” is that everyone, by now, accepts those rough dates, and when one invokes the words “Harlem Renaissance,” informed readers immediately understand the reference, and even though some skeptics often place a “so-called” before the term, and others like to argue about when it began and ended, having an actual name for that period, disputed though it might be, seems extremely useful to me.

The reason naming is so difficult in this instance is that there is no organized or even loosely organized “movement” that collects these post-Civil Rights movement artists and places them under any sort of overtly political banner, let alone emancipatory banner. Correspondence from Langston Hughes to Wallace Thurman, for example, and between other writers and artists of that era did, on occasion, use the term “Negro Renaissance” to describe themselves, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, sometimes not.⁵ The term “New Negro” was also common during that period. And in the 1960s, the BAM was joined at the hip to the Black Power movement. Those were different times, times that demanded a certain amount of coherence, even as black artists within those times disagreed with each other about what constituted a black aesthetic.

Ward makes a very useful point in noting that Clarence Major and Adrienne Kennedy were doing work that seems somewhat similar to the post-soul aesthetic. We could add people like Fran Ross and Ishmael Reed. We could go back further than that: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.⁶ Or we could talk about contemporary African American literature, in which texts by veteran novelists such as Charles Johnson (*Oxherding Tale*) or Toni Morrison (*Tar Baby*) might well be said to extend what Major and Kennedy were doing. (I think it instructive that Trey Ellis’s novels and Paul Beatty’s poetry and Darius James’s work has often been blurbed by Major and/or Reed, suggesting a more or less direct lineage). Moreover, black texts before and through the Civil Rights movement did, of course, explore blackness. Frederick Douglass did so as early as his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, when he wrote poignantly of no longer being “within the circle” of blackness on the plantation (29). Charles Chesnutt did something similar with his Uncle Julius character’s complicated relationship with blackness. Helga Crane, in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, evinces both biraciality and biculturalness in ways familiar to students of the post-soul aesthetic. Certainly, blaxploration has always been a part of African American thought in one way or another.

No, I would not begin to suggest that the writers I call “post-soul” are doing something completely, startlingly new, something unprecedented. Where Professor Ward and I disagree, I suppose, is about the import of that very “social construction” he refers to above. That context matters, vitally matters, to me. Artists create art with and against the times in which they live. I am not suggesting that the contemporary contexts should overly determine the ways we view

the resulting texts, but they do matter. And the chief difference between the Civil Rights movement and earlier and this post-Civil Rights movement era is the black artists' relationship to the idea of freedom. When Ward ruminates on "some rupture involving assumptions, attitudes, and purposes occur[ing] in concert with other cultural and political changes," my response is that differing conceptions of freedom is at the core of such a rupture. Many would argue, with justification, that we are still not yet "free" — that we are not even close. But a chief landmark was obtained postbellum: we gained freedom over our bodies. Other landmarks occurred with *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And the struggles during the movement era, violent and nonviolent, during which many lives were affected or lost, created the ambiguous, legally-free, land of quasi-opportunity that is the US today. The writers of the nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries did, indeed, explore aspects of black identity that are familiar to the PSA. But their ideological bottom line—or the ideological interpretive context often thrust on them—was the African American struggle for freedom. As a result, today's black artists, who have grown up in this squishy, hazy, post-Civil Rights movement era of sometimes-real, sometimes-imagined freedom, are exploring blackness from within contexts markedly different from their forebears'.

There is palpable tension between freedom—as artists—and the struggle for freedom—as black people. That tension has been expressed by leading black theorists in a series of call-and-response statements lasting for much of the twentieth century.⁷ Standing on the shoulders of these theorists, Greg Tate and Trey Ellis offered their own views on artistic freedom in their 1980's essays. In both writers' essays, the post-Civil Rights, post-struggle-for-freedom context loomed large. Ellis repeatedly talks about the freedom he and his PSA peers express in a series of repetitive clauses that appear throughout his essay: echoing Hughes in "The New Black Aesthetic," Ellis writes, "*We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black*" (235; italics added). On the same page, he writes, "*I now know that I'm not the only black person who sees the black aesthetic as much more than just Africa and jazz*" (234; italics added). Three pages later, he writes that post-soul artists "aren't flinching before they lift the hood on our collective psyches *now that they have liberated themselves from both white envy and self-hate*" (238; italics added). These are only three examples of a rhetorical strategy Ellis uses to discuss post-soul freedom throughout his essay. Ellis's rhetoric of personal liberation distinctly recalls Du Boisian double consciousness: for the balance of the twentieth century, double consciousness has informed aesthetic statements in one way or another; Ellis's and Tate's essays are no different, except that they seem to imply that this post-Civil Rights movement generation has somehow transcended double-consciousness. Their articulations of this aesthetic are no less than self-generated, black-on-black emancipation proclamations. As Tate writes in "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deaky": "These are artists for whom black consciousness and artistic freedom are not mutually exclusive but complementary, for whom 'black culture' signifies a multicultural tradition of expressive practices; they feel secure enough about black culture to claim art produced by nonblacks as part of their inheritance. No anxiety of influence here—these folks believe the cultural gene pool is for skinny-dipping" (207).

So I was intrigued when Professor Ward suggested that the term "post-soul" strikes him as "language that is valid for cultural description but of limited value in trying to establish literary order." Could he be saying that black literature progresses in a linear fashion, that the slave narratives begat novels, that the Harlem Renaissance writers rebelled against the plantation tradition or Victorian aspects of, say, Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar or Frances Harper and

Pauline Hopkins, and that the Richard Wright/James Baldwin/Ralph Ellison/Gwendolyn Brooks social protest school scowled at the Harlem Renaissance, and that the BAM attempted to squash the social protest crowd?⁸

If so, I am with him, but I see two complications. One, there have been and will always be texts that exist “out of time,” if you will; there are always exceptions to the prevailing literary convention of the day. Maybe that reality disturbs Ward’s quest for literary order, maybe not. But the deeper issue seems to be finding “language that can embrace the diverse literary works of a given time period” when that period does not conform in lockstep, as did virtually every previous black literary “period,” to a quest for black freedom, whether it is slave narratives that speak to literal corporeal freedom, or Harlem Renaissance literature that implicitly attempts to demonstrate that blacks are human and worthy of equal treatment, or the social protesters trying to gain freedom by trying to make the “white man listen,” through the BAM revolutionary freedom movement. Through it all, the struggle for freedom was the constant, and that constant, it seems to me, is no longer (the) constant.

four. “School”’s Open

I eventually met up with Jerry Ward—over lunch in Boston during the 2005 annual convention of the American Literature Association. Nothing much more than the above emerged; we agreed where we agreed and we agreed to disagree where we did not. For me, I was happy enough to break bread and discuss issues I care deeply about with an elder statesman of African American letters, even as I recognize that there is, understandably and inevitably, a certain amount of older-generational resistance to this aesthetic as well as, perhaps, resistance to the study of this aesthetic. Jerry, for his part, was both gracious and graceful as he made his points; no one who has ever met him would presume otherwise.

As for the post-soul aesthetic itself? It is a school. And it is the signal artistic and literary school that has gained currency since the Civil Rights movement. Certainly, scattered texts exist that were published before this “post” era that vaguely or distinctly resemble post-soul aesthetic texts, but it seems to me there is a reason these artists emerged in this post-Civil Rights movement era. I hope the development of fluid-yet-distinct conventions will assist African Americanists in identifying and comparing and talking about these texts—as a school—in all their complicated, wide-ranging, messy glory. My conception of the above post-soul matrix, then, ultimately suggests that to be identified as “post-soul” an artist who was born or came of age after the post-Civil Rights movement will have produced a text or body of work that grapples with the cultural mulatto archetype, and/or executed signal “blaxploration,” and/or employed allusion-disruption strategies to achieve a “troubling” of blackness.

My hope is that my post-soul matrix will allow the PSA to avoid criticisms of the sort that Eric Lott leveled at “The New Black Aesthetic” when it was originally published in *Callaloo*. Lott called it “the false totalizing of a generation of intellectuals” (244). Tera Hunter, also in *Callaloo*, was “hard-pressed to discern, for example, what esthetic values and commitments” artists such as “Eddie Murphy and Wynton Marsalis share in common” (247). Similarly, William M. Banks, in *Black Intellectuals*, argued that “the artists whom Ellis identified as purveyors of the New Black Aesthetic . . . displayed no common theme or set of artistic values” (219). Lott, Hunter, and Banks each have legitimate concerns,

and I hope that my elaboration on the “common theme” and “artistic values” of the PSA helps clarify these issues. I hope as well that the essays in this special issue of *African American Review* contribute to an understanding of this aesthetic. Ultimately, in my conception of the post-soul aesthetic, it holds true that one must have been born or come of age in the post-Civil Rights movement era, but that only *qualifies* one to be a post-soul artist—it does not automatically *make* an artist’s work post-soul. Now, I am not so naïve as to think that this set of post-soul aesthetic criteria will cause criticisms such as Lott’s, Hunter’s, and Banks’s to disappear completely; on the contrary, I am certain that additional, ideally constructive, criticisms will sprout—as well they should—but my expectation is that said criticisms will be based on what can now be seen as a tangible post-soul sensibility, however wide and varied it will, no doubt, continue to be.

I would like to thank La Vinia Jennings, Darryl Dickson-Carr, and Daphne Brooks for their input in this essay. I offer special, heartfelt thanks to Joycelyn Moody for her grace and understanding during a difficult time.

Notes

1. “Steps” include organizing “Post-Soul Satire: A Symposium on the Fiction of Paul Beatty, Trey Ellis, and Darius James” at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, 6-7 Apr. 2001; inaugurating the *Platitudes* Back-in-Print Project, which lead to the Northeastern Library of Black Literature edition of Ellis’s novel in 2003; and serving as respondent to the “New Black Aesthetic: Cultural Mulatto” panel at the MLA Annual Convention, Washington, DC, 27-30 Dec. 2005.

2. For information on “The New Black Aesthetic,” see Ellis (“The New Black Aesthetic,” *passim*); for “postliberated,” see Tate 200; for “post-soul,” see George (*passim*) and Neal (*Soul Babies*, *passim*); for “post-black,” see Golden 14-15; for “NewBlack,” see Neal (“The Birth of NewBlackness” 122).

3. See Boyd’s “Real Niggaz Don’t Die: Generational Shifts in Contemporary Black Popular Culture” in *Am I Black Enough For You: Popular Culture from the ‘Hood and Beyond* (13-37); see also Ashe et al’s “These—Are—the ‘Breaks’: A Roundtable Discussion on Teaching the Post-Soul Aesthetic,” in which Mark Anthony Neal asserts, “For me, at some point, post-soul really didn’t encompass all the things that I wanted that break to represent. So when Thelma Golden began talking out loud about this notion of ‘post-black,’ that became helpful for me, but for me that’s actually the middle move. For me the thinking is to go from a ‘post-soul’ to a ‘post-black’ to what I term a ‘NewBlack’ ” (788).

4. Film: *Afro-Punk: the Rock n’ Roll Nigger Experience*; music: well, Afro-Punk itself—plus OutKast and Kanye West; art: Iona Rozeal Brown, Kehinde Wiley; literature: Touré, Emily Raboteau, Mat Johnson, among others.

5. See Langston Hughes, letter to Wallace Thurman, 29 July 1929, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

6. Ellison, Toomer, and James Weldon Johnson, *et al*, do, appropriately enough, have aspects of their fictions that reflexively, and at times explicitly, explore blackness. But one must be mindful of the historical and socio-cultural moments in which these texts were produced. While such authors might well have demonstrated an expansive view of blackness in their work, American culture was still quite brutally segregated, and that reality is also a part of their work. The post-soul aesthetic artist’s work is produced and exists at a time that reflects the complicated post-civil rights (un)reality in which we live.

7. Du Bois’s 1926 “Criteria of Negro Art” asserts about the black artist: “Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice . . . Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. . . I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (757). Langston Hughes, later that year, responds at the end of “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (1271)

Within five years, then, two starkly different views on artistic freedom and the struggle for freedom were articulated. Hughes rejects a propagandistic stance, and suggests that as long as he is writing about his beloved black folk, he can stake a claim for artistic freedom that no one can impede.

Nearly a dozen years later, Richard Wright cautioned, in a "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), that "a simple literary realism which seeks to depict the lives" of African-Americans and is "devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of . . . revolutionary significance . . . must of necessity do a rank injustice to the Negro people and alienate their possible allies in the struggle for freedom" (1384). As he wrote those words, he was in the midst of writing *Native Son*, a novel that firmly established "social protest" black art. And by 1949, James Baldwin had responded to Wright's call with "Everybody's Protest Novel," an essay proclaiming that "the avowed aim of the American protest novel is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed" (1657), but that, ultimately, "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (1659). Clearly, the question of which is more important, artistic freedom or the struggle for freedom, dominates some of the most important black aesthetic statements of the 20th century—including those of the 1960s, where the Black Aestheticians's strident stance was summed by Ron Karenga's claim that "an artist may have any freedom to do what he wishes" as long as his art "does not take the freedom from the people to be protected from those images, words and sounds that are negative to their life and development" (1976). Surely, Karenga and others of the Black Arts Movement agreed with Du Bois's views on propaganda, but by 1977, Audre Lorde was taking her own nuanced stance on artistic freedom versus the struggle for freedom. In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," she writes, "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom" (2211). She is, indeed, linking artistic action to freedom, but she alludes to a personal sense of freedom for women as well as a struggle against patriarchy and white supremacy.

8. Reid-Pharr has warned against what he calls the " 'Big Bang Theory' of Black American culture" (144): "I would suggest," he writes, "that we are seriously handicapped by our over-utilization of linear and singular conceptions of the development of Black American culture" (137). The key word here is over-utilization. As I suggest below, as long as exceptional moments and texts are accepted and acknowledged, as long as such linear conceptions of black cultural development are viewed with an expansive, critical eye, then students of African American culture should not end up so "handicapped."

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