Novel Speculations: Postrace Fictions in the 21st Century

by

Ellen Song

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

___________________________

Thomas Ferraro, Co-Supervisor

___________________________

Aarthi Vadde, Co-Supervisor

___________________________

Priscilla Wald

___________________________

Nathaniel Mackey

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2018
ABSTRACT

Novel Speculations: Postrace Fictions in the 21st Century

by

Ellen Song

Department of English
Duke University

Date: __________________________

Approved:

__________________________________________

Thomas Ferraro, Co-Supervisor

__________________________________________

Aarthi Vadde, Co-Supervisor

__________________________________________

Priscilla Wald

__________________________________________

Nathaniel Mackey

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2018
Abstract

This project charts the emergence of a postrace aesthetic in American fiction. It examines how American novels respond to the pressures of what has been called the paradox of the postrace era: that our images and rhetoric portray a nation moving toward racial equality while our statistics actually reveal the opposite. I argue that through the use of features such as futuristic orientation, racially unmarked characters, and the reconfiguration of racial groupings, postrace novels attempt to unsettle our notions of race—a paradoxical endeavor, for attempts to unsettle a category ultimately invoke it again. Capable of interrogating emergent cultural phenomena, postrace novels provide a crucial vantage point from which we can interpret the shifting operations of race in the 21st century.
Dedication

For my parents, Tae Hun Song and Hyun Suk Song
Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. vii
INTRODUCTION: The Postrace Paradox in American Culture ........................................... 1
1. Technologies of Racial Transformation in Your Face in Mine ........................................ 27
2. Chang-rae Lee’s On Such a Full Sea and the Limits of Colorblind Representation ....... 80
3. Racial Revelations: The Aesthetics of Withholding ...................................................... 123
4. Coercive Choice in Octavia Butler’s Dawn .................................................................. 171
CONCLUSION: The Postrace in the Era of Trump .............................................................. 221
WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................... 227
Biography ........................................................................................................................... 237
Acknowledgements

I extend my sincerest thanks to my co-chairs, Tom Ferraro and Aarthi Vadde. Tom’s e-mail correspondence with me before I was ever officially accepted into this doctoral program made me believe that I could be worthy of leading an intellectual life; I do not know that I would have ended up on this path without his faith. Throughout the writing process, he consistently asked me the big questions and urged me to remember my own voice and passion, which I hope to do one day for my own students. Aarthi, whom I have admired since the early days for her poise, eloquence, and acuity, has held me to a rigorous standard of scholarship. She frequently reminded me of the nuanced, complex, and not-always-moral work that literature does, which shaped this project in important ways. I thank her for her unchanging attentiveness and intellectual generosity.

I am grateful to Priscilla Wald, who possesses the uncanny ability to make her students believe that their ideas are worth pursuing, even – especially – at those moments when they are the most hesitant. Her boundless enthusiasm and unwavering support of her students are nothing short of inspiring. And finally, my heartfelt thanks to Nathaniel Mackey, who taught the best course I’ve ever taken as a graduate student, and who has always made me feel included in that most important of pronouns: we.

Along the way, my fellow graduate students provided me with much-needed company and, at times, commiseration. Thanks for the coffee dates, for filling the gaps in my reading list, and for simply understanding; I’ll thank you in person.
My parents, Tae Hun Song and Hyun Suk Song, whose blind faith in me has not wavered once, are models of perseverance. Their struggles daily remind me that it is a tremendous privilege to lead a life of the mind. Being their daughter is what keeps me grounded and returns me to myself when I get lost.

Without any sense of hyperbole, this project could not have been actualized without the love, patience, and shelter of Davide Carozza, who has been by my side throughout the entire duration of this doctoral program. His generosity, both intellectual and emotional, has changed me and my life for the better. I cannot thank him enough.
INTRODUCTION: The Postrace Paradox in American Culture

On Racial Boundary Crossings

On the screen, we see a young man dressed in a yellow button-down shirt, tucked into his belted jeans. We see him with golf clubs on a green course, ambling through his local farmers’ market, and watching over the safety of his community, unhesitant to call law enforcement if he feels it necessary. We are told initially that he is an “average teenager” who goes to school, enjoys video games, and listens to music in his room. The young man, however, has another story to tell. Far from being an average teen, he knows that he has “always felt different.” At movies and in other public spaces, he has always wondered, “Why am I not getting the respect I deserve?” He continues, “And then, it just hit me: I’m white. [pause] And thirty-five.”

Harrison Booth identifies as a thirty-five-year old “Coca Cola systems engineer,” originally from Colorado, who favors Patagonia clothing and likes to envision the way he will look “after the surgery.” But Harrison was actually born Antoine Smalls, and his family refuses to accept his “transracial” identity, or his insistence that he is a white man although he has dark skin, braided hair, and attracts unwanted nods of solidarity from black people who walk past him on the street. According to Harrison/Antoine, his family simply “doesn’t get it.” He states: “They don’t realize that race is just a made-up thing. They grew up having labels and I’m just not like that.” The camera cuts away at one
point to the surgeon who will be performing the “racial transition,” which the doctor admits is fully possible – although he says after a pause that it’ll undoubtedly make Harrison/Antoine look “weird.”

This is the beginning of the seventh episode of season one of Atlanta, rapper and actor Donald Glover’s absurdist-realist television show on FX about two black cousins trying to make it in the rap world of the eponymous city. The episode, entitled “B.A.N,” is an obvious spoof of the real-life cable network Black Entertainment Television, more popularly known as B.E.T. “B.A.N” features an episode-inside-an-episode, with one of Atlanta’s protagonists, the rapper Paper Boi, being called to a talk show to discuss the issue of trans identities, as he has previously disparaged transgender people in a song. The social concerns that are most pressing in the rapper’s life, however, relate to discrimination against black men. A speaker from an organization representing the interests of transgender people is also present at the table, arguing against the homophobia and transphobia of Paper Boi’s lyrics; she wants to convey the importance of intersectionality, of the common interests that should be undergirding groups dedicated to combatting racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia. The camera eventually cuts away to a live, on-the-spot video conversation with Harrison/Antoine, who looks the same as in the earlier interview, except he now has copper-blond hair, bangs and all. Paper Boi erupts into laughter, ridiculing Harrison/Antoine for his appearance, but when the Center of Trans American Issues representative then presses Harrison/Antoine for a condemnation of the rap community’s general “intolerance,” essentially asking for
Harrison/Antoine’s solidarity, the result is exactly both expected and not. In an ironic climax to the episode, the transracial black-to-white man does not believe in the reality of other trans identities, declaring gender transformation “unnatural” and homosexuality an “abomination,” and exploding any expectations for solidarity among the various groups that are lambasted for their difference (“B.A.N.”).

I start with this rather lengthy overview of a cult-status cable television episode to establish the tenor of popular culture’s handling of the shifts in the boundaries of racial identification in the current era, otherwise known as the “postrace era.” The shifting boundaries of race in this 21st-century moment are simultaneously ridiculed for the obvious ways in which they are still tangled up with racialized power (for who gets to exercise the power of choosing a racial identity?) and significant enough to be depicted in art and culture and spark serious conversations about the extent to which identity, as a whole, is mutable or not.

The phenomenon of transracial identities openly lampooned in Atlanta is a clear reference to the real-life case of Rachel Dolezal, the N.A.A.C.P leader and adjunct black studies professor who was outed by her Christian fundamentalist parents in 2015 as a white woman, though she had passed for several years as a biracial black woman through the power of makeup, hairstyling, and tanning, and had claimed one of her adopted black brothers as her son (Gayle). Dolezal is not referenced by name in Atlanta’s “B.A.N.,” but her interviews on network TV mirror Harrison/Antoine’s. And though, in many ways, Dolezal served as the laughingstock of 2015, sparking angry, widespread charges of
racial appropriation and inspiring parodies on comedy shows like Saturday Night Live, she might be said to literally embody the argument of scholars like Eric Lott and Michael Rogin, who write that blackface minstrelsy entails a strange, compelling, and paradoxical combination of racial revulsion and desire (Rogin 17) or a “mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation” (Lott 6). I mention both Rogin, a political scientist, and Lott, a cultural historian, because they underscore the fundamentality of desire in the momentary assumption of black skin – in ‘blacking up’ – in a way that also acknowledges that this desire is a destructive one. I mention both scholars, also, because they disagree on some other key points, despite their similar subject matter. Lott argues in his famous Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy in the American Working Class that “The very form of blackface acts – an investiture in black bodies – seems a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of ‘blackness’ and demonstrates the permeability of the color line” (6). But Rogin, in Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot, is less swayed by what he calls the “postmodern” take that emphasizes blackface minstrelsy’s ability to destabilize identity boundaries. Rogin argues that those in power can flirt with the notion of giving it up, without any real risk. What follows is that “the more the freedom to perform any role, the less subversion in the play” (34). Put another way, the more freedom an individual has to try on different identities, the more likely that the performed identity will have little hold on the self. Blackface, for Rogin, demonstrates less the permeability of the color line than
it serves as a risk-free way for white participants to play at being black for a temporary and contained period of time.

The charges against Dolezal that she had appropriated a black identity for certain material benefits – for example, to gain legitimation in her employment as a black studies academic and anti-racist activist – when others do not have the same ability to move between identity roles are not to be dismissed. That she would receive such tangible benefits from her boundary-crossing points to the undoubtedly exploitative aspects of blackface. But without being an apologist for Dolezal’s charade, it is also possible to note the immaterial elements that also went into her assumption of a black identity: a fantasy borne of a desire to leave herself behind and stay rooted in the identity of an obvious “other,” rather than move back and forth between identities. In my final reference to pop culture for the moment, I turn to the comments of the internationally-famous Barbadian pop star, Rihanna, who has this to say about Dolezal: “I think she was a bit of a hero, because she kind of flipped on society a little bit. Is it such a horrible thing that she pretended to be black? Black is a great thing, and I think she legit changed people’s perspective a bit and woke people up” (Miller). Going back to Rogin, if it is indeed the case that a performed identity ends up having little purchase on the self when that self has plenty of freedom to move between and choose identities, then is it not somewhat meaningful if the self chooses just one role, among so many others, to embody?

In postrace cultural productions, the questions posed above are addressed and can be considered fully, in all their discomfiting, absurd, intriguing, and experimental
capacities. Whether in television shows like *Atlanta* or in novels like Jess Row’s *Your Face in Mine*, which posits the possibility of technological procedures that will help “transracial” individuals actualize their preferred racial identities, whether black, white or East Asian, postrace narratives play with racial boundaries, paradoxically destabilizing and stabilizing them at the same time. Having established popular culture’s fascination with the limits and porousness of racial boundaries, in this project I turn specifically to American novels to examine how these same concerns are enacted, represented, interrogated, and played with in fiction, through the medium of written language. If 19th- and 20th-century blackface and minstrelsy are characterized by the paradoxical entangling of revulsion and desire, then in the postrace era, an insistence that race either ought to be or has already been transcended paradoxically forces us to further examine the racial structures undergirding our realities. American novels, like other cultural forms, are responding to such pressures of the postrace era. This project charts an emergent literary aesthetic in American fiction: “postrace novels” are invested in destabilizing the category of race, which is an essentially paradoxical endeavor, for any attempts to unsettle a category ultimately run the risk of invoking it again, possibly even entrenching it further. In chronological order of publication, the works studied in this project are Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*, Don DeLillo’s *Pafko at the Wall* and *Underworld*, Ed Park’s *Personal Days*, Teju Cole’s *Open City*, Jess Row’s *Your Face in Mine*, and Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea.*
Social Scientific v. Literary Treatments of the Postrace

Since the term “postrace” itself is a controversial and often misunderstood concept, a careful disclaimer and clarification of terms is in order. Because so many people have used the term to mean different things in different contexts and because the popular use of the term is frequently at odds with the academic uses of the term, I recognize that any definition cannot be an all-encompassing one. While acknowledging the inevitable imprecision of terms, I posit that there are at least three different strands or variants of the term “postrace” that must be registered. In my breakdown of terms, all three strands relate to the notion of the postrace as an object of desire, a goal that is aspired to. It is, fundamentally, a wish: a wish for an era of racial equality. Where the three strands differ is in the degree to which this wish is understood to have been realized or fulfilled.

In the first strand, the wish is believed to have been completely fulfilled at this point and thus passé, to the point that the wish can no longer even be considered as such; those who use the term “postrace” in this capacity believe, either sincerely or in a self-serving fashion, that the current era is a triumphant one. They perhaps believe that everyone now enjoys the “same degrees of freedom to choose their preferred level of ethnic/racial identification, while ignoring continued stereotyping and the privileges of whiteness” (Squires 7).

In the second strand, the wish of the “postrace” is believed to have been fulfilled to some degree, though perhaps not completely; those who use the term in this capacity
understand that racism does persist even today, but believe that it is not a central, organizing force in people’s lives. They perhaps overstate the notion that racism has been overcome in the past few decades, pointing to the existence of, say, the black elite as evidence of the diminishing importance of race when it comes to the acquisition of wealth or opportunities, especially in comparison to earlier periods. Literary scholars such as Kenneth Warren and Walter Benn Michaels may be associated with this category, even if they do not necessarily use “postrace” as an explicit, key term in their scholarship, as they argue that class should be privileged over race as the primary or central site of inequalities in the 21st century. This privileging of class over race is but one iteration of the concept of the postrace era.

Finally, in the third strand, the wish of the “postrace” is acknowledged as important but also understood as a wish that remains unfulfilled; those who understand the “postrace” as this failed or yet-to-be-realized wish use the term critically without necessarily claiming it as their own. This third strand may be observed among scholars in the social science disciplines, ranging from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in sociology, to Michelle Alexander in law, to Hazel Markus in psychology, and Catherine Squires in media studies. Though there is some overlap between the second and third strands, in that they both acknowledge the enduring persistence of racism as a fact of life in 21st-century America, there are important differences between them. For example, it is significant that the thinkers engaging with the third strand are the ones explicitly using the term “postrace” even as they demystify or critique it. These thinkers, who treat the postrace era
with cynicism, also insist on the continued importance of analyzing race as the primary site of inequality, whereas those who are implicitly engaging with the second strand would minimize this importance even though they acknowledge the existence of racism in American society today.

To reiterate, for the purposes of this project, the postrace era should refer not to a current epoch in American history in which race and racism have been transcended or superseded temporally but must be understood in a critical, deflationary, and ironic capacity. The irony surrounding the postrace era pertains to that which was promised or aspired to but has not been realized: an era in which the concept of race and the problems of institutional racism should no longer influence any area of life, whether in the criminal justice system, housing and real estate, the media, voting and politics, education, and the like. An era, simply put, in which the issues of racism should have been solved, transcended, handled, competently and happily dealt with. My project is much more aligned with the third variant of the postrace than the other two variants, but I am essentially taking the argument of the third variant – that the postrace era is a myth, or paradox, or ironically-named – as my starting point rather than setting out to empirically prove this or to further argue that the postrace era should be dismissed specifically for being a myth or dream or fantasy. From this starting point, I argue that the non-empirical, aesthetic elements of postrace novels help us to understand something about the allure of the so-called postrace era, an allure which persists precisely because of its dreaminess, its hazy capacity to engage our varying feelings about a projected racial harmony.
Relatively, the cultural critic and journalist Jeff Chang describes the “paradox of the postrace era” as the incongruity between the rhetoric and media images that portray a United States moving toward racial equality and away from cultural segregation and the measurable indices that reveal the opposite, that the country is moving farther away from racial equality than ever before (1). But the term postrace era inevitably carries a temporal association, implying a temporal failure: the failure of the liberal societal dream that was supposed to have arrived, a future that would one day be the present. Catherine Squires writes in The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century that when it was first used in the 1970s, the term “postrace” carried an aspirational and temporal significance, to describe a future political situation in which voting would not occur in the United States along clear racial lines; in a truly postrace future, politicians would no longer be able to depend on, say, the African American vote. Even in the 1990s, in the very recent past, news sources tended to use the term “to describe a time in the distant future when racial discrimination will truly be a thing of the past” (Squires 19). In the years immediately after the election of Barack Obama, media outlets have used the term “postrace era” primarily in a pessimistic manner, to describe either its failure or its never having arrived. Of course, we are not yet in a triumphal postrace era, and the folly has been in hastily declaring, even if only for a few brief months during Obama’s rise to political prominence, the notion that it had arrived.

Postrace studies as a whole is an emergent field, one that has been addressed by scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds ranging from the aforementioned fields of
law (Michelle Alexander), sociology (Eduardo Bonilla-Silva), psychology (Hazel Markus), and media studies (Catherine R. Squires), to race studies (Paula Ioanide), African American cultural studies (Imani Perry, Richard Iton), and literary studies (Ramón Saldívar, Kenneth Warren, Yoonmee Chang, Stephen Sohn). Social science disciplines invaluably articulate the tangible and material injuries of racism, doing the important work of collecting evidence to empirically demonstrate the ongoing racism inherent in most of our institutions in our “postrace” era. This is oftentimes an explicitly stated goal of postrace social sciences scholarship. Consider the following passage from Michelle Alexander’s preface in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*:

“This book is not for everyone. I have a specific audience in mind – people who care deeply about racial justice but who, for any number of reasons, do not yet appreciate the magnitude of the crisis faced by communities of color as a result of mass incarceration...I am also writing it for another audience – those who have been struggling to persuade their friends, neighbors, relatives, teachers, co-workers, or political representatives that something is eerily familiar about the way our criminal justice system operates, something that looks and feels a lot like an era we supposedly left behind, **but who have lacked the facts and data to back up their claims.**” (xiii, emphasis mine)

Alexander’s preface, which ends on the note that her book is also written for those trapped inside the criminal justice system, reveals two interests. First, her book is meant to gather in one place the empirical data which proves that the criminal justice system in a supposedly colorblind era is in fact a deeply racist one. It is also meant specifically for already-interested readers, or readers who already exhibit what race scholar Paula Ioanide would call “affective receptivity” (15) – the emotional openness or willingness to have
conversations about the painful reality of racial inequality. It is only for those who are “affectively receptive” that facts will even operate the way they are intended, for those who are emotionally closed from acknowledging the reality of racism will not be persuaded by empirical data, as facts cannot and do not move people’s opinions on the things they simply feel in their bones to be true.

If the goals of social science scholars of the postrace era are explicitly anti-racist ones – Alexander’s work will invaluably be used in efforts to reform the criminal justice system, for example – my project has different aims. I do not claim that postrace novels will immediately or directly cultivate “affectively receptive” readers or better, more moral people; making people care about racial injustice is not a simple matter of directing them to certain fool-proof books. Nor does a reader demonstrate her dedication to racial equality simply by reading many novels (or consuming movies, or listening to particular genres of music) that treat racial identities or raced characters. I want to be very careful about making large ethical claims about postrace novels because the act of reading does not in itself take the place of revolutionary, political, or civic engagement. My point, rather, is that emotions and feelings play an enormous part in our social relations and they are often so deeply ingrained that no appeals to fact or empiricism can change them.

Taking a cue from Ioanide, it is precisely because feelings are messy and complicated and often at odds with facts that non-empirical studies – in this case, of literature – are necessary in the examination of race, racism, and racial identity. In an era marked by so much controversy, confusion, and paradox, and such a great sense of unrealized
egalitarian aspirations, it is imperative that we take stock of the cultural responses and artifacts attempting to make sense of it all.

Without exaggerating literature’s potential for racial emancipation, I want to outline the strengths of a literary approach to race. Postrace literary studies are inherently interdisciplinary, as they are founded on the sociohistorical definitions of the postrace era – a period in which, more than ever before, race is understood as something that is actively done, rather than essential or pre-existing. However, as Catherine Gallagher and Anne Anlin Cheng guide us, a literary approach to the postrace offers unique insights into the workings of race in the 21st century. In “The Rise of Fictionality,” Catherine Gallagher argues that fiction is inherently pleasurable because it provides readers with a space for imaginative play, which allows for “risk-free emotional investment” (351) with characters who only exist in the realm of the textual. This imaginative play, in turn, produces the reader’s self-awareness, as he reflects pleasurable on his own superior status as a being that exists outside of the text, in the realm of the real (357). Considering the fraught real-world arena of racial discourse in the U.S., it’s easy to recognize the importance of fiction’s general ability to allow for imaginative engagement with racially-inflected characters and places. But postrace novels, in destabilizing and possibly re-stabilizing race, show the ways in which race is constructed, performed, enforced, maintained, and made to exist. In distinct contrast to either the didactic overtones of political, antiracist rhetoric or the clinical bent of empirical studies of race that seek to point out the existence of racism largely to those who already care, it is exactly the
pleasurable quality of fiction – the kind that comes from the reader’s imaginative, speculative engagement with the text – that allows readers to get to see the *doing* of race. 

On a related note, if the social sciences are concerned with highlighting the empirical and the “real” costs of policies related to race, what literature is uniquely able to do, according to Anne Anlin Cheng, is account for and theorize the messy, complex, overlapping emotions that comprise the “psychical dynamics” through which social relations, including racial relations, play out. These include emotions like “desire and doubt, affirmation and rejection, projection and identification, management and dysfunction” (15). Building on Cheng’s assertion, this project posits that literature can account for the overlapping processes constituting racial grief and identity not only on an individual level but on a broader, cultural level as well. It also posits that literature can interrogate cultural phenomena even as they are emerging. Postrace novels are revelatory precisely because in sorting through *ongoing*, shifting racial processes, they are not necessarily bound to historically-specific depictions or understandings of race, or to representations of the “real.” They present to us in imaginative and inventive ways the cultural formations in which we are entangled, providing us with a vantage point from which we can take emergent phenomena seriously, perhaps in spite of our instinctual reactions to them, so that we may make sense of their potential bearings on the future.

Postrace novels thus merit our attention for two reasons. As fictional works that highlight or otherwise play with the very enacting, performing, policing, and maintaining of race through language, they perform the vital task of reminding us of the constructed
and discursive nature of race. But at the same time, insofar as they are aesthetic objects and not works of political or didactic rhetoric, postrace novels have room to be subtle and ambiguous in portraying the oftentimes contradictory aspects of racial identity. It is not the goal of this project, for example, to merely point out that the paradox of the supposedly postrace era is that it is in fact a racist one, because to set out to demonstrate that racism is rampant in the postrace era is to rely on relatively transparent, empirical figures. This project is instead concerned with opacity, contradiction, and blurred lines in the six novels that are examined, related to the nebulous, non-empirical aspects that make up racial identification and feelings. As I analyze paradox, irony, and affect – features of the text that defy simple categorization – my methodology embraces the potentially contradictory impulses of the works being studied. Ed Park’s *Personal Days*, for example, plays with race while performing a class critique; Teju Cole’s *Open City* simultaneously resists and perpetrates stereotypes of blackness; Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea* both posits a new racial order and reifies an existent one in its vision of a future Baltimore; Octavia Butler’s *Dawn* shows the ways in which a choice can be both made and coerced at the same time.

This project’s intentional focus on paradox, opacity, and all the contradictory and ambiguous processes that comprise racial feelings and identity formation allows for a nuanced observation of what is fundamentally a confusing and opaque moment. The postrace era, even among those scholars who essentially agree on its existence, provokes different reactions or interpretations. Michelle Alexander would posit that the
machinations of race and racism in the postrace era are similarly – if not more – insidious than in previous eras, because in the current moment, racism occurs in a “well-disguised” (4) manner and is now more difficult to prove, whereas Kenneth Warren would warn against any kind of “nostalgia” (5) whatsoever for those previous eras, which includes nostalgia for the presumed unity of black people who were made to live under a formalized system of segregation. These varying stances on the postrace era may seem to be opposed to one another in some ways, but they must both be heeded. I am not interested in arguing that one response to the postrace era is better or more accurate than the other. Rather, it is necessary to reconcile the ways in which the racism of the postrace era might seem, in the words of sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, like “racism lite” (3) compared to that of the Jim Crow era – which would be in line with an aspirational sense of progress – and the ways in which there are indeed new, sinister challenges to racial justice that are specific to the postrace era. A focus on the aesthetic qualities of postrace novels will allow us to steer clear of binaristic understandings of the postrace era, so that we may better appreciate the tricky, paradoxical nuances of a moment in which there is so much disagreement over whether or not progress has been achieved.

In focusing on the aesthetics of postrace novels, this project owes a debt to Ramón Saldívar’s pioneering work in postrace literary studies, which posits the notion of a postrace aesthetic that is at once intertwined with the empirical findings of social scientists and yet distinct from them. Perhaps inspired by the empiricism of the social scientific disciplines that are more established in postrace studies, Saldívar neatly outlines
four essential features of postrace aesthetics, summed up succinctly in the following list: it is in “critical dialogue with the aesthetics of postmodernism” (“Second Elevation” 4); it “draws on the history of genres and typically mixes generic forms” (4); it is “invested in speculative realism,” or what Saldívar considers to be the “hybrid crossing of the fictional modes of the speculative genres, naturalism, social realism, surrealism, magical realism, ‘dirty’ realism, and metaphysical realism” (5); and finally, it “explores the thematics of race in twenty-first-century America” (5).

Even as critical race studies and postrace scholarship as a whole acknowledge the non-essential nature of race – what Saldívar himself calls the “doing” of race – so far, critics in postrace literary studies tend to define postrace fiction primarily in relation to “minority” authors who challenge expectations that they write ethnorealistic literature reflecting their backgrounds. This is true of Saldívar as well, despite his general focus on the aesthetic qualities of postrace novels themselves, as he is also concerned with the biographies of the authors of such novels. For example, he writes that “a new generation of minority and ethnic writers has come to prominence whose work signals a radical turn to a ‘postrace’ era in American literature” (“Second Elevation” 1). He categorizes these writers along ethno-racial lines like those of Census classifications, such as “African American,” “Asian American,” “Native American,” and “Latino,” with Saldívar conceding that “a case can be made” for including white Jewish authors like Michael Chabon, Gary Shteyngart, and Jonathan Safran Foer (3). Similarly, Asian American literature scholars Yoonmee Chang and Stephen Hong Sohn describe postrace Asian
American fiction as works that do not feature Asian American characters – although one could easily argue that a work that features no Asian American characters or concerns perhaps should not be considered an Asian American work at all, despite having been written by an American author of Asian descent. If we are to accept the general premise of postrace studies – both in the social sciences and literary studies – that race and racism operate in the 21st century in a manner distinct from that of earlier periods, then it seems logically inconsistent to insist on a classificatory regime based on ethno-racial labels of previous eras. This is especially troubling since racial labels themselves are imprecise and, in many cases, cannot account for nuances in identification. Let us return to the “postrace Asian American novel” for a moment. If an American author of Asian descent is intentionally attempting to steer clear of a realist representational mode that must answer to calls for authentic ethnic representation, if her novel is denaturalizing ethno-racial identity and thus reminding readers not to take it for granted, then to insist on using an ethno-racial identity term to classify the novel seems to be incongruous with the work that the novel is doing.

Similarly, to suggest simply that a “postrace novel” is a novel written by a minority author about a subject other than that author’s minority background is to suggest that postrace novels can only be written by ethno-racial minorities, which is to say that only ethno-racially marked authors could be capable of or charged with denaturalizing race. This implies that race is the purview only of those with raced bodies, which brings us into the insidious territory of belief in essentialized notions of race and distances us
from understanding that race, as Barbara and Karen Fields repeatedly remind in *Racecraft: The Soul of American Inequality*, is enacted in a fundamentally social process of racism. But novels that denaturalize racial identity need not — and indeed, are not — written only by raced or otherwise minoritized authors. This dissertation aims to broaden the scope and reach of postrace novels by focusing on aesthetics and themes instead of the ethno-racial affiliation — or, more specifically, the “minority” status — of the authors. To this end, I adopt a deliberately comparative approach, examining works by authors of different ethno-racial backgrounds, which also includes white authors who are both ethnically marked (DeLillo) and not (Row). Outside of this dissertation, there has yet to be a comparative study of American postrace novels that includes the productions of white authors. This is a gap that I believe must be filled, for, as Toni Morrison, writing of the presence of blackness in all aspects of American national culture, reminds us in *Playing in the Dark*, American literature could not help but be shaped by “its encounter with racial ideology” (16). Insofar as “America,” borne of the flight from the “Old World to the New,” is understood to have been borne from a “flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility” (34), its slave population was “understood to have offered itself up for reflections on human freedom” (38). Morrison writes powerfully that “Nothing highlighted freedom — if it did not in fact create it — like slavery” (38). Race thus operates in the service of those who are supposedly unraced, and to be a white author in the United States is to deal with the undeniable national history and legacy of race and racism. The workings of race do not fall only on the shoulders of those with
raced bodies. As my project shows, the works of white American authors are indeed haunted by racial ideology and are preoccupied with sorting through the processes that comprise race; this must not be ignored.

The Novels

*Novel Speculations: Postrace Fictions in the 21st Century* analyzes the contours, patterns, and investments of the literary productions of the controversially-named postrace era, a post-civil rights moment in the United States marked, more than ever before, by the understanding that race is socially enacted rather than biologically or essentially pre-existing. Along with the notion that race is largely a social construction is the accompanying call of critical race theory that race, rather than serve as a source of any pride or community or belonging, should be divested of its significance, since it is not an essential entity. Paul Gilroy writes that the enduring allure of race lies in its presumed ability to protect us from the fractured chaos of modernity (*Postcolonial 6*), while Barbara and Karen Fields passionately argue that what we need today is not better language to discuss the myth of race but a politics to uproot racism (109). Less available to us is the notion of how. *How* will it be possible to divest race of its significance? *How* can race and racism be dissolved, after so many centuries of their entrenchment in our social fabric? *Novel Speculations* looks to postrace novels as works of art that are attempting to answer these questions. This project uncovers the formal, generic features through which six postrace novels, written near the turn of the 21st century, attempt to
unsettle the concept of race, through features such as the confounding of existent or familiar racial groupings, settings in alternate or future worlds, and the strategic absence of characters’ racial markers. But each of the novels, far from showing the irrelevance, transcendence, or dissolution of race in the 21st century, reveals that any attempts to “uproot” race and racism inevitably bring them back to the forefront of our imagination, ultimately showing us the tremendous challenges to our ability to even imagine a sincerely, unironically postrace world.

The first chapter, “Technologies of Racial Transformation in Your Face in Mine,” points to the prescient way in which Jess Row’s speculative-realist novel, published the year before the Rachel Dolezal controversy, described a world in which race-change technology could be purchased by individuals claiming to be “transracial.” In Your Face in Mine, set in Baltimore and Asia, consumerist choice becomes equated with political choice. The reader is confronted with the same question facing the characters – if you could choose to be anyone, who would you be? – and is thus repeatedly pressed to imagine his life as another, even if it is only to affirm that he wants to maintain his current racial identity. The novel speculates on the possibility that special technology, which would allow one to literally live in the other’s skin, might finally allow race to be transcended. I argue, however, that the novel illustrates a deflationist postrace aesthetic in the way that it demonstrates the possibility of visible, racial transformation only to debunk this possibility in favor of a psychologically or internally-rooted identity transformation. This is a move that simultaneously emphasizes the
physical or visible elements of racial identity, on the one hand, and the psychic components of racial identity, on the other. Ultimately, the novel is obsessed with its own boundaries as a work of fiction, as an object creating more discursive attempts at empathy instead of non-discursive ones, which points to the indispensable role of language in our ability to understand a racial other. Given the novel’s eventual concession that completely democratic technologies of racial transformation will never be realized – that the ability to choose racial identity will never be open to all – it ultimately posits that imagination, fueled by language, is the only existent path to an even scant attempt at empathy.

Chapter 2, “On Such a Full Sea and the Limits of Colorblind Representation,” examines Chang-rae Lee’s latest novel, On Such a Full Sea, a speculative work about a future Baltimore, populated by the descendants of Chinese settlers and “native” dark-skinned Baltimoreans. The collective “we” voice and the futuristic setting of the novel, in which nations, racial groups, and economic systems are reconfigured, lead us to expect that the novel will present a radical vision for a future social order. It is thus surprising that the novel deploys a familiar race-based hierarchy that places the descendants of African Americans at the bottom, all the while using colorblind language that hesitates to actually name them. Lee’s evocation of a historical racial hierarchy could be read as his participation, using the veiled language of the postrace era, in a representational system that maintains racist ideologies. I present an alternate argument: rather than simply failing in its own radical social vision, the novel works as social critique, as an interrogation of
the linguistic politics of representation. In its conspicuously inconsistent use of colorblind language, the novel forces us to think of the limits of racial representation in narrative to stimulate or take the place of material, political change.

Chapter 3, “Racial Revelations: The Aesthetics of Withholding,” tracks what I call the aesthetics of withholding, or the strategic concealment of characters’ racial markers, in three novels: Don DeLillo’s Underworld (or more specifically, Pafko at the Wall, the novella precursor to Underworld’s prologue), Teju Cole’s Open City, and Ed Park’s Personal Days. In these works, the racialization of several characters is intentionally delayed; it is accomplished not through flat-footed biography or description, but through a purposeful, sometimes playful, oscillation between the withholding and disclosing of information, which eventually leads to a momentous revelation about their identities. I contend that the aesthetics of withholding, aside from simply forcing the reader to check his assumption that an unmarked character is white, highlights the capacity of language to destabilize racial categories, rendering them slippery – at times familiar, in the form of predictable stereotypes, but at other times completely elusive. The intentional gaps in characterization, intended to buttress against a notion of universal whiteness, may become the very breeding ground for other stereotypes to take hold. The aesthetics of withholding thus reveals the close relationship between racialization and stereotype, as well as the impossibility of challenging stereotypes without also invoking them.
In my final chapter, “Coercive Choice in *Dawn,*” I turn to the generative annihilation of choice in Octavia Butler’s *Dawn.* Set 250 years in the future and following a nuclear catastrophe that has destroyed Earth, in *Dawn* the few surviving humans find themselves co-existing with an alien species, the Oankali, that has saved the humans for the purposes of interbreeding with them. Published in 1987, *Dawn* is the earliest of the works examined in this project. I have included *Dawn* in a largely 21st-century focused project because its presentation of a world in which aliens overtake humans might be thought, at least on a superficial level, to posit a world in which racial difference should be transcended, if not triumphantly, than for the sake of an endangered humanity. After all, in a world in which so few humans remain, racial differences among the survivors, although specifically noted, might seem to be far less significant than their collective identity as humans struggling against aliens. As a result, choices appear to become dramatically limited in this speculative world, whether in self-identification or in available mating partners, human or otherwise. However, I argue that it is precisely this flattening of choice that paradoxically leads to greater diversity in categories, either through racial mixing between the humans or through interspecies breeding that may lead to the post-human. A pervasive, paradoxical logic of social classification is at work all throughout *Dawn,* much like the paradoxical logic of racialization at work throughout the rest of this dissertation. Although *Dawn* has been read as an allegory of racial relations in the U.S., it has also been read as a meditation on what is human, an indication that *Dawn* comes closest to creating a world in which race might be evacuated in the face of a
greater, impending doom to all of humanity – to creating a world that might be literally, sincerely, and unironically postrace.

In the spirit of emphasizing the unique ability of narrative to play with race, to conjure it when it is not so available to us through visual identification, and to mess with our expectations, I gesture back to the opening paragraphs of this introduction, which deliberately engage with colorblindness, perhaps the most significant ideology unique to the postrace era and an important element of my argument throughout Novel Speculations. Colorblindness, according to philosopher Lawrence Blum, is both a moral and legal ideal. In law, it refers to “race neutrality” (91) or the belief that race should not be a factor in policy formation, which is motivated by the notion that race is an odious social category and thus should be rejected and avoided. As a moral, social ideal, however, it relates to “race egalitarianism” (93) – belief in a social order in which race would not affect basic opportunities – or, even further, “racial harmony” (94), which should be self-explanatory. The legal variant of colorblindness would seem to be at odds with its moral variant, as the act of simply ignoring or disregarding currently existent racial inequality in the name of race neutrality will certainly not pave the path toward racial harmony. This tension is exactly what makes colorblindness, as we understand it today, both dangerous and alluring; it posits a tempting, easy solution to grave societal ills by letting us think that the act of simply avoiding racial labels operates in service of the anti-racist, utopian end of a truly just and harmonious society.
But colorblindness persists, both in life and narrative, because it is as alluring as it is dangerous. It is all too easy to point out the failings and dangers of colorblindness, but given this project’s focus on paradox, ambiguity, and troubled binaries, we must also consider what, if anything, colorblindness affords us. It is likely safe to say that after reading only the first paragraph of this introduction, which I wrote in an intentionally colorblind manner, the reader has little indication that Antoine/Harrison has dark skin or braided hair, for our default assumption is that any unmarked character is unraced, or white. His admission that he has always felt “different” can refer to any number of identity signifiers. His feeling of “difference” is something to be taken, at least in the space of those few sentences, seriously and sympathetically. What’s missing from the first paragraph is the deadpan hilarity and weird absurdity that is quietly and deftly accomplished by the show in its visual form. On the show, from the minute we see Antoine/Harrison, we cannot ignore his unmistakable appearance as a dark-skinned black man, which leads us to take his claims skeptically. But if the introductory paragraph, composed of words, is unsuited for accurately conveying the wry, ironic humor characteristic of Atlanta, it manages to have its own set of accomplishments: it allows us, at least for a while, to sketch out a character, a person, in the way he wants to be seen.
1. Technologies of Racial Transformation in *Your Face in Mine*

In 2000, New York City-based artist and photographer Nancy Burson created the Human Race Machine (HRM), a computer console that takes a photograph of a participant and, using digital images of thousands of people of each race, adds or subtracts various facial features to the photo in order to portray what the same person might look like as a member of another race (Kelley). Photographs generated by the HRM were featured on the front-cover of a December 2003 issue of *Scientific American*, which provocatively asked “Does race exist?”, only to offer in a pithy sub-heading that “Science has the answer: genetic results may surprise you. On the cover, the magazine prominently displayed photos of six faces arranged in a circle – all identifiably female, comprising a spectrum of human phenotypes, easily recognizable to the American reader as white, black, and perhaps Middle Eastern, East Indian, Asian, Latina. Aside from differences in eye color, hair, skin tone, the faces are almost identical. The gesture proffered by the magazine – the suggestion that humans are more alike genetically than different, and that accordingly, race should not be considered “real” – is one with which the artist sympathizes. Burson, who has aided the FBI by creating digitized photographs of what missing children would look like as they age, developed the Human Race Machine with similarly catalytic, socially meaningful purposes in mind, as she seeks to use her work “to underscore the commonality of humanity” (Bamshad 84). It was
specifically after the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. that Burson updated the Human Race Machine to include a Middle Eastern face. Using pictures of Arabs and Jews to create the composites, she noted, “Let’s put them together and see if they can be peaceful inside the camera at least” (Kelley). Burson’s project can thus be categorized as an anti-racist one, a project that seeks to realize a transcendence of race and its related hostilities.

Fully aware of the scope of the violence and disunity that regularly arise due to identitarian politics in the world, Burson has created a new technology for racial transformation, albeit one that is ephemeral. The artist does not deny the existence of race; indeed, the fact that she has chosen to posit six separate, visually recognizable groupings of people shows that she is not “colorblind” but fully aware of physical difference. But Burson’s insistence that “the concept of race is not genetic, but social” (Burson) comes across as dismissive, privileging the scientific discourse of genetics over the lived social realities of racial identity. If the challenge to mankind’s harmony lies in the latter, then following Burson’s logic, it can be overcome by intentional exercise. The goal of Burson’s HRM is thus to facilitate empathy by promoting identification with those who look different from us, by allowing us, literally, to become other than ourselves, if only in the form of pixels on a screen, if only for a moment. She says, “It’s sort of my prayer for racial integration and, ultimately oneness….To be able to step into somebody else’s shoes, and walk through difference to sameness, gets us closer to oneness” (Kelley). Her goal seems to have been realized in at least one New York City user, a young man of European descent who was able to see what he would look like as a
black man, who remarked of his experiencing using the HRM, “It shows you how human you really are, and how everyone goes through their day-to-day life” (Kelley). The artist’s recollection that visitors in London waited in line for over an hour and half to use the machine suggests that there are many who are curious about inhabiting other bodies. If not fully sharing in Burson’s utopic quest to one day ignore or surmount difference altogether, then they are at least open to visualizing themselves in someone else’s skin – at least, for three minutes.

If the Human Race Machine is a technology for temporary transracial transformation, one that evokes the bare edges of empathy by allowing a white man to imagine himself as black, a black man to see himself as Middle Eastern or Asian for just three minutes, Jess Row’s 2014 novel *Your Face in Mine* asks us to consider the possibility of extending those three minutes into a lifetime, as it imagines a world in which it is possible to change one’s race through a series of cosmetic surgeries and lifestyle changes. When attempts are made to actualize the transcendent, utopic ideal of the “postrace” era – through, for example, the use of technologies to realize a “transracial” identity, as in, say, a white-to-black identity – we are faced with the ethical implications of choice. Is identity something that can be chosen? If so, who gets to choose? Stuart Hall posits the discursive construction of identity and defines it as “the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’… us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which
constructs us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’” (5). In other words, the subject is hailed, but also invests in the position, so that the process of identity creation is not one-sided, but twofold. Simply put, one must agree with the subject position one has been assigned to – there is the matter of choice. In Row’s novel, those who do not agree with the subject positions they have been given, embodied in particular phenotypic forms, consider the possibility of taking matters into their own hands via scientific technologies. The nature of this choice is examined from three different angles which are also inextricably bound in the world of the novel. One chooses to change one’s physical embodiment in an attempt to realize a desired, perhaps “improved” identity; for the sake of an empathy-based experiment to experience life as one who is other; or lastly, and possibly most discomfiting, in the name of consumerist choice.

A postrace novel that posits the literal transcendence, the literal crossing, of racial lines, Your Face in Mine demonstrates the flimsiness of easy attempts at empathy. The real work of transcending racial lines is not one that can be bought or enacted through a series of physical changes, but through psychic, emotional, and cerebral negotiations, all of which take place in the imagination. Though the novel speculates on the possibility that special technology, which would allow one to literally live in the other’s skin, might finally allow race to be transcended, the novel ultimately concedes that even if such technologies were to exist, they could never be democratized. The ability to choose racial identity is thus precluded from being truly available to all. However, I argue that where bio-technological advances fail to facilitate a truly embodied and hoped-for
understanding of the other, the novel persists as a technology of its own that promotes a discursive, if not embodied, understanding. Technologies of transracial change may prove to be untenable, or worse, exploitative, but imagination, fueled by language, is available to all of us in our attempts to empathize with our others.

**Race in the Postrace Era**

The creation of the Human Race Machine is premised on the position that race has no genetic or scientific basis but is instead a social construct. This position, held by Nancy Burson in 2000 and by so many others since then, is a product of its time, one that corresponds appropriately to the prevailing view of race and race relations in the U.S. in the 21st century, which is markedly different from the prevailing notions of the previous century. Walter Benn Michaels describes a 20th century in which blatant white supremacy, as symbolized by the Ku Klux Klan, morphed into a pluralism that invented a new form of racism that valorized difference, which then allowed the pluralist to “prefer race only on the grounds that it is his” (*Our America* 137). Although race is still a central matter in “American and global modernity,” according to Ramón Saldívar, the 20th and 21st century treatments of race are markedly different from those of previous centuries, specifically in that we have moved away from a biological understanding of race into a social one: “views are changing from formerly held essentialist notions of biological races to more complex understandings of race as an element of human experience based on ancestral group characteristics, shaped by psychosocial patterns, and institutionalized
into political and economic structures of inequality” (2). Under this view, race is not something that simply *is* due to biology, but something that is *done* – performed, organized, and enacted into being.

Though Burson and Saldívar both acknowledge the socially constructed, discursive nature of race, for Burson and proponents of colorblind attitudes, this is grounds for race, as both an abstraction and as an organizer of social realities, to be surmounted and then altogether dismantled in the quest for utopic harmony, while for Saldívar and his cohort of thinkers, the socially constructed nature of race is no less insidious or easily conquerable than its previously-held biological understanding. In fact, it is precisely the downplaying of biological notions of race that has paved the way for 21st-century-specific versions of racism and racialization processes to come into being in the first place: race relations as characterized, according to social scientists, by “post civil rights racial apathy, color-blind racism – racism without racists, or new racialized ethnicities” (2). A distinctly 21st-century racism, one that is predicated on the notion of social constructivism rather than essentialized notions of biological difference, is no less entrenched for being constructed.

With the death of essentialist notions of race-as-biology have risen two competing understandings of race and racialization processes in the 21st century: one that weighs 21st-century manifestations of racism as equally malicious as those of the previous century, and another that urges that race in the current century must be understood on its own terms, in its own context. The colorblindness of the 21st century is dangerous,
according to legal scholar Michelle Alexander, because it not only allows racially-motivated caste systems to persist, but it disguises them, making it all the more impossible for these systems to eventually be dismantled. Alexander argues that mass incarceration has emerged in the United States as a “stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racial control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow” (4):

In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don’t. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color ‘criminals’ and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. (2)

According to Alexander, following the end of slavery in the 19th century, legal measures have continually ensured an undercaste that is overwhelmingly black and brown in the United States. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, southern states enacted vagrancy laws that made it a criminal offense not to work, which were then “applied selectively to blacks” (28). The vagrancy codes worked in tandem with convict laws that then allowed these “vagrants,” who ended up in prison as they could not afford to pay their fines, to be hired out to plantations and private companies, ensuring yet another system of forced servitude despite the de jure end of slavery. Similarly, in the era of colorblindness, anti-drug laws target black and Latino populations disproportionately. For example, the sale of 28 grams of crack cocaine nets a five-year mandatory prison sentence, while 500 grams of powdered cocaine nets the same sentence, although these
are two forms of the same substance. The majority of crack offenders are black (95%) while the powder cocaine offenders are largely white (Alexander 112). Arrested persons, who are disproportionately minority men, are subsequently denied the right to vote, and once released, they are subjected to “legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits” (2). In the era of colorblindness, mass incarceration as social control has replaced Jim Crow, which had replaced the slavery in the preceding centuries, but all without explicitly naming race or racial targets.

On the other hand, in the controversial What Was African American Literature? Kenneth Warren explicitly objects to the idea that the years following the heyday of the Civil Rights movement have brought about manifestations of racism that are equally sinister as previous ones, not because racism has disappeared, but because “pointing out the persistence of racism is not to make a particularly profound social observation or to engage in trenchant political analysis” (5). According to Warren, the belief that current social inequalities are simply a reiteration and a re-establishment of the same racial hierarchy that existed for most of the 20th century “misunderstands both the nature of the previous regime and the defining elements of the current one” (5). Alexander concedes that mass incarceration necessarily targets whites as well as minorities for it to successfully propagate the guise of colorblindness, and that it has torn apart the black community between its upper and lower classes, who are inevitably affected by mass incarceration to different degrees. For Warren, this disunity in the black population is one of the prime markers of the new, post-segregation “regime”: unlike in the postrace era,
during Jim Crow, all blacks were united, despite class differences, precisely due to the segregation that lumped them in one category apart from whites. The relative unity of African American identity under Jim Crow carried over into literary production as well, as all African American authors who wrote under Jim Crow knew that their work would be used indexically, as a measure of black progress, which would ultimately be seen as protesting the injustices of the Jim Crow system. In a postrace era in which formal segregation is no longer operative, we can no longer presume the unity of African American identity, and in turn, the united nature of works by African American authors.

These interpretations of the postrace era, differing as they are, accomplish the common task of positing the postrace era as a distinct and observable phenomenon, with specific effects on life, both in quantifiable realms – the criminal justice system, per Alexander – and cultural ones – literary production, per Warren. Having established the postrace era as our current mode, an explanation of relevant terms, as used in literary scholarship, is in order. Some scholars, in line with Warren’s argument about our inability to presume the sanctity of a minority identity, have said that the “postrace” or “postracial” turn in literature signals a freedom from the ethnographic imperative previously imposed on ethno-racially marked authors. In this case, “postrace” literature would indicate the lack of correspondence between an ethno-racially marked author and the ethno-racial content of his writing, such that a black author need not be limited to writing about “the black experience” and an Asian American author need not produce what Frank Chin would call the “Chinatown book” (Chang 22). Yoonmee Chang
explicitly writes that “[t]he postracial in Asian American literature can be described as literature written by Asian American writers that does not contain Asian American characters or Asian American experiences” (202). Thus, in the postrace era, gone is the implicit understanding that an ethnically marked author must deliver authentic ethnic representations in the realist mode, or the belief that he can even be a representative member of an authentically ethnic community.

However, it is not enough to say that a postrace literary work simply avoids attempting to encapsulate a particular ethnic experience; by this logic, any novel that does not focus on ethnic representation would count as a postrace novel, simply in the sense that race has been “transcended” by being ignored or avoided. Rather, postrace literary works are marked heavily by paradox, which is indeed the operative characteristic of the postrace era. What’s so paradoxical about the postrace era is that its name implies the end of the importance of race, seems synonymous with “post-racist,” but in practice race seems to be just as important as ever. Ramón Saldívar writes, for example, that the term “postrace” can only be understood ironically:

To signal the continuing importance of race as a category of analysis, racism as an undiminished fact of contemporary American life, and white supremacy as the unacknowledged ideology of our times, along with a concomitant and untrammeled persistence of the desire for the transcendence of race and racism in the literature of the post-Civil Rights era, I use the term “postrace” as Colson Whitehead and other writers have suggested that we do: under erasure and with full ironic force. (2)
Thus, the paradox of the postrace era is that all of our rhetoric and images indicate, in an aspirational manner, a culture moving closer to racial equality, although all of our measurable indices and statistics reveal the opposite (Jeff Chang 1). It’s no surprise, then, that a postrace literary aesthetic will be marked by precisely the same paradoxical, ironical register. I argue that as products of a paradoxical period, postrace novels are novels that attempt to destabilize the category of race, an attempt that paradoxically runs the risk of re-invoking and possibly re-entrenching the category.

If we make sense of a postrace aesthetic not as a transcendent, universal literary aesthetic, but as an aesthetic that specifically grapples with the effects of racism and the previously prevalent notions of biological essentialism, then we can start to see its characteristics. Saldívar helpfully outlines what he considers to be the most salient features of a postrace aesthetic: it is in “critical dialogue with the aesthetics of postmodernism”; it “draws on the history of genres and typically mixes generic forms”; it is “invested in speculative realism”; and lastly, it specifically “explores the thematics of race in twenty-first-century America” (4-5). Saldívar’s definition of the postrace aesthetic is generic, as he essentially equates this aesthetic with what he calls speculative realism, a “hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and genre fictions, including science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper” (13). Speculative realism, in combining magical, fantastical, technological, and science fictional elements of storytelling with the “Real,” often appears allegorically, “as a basis for recognizing and understanding the construction of the new political destinies we may witness taking shape
among diasporic groups in the US today” (14). Speculative realism, according to Saldívar, allows us to imagine new forms of representation – not simply authentic representation, which was the purview of the ethnographic imperative – that will “validate our utopian desires for social belonging” (15), whether they appear in the form of the Human Race Machine’s vision of a united mankind, racial differences dissolving into “oneness,” or into some other kind of grand sociopolitical equity.

Though Saldívar’s definition of the postrace aesthetic is primarily concerned with the contours and characteristics of literary works themselves, he is nonetheless concerned with ethno-racial backgrounds of the authors of these texts – an extra-literary characteristic – just as Yoonmee Chang and Kenneth Warren are. Saldívar mentions a sizeable list of contemporary writers, scholarly ones as well as creative authors, who take up postrace literary aesthetics as a serious topic of inquiry, which serves as a testament to the significance of this emerging field of literary studies. What all of these writers have in common is that they can be sorted into ethno-racial categories, by Saldívar as well as by self-identification, as other than “white.” Consider the following list:

In addition to [Colson] Whitehead and [Kwame] Touré, a host of other writers are also exploring a post-postmodern, post-Civil Rights moment in American racial formations. I refer to writers such as African Americans Percival Everett, Dexter Palmer and Darieck Scott; Asian Americans Karen Tei Yamashita, Sesshu Foster, Charles Yu, and Larissa Lai; Native American Sherman Alexie; Latinos Salvador Plascencia, Junot Díaz, Michelle Serros, Yxta Maya Murray, and Marta Acosta. A case can be made for including Michael Chabon, Gary Shteyngart, and Jonathan Safran Foer’s recalibrations of Jewish and Yiddish ethnicity. (3)
Saldívar must state that a “case can be made” for the inclusion of Jewish authors precisely because the opposite is also true, as the case can also be made to exclude them from this list. Historically, Jewish authors have also faced the ethnic imperative to deliver authentic representations of Jewish life and community, or to develop characters with some amount of ethnic consciousness. At the same time, Jewish assimilation into mainstream American culture is reflected in the inclusion of Jewish authors in the canon of white American authors. Though between the two world wars, the “classic ethnic novel” in the U.S. was written largely about European immigrant populations, like Jews, Scandinavians, Irish, and Italians, after World War II, an attempt to unify Americans led to a “redrawing of the boundary between desirable and suspect ancestries” which opened the wider net of a European identity, Jews included, to equate with an American one (Ferraro 384). Saldívar lists four generic qualities of the postrace novel, but another implied quality is the novelist’s status as belonging to a racial or ethnic minority group.

What, then, do we make of white authors who are also attempting to reconfigure the thematics of race? Are they understood to be working with a “postrace” literary aesthetic as well? Or is the term reserved for minority authors? Under the ethnographic imperative, minority authors were expected to write about their respective communities, while at the same time, white authors who wrote about minority consciousness or experiences – Flannery O’Connor or William Faulkner, for example, both wrote black characters – could never be considered as being anything other than white authors. But in a postrace era, if authentic ethnography is no longer salient, or at the least no longer
valued to the same extent, then the case can be made that a reconfiguration of the thematics of race falls not only in the purview of ethno-racially marked authors. If we accept social scientific definitions of the “postrace era” to refer to a period in which the effects of essentialist notions of racism are unraveling, such effects must implicate everyone living in the era, whites as well as nonwhites. Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, makes it clear that race is not the purview of only those who find it thrust upon them; to be a white author in the United States, a country marked by an Africanist presence in every single one of its institutions and values, is to negotiate the racial legacy of the country, like it or not. People of color are not the only ones who must deal with the concept of race – this imperative is placed on everyone.

**Coveted Identities**

I focus on Jess Row’s *Your Face in Mine* to push past the inherent expectation that only “minority” writers are concerned with scrutinizing racial identities and racialization processes, to challenge any identitarian limitations placed on the postrace aesthetic. Indeed, even the marketing of Row’s novel seems to indicate a sense of surprise at a white author’s exploration of racial identity in the supposedly postrace era. Row’s whiteness is significant because it establishes expectations for the novel. On the book jacket of the hardcover version of *Your Face in Mine* are two blurbs from African American authors, a gesture of legitimation. Victor LaValle writes, “A white writer tackling race and class this honestly, this fearlessly? Talk about a rarity”; while Martha
Southgate adds, “In our time, when race is the most charged, complex (and perhaps most important) subject available for an American writer to take on, it is incredibly rare to encounter a book written by a white man that engages thoroughly, thoughtfully, and thrillingly with that very subject.” Lest anyone charge that these reviewers are reading too much into Row’s race, Row gestures to James Baldwin in his acknowledgements – “above all to James Baldwin for Another Country and for his words to white Americans, in anger and in love” – demonstrating his awareness of both his own whiteness and the social significance of the fact a white author would deign to write on the thorny subject of race.

Your Face in Mine follows in an established line of American “passing” narratives, with famous examples such as Nella Larsen’s Passing and George Schuyler’s Black No More. Unlike these two predecessors, however, Your Face in Mine updates the concept of racial passing or transformation to better fit the context of a globalized world economy. In the world of the novel, the “transracial” is posited outright as a parallel to the “transgender,” and plastic surgery and skin-coloring procedures, along with a total lifestyle overhaul that includes speech lessons and new biographies, allow a variety of characters to begin the process of transformation. The transformation is not entirely permanent, as racial reconstruction will require a lifelong regime of drugs and procedures, but it is as close to permanent as can be. Expanding the black-white binary at the center of American passing narratives, in Row’s novel, the cast of characters includes: a Japanese man in the midst of transforming into a dreadlocked Jamaican
Rastafarian; a Korean woman seeking a preppy New England look; a white man of Jewish descent who becomes a black entrepreneur in Baltimore; and the descendent of “Ellis Island” Americans who becomes Chinese.

In *Your Face in Mine*, Kelly Thorndike, the descendent of Ellis Island immigrants and an academic-turned-public radio producer, returns to his native Baltimore after the accidental deaths of his Chinese wife, Wendy, and their toddler daughter, Meimei. At the novel’s opening, upon returning to Baltimore, he runs into a black man he instinctually recognizes, although he has no idea how they might be acquainted: “I am looking into the face of a black man, and I’ll be utterly honest, unsurprisingly honest: I don’t know so many black men well enough that I would feel such a strong pull, such a decisive certainty. I know this guy, I’m thinking, yet I’m sure I’ve never seen his face before” (3). That Kelly feels the need to preface his admission that he does not really know that “many black men” with a defensive “I’ll be utterly honest, unsurprisingly honest” captures the fraught nature of racial discourse at large, one which will be explored continually in the novel. Kelly will be honest, but what he will reveal in his honesty is not surprising, given who he is. Kelly’s preface gives his admission a confessional tone; he is painstakingly aware that his lack of black acquaintances may reveal information about his upbringing, values, social habitus, class status, and the like, that he is hardly doing what is expected of the politically-correct white liberal, the “Good White Person” who was “meant to have a few, select, black friends” and was “supposed to live with the frisson of guilt that comes from owning an expensive, elaborate security system, and to mention, at
parties, that rates of incarceration for black males are six times the national average” (54). Kelly reveals the paradox of the transcendent, postrace, supposedly post-racist era: in a period in which color barriers are believed to have been broken in institutions all over the country, the institution of friendship is nonetheless affected or even dictated by race.

The black man in question, Martin Wilkinson, formerly Martin Lipkin, is an old friend of Kelly’s from high school who had since gone off the radar. Martin, formerly a Caucasian man with a gay Jewish father, enlists Kelly, despite the latter’s reluctance, to help him construct the narrative around his racial transformation, which he hopes to eventually publicize. He claims that he has “Racial Identity Dysphoria Syndrome,” feelings of being born in the wrong race, akin to “gender dysphoria” experienced by “transsexuals [who] claim to [have been] born in the wrong sex” (41). In a written self-diagnosis, Martin insists that his transformation is not a “perverse expression of ‘white guilt’” (41), and that although he had been fully aware of the nation’s history of racial injustice, he “was never led to feel a sense of responsibility or even involvement in the history of black people in America” (42). Rather, he simply felt that he was born into the wrong body. The fact that liberal white guilt never enters into the equation is meant to bolster the claim that he simply has felt black for his entire life, for he has nothing to gain in the way of moral absolution, in his transracial change. A psychological backstory is provided: born on a cultish commune to an indifferent gay father and a nameless mother who had only mated in the name of the cult, Martin’s initial experiences of community revolve around black people, with his best friend from his predominantly black
elementary school, Willie, and Willie’s family, who treat him with warmth and make him feel human, “as if for the first time” (114). Willie tells Martin repeatedly, not to worry, for he will become black soon enough: “your hair will fall out and grow back, and you’ll get darker, you’ll be just like the rest of us” (112).

Martin’s desire to become black, seemingly rooted in his desire for an identifiable community that possesses identifiable values, food, language, and rituals, corresponds to Paul Gilroy’s point that the unique currency of race – and the reason it is so difficult to dismantle – lies in its ability to be coveted and understood as some sort of “stabilizing force” that can “provide a unique protection against the various postmodern assaults on the coherence and integrity of the self” (*Postcolonial* 6). Under this logic, racially-marked people will always know what they are; rather than existential crises about confused identities in an increasingly disorienting and fractured world, their selfhoods will always be grounded in their race and racial-cultural communities. For this reason, racial difference is valorized rather than eschewed or annihilated in the name of transcendent universality. For Martin, who grew up in an indifferent household, with a father who was Jewish but denied this aspect of himself, the cultural markers of Willie’s family life – the constant presence of Cape Verdean food, the “enormous Ali-Frazier poster hanging up in the hall” (113), the Benin masks on the wall – are critically linked to a wholeness of identity and the possibility of happiness.

Martin is the first to suggest the fluidity of the concept of race, as he learns early that race is performative. However, this fluidity is actively fettered and policed by
various parties invested in the notion of authenticity: a white child should not earnestly participate, especially unconsciously, in black culture. After years at Shabazz, a largely black elementary school, Martin was finally forced to transfer to another school in a white neighborhood, where he had a hard time fitting in because he was speaking, “effectively, black English” (150). He received correction from whites and blacks alike and experienced his first instance of cultural policing. White school officials told him, “there’s such a thing as standard English, and that’s what we speak at this school” (150), and that he could unwittingly be offending black students with his linguistic patterns, while a black parent wrote in a scathing newspaper column, “What kind of perverse linguistic experiment is going on at Roland Park Elementary School? Why are they teaching white children to speak pidgin Black English?” (150-151). Although culture is clearly seen to be discursive and fluid, since it is so easily adopted by a child who has yet to be socialized in notions of cultural authenticity, it is policed from both sides, from within and without.

The fluidity of race is not only a matter of cultural performance. For Martin, it is linked to the phenotypical as well. Even the surgeries required to transform him from white to black, to make Willie’s childlike prediction come true, are not all that extensive, in his estimation: “[H]onesty, it’s nothing that surprising. Mostly it’s been done before. Collagen, rhinoplasty, eyelid changes, voice box alterations. A lot of nipping and tucking. You’d be surprised at how little it takes to make a difference” (33). The surgeries are successful insofar as they fully convince everyone in Martin’s new life, including his
black wife, adopted daughters, and business associates, who never question for a second that Martin may be anything other than who he presents himself as being. Martin’s realized goal of becoming black manifests itself not simply in a supposed wholeness of identity, as something that allows Martin to have a rich civic life, marked by active participation in the black church, in local associations of black entrepreneurs, and a beautiful black family. Alongside these benefits come threats as well, as in the threat of police brutality or in material and psychic suffering under racism. Kelly, when riding in Martin’s car, notices a change that comes over Martin when the two notice a police car nearby: “I feel a change in the envelope of energy around Martin, a crackle of static electricity” (176). Here it dawns upon Kelly that Martin must suffer daily from the threat of institutional racism and violence, that there is no question as to why Martin “puts on a suit and silk tie every day when he leaves the house” (177), whereas Kelly needs not worry himself as deeply with his appearance. The question posed implicitly in this thought is whether Martin is made more authentically black by his having to sort through both the affirmative and negative aspects of his new identity.

The limits of imagination

Kelly, considering how Martin has hired him and paid him suspiciously large amounts of money to construct his racial coming-out narrative, wonders why Martin even needs a story at all. “What does he need to explain? Look at his happiness: isn’t that reason enough?” (44), he thinks. Martin presses Kelly repeatedly about whether Kelly
can truly understand the phenomenon, without focusing too precisely on causation and circumstances, that Martin has simply always been a black man. If Kelly can accept this, Martin says, then he will understand the possibility of racial dysphoria happening to anybody. It becomes increasingly evident that Martin is slowly trying to scout Kelly for the procedure as well, for reasons which will be revealed later, although Kelly is not yet aware of Martin’s true intentions. For the moment, to support the claim that Kelly could have the kernel of racial dysphoria within himself as well, Martin asserts the significance of liberal environments that encourage flexibility in identity markers, like gender and sexual orientation, something Martin may be more primed to hold true, as his father was gay:

You think environment and suggestion has *no effect at all*? Either, it’s a fad, a style thing, which is bullshit, or it’s present in a much higher percentage of the population than we realize. Given the technology, the resources, the access, a change in social approval, it could be ten percent….And if one, why not the other? You have to turn the whole logic around. Not who are you *now*, but who would you most like to be? What is the ultimate form of you? (120)

If gender can be fluid in this marked way, why not race? The question might be especially salient given the 21st century understanding that race is less a biological fact but a social construction, something that must be performed, enacted, and policed. Post-civil rights era notions of race, as in Saldívar’s configuration, that conceive of race as actively *done*, rather than simply factual in a biological or genetic way, actually open the way for Martin’s thinking, compared to previous centuries’ understandings of race. Adolph Reed, for example, asserts that the problem in arguing that race is somehow fixed
and authenticatable as a category of identity while gender is fluid is to depend on essentialist thinking for both situations. Gender is “no less constructed than race,” according to Reed. He takes issue with the idea that “trans people transition in order to be the gender [they] feel inside” – arguably a claim that is made to support the notion of gender’s fluidity – because for him it ultimately takes for granted that gender is melded into sex type. In a sense, an attempt to subvert essentialist thinking thus ends up reifying it.

Martin is happy as a black man, far happier than he ever was as a neglected white child. The novel anticipates charges of appropriation on Martin’s part, as a white man who has willfully chosen to darken his skin and take all that he wants from black community and culture, without having been relegated to it by a matter of birth, by presenting us with the potentially revolutionary possibility that everyone will now be capable of appropriating from one another. At this point, appropriation stops being appropriation and instead becomes a kind of extreme, albeit mutual, embrace of otherness. Or, if appropriation is still considered to be a salient issue, as appropriation becomes mutual, with each identity carrying its own symbolic capital and a covetable status, then the playing field will have become leveled.

Kelly gives Martin’s questions serious consideration and thinks about what kind of transformation he could undergo, given the chance:

On the same note, who would I want to be? How far does it extend? Could I be, for example, Takeshi Kitano? I’ve always loved Takeshi Kitano. Something about the weariness in his eyes, and his utterly still face. Or, simply, better
looking. Given the chance, I might choose to be handsomer. Better bone structure. A slightly larger penis. From what point do I begin to empathize with Martin? Or does this stretch and distort the very idea of empathy, the powers of the imagination? I have no idea what it would be like to want to be a woman. In my life I’ve known two transsexuals: Donald Hathaway, who was two years below me at Amherst, and who became Dani my senior year, and Trish Holland, at WBUR, who called herself a boydyke, wore three-piece suits, and resembled a thinner Leonardo DiCaprio with dark hair. In neither case did I feel I had to understand them. There is a point where analogies end. Acceptance has to precede analogy. Acceptance is not equivalence.

Acceptance is not enough. (125)

Unlike Martin, Kelly does not think in terms of a change in race, but in terms of individual people he has admired – the acclaimed Japanese actor and director, Takeshi Kitano, provided here as an example – or in terms of aesthetic enhancements. He can conceive of racial reconstructive surgery only as a series of popular cosmetic surgeries, since the abstract concept of a completely new, unpublicized racial reconstructive procedure can be broken down into epistemologically manageable units of individual cosmetic changes that have already been in existence for decades, especially cosmetic surgeries that are unquestionably racially-inflected. The novel mentions eyelid surgery, popular in East Asia as a whole but especially in South Korea, along with rhinoplasty among Jews, as examples of racialized plastic surgery techniques. Cosmetic surgery, borne of physical insecurities, even if racially inflected, is a knowable entity for Kelly. He can understand the desire to look more attractive and he can imagine how this desire, for him, would manifest itself in a conventionally gendered way: a larger penis, obviously, would only reaffirm his masculinity. Changes to make oneself more beautiful,
a more attractive version of one’s given self, male or female or black or white, are comprehensible.

On the other hand, gender dysphoria, a change far more extreme than a nip of cartilage here, a folding of skin there, is not something Kelly can understand, and because it is incomprehensible to him, it is something he cannot empathize with, empathy being a project of imagination. And insofar as gender dysphoria is posited in the novel as a much more comprehensible, knowable, discoursed counterpart to racial dysphoria, Kelly’s inability to understand gender dysphoria predicates his inability to understand racial dysphoria. The analogy that likens the transracial and the transgender fails, for Kelly, because he does not understand either. Without this initial ability to understand, the question of empathy, as it pertains to Kelly’s relationship to Martin, is no longer a salient one. Empathy is simply impossible in this case.

In the last few lines of this quoted passage, our conception of empathy as a project of the imagination is revealed to be insufficient to connect the experiences of disparate people(s) together. Kelly’s statement, “There is a point where analogies end,” asserts that there is a point when analogy or metaphor – discursive acts, literary devices that ultimately constitute empathy by likening one perspective to another – simply cannot extend any further. For a premise or object to be analogized, for there to even be a discursive attempt at empathy, there must first be acceptance of the premise at hand. However, as Kelly says, “Acceptance is not equivalence.” Acceptance, which is the only thing that paves the road to analogy, and ultimately empathy, is still not the same as
being, rather than simply imagining, the object that demands empathy in the first place. Acceptance, in Kelly’s configuration, is thus not enough to bridge the distance created by difference, although once upon a time, it would have been a worthy and noble step in the right direction. The old attempts at understanding and imagining one that is other are thoroughly insufficient in the presence of the novel’s new biotechnologies, which may enable one to fully embody the other’s position, so that empathy will not come simply from discursive acts and imagination, but lived experience, from being. In Kelly’s eyes, language and imagination can’t beat the real deal.

Kelly’s largest confrontation with difference can be tied back to Wendy, whose seemingly authentic Chinese-ness had daily reminded Kelly, the Sinophile, that he himself could never really be Chinese, but would instead remain what the Chinese called “laowai,” or foreigner. In the backstory of the characters, Kelly and Wendy first meet at a school in Wudeng, China, where Kelly is a native-speaker English teacher and Wendy is an administrator. They live in China for several years, and at the present moment in the novel, Kelly is fluent in Chinese. He holds a PhD in East Asian Studies from Harvard, having written a translation dissertation on obscure Chinese poems and letters, and he names his daughter Meimei despite his wife’s desire to call her Julia. He mentions feeling the “simple gladness of waking up in Asia” (243). Kelly is told on numerous occasions that, despite his best effort at acculturation, he simply is not Chinese and cannot become so through sheer will and effort:
When I was first learning Chinese in college, enraptured by each new character, I used to write famous quotations on little slips of paper and carry them around in my pockets, like fortune-cookie fortunes. At parties, after the third or fourth beer, I would distribute them to friends—girls, especially—making up meanings as I went along. It was one last failed attempt to cultivate an aura of eccentric cool. Later, however, in China, my ability to quote famous proverbs from memory made me a minor celebrity. In restaurants, at official banquets, people would crowd around my table to listen to the laowai who could recite Confucius and Zhu Xi. Wendy hated it. They’re treating you like a monkey, she said. You’re supposed to meditate on these things, not broadcast them like songs on the radio. … You’re distorting them. You think you’re becoming Chinese, and you’re not. You’re becoming a parrot. (125)

* 

When I was first learning to cook Chinese food, Wendy would push me out of the way with her hip and say, that’s not the way to do it. It won’t taste right that way. What was I doing wrong? I would ask. I don’t know. I can’t explain it. Her mother was more straightforward. Once she tasted some black chicken soup I’d made, squinted, and said, the problem is, Lao Kaili, you’re not Chinese. (291)

In the first quote, good intentions aside, Kelly is acting as an “ethnic entrepreneur” in a number of ways. Yoonmee Chang states that the “ethnic” in “ethnic entrepreneurship” does not simply describe the “entrepreneur’s racial-cultural body” (136). More importantly, “ethnic” denotes that “ethnicity is a commodity, and that the entrepreneur’s particular enterprise is trading that commodity, through which he obtains class privilege” (136). In short, an ethnic entrepreneur uses ethnicity to advance himself in some capacity. Infatuated with Chinese culture, Kelly first decides to use his budding cultural knowledge in an attempt to bolster his cultural capital and thus gain a more privileged position in his social circle of elite college students. In China, he uses the same cultural knowledge, this time with a group of people even more intimately acquainted with it than he, but also for the same intention of personal advancement. In the latter case, it is not his sheer
knowledge of China that awards Kelly any cultural capital or social prestige, but rather, the fact that he is a white Westerner knowledgeable about a culture no one expects him to care about. In a way, it is precisely his white Americanness that continues to grant him any privileged status. By commodifying Chinese culture to the Chinese, instead of becoming more Chinese himself, Kelly ultimately reiterates and reaffirms his own Americanness.

The second quote speaks to the perceived *essence* of being Chinese that continually haunts Kelly. The novel, at various moments, seems to go against its status as a work of the postrace era of the 21st century by positing various essentialist notions, notions that we associate with previous centuries in the context of the United States. When Kelly first meets the post-transformation Martin, he thinks that Martin’s new physical characteristics are somehow essentially black, with Martin’s voice now “thoroughly, unmistakably, a black man’s voice, declarative, deep warm, with a faint twang in the nasal consonants” (6). Outside of the American context, Kelly is confronted by modern Chinese law, at least in the novel’s presentation, which precludes a multicultural society because “the spirit of the law is *jus sanguinis*” (13). The truth, painful for Kelly, is that “[f]oreign-born children of Chinese parents can give up their citizenship and return, with difficulty, but no Westerner has ever *actually* become a Chinese citizen” (13). Kelly, despite his best efforts, despite raising Chinese children, could never become Chinese, according to the law. To be Chinese, one must possess Chinese blood. As such, Kelly’s attempt at making Chinese food, despite not being
wrong or misguided in any glaring, identifiable way, even to the authentically Chinese Wendy, is just somehow off. There is no explanation for this – Kelly has not added three teaspoons of spice instead of one – except for the fact that Kelly simply is not Chinese. Specific cultural acts, such as cooking, are thus painted as inextricably linked to a racial-cultural community, reinforcing the notion that these acts can only be performed fully by those who belong to the community through blood ties.

The notion that blood ties are central to racial belonging is historically longstanding and has been understood literally at times, even to the detriment of public health. In the United States, it wasn’t until 1950 that the Red Cross announced that it would stop the practice of segregating blood donations; donations from black donors were kept in separate refrigerators, or black donors were seen on separate days from white donors. Before this, when the United States was aiding Britain through the “Plasma for Britain” program during WWII, the War Department had ordered the segregation of blood from black donors, worried about the propriety of sending “Negro blood to the British wounded” (Fields 59). Under the literal logic of blood ties, Kelly’s biotechnologically-enabled transracial movement from white to Chinese would change just the casing of his body, not the blood coursing through his veins. What transracial technology accomplishes, however, is a subversion of an essential notion of difference through an external, bodily transformation that affirms a fundamentally psychic transformation. Kelly does not become Chinese simply by having a series of surgical procedures; but rather, the surgery physically actualizes and reinforces a transformation
that takes place in Kelly’s mind. It is crucial that Kelly’s transformation into Curtis Wang, an American-raised Chinese man from Athens, Georgia, is one that revives Meimei and Wendy. In the penultimate section of the novel, the first-person narrator, who has been Kelly throughout the whole novel, states in present tense, “I wake up with Wendy sleeping next to me” (361), although Wendy has been dead since the beginning of the novel. In this moment, Meimei is alive and well and begs her father, who is headed to work, “Stay with us. Stay here. In this story” (365). There is no acknowledgment of this man’s past as a white man named Kelly; he is simply Curtis from Athens. Being Curtis from Athens enables Kelly to have a family that is still intact, a family that is not fractured due to death or from unassimilable racial differences. After the surgery, the protagonist thinks to himself, “I’ve become them” (368). The surgery transforms Kelly into a Chinese man in the same way that it brings back his wife and daughter from the dead: it allows Kelly to live out vision that is no less real for taking place in his mind.

**Consumer Choice as Philosophical Experiment**

Martin and Kelly are not the only characters in *Your Face in Mine* who see racial transformation as key to the realization of a coveted identity. If for Martin blackness is equated with a sense of interior wholeness and the potential of a rich civic life, then for Julie, a Korean anthropologist in the midst of transforming into white, whiteness is both the cause and the result of internalized racial self-hate. Julie has “any Korean woman’s pencil-straight black hair” (241) but at the moment her facial features look so fully
European that if she dyed her hair, no one would be able to discern any East Asian features in her. From the minute Kelly first lays eyes on Julie, she seems somehow familiar, like someone he should absolutely know. Julie explains that Kelly, an East Coast native and graduate of Amherst College, would be familiar with the type of face she was striving to obtain through racial transformation. When she first visited Dr. Silpa, the Thai plastic surgeon at the center of “racial reassignment surgery,” she had brought him college brochures:


The particular brand of whiteness that Julie covets is an intensely pale, preppy, Anglo-Saxon strain, found in New England, a skin color that is so extreme in its clarity and fairness that it is essentially pink, so translucent that the blood running under the skin is made extra radiant. To be white, in this idealized version, is to be multi-faceted and highly expressive. It is to be able to blush hotly and have all the color run to the cheeks, to look alive because red blood can be seen coursing through bluish veins. It is to possess a face in which emotions can easily be read. In short, it is to be legible, which stands in contrast to the historical inscrutability of the “Oriental.”¹ This is made especially clear

¹ Jane Hu writes of the “impersonality” of the Asian in her New Yorker article “The ‘Inscrutable’ Voices of Asian-Anglophone Fiction.” In Inscrutable Belongings: Queer Asian North American Fiction, Stephen
when Julie reveals that the American movie *Love Story* was the catalyst for her desire for racial reassignment:

> When I looked at Ali MacGraw’s face, my eyes burned. The way she spoke to him. The way she laughed. The way she suffered. It was all there! You didn’t need the subtitles. I’d never seen a face like that. I tried, when I was at home, looking at the mirror, to make all those expressions. And I couldn’t. I had no range of feeling. My face was hollow. It was a mask. By comparison, it wasn’t even human. (292)

Ali MacGraw’s expressions transcend the need for subtitles precisely because her face is the universal one, whereas Julie’s is coded as marginal and illegible. Much like the character of Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the prepubescent black girl who wants nothing more than to feel worthwhile, which is linked to a singular model of blue-eyed beauty, Julie struggles with the supposedly expressionless features of her East Asian face, highlighted and made ugly to her specifically in contrast to the exquisite expressiveness of European facial features. The illegibility of Asians has been a long-standing trope in American history and literature, from the physical illegibility of the identical moon-faced, shifty-eyed “Orientals” who comprised the threat of the “Yellow

---

Hong Sohn discusses the “inscrutable belongings” of queer storytellers of the Asian Diaspora. Richard Lee argues on the Asian American Psychological Association website that Asian Americans face institutional discrimination based on “perceptions of culturally-based personality characteristics of inscrutability and passivity.”

---

2 There can be an alternative to the way Julie feels about her features. In Chang-rae Lee’s *The Gesture Life*, this trope is noticeably reversed, with the mildness of East Asian facial features, in contrast to European ones, shown as something that can indeed be desirable in its own right. Doc Hata, the Korean-Japanese protagonist of the novel, is in a romantic relationship with his neighbor, a Caucasian widow. She remarks, admiring his features, “It’s just that your face is so unlike my late husband’s, I can’t help you. Bradley had such severe features, a long, narrow nose and deep-set eyes and a jutting chin. He was aggressive, in appearance. You have a wonderful gentleness to your face. A softer line to everything” (70).
Peril” facing the United States in the late nineteenth century to the social and political illegibility of Asians in a social system governed by a white-black binary (Yoonmee Chang 2). Eugenia Kaw, in a foundational 1991 ethnography of Asian American women’s plastic surgery practices, argues that “Asian-American women’s decision to undergo cosmetic surgery is an attempt to escape persisting racial prejudice that correlates their stereotyped genetic physical features (‘small, slanty’ eyes and a ‘flat’ nose) with negative behavioral characteristics, such as passivity, dullness, and a lack of sociability” (75). Julie, who grew up in an East Asian nation heavily influenced by American culture and politics, who attended a school with a Western curriculum, and who was continually bombarded with advertisements of white women at “bus stops, billboards, magazines” (Row 292) has fully internalized the message that her features are robotic, stoic, ugly, unreadable, and therefore inhuman.

For Julie, to be understood as human is to be white. However, the novel does not elevate whiteness as the ultimate racial ideal. Those who have not bought into Julie’s understanding that whiteness equates with humanity, for example, don’t glorify it in the same way that she does. In contrast to Julie’s description of whiteness as “delicate but fiery” and even colorful in its multilayered-ness, Martin asserts instead that whiteness is a lack, an absence. “Whiteness is tricky,” according to Martin, because “no matter what, it’s always about taking something away…. To get that ultra look, that Tilda Swinton thing, you have to go in there and strip all the melanin away” (247). To attempt whiteness is thus technologically difficult, according to the novel, a risky endeavor that has
produced the Michael Jacksons of the world. Just as Martin seemingly chooses blackness for its rich association with community, values, foods, and other cultural markers that were distinctly absent in the version of whiteness he had known, even physical or phenotypic blackness is associated with an isolatable and distinct richness that whiteness lacks: that of melanin.

Unlike Martin, who insists that he has simply felt like a black man in a white man’s body, a freak mistake of genetics and biology, which makes his decision to become black an obvious or predetermined one, Julie seems to wield far more choice in electing to transform races. She never pretends to suffer from racial dysphoria but is instead interested in theoretical, abstract questions, pertaining to stable subjectivity and the philosophical implications of getting to choose what any given body should look like:

We’re so focused on child development, adolescent development – as if, as adults, we stop changing and become one solid thing! Why shouldn’t I wake up one day and say, I need to change? No, it wasn’t always there. Not for me. No, it wasn’t biological. I wasn’t born in the wrong body. Whatever that means. Will I survive how I am? Of course. But why settle for survival? We’re talking about choice. Conscious, adult, rational choice. Should I use these words? Consumer choice. (292)

Yet for Julie, consumer choice is political as well; the two cannot be separated. Martin insists on the fluidity of racial boundaries, the performance of race, whereas Julie has a radical view of existent racial boundaries as something that can be dismantled or distorted via consumerism. The philosophical question at the heart of her consumerist-political decision to undergo surgery to become white is if there is indeed such a thing as a self “before there’s a racial self, a male or female self” (293). Simply put, must
consciousness be embodied? Is there a version of consciousness that has nothing to do with a physical form?

Julie continues on the subject of her “conscious,” “rational,” and “consumer” choice, provocatively asking:

If doctors could sustain your brain after your body died, and preserve, say, your optic nerves, so you’d just be a brain and two eyeballs in a jar, capable of seeing the world, capable of consciousness, but otherwise body-less, who would you be? Would you be yourself?...In other words, if consciousness isn’t embodied, is it even still human? Okay, so that’s still a theoretical question. But what if we made consciousness portable, across racial lines?...We have to decide, if we had the choice, would we eliminate gender? Would we eliminate race? Or, rather, make it all a matter of choice, a matter of means? (293-294)

Julie’s questions bring to mind the arguments of scholars of artificial intelligence and technology, like Hans Moravec, who propose the possibility of “downloading” (123) human consciousness into a computer drive, arguing that human identity is essentially “an informational pattern rather than an embodied enaction” (Hayles xii), an argument for the “posthuman.” Relatedly, we can consider a real-life example of a group of individuals who are working to actualize a dream of a disembodied consciousness, who call themselves Extropians or transhumans, a term that underscores their acknowledgment that they occupy a middle ground between regular old-fashion humans and an impending disembodied posthuman (Vint 176). Extropians see the body as irrelevant and “see humanity as a transitory stage in the evolutionary development of intelligence” (qtd. in Vint 176). The Extropian founder, Max More, has recorded the seven guiding principles of Extropian philosophy in “The Extropian Principles Version
3.0: A Transhumanist Declaration,” ranging from principles, relevant to our conversation here, such as “Perpetual Progress,” “Self Transformation,” and “Rational Thinking” (More). These principles are eerily echoed in Julie’s questions to Kelly – of why she should settle for mere survival when she can point to rational decision-making to modify herself in a way that she sees is an informed, controlled, transformative improvement.

Sherryl Vint points out that a desire to transcend the body is actually a desire for immortality, a way to be exempt from ethical obligations rooted in the world in which we live: “Technological visions of a post-embodied future are merely fantasies about transcending the material realm of social responsibility” (8). Desires to transcend the body act, paradoxically, as a way to get back to an old-fashioned liberal humanist understanding of the self, as contained, rational, and able to master the world outside it. Similarly, the philosophical solemnity of Julie’s thought experiment becomes undermined when we discover that her desire to transcend embodiment is, more than anything else, a selfishly motivated one, stemming from her deeply internalized racial self-hatred. Or rather, Julie does not actually wish to transcend embodiment, but she hopes to attain the particular embodiment that she thinks will bestow upon her the greatest privileges, including a sense of wholeness of self.

A cynical interpretation of Julie’s philosophical experiment becomes justified when we consider that inextricably linked with an unembodied, “transhuman,” or cyber model of subjectivity are capital and consumerism. In the end, Martin’s dreams of bringing racial reassignment to the rest of the world prove to be selfishly profit-driven,
motivated by a bottom line to make money more than anything else. More than an ontological experiment, more than an exercise in extending empathy, the goal of “Hue,” the company Martin has founded to fully develop racial reassignment technologies and market them globally, is to cater to market demands resulting from the commodification of culture. Among the people transitioning in the novel is Tariko, a self-described second generation Japanese Rasta who wants to become black and move to Jamaica. Tariko practices a thick Jamaican accent and refers numerous times to Bob Marley lyrics. Martin anticipates the potential of blackness as a commodity to be traded in the world market, as he declares to Kelly, “You have no idea the number of people – the German, the Danes, the Norwegians, the Japanese, the Saudis, the Pakistani rich kids from Lahore – who are already lining up. Black culture is global now. There’s hip-hop in a hundred different languages” (320).

Aside from the obviously self-interested motivations of those seeking to cash in from global interest in racial identities, the dark underbelly of the consumerist choice at the center of transracial change also lies in its potentially coercive nature due to its dazzling promise of something better: Paul Gilroy’s idea of the whole, unbroken self. Kelly eventually learns that he was actively “recruited” by Martin; their chance encounter in a parking lot in Baltimore is revealed to have been staged after Martin conducted extensive research on Kelly. Fully expecting Kelly to be vulnerable after losing his wife and daughter, Martin targets his former friend because Kelly, with his intimate knowledge of China, could serve as the tool that would allow Hue to market its services
to Asia. Not having anyone transitioning to an Asian “G.I.” or “goal identity” would be unwise for marketing purposes. Julie explains to Kelly that “[Y]ou can’t launch a product like this in Asia with the implication that somehow Asians aren’t, well, as desirable. You need that press conference and it needs to look like the world” (289). In the United States, a white person’s adopting of black culture and identity, complete physical transformation notwithstanding, would undoubtedly be considered gross cultural appropriation.

“Americans are stuck on the idea of race, no question. Here we’re going to be facing some serious hysteria,” Martin admits (34). Yet Martin recognizes that racial relations do not, and should not have to, operate everywhere according to an American system of social rules: “But the thing is, there are a hundred other ways to play this a hundred other places” (34). In Asia, one way to “play this” is to market racial reassignment as something that is mutually beneficial to all parties involved, as a procedure that is equally flattering to all the different racial variations of the world.

In the novel, going “global” equates with expanding into Asia. The passage highlights the untapped market potential of Asia as well as the specific desirability of black culture, both of which Hue must manipulate equally if it really intends to succeed in its capitalistic mission. Due to practical concerns like high linguistic demands and the anticipated challenges of assimilating into homogeneous East Asian societies, it is presented as a given that finding people willing to transform to an Asian G.I. will be difficult. But, importantly, it is implied that this difficulty also arises from the weaker marketability of Asianness, especially as compared to blackness. Black culture’s far-
ranging reach, its popularity from Europe to Asia to the Middle East, is repeatedly emphasized in the novel, but the desirability of blackness among white Americans and Europeans is highlighted in particular.

White obsession with, and commodification of, black bodies is by no means new. Nor is the interest in racial transformation. In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott points out that nineteenth-century minstrelsy in the United States operated according to a dialectic of both love and theft, a racial politics “underwritten by envy as well as repulsion, sympathetic identification as well as fear” (8). Blackface was fascinating to whites across class lines, as it had a largely working-class audience, but many of its performers were Northerners “raised in families with intimations of upward mobility” (49-50). Blackness had been conceived of as an arena for sensual indulgence, a sort of freedom from social mores for these minstrel performers, largely bohemians who, “[m]arginalized by temperament, by habit (often alcoholism), by ethnicity, even by sexual orientation” would “immers[e] themselves in ‘blackness’ to indulge their felt sense of difference” (51). Blackface acts were an early “manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of ‘blackness’” (6). Despite the essentialist racial ideas prevalent at the time, this earlier precursor to racialized plastic surgery nonetheless demonstrated the porousness of the color line. But lest we run the risk of being apologists for blackface, Michael Rogin also points out the limits to Lott’s emphasis on the “love” in *Love and Theft*, reminding us that blackface also served as a rite of passage for immigrants on their way to becoming American (5), for this “racial
cross-dressing” operated more in the serving of moving “settlers and ethnics into the melting pot by keeping racial groups out,” than for destabilizing raced identities (12). Rogin does well to remind us that in the 19th century, whites put on blackface to attack blacks (37). If a sense of desire undergirds blackface, we cannot forget that it is a destructive one.

The novel is highly self-conscious of the historical white-black power dynamic and wary of reinforcing it; for example, when Kelly starts having sexual fantasies about Martin’s wife, a charismatic black woman, he realizes that he had not been attracted to black women previously because it is “inconvenient, unsightly, because the image it brings to mind, let’s just say it, is the master and the slave, Sally Hemmings and President Jefferson” (194). Armed with such self-consciousness, the novel undertakes a project of subverting the historical racial hierarchy, specifically through the intertwined tropes of beauty and racial pride. The novel thus posits a reconfiguration of the beautiful as the most pressing challenge in the quest to introduce racial reassignment techniques to the world. Aside from Julie’s transition from Korean into the palest of Anglo-Americans, there is no other mention of a transformation into whiteness, which must be considered an intentional decision on the author’s part. Classical European beauty has always been the gold standard. But instead of upholding whiteness as the utmost ideal, the novel instead deems it to be cold and hostile to life:

“Look in the textbooks. Better yet, look in the museums. That translucent marble surface, the smoothness, the tight curves. That's what whiteness means. Horaios, do you know that word? The Hellenistic Greek term for beautiful. The same
etymology as *hour*. Meaning *of the moment*, or ripe. But the ripeness we’re talking about is something else.

… Something frozen in time. Not actual ripeness, not the ripeness of a plum, or an actual teenager, say, but ripeness as a disappearing point on the horizon. Not actual beauty, more like the tomb of beauty. What do you think Botox is all about? All those whiteness creams, all those pale waif-models? It’s the death glow. The corpse pose. (332-3)

Dr. Silpa, the physician at the center of all the racial reconstruction surgeries, has been developing his surgeries and skin-darkening drugs for years, but without any interest from the scientific community. Reviewers who looked over his journal articles were unwavering in their conviction that “[n]o one would willingly consent to have his skin darkened permanently” (331). To introduce racial reassignment surgery to the world, to introduce the idea blackness could be preferable to whiteness, would require a fundamental epistemological shift in the world.

Given the long American history of passing-for-white narratives; of works treating racial self-hate under Eurocentric ideals, such as *The Bluest Eye* or the 1959 film *Imitation of Life*; of long-ingrained racist sentiments in popular culture about non-Anglo physical features, the novel subverts the typical racial self-hate we have come to expect of minority groups by presenting us with an extreme case of white self-hate in Kelly. Upon reading a section from *The Souls of Black Folk* in which W.E.B DuBois mourns the death of his infant son, our narrator, who has gone through the same loss of a child, is understandably mournful. Yet, he reacts violently against himself for his feelings, telling himself: “Your self-pity is unbelievable, I tell myself …. You myopic, narcissistic,
privileged motherfucker, with your brand-new offshore bank account, your severance checks, your sheer, everyday whiteness, your get-out-of-jail-free card, you who can have it both ways, any way you like” (127). Kelly chastises himself, a “privileged” white man, for daring to sympathize with and mourn alongside a man like DuBois.

There is no black character transitioning into white, because the creation of such a character would result in the reiteration of the very tropes that the novel is challenging. It also comes as no surprise, then, that the only character in the novel transforming into white has a final breakdown and is ultimately unwilling to accept the decision she has made. As Kelly’s race-change draws near, Julie tries to paint a clear image of the bioethical sins they will be committing by bringing racial reassignment to the public. She warns Kelly that his role in entering the Chinese market will be to get into tissue farming – hair, skin, teeth from prisoners and other invisible people at the bottom of Chinese society – but Kelly rejects her warnings. Their mutual provocation ends in the following way:

   Oh, you have no idea about me, she says. Don’t even bother to guess. But isn’t that the point? It’s up to you. Shouldn’t we own up to that?
   White people that we are.
   Don’t call me that.
   Why? Isn’t that what you wanted, Julie-nah? (336-337)

After adopting whiteness, Julie cannot handle the charges of white privilege. Fulfilling the desire to become white has done nothing to repair any sense of fracturing or unhappiness Julie had before her transition. The confrontational questions she poses to Kelly about his expectations of the surgeries – “You think, what you’ll be less divided,
more *yourself*? You’ll just be the same ball of questions as always” (335) – come from firsthand knowledge that the realization of a desired racial identity ultimately makes no difference in personal happiness or in the realization of some truer, better, more intact self. Julie’s final disintegration, which entails the epiphany that she can’t even accept the white identity she has purchased, results in her shooting and killing Dr. Silpa, the only surgeon in the world who knew how to perform these procedures. Hue’s enterprise is completely threatened.

**Conclusion**

It seems that the only way to read Martin’s initial claims of racial dysphoria, of simply feeling like a black man in a white man’s body, is cynically. The written life-story he provides Kelly – from the story of the first time he saw a black woman and projected a motherly image on her, to his formative experiences with his black best friend, to his eventual drifting and selling of drugs after the death of his father to AIDS – is discredited once Kelly has a private investigator conduct a background check on Martin. It is possible that parts of the story are true, but there is no way to know which are sincere and which are totally fictitious. Martin Lipkin is revealed to be a criminal who served eighteen months in a Vermont jail for identity theft, after which he fell completely off the grid. It is obvious that a significant reason for Martin’s transformation from Lipkin to Wilkinson, from white to black, is to shed the trappings of a failed man and to run away, in the service of creating a better identity, one which could fit into a preexisting
community of people that would welcome him as one of their own. Martin’s motivation for racial reassignment stems not from racial dysphoria but from a desire to reform himself the easy way, to literally become a new man, rather than bettering the previous one. By the end of the novel, it appears that Martin was actually some sort of criminal mastermind all along, with capitalistic gains being his primary motivations. Becoming black is an extended version of identity theft.

Theoretical texts have addressed the implications of capitalist, biotechnological advances on notions of human difference. Rosi Braidotti warns that the global economy “ultimately unifies all species under the imperative of the market” and that “its excesses threaten the sustainability of our planet as a whole” (63), binding humans through a sense of shared vulnerability. Paul Gilroy, who argues for the need to “liberate humankind from race-thinking” (After Empire 12) suggests provocatively that this species-level vulnerability is precisely what might force us to overcome ideas of racial difference. It is difficult, according to Gilroy, for us to move away from race-thinking in an age in which celebrations of racial difference, in the form of self-defensive racial solidarity, which was initially meant to serve as protection from the shame and pain of racial subjugation, now give race a perceived and symbolic currency. Gilroy has consistently maintained in his writings that “race” (which he places in quotation marks) is not the cause of racism, but rather the product. He warns repeatedly that racism, an ideology, has “amplified and projected” racialized difference “in order to remain intelligible, habitable, and productive” (Postcolonial 31). According to Gilroy, the focus of our inquiry should thus
be the ideology that is racism, rather than the concept of distinct races. Once we have a handle on the “alchemical power” (32) of racism, we will have to do the difficult work of choosing between two alternatives:

We can opt to reproduce the obligations of racial observance, negotiating them but basically accepting the idea of racial hierarchy and then, inescapably, reifying it. Or there is a second and far more difficult and rewarding alternative, in which for clearly defined moral and perhaps political reasons we try to break its spell and to detonate the historic lore that brings the virtual realities of ‘race’ to such dismal and destructive life. (32)

The latter call to action is utopically attractive and, as Gilroy says, morally imperative, but how exactly will it be possible to dismantle the concept of “race” altogether? One of the proposed answers is biotechnology. He writes in Against Race of the case of Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman from Baltimore who died from cervical cancer at the age of 31, whose cells were taken from her body without consent by a cell biologist at Johns Hopkins Hospital (19). Her cells have been critical to cancer research, and they have also been hugely profitable for the biotech industry. Also of note is that the researchers working on the cells did not even know at the beginning that the cells had come from a black woman. The case of Henrietta Lacks “raises important issues about when material of this type extracted from a body can be considered human tissue and the point at which it is to be identified alternatively as a form of property that belongs, not to the person in whose body it began, but to the commercial interests involved in selling it for private profit” (19). For Gilroy, racial difference thus becomes secondary to the larger category of species or humanity, as “race-defying cells, the body’s smallest vital
component, have become absolutely central to controversies over the limit and character of species life” (20). Due to biotechnology, instead of considerations of race, we will be faced with an “[a]wareness of the indissoluble unity of all life at the level of genetic materials” which will “lead to a stronger sense of the particularity of our species as a whole” (20). Biotechnology, with all its sinister power, may thus lead to an emancipatory transcendence of race, albeit an uncomfortable one.

In *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Denise Ferreira da Silva remarks that “Gilroy announces that the demise of race is already under way, thanks to the radical alteration of bodies promised by genetic manipulation and the commodification of the black male body as an object for global and suburban white consumption” (8), both of which are themes explored by *Your Face in Mine*. However, the fundamental problem with Gilroy’s thinking, according to da Silva, is that “the humanist desire” for science to ironically “denounce race’s scientific irrelevance” cannot reduce the “*materiality* (body and social position) of the economically dispossessed black female” (9). The repeated calls for transcendence or universality over racial difference, even with the support of the supposedly empirical scientific fields, nonetheless do not change the fact of the lived realities of racialized identities. Henrietta Lacks’s cells were not immediately understood to have come from a black body, but the extraction of her cells was inextricably linked to her being a poor minority woman. Da Silva writes, “That cancer cells do not indicate dark brown skin or flat noses can be conceived of as emancipatory if one forgets, or
minimizes, the political context within which lab materials and the benefits of biotechnological research will be distributed” (9).

In general, da Silva is highly suspicious of science, the privileged domain for the production of what is understood to be truth. Science and history coupled together created the universal subject, as the nineteenth-century-specific scientific production of the “racial” was a “productive and violent gesture necessary to sustain the post-Enlightenment version of the Subject” (xiii). The “racial” is not something that is simply unaccounted for or unexplained by modern subjecthood but is what allowed modern subjecthood to come into being at all. Da Silva asserts that science was one of the tools that produced cultural difference in the first place; anthropologists manufactured culture as a scientific context. Appeals to science, like Gilroy’s, to bolster humanistic claims and eliminate the concept of race do not take in consideration, or are willfully ignorant of, the fact that science and history, far from being objective accounts, have been used as “weapons” in global oppression (xix).

The novel has undeniably tapped into the deeply uneasy discourses surrounding racial difference and identity formation, and the globally commercialized practices that endow some with the ability to pick and choose the features they want, to become a little bit “transracial.” In Brazil, for example, anthropologist Alexander Edmonds writes that an “African” body is upheld as a feminine ideal (136) while European facial features reign supreme as the most desirable, and patients ask for specifically racialized modifications, such as a Caucasian nose (146). In South Korea, eyelid surgery to make
the eyes bigger, rounder, and more Western is overwhelmingly popular. In a surprising twist, in 2014, the year that Row’s novel was released, a blonde-and-blue-eyed Brazilian man named Max went to South Korea to have ten procedures to create an epicanthic fold and single eyelids, the completely reverse of the most popular procedure in the country; the story was not widely publicized outside of Korea and Australia (Hoh). And in the United States, just one year after *Your Face in Mine* was published, parodically portraying “transracial” identities, civil rights activist Rachel Dolezal was outed by her parents for being a white woman, though she had passed for years as a biracial black woman. She would go on to call herself, much to popular disdain, “transracial.”

Dolezal, whose childhood photos show a freckled, light-haired, white girl, had tanned her skin and curled her hair in an attempt to pass for black. The details used to constitute her black identity are numerous: she attended graduate school at Howard University; claimed to be the daughter of a black father; became the guardian of her black brother, whom her parents had originally adopted; married a black man and had a child with him; served as the president of a Spokane chapter of the NAACP; and lectured on the politics of black hair at her teaching job at Eastern Washington University. In a local news clip that has since gone viral, in which a reporter first asks her the question “Are you African-American?” Dolezal looks perplexed and responds, “I don’t understand the question.” Eventually, in a July 2015 interview in *Vanity Fair*, the same magazine that broke the story that same year of Bruce Jenner’s transition into Caitlyn Jenner, which
paved the way for fierce public debate about the legitimacy of the transracial as compared
to the transgender, Dolezal maintains the validity of her black identity:

> It’s not a costume….I don’t know spiritually and metaphysically how this goes,
> but I do know that from my earliest memories I have awareness and connection
> with the black experience, and that’s never left me. It’s not something that I can
> put on and take off anymore. Like I said, I’ve had my years of confusion and
> wondering who I really [was] and why and how do I live my life and make sense
> of it all, but I’m not confused about that any longer. I think the world might be—
> but I’m not.

* I just feel like I didn’t mislead anybody; I didn’t deceive anybody. If people
feel misled or deceived, then sorry that they feel that way, but I believe that’s more
due to their definition and construct of race in their own minds than it is to my
integrity or honesty, because I wouldn’t say I’m African American, but I would
say I’m black, and there’s a difference in those terms. (Samuels)

Dolezal doesn’t explain the difference between African American and black, but even in
the days after being outed, she still firmly maintains that she is black. The photos in
*Vanity Fair* show that Dolezal has traded in her curls for long, blonde box braids.

The public response directed toward Dolezal was massive and negative, with
Dolezal being lambasted for having lied for years and for having appropriated the identity
of a marginalized group of people. The latter criticism was frequently supplemented with
the idea that while Dolezal could have the wherewithal and the temporary technology
(tanning, makeup, perming) to pass for biracial and claim a black identity, darker-skinned
black women would never be afforded the ability or technology to appropriate a white
identity. This, numerous blogs and articles state, was the grossest aspect of Dolezal’s
self-presentation as a black woman: the fact that Dolezal got to choose when so many
other cannot choose.³ Or if they were to choose, as in the case of individuals who receive racialized plastic surgery, their choices would be pathologized as tied to internalized racial self-hate, inferiority complex, or a desire to appeal to dominant white culture, whether for practical or psychological purposes.

I mention Rachel Dolezal not to simply point out her sins in perpetuating an act of cultural appropriation or to highlight the ways in which her co-opting of a black or biracial identity was self-serving in tangible or material ways; this work has already been done, and justifiably so, in forms ranging from news articles to television parodies, comedy sketches to social media. Rather, I posit that it is no coincidence that the explosion of Dolezal’s story in our popular consciousness occurred so soon after the publication of Row’s novel. Racial boundary-crossing has a long history in the United States, and the pressures of the supposedly postrace or colorblind era are clearly exacerbating deeply-held, conflicting feelings about racial desire and identity. It is far easier to point to Dolezal’s résumé and point to the salaried positions and literal benefits she obtained most likely due to her racial self-presentation. It is far more difficult to point with certainty to the immaterial, invisible, and psychic motivations and processes that led her to assume a different self. Not the mention the possibility of deep pleasure as well – a sensual pleasure in masquerade that far exceeds the crude consumerist satisfaction of

³ Consider, for example, the title of Syreeta McFadden’s article on Rachel Dolezal in The Guardian: “Rachel Dolezal’s definition of ‘transracial’ isn’t just wrong; it’s destructive: [t]o deny ethnic and cultural differences is to erase the identities of those who cannot choose.”
exploiting race for essentially material gains. Though race critical theorists are predisposed to pointing out the ways in which race operates mostly in service of capital, Barbara and Karen Fields do well to remind us that “racist concepts do considerable work in political and economic life; but, if they were merely an appendage of politics and economics, without intimate roots in other phases of life, their persuasiveness would accordingly diminish” (11). These “intimate roots” are connected to immaterial pleasures: indulgent sensuality, as Lott writes of blackface, or in the creation of American national belonging, as Rogin writes also of blackface. In the spirit of indulgence, I close this sequence with a self-explanatory quote from Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Gravity Rainbow*, addressing the centrality of race – and not simply capital – to the European colonial enterprise:

“What’s a colony without its dusky natives? Where’s the fun if they’re all going to die off? Just a big hunk of desert, no more maids, no field-hands, no laborers for the construction or the mining – wait, wait a minute there, yes it’s Karl Marx, that sly old racist skipping away with his teeth together and his eyebrows up trying to make believe it’s nothing but Cheap Labor and Overseas Markets. . . . Oh, no. Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul, where a fellow can let his pants down and relax, enjoy the smell of his own shit. Where he can fall on his slender prey roaring as loud as he feels like, and guzzle her blood with open joy. EH? Where he can just wallow and rut and let himself go in a softness, a receptive darkness of limbs, of hair as woolly as the hair on his own forbidden genitals. Where the poppy, and cannabis and coca grow full and green, and not to the colors and style of death, as do ergot and agaric, the blight and fungus native to Europe. Christian Europe was always death, Karl, death and repression. Out and down in the colonies, life can be indulged, life and sensuality in all its forms, with no harm done to the Metropolis, nothing to soil these cathedrals, white marble statues, noble thoughts…. (321-322)
We are to recall here what *Your Face in Mine* has stated of the supposed beauty of whiteness, how it is found in “translucent marble surface” (332) and in “museums,” not so different from cathedrals. Beauty that is a pale “death glow” (333). If whiteness is beauty that is marble, cold, and tight, a “ripeness” that is “a disappearing point on the horizon,” (332) then its dark counterpart is beauty that is slack, warm, and fleshy. A ripeness that does not disappear or recede but envelopes, thick and juicy. Or at least, such is the imagined, expected, and overdetermined beauty of the dark if it is to serve as the necessary counterpart to the white.

Considering the fraught real-world arena of racial discourse in the U.S. and beyond, we must recognize the importance of fiction’s ability to allow for imaginative engagement with characters that are negotiating racial identity in ways that are perhaps discomfiting and fascinating at the same time. It is possible to dismiss the Rachel Dolezals of the world and simply brush off the notion of a “transracial identity” as a laughable myth – as a consumerist shortcut to deal with the crises of identity burdening those who live in an increasingly global, anxiety-ridden, modern world, or as an intense, self-serving appropriation of racial-cultural identity. But it is precisely the speculative and fictional nature of *Your Face in Mine* that allows for a deeper exploration of the technologies of the transracial, for an examination of the invisible and immaterial elements involved in the negotiations of racial identities. Catherine Gallagher argues that fiction allows for “risk-free emotional involvement” with characters who only exist in the realm of the text, a uniquely pleasurable quality of fiction. In the case of Row’s novel, a
speculative and fictional treatment of the fraught subject of racial experimentation and
desire gives us the safe and pleasurable distance from which we can engage with the
potential impact of transracial technologies: technologies related to our desires to
embody, play with, try on, and touch our others. As a fictional work, not an empirical
study answering the demands of facticity or a news source pretending at neutrality or
objectivity, *Your Face in Mine* has the freedom to seriously examine the complex, messy,
lived realities of racial identity and racial desire.

*Your Face in Mine* hints that the transracial or racial reconstruction techniques it
presents cannot ultimately be sustainable, but the case is that even if the surgeries had
been successfully publicized and marketed in the world of the novel, they would still not
be available to all. Martin wants to market the procedure to the world specifically
because of its lucrative potential, so the surgeries would have to cost a fortune.
Theoretically, the procedures would have been open to all people from every single racial
category imaginable, so that dark-skinned black people would transition to pale-skinned
East Asians or Caucasians just as easily as the reverse could occur. But as Julie indicates,
some “Goal Identities” are bound to be more popular than others. And the prohibitive
costs would ultimately have made the procedures available to the richest of the rich,
making the matter of choice, once again, applicable only to the already-privileged.

The novel ends before the marketing and realization of this new business could
ever occur, Julie having killed Dr. Silpa, a murderous act that shows the extent to which
she has been plagued by overlapping, paradoxical feelings of both attraction and

78
revulsion for whiteness. Following this, the novel closes on a wonderfully ambiguous, in-between moment, when Kelly-Curtis is still mid-flight to an idealized China, preparing himself to finally go “home.” In this space – both Kelly-Curtis’s headspace, and the literal airspace above nation-states, with their demands for citizenship – the possibilities for self-realization are endless. The inconclusive conclusion shows us that the novel is less concerned with the real procedures that would literalize racial transformations. It is, instead, much more interested in allowing us to be suspended in an imaginary space as we enact the multiple negotiations at the heart of racial identity and racial desire.
2. Chang-rae Lee’s On Such a Full Sea and the Limits of Colorblind Representation

Chang-rae Lee’s latest novel, On Such a Full Sea, imagines a future United States that has become dominated politically and economically by the nation we know today as China and projects a corresponding vision of once-industrial cities like Baltimore (now called “B-Mor”) or Detroit (“D-Troy”). Environmental devastation has made parts of the world completely uninhabitable, and the United States has become divided into three rigid classes, with consumers living in “Charter Villages,” producers living in “production facilities,” and the lawless poor living out in the “open counties.” Against this backdrop, the novel is stubbornly and self-consciously reluctant to define the parameters of individual identity or a sense of belonging. The very first lines of the novel call individual identity into question: “It is known where we come from, but no one much cares about things like that anymore. We think, Why bother? Except for a lucky few, everyone is from someplace, but that someplace, it turns out, is gone.” Immediately apparent is that the novel is narrated unconventionally by an unnamed first-person plural, “we.” History, nationality, and geography no longer appear to be important in a world in which those things are constantly in flux, to the point that they seem to have been essentially eradicated. Those who cannot trace their lineage to a particular place are considered “lucky”; to be bestowed the knowledge of a past, then, whether documented or mythic, is a burden that keeps them from enjoying the present. More than any notion
of individual identity, what the collective narrators value is a routine composed of a highly regulated workday and time spent in the presence of the community.

Instead of proper-named protagonists rooted in a specific time and place, *On Such a Full Sea* presents us with an unusual narrative collective living in some future projection of Baltimore, which is called “B-Mor.” B-Mor has been settled as a labor colony by the descendants of New China, which has reached absolute saturation and is no longer inhabitable, with its “rooftops a mess of wires and junk” and the “river tea-still, a swatch of black” (1). The “we” of this collective begin to describe a seemingly archetypal love story about two characters, Fan and Reg, who are only known by their first names. The tale: a young woman, deeply in love and pregnant, leaves home in search of her lover, who has silently disappeared from their hometown. The young woman, never to return, then becomes the stuff of lore in the town’s communal memory. Fan is gone now, and “whether she’s enduring or suffering or dead is a matter for her household, whatever their disposition” (2), not for the tellers of the story. That the narrators are not attached to Fan is significant and signals to us a meta-fictional turn away from plot and

---

1 *On Such a Full Sea* marks an obvious and curious departure from the rest of Lee’s oeuvre, which mostly consists of novels that treat individual identity in the context of diaspora, immigration, and assimilation, with a strong attachment to proper-named characters, often of Korean descent, and established settings. *Native Speaker*, Lee’s first and most famous novel, follows Henry Park, corporate spy, as he reflects on his upbringing as the child of Korean immigrants in multiethnic Queens. In *A Gesture Life*, Doc Hata, a retired Korean-Japanese doctor, recalls his experiences as a soldier in Japan during World War II as he resides in the prosperous suburbs outside of New York City. *Aloft* explores the mind of the Italian-American Jerry Battle, whose Korean immigrant wife commits suicide in their Long Island home. Finally, *The Surrendered* examines several characters haunted by the legacies of a war-torn South Korea, including an orphan, June Han, and the woman in whose care she seeks comfort, the deeply troubled American missionary, Sylvia Tanner.
representation, toward the craft of storytelling itself. As Brian Richardson writes in *Unnatural Voices*, the “we” voice transcends the “strictures of realism” (42) since the voice is unable to gain access into private thoughts of characters. Lee turns away from ethno-realism, his typical mode, to a dystopically-inclined novel that declares that “more and more we can see that the question is not whether we are ‘individuals’… but whether being an ‘individual’ makes a difference anymore” or “whether we in fact care” (3). In sketching out a world in which the typical categories of identification seem unrecognizable – family, ethno-racial groups, nation – the novel declares its political and experimental stakes in imagining a new world order.

With characters that seem less like psychologically realized individuals than ideas or concepts, and a location that differs significantly from the author’s own historical context – formal features that Joanna Russ and Darko Suvin would argue are characteristic of science fiction – *On Such a Full Sea* gestures toward the speculative. The novel is interested in “world-building” by repositioning the boundaries of the various concepts – national allegiances, governments, economic systems, identity markers – that organize the world we know today. This is, of course, a task all too pertinent in an increasingly globalizing era. What seems incongruous about this supposedly futuristic or alternative backdrop is the novel’s deployment of an existent social order, a race-based hierarchy that places the descendants of African Americans at the bottom. This is also done using the veiled, colorblind language that is typical of the post-civil rights era. Why does Chang-rae Lee, who has written so eloquently and realistically about black-yellow
relations in *Native Speaker*, seem to deploy this racial hierarchy in a futuristic novel? Readers who had hoped for a radical treatment of race relations in this novel may be disappointed. But instead of reading *On Such a Full Sea* as a complicit tool in the reproduction of the power structures we can identify in our world today, I argue that the novel works as a social critique, as an inherent exploration of the politics of representation. If the individual story’s significance is diminished, as the novel puts forth, then the ability of the individual story to affect the community – to uplift or advance it or, conversely, to depress or degrade it – is also diminished. *On Such a Full Sea*’s defiant disinterest in the importance of individual narrative thus works to push us to appreciate the limits of narrative in general to effect change on a collective level. Read as a social critique, the supposed shortcoming of the novel – namely, its inconsistent deployment of colorblind language – morphs into a quiet but important tool for transforming our expectations about societal change and our ability to imagine new worlds for ourselves.

The novel encourages us to visualize and thus humanize the supposed stars of the plot, describing Fan as so petite that most people assume she is still a child, while Reg is said to possess skin of a “wheat-brown, buttery hue” (6). Yet Reg does not speak once in the novel, nor is he fleshed out in any significant way, as a character with feelings or ideas or any attributable experiences; he is only described in his absence. Any words or actions attributed to Fan are only relayed to readers by the unusual collective narrative voice, whose identity is impossible to pin down. Although in certain passages the voice hints at membership in a single clan (72), and at being neither children nor fully adults.
(192), leading us to understand that they may in fact be peers of the teenaged Reg and Fan, it is never explicitly made clear to whom the “we” refers. In fact, any effort to discern the identity of the speakers would be a wasted one. All we can ascertain is that the voice is not omniscient. There is no documenting of what happens to Fan on the road, during her supposedly extensive travels through the territories outside B-Mor, and the narrative’s guess is as good as anyone else’s.

The relative uncertainty of the narrative voice is apparent on the level of grammar, as various experiences attributed to Fan are expressed using a past probable tense instead of a simple past tense. For instance, the collective speaker states that “Fan must have dreamed” (37, emphasis mine) instead of simply stating that “Fan dreamed”; that “she may have had more particulars in mind” (157, emphasis mine) instead of saying unequivocally that she had such particulars in mind, and so on. There are myriad examples of this narrative uncertainty, on just about every page. The actions and thoughts attributed to Fan are, at best, a matter of opinion, which the voice self-consciously impresses upon readers: “We reshape the story even when we believe we are simply repeating it. Our telling becomes an irrepressible vine whose hold becomes stronger than the originating stock and sometimes even topples it, replacing it altogether” (186). Any desire to maintain the supposed truth or fact of the original story becomes irrelevant, according to the voice, as each retelling ultimately takes the place of the version of the story that preceded it. The frequency of such declarations leads us to presume that what is really important is not the truth behind what happens to Fan in her search for Reg, but
rather, the way in which the narrative is crafted. Instead of directing our attention to the heroic lovers with their unknown adventures along an unknown road, we must focus on the structure of the narrative and on the larger project of storytelling itself.

On a formal level, there are generic attributes that suggest that On Such a Full Sea gestures toward science fiction, the most blatant ones being the collective level of narration and the lack of true narrative interest in the arc of the alleged protagonist, Fan. Joanna Russ, in her classic essay “Toward an Aesthetics of Science Fiction,” proposes three related formal characteristics of science fiction: science fiction is essentially didactic; its protagonists are always collective; and its emphasis is “always on phenomena – to the point that reviewers and critics can commonly use such phrases as ‘the idea as hero’” (113). Indeed, as Fredric Jameson writes in Archaeologies of the Future, complaints about the absence of psychologically “interesting” characters in science fiction mark the “conventional high-cultural repudiation of SF” (xiv). If science fiction is to be baldly and insistently didactic, then it follows that the individual characters in the narrative serve only as vehicles of the lesson to be imparted. Russ elaborates that protagonists of science fiction novels are never individuals, although “individuals often appear as exemplary or representative figures” (113). The collectivity of the protagonists is undoubtedly crucial to On Such a Full Sea. The narrative voice’s relation to Fan in the novel is worth examining in greater detail:

We can talk about her openly because hers is no grand tragedy, no apocalypse of the soul or of our times. Yes, there are those who would like to believe otherwise; that each and every being in the realm is a microcosm of the realm. That we are
heartened and chastened and diminished and elevated by a singular reflection. This is a fetching idea, metaphorically and otherwise, most often enlisted for promoting the greater good. But more and more we can see that the question is not whether we are “individuals.” We can’t help but be, this has been proved, case by case. We are not drones or robots and never will be. The question, then, is whether being an “individual” makes a difference anymore. That it can matter at all. And if not, whether we in fact care. (3)

This is a quote that will appear again in this chapter. In the current context, the narrative “we” treats Fan as a topic of conversation because she is an exemplary or representative figure for the entire group. She is exemplary precisely and ironically because she is not extraordinary; her singular story is not necessarily one that will lead others in her community to be either “diminished” or “elevated” in any way. To believe that Fan’s story – or any one story – could have such an effect on the community would be, in the language of the novel, best suited for political ends, something “enlisted” by an unnamed force for benevolent socialist ends (“the greater good”). The narrative “we” differentiates itself from “those who would like to believe” in the enduring legacies of individuals but ultimately condescends to this latter group as victims of artful (“metaphorical”) and wishful thinking. The point of the passage, in the end, is to declare that individuality is a passé concept, which it of course does, paradoxically, while telling the story of a particular individual. Despite the novel’s gestures toward reconfiguring the identity markers currently organizing our world, it nonetheless contains vestiges of them. This is true of the novel’s treatment of individuality – which the novel simultaneously invokes and undermines – and, in the pages to come, of race – which it attempts to disrupt but ends up reifying.
In addition to a collective speaker, in science fiction the standards of plausibility “must be derived not only from the observation of life as it is or has been lived” – which is the standard of realist or naturalist writing – but “rigorously and systematically from science” (Russ 113). Darko Suvin’s famous principle of “cognitive estrangement” refers to the “factual reporting of fictions” (Nodelman 24) that has the significant effect of distancing or estranging us from our understandings of reality – the ways in which science fiction describes unfamiliar things as though they were familiar, leading us to question our assumptions about reality. Science fiction must feature science, admittedly a wide-ranging category that encapsulates the “hard” and social sciences, but also “disciplines which as yet exist only in the descriptive or speculative stage” (Russ 113) such as political theory. With regard to Lee’s novel, the highlighted term here is “speculative,” as the “science” at hand in this case is sociopolitical. Lee’s novel, concerned as it is with the potential conditions that will lead to a reconfiguration of the United States and its citizens, is essentially an experiment in “utopia,” what Suvin describes broadly as “a verbal construction” that manifests “an alternative location radically different in respect of sociopolitical conditions from the author’s historical environment” (40) and as “the sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction” (61).

Taking a cue from Ramón Saldívar, whose aesthetic interpretation of the new term “speculative realism” allows us to glide over the many contentious debates regarding the generic parameters of science fiction, utopia, futuristic fiction, and the like, On Such a Full Sea can be generally called a speculative novel. Specifically, it can be
called a speculative realist novel, in the way it blends realism with aspects of genre fictions, such as science fiction, in order to address representations of racial formation in the United States. Saldívar borrows his usage from a group of European philosophers and modifies it; the phrase “Speculative Realism” \(^2\) first appeared in continental philosophy in 2007 at a conference at Goldsmith College (Willems), as an umbrella term uniting philosophers working against correlationism, or the “idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (Willems). Under correlationism, object and thought are seen as inherently connected, and we are believed to have access only to that connection. Ultimately, correlationism sees the world as part of thought, rather than thought as a part of the world. Quentin Meillassoux, for example, offers up his argument against correlationism by pointing to technologies that can date the universe as having existed far before humans ever appeared on Earth. For Meillassoux, science thus proves that the world has existed before thought. Crucially, the thinkers behind speculative realism privilege “distinct forms of realism against the dominant forms of idealism in much of contemporary philosophy” (Willems).

With regard to a literary aesthetic, Saldívar defines speculative realism as a “hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and genre fictions, including science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper” (13). As a branch of philosophy, 

---

\(^2\) I will henceforth capitalize the term as it relates to contemporary philosophy and use the diminutive form to discuss the aesthetic genre.
Speculative Realism works toward ascertaining if there really exists a “non-thinking reality” (14) independent of human access to it and seeks to know if “a rational procedure to discover specific properties of the Real may be conceived” (14). For literary purposes, however, speculative realism should not be tasked with eventually effecting access, from a work of fiction, to the Real – say, in the form of “real-life” sociopolitical movements or activism; indeed, “it works in a different direction than would a naïve sort of realism toward a critical realism that would posit the knowability of phenomena, even if we can’t know the thing-in-itself” (14). Saldivar writes that speculative realism is ultimately a “weird kind of realism that posits the speculative possibility that we may be able to imagine the conditions under which the thing-in-itself and its phenomenal form might coincide” (14). In the case of On Such a Full Sea, the unrealized and therefore unknowable “thing-in-itself” might be a version of the United States that has been knocked down from its pedestal as a hegemonic force in the world, while its imagined, and thus knowable, “phenomenal form” would be the future United States in a state of obvious, undeniable decline amidst the rise of the emerging markets; alternatively, the “thing” could also be the nature of “improved” race relations in Baltimore while its phenomenal form is race relations in Baltimore if the black-white racial binary of the U.S. is interrupted by the bigger presence of yellow. Simply put, speculative realism allows us to consider the conditions under which current sociopolitical situations and forms of representation might meet with deep utopian desires.
Saldívar, concerned as he is with a core, but expanding, group of living minority authors whose works are trying to make sense of real-time racial formation and representation in the United States, writes of the postrace turn in American literature in the 21st century, with “postrace” signifying the “consequences” of racism (15) rather than its end: the emergence of a new racial symbolism that orients us toward thinking about, for example, “migration, diaspora, the history of economic, social, and legal injustice, [and] constant surveillance” (15). Speculative realism thus serves as the unique form of postrace literature, as it is a “symbolic way of linking the realm of public political life to the mysterious workings of the heart’s fantastic aspirations for substantive justice, social, racial, poetic, or otherwise” (15); it is one of four specific attributes that Saldívar outlines as characterizing postrace literature. *On Such a Full Sea* fully engages in this new racial symbolism of the 21st century, in its examination of a society marked, in Saldivar’s terms, by migration and diaspora (of the Chinese to the United States, for starters); of economic, social, and legal injustice (in the harsh segregation of the United States into three separate social classes, amidst a world ruined by environmental contamination); and constant surveillance (as official videos in B-Mor show us Fan’s final moments in her hometown and citizens must appear for mandatory health examinations whenever the state beckons).

In addition to an investment in speculative realism, this chapter is concerned with another characteristic of postrace literature, as outlined by Saldívar, which is an investment in the workings of race specifically in the 21st century or in the post-civil rights era. One of the most significant indications of the novel’s preoccupation with race
in a manner unique to the 21st century, as opposed to previous centuries, is its usage, albeit inconsistent, of colorblind language, as seen in its reluctance to directly invoke blackness, despite its dependence on “Caucasian” and “Asian” as classificatory categories. According to the race scholar Paula Ioanide, in the period known as the post-civil rights era, “people have not stopped talking about matters concerning race and sexuality, but instead have done it in color-blind, coded terms” (11), with terms such as “criminals, drug dealers, thugs, gangsters, inner cities, terrorists, suicide bombers, illegal aliens, gangs, etc.” coming to signify African Americans, Arabs and Latinos. Indeed, Michelle Alexander writes that the Reagan administration’s campaign against drugs “solidified in the public imagination the image of the black drug criminal” (105) by the early 1990s, to the point that drug and crime activity became singularly associated with African Americans. Alexander also cites a 1995 study in the *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education* that asked participants to close their eyes and envision a drug dealer. An overwhelming 95% of respondents pictured a black drug user, although at the time, African Americans as a demographic constituted only 15% of drug users. Due to such rhetorical changes in the way in which race is discussed, in the post-civil rights era broadly, and especially in the 21st century, it is no longer even necessary for the category of “black” to be invoked explicitly; instead, a string of negative associations has come to serve as a shorthand for race.

That the loaded language of criminality and urban poverty seem to have become the preferred shorthand for African Americans shows just how profoundly uncomfortable
American society, especially white society, has become with the racial category. *On Such a Full Sea* does not rely on notions of criminality to stand-in as codes for one of its characters, but it nonetheless displays a notable reluctance, as is typical of colorblind language of the current era, to name people as “black.” Colorblindness is a moral and legal ideal, one with three distinct but related variants, as laid out by the philosopher Lawrence Blum: race neutrality, which denotes that racial categories should not be used in policy formation and is motivated by the idea that “since race is an odious social category, we should attempt as much as possible to jettison it” (91); race egalitarianism, “a social order in which racial identity does not affect basic life chances, and racial discrimination and its legacy are opposed” (93); and finally racial harmony, which goes beyond racial egalitarianism in seeking a “society in which different racial groups live harmoniously and interdependently with one another on a plane of equality” (94). As there are multiple angles to the meaning of “colorblindness,” the concept is ripe for misunderstanding, especially as colorblindness today has more or less become associated with race neutrality in matters of law, which in practice is often at odds with the rather appealing moral aspirations of race egalitarianism or racial harmony. Because “race” does not simply signify phenotype or “somatic characteristics” (101) but carries with it heavy historical and moral significance, serving as a “way of thinking about, experiencing, perceiving, and relating to people” (102), it’s no wonder that racial labels tend to be avoided. Blum posits that the reluctance to use racial terminology may originate in a misunderstanding of colorblindness; with race neutrality as the most
common ideal, there may be the accompanying “feeling that it is somehow wrong, or even racist, to notice people’s race” (102). But insofar as coded language comes to serve as a stand-in for minorities, the truth is that colorblindness is professed as the prevailing ideology of our time, but race is being seen, registered, and used all the while by the very supporters of colorblindness.

The inconsistent colorblindness of *On Such a Full Sea* is striking. The novel’s preoccupation with racial formation manifests in the fact that every character is raced, although the term ‘black’ is conspicuously absent. Instead, the novel depends on coded histories and hints that necessitate a certain cultural knowledge on the reader’s part. One of the most striking points of contrast between our Baltimore and Lee’s B-Mor is the cities’ racial composition. According to the narrative, the “indigenous population” of Baltimore were largely “descendants of nineteenth century African slaves and twentieth century laborers from Central America” (19). Two centuries later, the descendants of the New Chinese have mixed with the so-called “native” inhabitants of the original Baltimore to produce families with names like Reynolds-Wang or Xu-Tidewater (20). That “native” in the context of the novel refers to ‘black’ and ‘brown’ inhabitants of Baltimore is significant, because these populations are being credited with an original or indigenous Americanness, something which is highlighted by the fact that in the present day, “native” has applied to Native Americans as well as to “nativist” movements among white Americans, whereas ‘blackness’ and ‘brownness,’ even for those born here, are inevitably associated with an otherness-from-within. In contrast, in the novel the opposite
of “native” is “original,” which is not Caucasian but New Chinese (102). It is difficult to visualize the version of miscegenation presented in this novel – between ‘yellow’ and ‘black’ or ‘brown,’ color terms I am using as stand-ins for racial groups, but which the novel does not engage – without harkening back to the long racial history of the United States, a country marked by a history of racial mixing along black and white lines in spite of anti-miscegenation laws. This is especially true when we consider the fact that mixed-blood families in B-Mor have been a source of gossip and ridicule, just as they have always been a source of scandal and derision in American history. The novel states that “there was a time – not as long ago as one would like to think – when people of Reg’s appearance would have been talked about openly, right in their faces, as if they didn’t have eyes or ears” (67). Pureblood New Chinese families have been known to snicker about people of “Reg’s appearance” (67), commenting, “Even the winter sun makes them darker” (67), or “They can still breathe through such flat little noses!” (67). In an admission of the post-race colorblind regime at play, the novel makes it clear that it is no longer acceptable for race to be so explicitly and disparagingly discussed; discussions about race are now expected to work in a different – perhaps more genteel or less hostile, certainly more quiet – manner.

Though Reg is never called ‘black,’ for the world of the novel is one in which the word seems to be taboo, he is overdetermined as such. He is a mixed-blood offspring of the yellow-black/brown miscegenation in B-Mor, and there are more than enough indirect hints regarding his phenotype, such as his having an “amazing head of Afro-type hair”
Once it is suspected that only Reg, with his “kinky head of hair” and his beautiful skin “the color of a smooth river stone” (6) and, again, “wheat-brown, buttery hue” (6), is free of a painful genetic disposition, the C-illness, a thinly veiled reference to cancer that afflicts everyone else, his appearance becomes associated with a certain healthfulness and therefore becomes fashionable. At this point, the novel states that among people “in the midst of their prime marrying years, the more ‘native-looking’ young B-Mors have become remarkably popular” (67). Young people start to get their skin bronzed at the pharmacy, while young men specifically start to get their hair permed to look like Reg’s. Although the novel takes pains to avoid calling Reg ‘black,’ instead describing his appearance as “native,” it is clear that descriptors such as “Afro” and “kinky hair,” phenotypical terms that are currently associated with present-day notions of blackness, inevitably designate Reg as a member of a specific racial category. But it is not just phenotype that forces upon Reg a particular, effectively black identity; nods to culture and history accomplish this as well. For example, hoodies are resurrected from the novel’s past (our present) as a form of dress that, due to its association in old videos of people who looked like Reg, becomes wildly popular again.

What is the effect of the novel’s pains to avoid the racial designation of “black” when it nonetheless makes use of various descriptors associated with this label? Despite expectations to the contrary, generations of racial mixing in B-Mor have not significantly altered the racial categories or expected racial hierarchies. Even in a purported future age in which individual identities and classifications are deemed passé, racial categorization
is something that resists disintegration. The novel thus projects that racial categorization will withstand future turmoil and change in the United States – in migration, racial demographics, established cities, political organization – and ultimately shatters the idealistic vision that shifting demographics, in the form of increased Asian presence in the U.S., is enough to create a new racial order.

Just as the B-Mors who share Reg’s appearance become the objects of ridicule (from the supposed pureblood descendants of the “original” New Chinese) or commodified desire (from the scientific community and trend-chasing youth), Fan, who does not have any hybrid racial identity, nonetheless experiences the same spectrum of responses when she leaves the gates of B-Mor: bigotry, in the form of racial slurs, and fetishism from members outside of her racial community. Fan’s experiences with the Caucasian women she meets once she leaves B-Mor illustrate this point prominently.

When Fan first leaves B-Mor and ends up in the wild open counties, she meets a woman named Loreen, who is marked by her “pretty marine blue eyes” (45). Although Loreen is from the most impoverished social class, she doesn’t defer to Fan’s supposed higher social standing as a member of the producing class; her immediate hostility toward Fan is not truly explained, but becomes more intelligible when, later on, she calls Fan a “little New China bitch” (154), which the novel, despite its insistent declarations that individual identity is insignificant, acknowledges to be a “slur,” an “epithet” (162). Loreen’s reliance on a racial slur to ridicule someone she hardly knows, indeed because she hardly knows the girl well enough to curse her in any other way, indicates again that racial
difference is indeed acknowledged by the inhabitants of the new world of this novel, despite the novel’s ostensible insistence to the contrary. Not only is racial difference simply registered, it is used either as a social tool or weapon, to negotiate one’s own social positioning against those deemed inferior through their difference.

Fan and Loreen eventually come to regard each other on good terms, but Loreen and her companion, Quig, are forced to deposit Fan with a wealthy Caucasian Charter family in order to be able to afford medication for Loreen’s son, who has the C-illness. Echoing modern-day slavery or, at the very least, obvious exploitation of cheap Asian child labor, Fan, believed to be a prepubescent girl due to her small size, is at first told that she will be a domestic helper in the extravagant home of Mister Leo and his depressive wife, Miss Cathy. Fan is to work alongside the primary maid of the house, Mala, who is also an “Asian of some kind” (172), in the novel’s words. The novel is again dependent on phenotype to categorize Mala: “her skin was quite dark and her hair wiry and thick and she didn’t look like she was of New Chinese blood” (172). What we know about her is that she is a Counties person who is allowed to return home for one day every three weeks, though otherwise she is responsible for running every aspect of Miss Cathy’s household. She celebrates the Lunar New Year (174) and has “mixed offspring” with her Caucasian husband. Curiously, she has also whole albums full of pictures of seven other young girls, about eleven or twelve years old, all of “some kind of Asian blood” (176) although their individual ethnicities are not important enough to be ascertained.
In a twisted take on adoption, we learn that these seven girls are being “kept,” like pets, by Miss Cathy, who is called their “keeper.” “Keeping” is a recognized activity in the world of the Charters, although it seems to be controversial in some circles, as is reflected in the following conversation that takes place at a Charters social event:

You could get pregnant now.
But I don’t have the time. I don’t yet have the money. And when I finally have both, I’ll be too old even to take drastic measures.
You can keep.
Don’t be icky.
I think we’ll all change our minds about that.
Not me. (281)

“Keeping” seems to be an ethically questionable but not unfashionable alternative to biological birth, though it is unclear if the children who are “kept” are typically members of a specific race, as is the case in Miss Cathy’s home. Insofar as “keeping” is a distorted version of adoption, it is no coincidence that the “kept” in this case are all East Asian girl children, as the novel is making a reference to the Asian and Cold War origins of international and transracial adoption. Arissa Oh argues that international adoption to the United States – and more broadly, the West – became formalized in the aftermath of the Korean War, as the Korean government established measures to evacuate unwanted children, especially the mixed-race children fathered by American soldiers, known as “G.I. babies” (2), or children who might otherwise have been poor, born out of wedlock, or disabled. American and Korean racial thought played a crucial role in international adoption, for although Korea was not the first country that American adopted from internationally, it was the country where international and transracial adoption became
systematized. Fan’s odd adventures in the home of Miss Cathy thus serve as a twisted reference to the historical power dynamic between the rising Asian economies and the United States and remind us of the ways in which some of the most intimate of realms – family and the home – are entangled with global politics.

The novel states that “keeping,” this “uncommon but growing Charter practice” (231), entails lodging humans “in the same way beloved pets were once kept by their owners, who, of course, did not query them as to what they might desire” (231). Those who are “kept” can be physically altered to maintain a certain look and may be denied status as individual human beings, in that they may be confined to a room in the house, not meant to pursue normal lives or educations, and essentially intended to serve as companionable entertainment for their keepers. The “kept” are recognizably different from regular people in their mannerisms and ways of thinking. In the case of the seven girls whose ranks Fan is expected to join, they are clearly rid of individuality in that any differences among them have been flattened: they no longer have proper names and they have been surgically altered to look the same. When Fan first meets her new sisters, who have been fashioned to look like identical dolls, they overtake her in their creepy girlishness:

She wore a simple white cotton nightshirt with an embroidered collar, rustic and old-fashioned. A second girl came out, wearing the same, though she was much taller and older. And then another followed…until it was all seven of the girls Fan had seen in the album. Some were grown women, twice as broad as the youngest. But something was different about all of them, and not just that they had grown older. All of their eyes were huge and shaped in the same way, half-moons set on the straight side, like band shells but darkened, their pupils being brown. They
were all giggling now, shoulders scrunched, their high pitch cutesy and saccharine. They crowded about Fan, bright of teeth. They smelled laundered and dryer-fresh. And now one of them was gently touching her face, others her hair, the rest clasping her arms, her hands, already vining themselves through her, snatching Fan up. (209)

The “huge” and “half-moon” eyes of the “Girls,” their “cutesy and saccharine” voices, their sweet and laundered smell, their infantilization into a girlish mass, point to the way in which they have been rendered into life-size anime figures or living dolls representing the “kawaii” Japanese aesthetic. Anime, or Japanese animation, features 2-D characters with enormous, twinkling eyes, a commercialized art and media form that captures an “aesthetic and sensibility that seems to dwell in the playful, the girlish, the infantilized, and the inevitably sexualized” (Yano 682). It is also an enormous Japanese export, “soft power-capital” (683) that provides “global currency in a market trade of youth culture that spans continents and oceans” (684). In being diminished to living anime figures, the “kept” are purchased and figuratively flattened, stripped of their humaneness, and comprising a literal cache of cool and cute for their keepers. In Miss Cathy’s home, they are kept inside a hidden room, their only duties consisting of sleeping by her side, like a stuffed animal, so that she may be soothed during her fitful nights.

And yet, something deeper seems to lie under the surface of the Girls’ glassy and doll-like demeanors: “[T]here was also a welling of wistfulness in those big brown discs, as if they were all quietly longing for someone or something, that they would always be searching” (213). The Girls, despite the repression of their agency, have thoughts and feelings that do not go heeded by their keeper. When Fan reveals to the Girls that she is
searching for her disappeared lover, and that her brother, who had long ago been upgraded to Charter status, possibly lives somewhere close by and may be able to help her, they too realize that they must help Fan. When their requests that Cathy release Fan go unheeded, they concoct a plan to help Fan: a couple of them poison themselves so that medical care must arrive immediately, a disturbance which will give Fan a chance to finally leave. The incident, apart from proving both the emotional and practical intelligence of the Girls, who remain treated like pets or toys, shows the limits of Miss Cathy’s consumerist love and consideration for her “kept”: despite the doctor’s warnings that the sick girls may die without treatment at the hospital, she insists they stay at home, for “[i]t was happier for all of them, especially Miss Cathy, to believe that the sickness would pass” (237).

Race is not only a determinant of interpersonal interactions in the novel, as in the case of the girls in Cathy’s home, but more crucially, it is something that is used in a decidedly institutional, unfeeling way. There are murmurs through B-Mor that Reg’s sudden disappearance may be attributed to his unique genetic ability to resist the “C-illness”; one of the rumors is that Reg has been picked up by members of the Charter class for the purposes of scientific experimentation:

So we must picture Reg in a Charter laboratory, sampling from a buffet of typical B-Mor dishes prepared solely for him….A troupe of physicians monitors him from behind a glassed booth, debating the interplay of his genetic panel, his blood and hormone levels, even his posture and demeanor, trying to unlock the secret of his constitution….Is it his particular fusion of original and native blood? The fact that he eschews alcohol?...Or is it the discovery, when the caterers took in the dishes, that the young man did not touch the fish. (102)
Reg’s mixed racial identity and mysterious genetic makeup seem to make him a superb physical specimen, and he has perhaps been removed from his hometown and community because he is uniquely valuable and deemed worthy of scientific interest. Despite potential claims that the medical interest in Reg here is one based on a positive value and that Reg has been transported away to a comfortable living situation in an upper-class Charter facility, this passage compels us to think about the long and uncomfortable history of medical and scientific experimentation in the United States on, specifically, unwilling black subjects. The examples are numerous: the infamous case of cancer research on Henrietta Lacks, as mentioned in the first chapter; the notorious Tuskegee Study of Syphilis in the Untreated Male, in which six hundred black men and their wives and children, between 1932 and 1972, were “deceived into participating in a research study that denied them treatment, so that [the U.S. Public Health Service] scientists could trace the progress of the disease in blacks” (Washington 37), which was believed by physicians at the time to afflict blacks less severely than whites; and the involuntary hysterectomies of Fannie Lou Hamer and thousands of other poor black women in the twentieth century, oftentimes “to allow [medical] residents to practice” the procedure (204), but largely stemming from a government-led initiative to reduce the number of poor blacks by curbing black births (Chana Lee). That the novel uses medical experimentation to theorize the disappearance – even, possibly, kidnapping – of Reg is no coincidence. In a novel in which Reg’s ethno-racial identity is intentionally and insistently unstated, his becoming the subject of historically-precedent, secretly-
conducted, and ethically questionable medical experimentation is yet another coded indication of his blackness.

The governing body controlling the world of the novel, known as the “directorate,” is mentioned 24 times. As expected of a dystopically-inclined tale, this governing body seems to be domineering and oppressive, but in the quietest of ways. There are only a few things known about the “directorate,” a lowercase and seemingly unremarkable term. They seem to be in bed with the Charters: “some of our more cynical citizens contend this is simply what the directorate and the Charters want us to believe” (53). They have been known to repossess the properties of “native” B-Mor residents at times: “…deeds and leases to their properties were unilaterally voided and reassigned to the (then nascent) directorate” (69). Finally, as in the case of Reg, they also have the power to summon individuals at will and direct them to undergo health procedures. Aside from the case of Reg, the narrative “we” also discuss family happenings, which suggests that the narrators are indeed members of a single extended clan. They describe another B-Mor resident’s sudden disappearance:

A month before, just around the time when Uncle receded, all of us B-Mors had gone in to be evaluated for a certain marker for liver disease, but this time it was only certain people being summoned, the listing of their names by clan flashed on every screen in the settlement, hand and home, facility and mall. Of course, it was casually known who might be mixed, but to that point it had never been officially designated. It was a very small percentage, in any case, and we were young and wouldn’t have really cared about such things, but to our surprise there was one person in our extended clan on the list, and it was Auntie Virginia.

She was the last person you’d think was possessed of native blood. She married into our clan, yes, but she was very pale, paler, in fact, than most of us,
who tend to be ruddy and darken quickly in the sun. She was on the short side, too, and spoke with a faint New China accent (like many older B-Mors did back then), and Uncle Kellen had known her since their first school days, her parents and siblings all derived from the originals, or at least appearing like they were. So what happened? Maybe the directorate has that information somewhere, the evidentiary gel lines. We shall never know. (72)

In the first paragraph, the quiet insidiousness of colorblind language is in play. The first sentence’s revelation that it was “only certain people” who were being summoned for health examinations does not reveal immediately what these “certain people” have in common. It isn’t until the following sentence, with the text’s italicization of the word “mixed,” that we come to realize that “certain people” is a euphemistic evasion intended to encapsulate racialized difference. The novel lends itself to being read aloud, especially in those sections that are overtly narrated by the collective voice in what seems indicative of oral storytelling. We can imagine the way in which a reading aloud of this text would pause and stretch out the word “mixed,” perhaps with a bit of a scandalized whisper. The fact is that being outed as a member of these “certain people” has serious social consequences, as we are to find out, despite the text’s reluctance to attribute social ostracism to perceptible racialized discrimination.

Auntie Virginia and her husband, Uncle Kellen, disappear suddenly not long after her unexpected outing as “mixed.” This outing is especially shocking since Auntie Virginia possesses no obvious physical markers of her otherness; in a sardonic twist, she is even paler than most of the other descendants of the “originals” and she has been
known in the community since her childhood. Yet this longstanding community history is insufficient to protect Virginia from racially-derived ostracism. The case of Auntie Virginia suggests that although the visible body is the privileged domain of race, raced status also exceeds the visual and the phenotypical. If, as Barbara and Karen Fields write, “physical features function merely as a visible index of an invisible essence that is separate and different from them” (211), physical features are a shortcut to perceiving the invisible essence, but the absence of such physical features does not necessarily mean that the invisible essence is also absent. As Virginia shows, racial otherness needs no “proof” in the form of supposedly raced features and, once perceived, it cannot be overcome by shared personal history or interracial marriage.

It is unknown why Virginia and Kellen leave without a word of goodbye, but the collective voice has some theories: “Sure, at a free-day gathering some members of the clan who drank too much beer maybe uttered some unkind words after Auntie Virginia was listed in that second call-up; maybe she was asked to excuse herself from a cousin’s wedding, not because of her presence per se but the needless commotion it might cause within the other clan” (73). It is unknown what those “unkind words” are, but in the

---

3 This plot move recalls the developments of George Schuyler’s 1931 satire Black No More, in which a medical procedure makes it possible for African Americans to lighten their skin color completely and transform themselves into whites. Although there are no more visible differences between whites and blacks, at least on the level of phenotype, the novel, preoccupied with the way in which notions of difference will always organize American society, posits that those who appear to be the whitest or lightest in skin tone, must in fact be the newly-white, the over-compensating white – thus, the formerly-black. As such, by the novel’s end, it is having very pale or “white” skin that becomes associated with racial difference.
second theory, the probable discrimination against Auntie Virginia is expressed in colorblind terms: Auntie Virginia is not asked, hypothetically, to leave the wedding because she is known to be possess “native” – African and/or Central American blood – but simply because her presence at the event might prove to be a nuisance for others who don’t know her quite as well. In this reasoning, it’s not that Virginia has done something wrong or become offensive; rather, the problem lies in the people who are prone to become offended precisely by Virginia’s inoffensive presence.

This reasoning falls in line with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s explication of color-blind racism as a racial ideology that “acquired cohesiveness and dominance in the late 1960s” and “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (2). Bonilla-Silva contrasts color-blindness with overt or explicit racial ideologies: “Compared to Jim Crow racism, the ideology of color blindness seems like ‘racism lite.’ Instead of relying on name calling…color-blind racism otherizes softly…instead of viewing interracial marriage as wrong on a straight racial basis, it regards it as “problematic” because of concerns over the children, location, or the extra burden it places on couples” (3). Under this logic, interracial coupling is wrong not because it entails two people of different racial backgrounds, but because it will make other people around them uncomfortable, succinctly described as the “extra burden,” of a social nature, that the couple will be made to face. Thus, the real problem is not with the interracial couple but with the people who have the unjustified problem with the couple in the first place. Similarly, Virginia and Kellen, now newly identified as an interracial
couple, are not called out on their interracial composition, but they are still reminded that they make others uncomfortable simply by their presence.

How can we handle Chang-rae Lee’s usage of color-blind language in *On Such a Full Sea*? Especially since this color-blindness nonetheless does not elide problems of racial difference? It is entirely possible to read the novel’s deployment of a racial hierarchy that places an unnamed black or brownness at the bottom of the social totem pole as a sign of its participation in a representational system maintaining racist ideologies. It is thus possible to interpret the novel as one that is not actually interested in creating a new, speculative world order, as it ostensibly sets out to do, or a novel that seems somewhat confused about its own status as a work of speculative fiction. After all, in writing a future-oriented novel, Lee could have shown readers an inverted or a flattened social hierarchy, much like in Octavia Butler’s *Dawn* or Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*, in which humankind, differences aside, must be at least somewhat united in the face of a threat from outside. Instead, in *On Such a Full Sea*, racial differences are – most often, quietly – acknowledged, exacerbated, capitalized upon, and fetishized, in a manner little different from that of our contemporary society. For a futuristic novel, what gives? How can we account for a speculative novel’s seeming reluctance or inability to create a new social order, despite its ostensible mission to do so?

The deployment of color-blind descriptions for characters otherwise knowable as black or brown – the use of language that fits neatly into a racial ideology that expresses its racial hostility in a decidedly softer and therefore more insidious manner – should not
simply be taken as evidence, as potentially may be the case, of the author’s racial biases or the novel’s unthinking status as an artifact of the postrace, color-blind era of the 21st century. At the risk of attributing too much to unknowable authorial intent, it must first be acknowledged that Chang-rae Lee has previously written of “real” racial relations in his earlier novels, and as such, his departure from a realist representation of African American and Asian American relations in *On Such a Full Sea* must be understood as noteworthy and purposeful. Racial and multicultural relations are examined in a realistic and historically-contextualized manner most prominently in *Native Speaker*. In it, the Korean-American protagonist, Henry, is married to a white woman who works as a speech pathologist for the city’s ESL, immigrant children; he is employed by a multicultural boutique “consulting” firm that fully requires its consultants, or corporate spies, to make use of their ethnic identities during their spywork; and, for his latest work assignment, he is tasked with shadowing a Korean-American politician who has a shot at becoming mayor in New York City, a demographically diverse city with equally diverse social troubles. Written in the wake of the 1992 L.A. Race Riots, *Native Speaker* treats the specific – indeed, hostile – nature of black-yellow relations in New York City. The mayoral candidate in the novel, John Kwang, urges an ethnically and racially mixed crowd of potential candidates to consider the root of the city’s tense race relations:

“…let us think that for the moment it is not a Korean problem. That it is not a black problem or a brown and yellow problem, that it is not a problem of our peoples, that it is not even ultimately a problem of our mistrust or our ignorance. Let us think it is the problem of a self-hate.” (151)
“If you are listening to me now and you are Korean, and you pridefully own your own store…know these facts. Know that the blacks who spend money in your store and help put food on your table and send your children to college cannot open their own stores. Why? Why can’t they? Why don’t they even try? Because banks will not lend to them because they are black. Because these neighborhoods are troubled, high risk. Because if they did open stores, no one would insure them. And if they do not have the same strong community you enjoy, the one you brought with you from Korea, which can pool money and efforts for its members – it is because this community has been broken and dissolved through history. (153)

Of course, Kwang’s election depends on his ability to appeal to a broad range of New York voters, especially the minority voters. His call to those who fall under the category of “black” and “brown” and “yellow” to see themselves as similar and too-familiar is thus unsurprising, as it is essentially a call for non-white solidarity, a “rare instance of crossing the color line in Asian American literature,” according to Chong Chon-Smith (24). Nevertheless, Kwang’s appeal to the Korean community in the second paragraph contains a sophisticated awareness of the institutional nature of American racism and the way in which it has devastated African Americans in particular: both materially, with regard to economic benefits, and psychically, on the level of community. The words “troubled” and “high-risk” are italicized in the text, lending Kwang’s usage of these psycho-social, impersonal terms an air of exaggeration or sarcasm; the italicized stress on these words are the textual equivalent of scare quotes. Kwang forces his Korean listeners to confront the origin of these textbook labels; if the Koreans indeed identify these terms with blacks, it is because they have learned these words from elsewhere, from American society at large. Kwang also reminds Koreans, who ascribe to a by-the-
bootstrap mentality regarding their relative economic success, the conservative belief they have built their small empire of grocery stores “up from nothing,” that their success has actually been contingent on “the blacks who spend money in your store” and thus “help put food on your tables.” Kwang is fully aware of the ways in which most Asian immigrants are attracted to the magnetic power of antiblack citizenship and white citizenship” (Chon-Smith 25). A speech that calls for black and yellow brotherhood and could have remained on the level of platitudes – “This person, this person, she, that person, he, that person, they, those, them, they’re like us, they are us, they’re just like you!” (152) – nevertheless acknowledges both the fact of African American marginalization in the United States and the ways in which Asians, in this case Koreans, have been able to benefit directly from this through their status as what Yoonmee Chang calls “middleman minorities” (165). Middleman minorities typically emerge in societies where there is a formal or informal status gap between the elites and the underclass, often fulfilled by groups that are racially distinct in the region (165). In the case of Korean American small-business owners in the United States, as middleman minorities oftentimes serving black neighborhoods, they are disadvantaged under whites, but nevertheless advantaged over blacks, a sociological fact to which Kwang’s speech draws attention.

As his past work shows, Chang-rae Lee is more than capable of being attuned to the workings of race in American society, in a nuanced and non-binary manner. Capturing the workings of race in a realistic mode seems to have been a significant
priority of the author’s in his debut novel; that the same does not seem to be true in *On Such a Full Sea* signals something important about the way that racial representation is meant to work at all. To address the significant conceptual problem of how we are to account for a speculative novel’s seeming reluctance or inability to create a new social order, despite its ostensible mission to do so, we must go back to the one of the most important quotes of the novel, examined at length earlier, about the waning significance of individuality:

> We can talk about [Fan] openly because hers is no grand tragedy, no apocalypse of the soul or of our times. Yes, there are those who would like to believe otherwise; that each and every being in the realm is a microcosm of the realm. That we are heartened and chastened and diminished and elevated by a singular reflection. This is a fetching idea, metaphorically and otherwise, most often enlisted for promoting the greater good. But more and more we can see that the question is not whether we are “individuals.” We can’t help but be, this has been proved, case by case. We are not drones or robots and never will be. The question, then, is whether being an “individual” makes a difference anymore. That it can matter at all. And if not, whether we in fact care. (3)

The passage, aside from declaring that the importance of individuality is not even worthy of debate in a world in which individuality can be taken for granted, states that any residing attachment we have to individual stories – or rather, stories about individuals – lies in an enduring and “fetching” belief that such stories have the potential to “promote the greater good” for humankind, or for community. At stake is the communal, the “greater good,” a level past the individual. The individual story thus can matter only insofar as it matters on the level of the multiple or collective. The effects of the individual
story on the listeners or receptors have been largely seen as positive; we might be
“diminished,” yes, but more than that, we can be “heartened,” “chastened,” or “elevated.”

If the individual story does not matter much anymore, as posed by the novel, then
its ability to hearten, chasten, diminish, and elevate the community is depleted. Thus, On
Such a Full Sea’s stubborn, stated disinterest in the significance of the narrative of the
individual works as an inherent exploration of the politics of representation, by forcing us
to consider the limits of singular, fictional representation to effect collective – and
therefore, political – change. Rather than serving as a simple and complicit tool in the
reproduction and re-inscription of existent power structures and racial hierarchies, the
novel functions instead as a social critique. Read in this way, many of the formal features
that appear as limitations of the novel actually become subtle vehicles for transforming
our thinking about social change, vehicles that still take seriously the ethical stakes to the
endeavor to re-imagine the workings of a society.

This chapter borrows ideas from scholarship on racial representation in television,
although Chang-rae Lee obviously operates in written narrative, rather than visual
storytelling. However, the lessons from television are appropriate in this case, as they
deal with the broader topic of the effects of fictional racial representation. In Ugly
Feelings, Sianne Ngai, in her chapter on “Animatedness,” writes of the controversy
surrounding Fox Television’s stop-motion animation comedy series from 1998-2000, The
PJs, which starred Eddie Murphy and was the “first prime-time program in American
television history to feature a completely non-white, non-middle class, and non-live-
action cast” (102). Despite this ostensible accomplishment in diversity in network programming, the show, which featured African American characters living in an urban housing project, drew criticism from a number of organizations which accused it of “carrying an antiblack message” (103) and deploying racist stereotypes of blacks. The controversy surrounding the show can be summed up in the tension between viewers’ desire for “mimetic realism” – which The PJs fulfills – and what Phillip Brian Harper calls “simulacral realism.” Whereas mimetic realism demands that “television faithfully mirror ‘the black experience’” (Ngai 104), which is undeniably marked by institutional issues such as racism and class barriers, the “standard of simulacral realism that has informed popular demands for greater representation of blacks on TV is rooted in the assumption that such representation would improve the objective conditions characterizing daily life for the mass of African Americans living in the scope of television’s influence” (Harper 62). Harper’s notion of simulacral realism is derived from Baudrillard, “who has conceived of the simulacrum as a representation that usurps the supposed primacy of the ‘real’ object conventionally understood to serve as its ‘original’” (64). The image of the thing is expected to overtake the thing itself. As it pertains to racial representation on television, simulacral realism is premised on the idea that representations “actively shape, define, and even occasionally usurp social realities” (Ngai 104) and is deeply connected to the belief that positive representations of African Americans can ultimately lead to significant and real improvement in their material conditions and social status.
Whereas a television show like *The PJs*, operating under the model of mimetic realism in its faithfulness to the material elements of raced life, has drawn criticism, the opposite is true of the programs produced by black showrunner Shonda Rhimes, whose production company *Shondaland* is responsible for network hits like the medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* and political drama *Scandal*, all centered on professional class characters like doctors, politicians, and lawyers. Rhimes is often praised for increasing racial diversity in network programming – with *Scandal* featuring a multiethnic cast centered on a black female lead, the fictional Olivia Pope, a crisis management political “fixer” – although her black characters, divorced from black issues or communities, generally operate in white or non-ethnic settings, such that the shows do not devote “any significant attention to the real, material concerns of black society” (Erigha 12). That shows like *Scandal* are praised for their colorblind portrayals of black characters while shows like *The PJs* are criticized for being “stereotypically” black for depicting the material concerns of everyday black life shows that viewers favor simulacral realism: an already-arrived, literally-realized postracial world on-screen shows us what we wish to see in the off-screen world.

To make the connection with potential reader responses to *On Such a Full Sea*, a reader’s discomfort with the racial representation of those who seem to be overdetermined as ‘black,’ a category never named but constantly invoked, is due to that reader’s expectation that the novel functions as a simulacrum. That is, as an experimental and future-oriented novel that could show a vision of an equitable society that has moved
away from the established white-black binary of the United States: one in which the status of ‘blacks’ or “mixed” people is significant improved, such that they are not noticeably at the bottom of a social hierarchy, or ridiculed either explicitly (for their appearance) or implicitly (in quiet, colorblind terms, as in the case of Auntie Virginia).

Any disappointment with the novel can be explained in the following way: that the novel portrays a United States two hundred or so years in the future but nevertheless shows black oppression as an unchanging social constant jeopardizes the “emancipatory” potential for representation alone to create social change in meaningful ways. In deploying colorblind language only to repeatedly invoke racial categorization and division, the novel identifies race as an unchanging constant in the United States; racial difference, no matter its sundry historical labels or naming regimes, is seen to be persistent. The novel suggests, ultimately, that even in a future U.S., in which white supremacy has been taken down a notch due to the country’s colonization by an Asian nation, and in which environmental devastation has wrought havoc on the world, racial animosity will remain relatively unchanged.

Thus, what *On Such a Full Sea* highlights, intentionality aside, are the limits of the literary representation of race and the limits of well-intentioned simulacral wishing. Again, the lessons of television are appropriate here precisely because *On Such a Full Sea* is not an example of simulacral realism and does not portray a postracial society in the aspirational manner typical of simulacral realism; this paragraph examines what it is that *On Such a Full Sea* stays away from, and to what effect. Simulacral realism, as
pertains to the representation of minorities in the media, shows viewers an integrated society rather than the truth of a segregated society in the hopes that the image of the integrated society will be sufficient – or at the very least, useful – in the actual propagation of that desired, integrated society. Yet, the good intentions behind the demands for simulacral realism can have subtly sinister effects, in that the circulation of the image of an integrated and equitable society can lead American viewers as a whole, and white viewers in particular, to believe that an integrated and equitable society has already been realized and thus requires no further action. The result is increased inaction in [white] television viewers, who become less inclined to support progressive measures that would actually lead to a more integrated society, with regards to both race and class. For instance, today, actors of color are disproportionately cast as characters working in law enforcement agencies.4 This development is important for two reasons according to Paula Ioanide, who is concerned specifically with television programming featuring American military forces working against Arab enemies. First, “[m]ultiracial representations of U.S. military agents reassured Americans that their state was not engaged in morally delegitimized imperialist invasions predicated on white patriarchal

4 Here is a qualitative example of the status quo of the “black judge” on television dramas. In Season 4, episode 17 of the NBC sitcom 30 Rock, which aired in April 2010, Tracy Morgan’s character, Tracy, and members of his entourage, all black, debate the consequences of Barack Obama’s presidency. Tracy argues that racism will be on the rise because whites will no longer need to feel sympathetic for blacks, as they will point to Obama as proof that black oppression is no longer an issue. Grizz and Dotcom, initially resistant, eventually realize that the tide may indeed be turning against them. The proof? As Grizz says, “Come to think of it, I saw a white judge on Law and Order tonight.”
Western supremacy” (50). After all, how can the state be perpetuating racist action when the heroes of the state are minorities? Second, “representations of Black, Latino/a, and Arab American actors as agents of the U.S. state…encouraged audiences who were historically disidentified with U.S. nationalism to identify with the state’s military and foreign policy agenda” (50-51). Minority audiences are thus recruited to identify with the state, even as the state perpetuates a racially-determined or imperialist mission. The result of the disproportionate casting of minority actors as law enforcement officers is an overwrought association in the American public consciousness of minorities as legal enforcers when, in reality, the opposite is true, as “no other country in the world incarcerates such an astonishing percentage of its racial or ethnic minorities” (Alexander 8) as does the United States. The demands of simulacral realism for increased, visible diversity in television representation hides the truth of minority persecution at the hands of law enforcement from viewers, which inevitably allows such viewers to remain in a state of “political amnesia” (Ioanide 51).

Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, in a detailed qualitative study on black and white audience reactions to The Cosby Show, which famously portrayed an upper-middle class nuclear black family, report that on one level, The Cosby Show succeeded in promoting racial tolerance among white viewers and fostering racial pride among black viewers (132). However, the show has created far more insidious effects as well, one with significant political and social implications:
Among white people, the admission of black characters to television’s upwardly mobile world gives credence to the idea that racial divisions, whether perpetuated by class barriers or by racism, do not exist….The Cosby-Huxtable persona (along with the many other black professionals it has brought forth in the TV world) tells viewers that, as one respondent put it, ‘there really is room in the United States for minorities to get ahead, without affirmative action.’ (135)

The belief that simulacral realism will lead to the rectification and reversal of deep-seated problems of institutional racism has led to a “new, sophisticated form of racism,” according to Jhally and Lewis, one that blames “ghetto underclass members” for their own inadequacies and resulting social position while registering the Huxtables as “examples of blacks who have changed their culture and thus their socioeconomic status” (137). Abiding by the demands of simulacral realism has played exactly into colorblind racism, the racism of the postrace era, which is what Jhally and Lewis are referring to, a racial ideology which associates the low social status of minority groups with those groups’ “culture.” Whereas Jim Crow racism depended on essentialism and “explained blacks’ social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority” (Bonilla-Silva 2), colorblind racial ideology blames the “cultural limitations” (2) of minorities – such as an inability to work hard enough. Jhally and Sut see the relationship between simulacral realism and this “new, sophisticated” racism as a causal one; even without declaring the precise nature of their linkage, what is clear is that simulacral realism and colorblind racial ideology are inextricably linked in that they both entail a glossing over of the processes of institutional racism in favor of surface-level appearances, the former on the level of images, the latter on the level of language. Whereas simulacral realism
calls for rosy pictures of racial progress to take priority over potentially progressive action, the use of colorblind language assumes that the simple avoidance of hostile racial language should lead to a progressive society free of racial strife or exploitation.

*On Such a Full Sea* anticipates the linkage between unironic, un-self-conscious simulacral wishful thinking and colorblind racial ideology. In deploying colorblind language in a painstakingly purposeful, obvious and self-evident manner, the novel, which turns away from Lee’s typical realist mode, is able to shine a spotlight onto what colorblind language is expected to accomplish and yet fails to do: create a world, via the inclusion and omission of specific language, in which difference seems to be minimized. The novel nonchalantly reiterates existent ethno-racial categories, such as Asian and Caucasian and, in contrast, stringently avoids racial labels related to blackness. But despite taking pains to avoid the literal words related to blackness as a classificatory social-racial category, through precise coded language, the novel still conjures up Reg, who we are able to recognize and visualize right away. It matters little that the novel refuses to call Reg ‘black’ or ‘African American’ or ‘biracial’ or “person of color.” Colorblind language is able to create his image just the same. By highlighting the way in which colorblind ideology works, the novel denaturalizes it as the language of our contemporary moment, points to its shortcomings, and prevents us from falling headfirst into its linguistically-determined fantasy.

*
In the accompanying essay to the novel, “Isn’t All Immigrant Fiction Essentially Dystopian Fiction?”, Lee writes that he was not interested in true “world-building” – in fleshing out some speculative future with “aptly designed infrastructure and laws and costumery” – but rather in exploring “what happens to people in certain intensified contexts, to trace and examine how they are formed and deformed by those contexts, and how they might ultimately ‘re-form’ themselves in the face of such pressures.” If we take the author’s stated intention here seriously, we understand that the world at the heart of *On Such a Full Sea* is meant, essentially, to be recognizable through both its similarities and differences with ours. Take the C-illness, for example. It is different from cancer as we know it, in that it affects almost everyone in the world of the novel. It is different from cancer also in the fact that only those possessing “native” blood seem to be free from this disease. And yet it is a devastating sickness called C-illness and not H-illness or M-illness; the “C” self-evidently identifies the disease as an intensified cousin of cancer. The C-illness is at once recognizable to us through its similarities and differences with cancer.

There are numerous other details in the novel that are obvious nods to their counterparts in our era today; videos are called “vids,” pictures are called “pix,” handheld screens are called “viewers,” and viewable “programming,” little different from television, is still the preferred entertainment of choice for B-Mors after they have spent a long day hard at work. The terms have modified spellings, but oddly enough, these
technological elements do not seem to have been advanced at all in the two centuries separating the characters’ worlds from ours.

Similarly, the colorblindness in the world of the novel and the politeness with which it is associated both ring familiar. What does it mean that future Americans, in Lee’s imagined world, still depend on visual forms of entertainment and on the superficial excision of terms related to “blackness,” while maintaining the original signifiers of this category? That the novel declares the passé status of the individual and his rootedness in history, place, and context, while still subjecting him to fetishized commodification and racialized experimentation? There is the fatalistic and all-too-tempting implication that racial identification and related strife will never end in the United States, even in the very distant future. But another potential reading avoids such fatalism while also taking into account the savvy with which the author has previously tackled thorny issues of ethno-racial identity in the United States. On Such a Full Sea acknowledges the enduring significance of racial representation in narrative, both in its form in language as well as in images, and anticipates the results of overinvesting in representation as an end in its own right.

To argue that On Such a Full Sea is a fundamentally revolutionary novel urging for non-narrative action would be to fall into the ideologically rigid tendency of critics of Asian American literature to “see texts as demonstrating either resistance or accommodation to American racism,” as Viet Thanh Nguyen writes in Race and Resistance, which results in the reductive evaluation of “resistance as positive and
accommodation as negative” (7). Indeed, given its unusual, collective narrative voice, which is possibly its most intriguing technical aspect, *On Such a Full Sea* is first and foremost preoccupied with the nature and processes of storytelling, much less so in didactically urging its readers to somehow create a better, less inequitable, American society. Yet it is fully the case that Chang-rae Lee’s latest novel shows the ways in which a society using colorblind language nonetheless targets its own citizens precisely according to racial identification, and in doing so, the novel exposes more broadly the limits of superficial language to effect political action. Rather than urge us, as readers who are also dependent on language, to spring for non-narrative action, the novel quietly and subtly reminds us to consider what our expectations for language have been historically, and whether those expectations have been met.
3. Racial Revelations: The Aesthetics of Withholding

In his playful essay on the “Striptease,” Roland Barthes writes that “Striptease – at least Parisian striptease – is based on a contradiction: to desexualize a woman at the very moment she is denuded” (165). Barthes soon elaborates that the end of the striptease serves to highlight that which is already natural, “nakedness as a woman’s natural vesture, which means, finally, regaining a perfectly chaste state of the flesh” (166). The striptease, in this configuration, is thus precisely the opposite of titillating. But Barthes soon seems to contradict his notion of the naturally chaste naked body, as he follows up this claim by writing that the props – feathers, furs, fans, so forth – used to cover the female performer during a striptease “continue to impregnate woman with their magical virtues even once they are taken off, providing a sort of enveloping memory of a luxurious carapace” (166), such that “the nude who follows remains herself quite unreal, smooth, and closed up like a lovely slippery object” (166). How can female nakedness be simultaneously “natural” and “unreal”? (Kahn).

The inherent contradictions in Barthes’ essay are not to be resolved in the scope of this chapter. Rather, I am interested in the line of thinking that is broadly supported by both of these contradictory sentiments: that the impact of a given revelation is intensified and felt most strongly when the revealing occurs after a withholding tease. For Barthes, the reveal of the naked female form either signifies the inherent chastity of bare flesh or
corroborates its belonging to the “category of luxurious objects which surround man with a magical decor” (166) – but regardless of which, it is the process of the tease, the highly performative nature of the withholding, that leads us to either conclusion. Novels of the paradoxical postrace era, to adapt the concept from the writer and journalist Jeff Chang, similarly participate in the simultaneous (un)doing, (de)stabilizing, blurring, and highlighting of race and its boundaries through play, specifically by teasing and withholding information related to its characters’ racial markers. In these novels, the slow racialization of characters, accomplished not through flat-footed biography or description but through a purposeful oscillation between the withholding and disclosing of information, ultimately leads to a momentous revelation about their identities.

Novels that specifically play with the concept of race are not new or found only in the paradoxical postrace era; for example, George Schuyler’s Black No More (1931) and William Melvin Kelley’s dem (1967) are both comical, satirical takes on black-white relations in the United States. Narratives that feature some kind of stunning revelation about a character’s unexpected (black) racial background, as in William Faulkner’s Absalom Absalom, and surprising plot twists resulting in the inclusion of unexpected black characters, as in the 1989 film Parenthood (Squires 106), are not new in the American storytelling tradition. Yet the late-civil rights era that has been discussed both

1 Jeff Chang explains in We Gon’ Be Alright the “paradox of the ‘post-racial’ movement – that while our images depict a nation moving toward desegregation, our indices reveal growing resegregation and inequity” (1).
colloquially and academically as the “postrace era” has seen a concentrated proliferation of novels that play with the notion of race, by slowly or unexpectedly racializing its characters, dropping non-explicit cues along the way to a surprising revelation about their identities. Examples of recent novels that specifically deploy the surprise racial “reveal” include, but are not limited to, Ed Park’s *Personal Days* (2008), Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011).

The aesthetics of withholding manifests itself in different ways, with regard to form as well as content matter, in the novels at the center of this chapter. *Personal Days* is a corporate novel, structured in multiple perspectives, including first-person plural, first-person singular, and third-person, and concerned with class identity and collectivity in the era of late capitalism. DeLillo’s sprawling postmodern classic *Underworld*, or more specifically the novella that inspired the epilogue to *Underworld*, entitled *Pafko at the Wall* (1992), is a historical piece set in Cold War America. Finally, in Cole’s debut *Open City*, written in familiar first-person narration, the cosmopolitan protagonist wanders the city and considers aesthetic approaches to dealing with difference. Despite their differences in form and primary subject matters, and despite the noticeable racial diversity among their authors, all of these novels consistently accomplish two crucial feats. First, they challenge the idea of whiteness as a universal standard, or the reader’s

---

2 Whitehead’s *Zone One* presents a character whose race is withheld until the very end, but I will not be examining the novel in this chapter. Though the racial “reveal” that occurs at the end of the novel performs the important task of checking readers’ assumptions of unmarked whiteness, in *Zone One*, this reveal occurs abruptly, without the lead-up of a slow series of hints or what I consider to be a teasing process of racialization.
assumption that an unmarked character need be a white one, even when hints have been
dropped along the way to the contrary. Second, they highlight the capacity of language to
play with race, rendering it slippery – at times familiar, in the form of predictable
stereotypes, but at times completely elusive. The aesthetics of withholding, as deployed
in key novels of the paradoxical postrace era, is invested in the destabilization of the
category of race, although the destabilization of this category rests, paradoxically, on its
invocation. The following examinations of postrace novels occur in order of what I
consider to be the degree of intensity with which the aesthetics is deployed: first, in
DeLillo’s works, we see a proto-version of this aesthetics; next, Open City unexpectedly
withholds two minor characters’ characteristics; and last, in Personal Days, race seems to
be almost completely missing.

**On Underworld (1997) and Pafko at the Wall (1992)**

The lengthy prologue to Don DeLillo’s mammoth 1997 novel Underworld,
entitled “The Triumph of Death,” follows a day in the life of fourteen-year-old Cotter
Martin as he skips school, sneaks into the historic 1951 playoff game between the New
York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, and unbelievably catches Bobby Thomson’s
home run ball, which won the Giants their historic victory. This home run ball goes on to
be the historic link connecting the disparate characters of Underworld, from Cotter in the
1950s to the protagonist Nick Shay, Cotter’s contemporary, in the 1990s, as Cotter’s
father heartbreakingly sells the baseball just days after the game. Though Cotter and the
Martin family are minor figures in *Underworld*, insofar as the prologue focuses most intensely on Cotter and elevates him as the unlikely representative of a “people’s history” of the era, he is deserving of our attention. Cotter is no extraordinary person; he is, after all, “just a kid with a local yearning,” but also, “he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge about the river, and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations” (11). Cotter’s reveries and desperations are brought to a head in his unexpected but purposeful quest – diving under stadium seats, knocking into competitors – for Bobby Thomson’s home run ball.

*Underworld* is the starting point for this analysis for two reasons. First, it is one of the most famous literary books of the 20th century. Second, and more importantly, as the earliest of the three novels to be examined in this piece, it serves as a proto-model of the aesthetics of withholding: in DeLillo’s work, racialization is not seamlessly “withheld” as much as it is noticeably messed with and delayed. This becomes more evident when we compare *Underworld* to its earlier, original version. Despite the prestige of *Underworld*, most readers do not know that the original version of the prologue to *Underworld* was published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1992, five years before *Underworld* was published. *Pafko at the Wall*, then considered a novella, would eventually be edited and re-named “The Triumph of Death” to be worked into *Underworld* as the prologue. It is this original novella, rather than the official prologue version in *Underworld*, that will be of special
interest in this article. *Pafko at the Wall* and “The Triumph of Death” are essentially similar, upon a line-by-line comparison, with some paragraphs edited for clarity and compactness, others for narrative effect.\(^3\) Despite the overwhelming similarities, the two versions of the prologue should be considered separate works due to the intensity of the seemingly scant differences between them: the original version of this story is far slower to racialize Cotter, participating to a greater extent in what I have called the aesthetics of withholding. The effect of this aesthetic in *Pafko* is that the ultimate showdown between Cotter and his rival for the baseball, Bill Waterson, a middle-class white man, is much more explicitly racialized and dramatic than is the case in the later *Underworld* version. It is undeniable that the narrative’s slow teasing out of Cotter’s racial markers serves to heighten the eventual conflict between the two baseball fans. The racist nature of this showdown then further contributes to the sense of triumph attributed to Cotter for finally taking possession of the ball. It is important to state outright that I am not concerned with speculating on authorial intent, on DeLillo’s reasons for making the showdown between Cotter and Bill less explicitly racial in the eventual *Underworld* version. Rather, I am intrigued by the sheer knowledge that racial markers and boundaries were the focus of DeLillo’s active experimentation during his process of writing the novel.

\(^3\) For example, in the later version, some sentences have become edited to feature a second-person voice that further enhances the reader’s perception that she is present at the playoff game: “Mays is walking toward the plate” (*Pafko* 39) in the original novella becomes in the novel “Look at Mays meanwhile strolling to the plate” (*Underworld* 16). When Cotter first runs into the game at the Polo Grounds, the original novella states, “Then we lose him in the crowd” (*Pafko* 37) whereas the novel version alters just a single word, so the sentence reads “Then you lose him in the crowd” (*Underworld* 14).
In the thrust of the narrative, Cotter is merely one of a multitude, so it is fitting that he is individuated quite slowly. In *Underworld*, he is introduced in the first line of the prologue by masculine pronoun and nationality ("He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eye that’s halfway hopeful" (11)) – and then on the next page, by age, outward poverty, and height ("fourteen, and you know he’s flat broke by the edgy leaning look he hangs on his body…scrawny tall in a polo shirt"). It isn’t until the following, third page, that the rest of Cotter’s physical embodiment is literally fleshed out. The narrative describes Cotter, who is running over the turnstile at the entrance of the stadium, as possessing his own gangly form of elegance. He is “just a running boy, a half-seen figure from the streets, but the way running reveals some clue to being, the way a runner bares himself to consciousness, this is how the dark-skinned kid seems to open to the world, how the bloodrush of a dozen strides brings him into eloquence” (13).

Notice how Cotter is described as “dark-skinned” in this passage. Curiously, in the earlier *Pafko* version, the original adjective in this place is “easy-gaited,” with the other words remaining the same. Cotter is thus individuated slowly in both *Pafko at the Wall* and *Underworld*, but it is in the former that he is racialized especially slowly, since his skin – which, decisive or not, is one important marker of racial identification – is withheld from readers for an even longer period of time.

__________

4 In the interest of clarity, by “narrative,” I refer to the general plot points of both versions, since the crux of the story of Cotter’s acquisition of the baseball is the same in both versions.
Later, in the stadium, Cotter feels a sinking panic as he worries that the “Negro” peanut vendor near him, “black rays phasing from his hand” (Pafko 41, Underworld 20), will make him hyper-visible to his seatmates, another hint as to Cotter’s racialization. It isn’t until near the very end of both versions of the prologue that the narrative explicitly labels this character as “black”: when Cotter decides against running off with the hard-earned ball, one he must fight to keep, because by running he will be “a black kid running in a mainly white crowd and…being followed by a pair of irate whites yelling thief or grief or something” (Pafko 65, Underworld 52). Indeed, it’s only by running deep into “unmixed Harlem” (Pafko 69, Underworld 57), his home turf, that Cotter is able to evade his seatmate, Bill Waterson, who claims the ball as his own.

Let us examine the following set of passages which occur in Pafko at the Wall and Underworld, respectively, just after the moment in which Cotter has wrestled away the ball from an unseen rival beneath the stadium seats, who turns out to be a furious Bill:

“I looked at you scrunched up in your seat and I thought I’d found a pal. He’s a shy kid that wears glasses. He roots for the right team. Not like so many others. These kids, these days. This is a baseball fan, I thought. Not some delinquent in the streets, a petty thief that does people out of things that are rightfully theirs. Baseball is what saves kids from mean lives. Understand what I’m saying? We had a big day together at the ballpark and now you’re dead set on disappointing me. Cotter? Buddies sit down and work things out.” (Pafko at the Wall, 68)

*I*

“I looked at you scrunched in your seat and I thought I’d found a pal. This is a baseball fan, I thought, not some delinquent in the streets. You seem to be dead set on disappointing me. Cotter? Buddies sit down together and work things out.” (Underworld, 56)
DeLillo cuts out the bulk of the original exchange by the time he gets to *Underworld*. The racist undertones of the top passage are intentionally and thinly veiled, but these undertones are much more muted in the *Underworld* version. As found in the top *Pafko* passage, Bill’s remark that he was pleasantly surprised at Cotter being a kid who roots for the “right team” must be weighed against the implication that he initially assumed that the boy would have rooted for the “wrong” team. Of course, we can be flat-footed for a moment: the “right” team is always the team you support. Bill’s appreciation of Cotter’s rooting for the “right” team can thus be boiled down, quite simply, to Bill’s happiness at having found a fellow fan. But there is the niggling sense that there is something deeper, coded, in what Bill is saying about Cotter’s fandom and in Cotter’s love of baseball, that emblem of wholesome Americana, which contains even more significance in the height of the Cold War, which is when this historic game is taking place. For Bill, the simple fact of Cotter’s being a baseball fan, one who happens to also root for the “right” team, supposedly precludes the possibility that Cotter could be, in his own estimation, a “delinquent” or a “thief,” someone who will eventually have a “mean life.” If we sense that there is a thinly-veiled bigotry in Bill’s words, it is because of Bill himself, as he is the one that asks Cotter, and by extension the readers, “Understand what I’m saying?” There is no need for Bill to be any more explicit than necessary, because his biases are nonetheless effectively communicated. The indirect, coded nature of Bill’s speech here is precisely another building block in the slow, indirect, back-and-forth, messy racialization of Cotter.
Again in reference to the *Pafko at the Wall* version, if Cotter’s support of the New York Giants is the “right” choice, then the “wrong” team to support would have to be the Brooklyn Dodgers. The decoding of the top paragraph requires some degree of historical and pop cultural context and a fair amount of conjecture regarding the psychologies of admittedly fictional characters. We should consider the fact that the history-making playoff game for the pennant title between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers took place on October 3, 1951, only four years after Jackie Robinson broke the baseball color line as the first African American player to play Major League Baseball (Jackie Robinson). The fact of Robinson’s having broken the color line would have still been monumentally impressive (and controversial) in 1951, and Robinson would have been at the height of his popularity after winning the MVP title in 1949, especially among African American fans. Bill Waterson, it is safe to argue, has his own set of assumptions about Cotter’s favored team: the black kid would probably be rooting for Jackie Robinson, and by extension, the Dodgers. In Waterson’s estimation, that Cotter turns out to be a Giants fan instead shows that he is “not like so many others,” not like so many others like Cotter, not like so many other African Americans. Bill’s assumptions about Cotter of course ignore the fact that by this point in time, the Giants have another African American player, Willie Mays, among their roster and playing in this particular game, and that teams, especially in cities with multiple teams, are determined as much by neighborhood affiliation as by any other types of identity markers, which could just as
easily explain the Harlem native’s being a fan of the Giants, rather than the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Bill’s careful deployment of implicit, coded racial language is in line with the liberal, upper-middle class persona he inhabits in the *Pafko* version, a mannered citizen who owns his own “architectural firm” (41), someone who knows how to behave in polite society and would be appalled by the use of less-than-genteel, explicitly racist slurs. Predictably, in the more racially explicit *Pafko* version, Bill eventually ends up calling Cotter the forbidden “word,” and he becomes utterly ashamed:

“I want that cotton-pickin’ ball.”
Cotter keeps walking.
“Hey goofus I’m talking to you. You maybe think this is some cheapo entertainment. String the guy along.”
“You can talk all you want,” Cotter says. “The ball’s not yours, it’s mine. I’m not selling it or trading it.”

Then Bill pauses, he stops cold and looks up and away in a dumb show of self-exasperation – a pained regret in his face and stance. He is fixed to the sidewalk, arms flat at his sides, and Cotter stands and waits.

“Look at that now, Cotter. Aw Christ, you made me say the word. Goddamn, you made me say it and there’s no forgiving the fact, is there? Aw shit, good Christ, but I’d a never said it if you hadn’t made me. Jesus in heaven, I’m completely mortified.”

They are both walking again, slowly now.
“You have to tell me we’re still friends. Cotter, I’m depending on you to tell me it’s okay. I said the goddamn word and I swear I didn’t mean it.

A car comes veering off the avenue and Cotter stops to let it go by. *He sees the driver is a Puerto Rican in a black cap.* Then he feels something shift around him. (*Pafko at the Wall* 68, emphasis added)

Bill’s language is at odds with his behavior, but the incongruousness of these two things corresponds with Bill’s liberal persona, as one who ostensibly and outwardly feels the
need to atone for racist behavior to maintain a veneer of politeness, but without confronting the core of the latent hostility animating his actions. Though he says there’s no “forgiving the fact” that he uses a slur against Cotter, in the end, he blames Cotter for making him resort to “the goddamn” word in the first place. Most importantly, despite admitting to remorse, not only does Bill ludicrously ask Cotter to confirm that they are “still friends,” but he soon begins to chase Cotter violently up the streets of Harlem, Bill “coming wide and fast and arm-pumping” (Pafko 68, Underworld 56) toward the boy, until he realizes that he is in Cotter’s home turf now.

Most accounts tend to conflate Pafko at the Wall and “The Triumph of Death,” as being the same text. For example, in 2011, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Bobby Thomson’s “Shot Heard ‘Round the World,” Grantland intended to publish “an excerpt from Pafko at the Wall, the prologue to DeLillo's American epic,” but the excerpt that was ultimately run under this heading was actually not from original Pafko at the Wall, but from “The Triumph of Death” (“Director’s Cut”). It seems that the differences between Pafko at the Wall and “The Triumph of Death,” if they are registered at all, are understood to be very minor changes. But this is dissatisfying, as the omission of Bill calling Cotter “nigger-ish” in the later version of the prologue is a significant detail, one that dramatically deracializes the tension between the two characters. The part of the passage that I have italicized – the entire exchange with the slur as well as the presence of the Puerto Rican man to remind Cotter that he is now in Harlem, where he has the upper hand against Bill – has been completely excised from the Underworld version. In “The
Triumph of Death,” tellingly, Bill never crosses the line by calling Cotter the forbidden slur; accordingly, Bill’s resultant remorse and regret are also made absent. In addition, Bill is no longer the owner of a small “architecture firm” but is made over as the owner of a “construction firm” (21), which bestows upon him much less of the cultural and professional class capital that would accompany an architect, which were the elements of Bill’s character that necessitated an outwardly polite, upper-class persona to begin with in Pafko at the Wall.

The tension in Underworld between Cotter and Bill-the-Builder is different than the tension in Pafko between Cotter and Bill-the-Architect in one key way: the racial undertone of the two baseball fans’ interactions in Underworld consistently simmers in the background, while it comes to a rolling, decisive boil in Pafko. It is precisely the slow and indirect racialization of Cotter’s character in Pafko at the Wall – in such telling details as Cotter’s having had a “Cousin Trumaine” from Alabama (Pafko 37), which is removed from the final Underworld version – that gives Bill’s ultimate outburst its weight as a plot point. The slow racialization of Cotter, performed at first in mostly colorblind language and in telling psychological and biological details, culminates in a showdown that, in Thomas Heise’s words, “pierces the illusory membrane around interracial camaraderie and good-natured rivalry” (233) that we had previously seen between Cotter and Bill before the home run, in the earlier moments of the game. While the bulk of Pafko at the Wall is slow to mark Cotter as a black character, it’s crucial to
point out that his blackness is explicitly named for the first time, some dozens of pages into the story, only during his conflict with Bill.

Bill’s eventual dependence on a slur to put down Cotter accomplishes the crucial task of reminding us that race is never a neutral or natural fact. Barbara and Karen Fields urge us to remember this in their monumental *Racecraft*: “‘Race’ too often recommends itself as a guiltless word, a neutral term for an empirical fact. It is not. Race appears to be a neutral description of reality because of the race-racism evasion, through which immoral acts of discrimination disappear, and then reappear camouflaged as the victim’s alleged difference” (95). Race is not a neutral term; rather, it is the practice and ideology of racism, the application of a “social, civic, or legal double standard based on ancestry” (17) that gives us the illusion of race. The Fieldses provide a helpful example to clarify the way in which racism is transformed into race, a transformation we often miss. In a common utterance such as “black Southerners were segregated because of their skin color” (17), causality is misattributed: “[S]egregation disappears as the doing of segregationists, and then, in a puff of smoke – paff – reappears as a trait of only one part of the segregated whole. In similar fashion, enslavers disappear only to reappear, disguised, in stories that append physical traits defined as slave-like to those enslaved” (17). In the above sentence, those responsible for enslaving are nowhere to be seen, and the burden of difference falls on the victims of enslavement. We see a similar logic at work in Bill’s backtracking after he tells Cotter to stop being “nigger-ish” but then blames Cotter for spurring him to use the slur in the first place.
In *Pafko at the Wall*, the momentous revelation that occurs through the aesthetics of withholding is less the fact that Cotter is a black kid from Harlem than it is the slithering reminder that race is not simply a classificatory or descriptive label, but a politically loaded concept. DeLillo’s novella, regardless of the author’s intent, demonstrates that racialization does not occur on its own, but is enacted precisely through the ideology of racism. The novella reminds us of the heavy weight of race and racism, and it implicates the reader, who will have to come down on one side or the other in Bill and Cotter’s insidious scuffle for the ball. Just as Spike Lee’s 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* forces viewers to decide, once and for all, what it means to “do the right thing” and who they will sympathize with in the face of an openly racist conflict, the reader of *Pafko at the Wall* is left to decide who really does have claims to the baseball, and what his position implies. Is it Cotter, who has snuck in to the game in the first place? Or Bill, who claims to have had the ball in his grip until it was knocked out by Cotter? After all, “the scuffle over who has rights to the Thomson homer grows into a question of who has the right to be in certain public spaces in the city” (Heise 233). DeLillo’s speaker certainly pushes the reader one way: once Cotter realizes that he has crossed over into his home turf of Harlem, he “holds the ball chest-high and turns it in his fingers, which isn’t easy when you’re running – he rotates the ball on its axis, spins it slowly over and around, showing the two hundred and sixteen raised red cotton stitches” (*Pafko* 69), gloating over Bill. Then, the narrative directly dares the reader, “Don’t tell me you don’t love this
move” (69) – implicitly calling for the reader’s self-reflection if it turns out that he does not, in fact, love this move.

**On Open City (2011)**

If the differences between *Underworld* and *Pafko at the Wall* serve to remind us that racialization is not a neutral fact, but intricately tied up with racism, Teju Cole’s debut novel accomplishes something similar in the way that it reveals the intricate relationship between stereotype and racialization, in particular of blackness. In its representation of two seemingly minor characters – indeed, minor enough that they do not even have proper names – *Open City* slowly mobilizes stereotypes at the same time that it buttresses against a standard of universal whiteness. This dual effect shows not the inconsistency of racial representation in the novel, but rather reveals the slippery dynamic between an aesthetics of withholding, or slow racialization, and the perpetuation of stereotypes: the intentional gaps in characterization as a result of withholding may prove to be the very breeding grounds for negative stereotypes.

Superficially, it seems unlikely that *Open City* could be a postrace novel, as racial and ethnic communities are repeatedly discussed. This is because *Open City* is a novel preoccupied with all sorts of difference and atrocities, and as such, it is historically literate regarding various types of suffering around the world. Pieter Vermeulen writes that *Open City* develops a “panorama of cultural and historical difference,” recounting as it does a number of atrocities linked to racial difference:
“the American persecution of its domestic Japanese population during the Second World War, the violent suppression of Native Americans by the Dutch settlers in the Americas, the suffering of Ugandan Indians under Idi Amin, the lingering legacies of slavery, the situation in contemporary Iraq, as well as the suffering of Germans at the hands of the Red Army after the Second World War” (44).

The novel notably refuses to homogenize populations that are so often flattened in the West, especially the sundry members of the black diaspora, as it acknowledges, independently, Africans, North Africans, African Americans and West Indians. Julius, the Nigerian-German psychiatry resident at the center of the novel, meanders through the city, talking to people. In those instances in which Julius’s interlocutors are not clearly labeled by national or explicitly racial descriptors, their interactions with Julius usually entail a recognition of mutual blackness, indicating to readers how they might be embodied.

Julius’s preoccupation with visible and traceable racial difference posits him as the inheritor of a long line of intellectual work that prioritizes skin, and its visibility, as the site of racial difference. Anne Anlin Cheng, who herself questions whether skin, and the visibility of skin, are indeed so available, recounts the long history of scholarship linking race to the visibility of skin, especially color: Fanon describes race as an “epidermal schema”; Mary Anne Doane discusses the “disabling overvisibility” of racial difference; while Homi Bhabha states that “skin, as they key signified of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes” (Cheng 7). Indeed, other characters pick up on Julius’s preoccupation with racial categorization as well. During an outing with friends, Moji, a childhood acquaintance, “demands” of Julius,
“Are you trying to find out if [my boyfriend] is black?” (203). Though Julius, a less-than-reliable narrator, denies this, it is more than likely that Moji was justified in asking her question. Even Julius’s estimation of Moji’s desirability is tied up in her skin, as he has earlier observed about her: “Her face was dark, so dark that it had faint purple notes in it, but she was not beautiful in the way I expected dark women to be” (198).

In a novel that aggressively identifies its characters’ backgrounds and features a protagonist who catalogues racial identities, the instances in which ethno-racial details are withheld are particularly glaring and imbued with purposefulness. As Colleen Lye notes, the narrative’s withholding of crucial identifying information is meant to illuminate the reader’s assumption of a universal whiteness (236). Against this backdrop of racially marked individuals, the couple of characters whose racial features are noticeably withheld for dramatic effect show us that character evocation need not occur in a consistent manner; rather, it is readers who should be alert about how they are reading and envisaging each and every character.

In one example, in the last quarter of the novel, we meet a character, minor but nonetheless significant, whose singular purpose in the narrative seems to be curb the reader’s assumptions that an unmarked character, in a book otherwise filled with racially marked characters, is white. The paragraphs describing Mr. F do not move the narrative forward at all, nor do they reveal much about the narrator, aside from his profession as psychiatrist. Mr. F, whose name is withheld in keeping with doctor-patient confidentiality, which conveniently contributes to the anonymity of the character, comes
to Julius to receive treatment for his depression. In the three continuous paragraphs dedicated to this minor character, there is plenty of demographic information about him: his neighborhood, class standing, family composition, age, and veteran status. The passage is worth examining in full below:

I saw an old gentleman. Mr. F., of Westchester County, was eighty-five years old and, save for some cataracts, was in remarkably good physical health. For a few months, his family had assumed that he was sliding into Alzheimer’s disease: his attention wandered, his memory failed, and often he seemed to be lost in the moment. He said less and less, and when he did talk, he seemed to be interested only in old memories, some of which he mixed up. But eventually the neurologist found that there was no medical reason to believe he had Alzheimer’s. Mr. F. was depressed. He was a Navy veteran of the Second World War, and had seen action in the Pacific. But he’d come home and married his sweetheart, and they’d had a large family – five children – all of them raised on his income as a factory worker in Albany, and hers as a nurse-aide and substitute teacher. His wife had died in 1999, and he’d moved in with the second of his three daughters a year later; it was while living there, in White Plains, that he began to eat and sleep badly, lose weight, sink into low moods, and experience a racing of his thoughts that he described, with great difficulty – he was a reticent man – as an effort to keep from drowning. When he came in, in his veteran’s cap and a blue windbreaker, he had that faraway look of those who had somehow gotten locked inside their sadness. I saw him only twice... I explained to him how the various medications might work. I was telling him that it was unlikely he would see any improvement in his mood for about a month when he interrupted me, raising his hand gently. I stopped midsentence, and Mr. F. said, with sudden emotion in his voice, Doctor, I just want to tell you how proud I am to come here, and see a young black man like yourself in that white coat, because things haven’t ever been easy for us, and no one has ever given us nothing without a struggle. (210)

There is no information leading up to the last line to indicate that Mr. F. identifies as black, although in Julius’s description of his two other patients, there is either explicit or implicit information pertaining to their ethno-racial backgrounds. For example, Julius’s patient, V., a historian and “member of the Delaware Tribe” (25), is haunted by the
historical scholarship she conducts on the decimation of her own people. Another patient, M., suffers from delusions after a recent divorce, and his possible Turkish ethnicity is hinted at via the story of his “Turkish American wife, Turkish mistress…[and] business in Ankara” (55). The composite image of Mr. F. as a World War II vet; a working family man belonging to a golden age of the American middle class, in which it would have been possible to support a large family on factory wages; a resident of the Westchester suburbs; and one who suffers from depression, plays with the reader’s expectations of who Mr. F might be. These details are quietly meant to evoke an image of Mr. F. as a white senior citizen. The overwhelming majority of World War II veterans were white, since even at the height of African American participation in the war, the Army was only around 9% African American (“Minority Veteran Report”), and Census reports show Westchester County to be a predominantly white county both currently and in 2010, close to the time of Open City’s publication (“Westchester County”). Depression also has a history of being seen as a white man’s disease, both quantitatively, in findings conducted by medical communities, and anecdotally. In Black Skin White Masks, Frantz Fanon famously pondered the inadequacies of Western psychoanalysis, the “findings by Freud and Adler…to explain the black man’s vision of

5 The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, found that “while about 14 percent of the population in general sought treatment for depression in 2011, only about 8 percent of African Americans did” (Nathan).
6 The National Alliance for Mental Health attributes such figures to a variety of factors, such as misinformation about mental illness, reliance on spirituality and community instead of medical support, and reluctance and inability to access medical care (“African American Mental Health”).

142
the world” (120), given the particular contours of psychopathologies directly resulting from the effects of racism.

Since Mr. F. is described as “reticent,” it is all the more striking that he would break his reluctance to speak in order to express racial pride at seeing that his psychiatrist is a “young black man,” indeed a noteworthy acquaintance, considering the statistical scarcity of black doctors in general. Mr. F. never needs to state outright in this conversation that he is black since his interlocutor should be able to see this for himself, but as far as readers are concerned, he signals his own racial identification by aligning himself with Julius under the umbrella pronoun of “us.” The three paragraphs on this character come to us at the end of a chapter, such that Mr. F.’s words are granted a certain gravity. By placing these words right before a section break, one marking the shift to a completely different focus in the novel, the novel gives the passage a quiet intensity by allowing it to speak for itself and also grants the reader a moment to deal with the realization that his assumptions have been mistaken.

Although Open City deploys the aesthetics of withholding to provoke self-reflection in readers about their biases, this is not to suggest that the novel is necessarily dedicated to providing positive or “good” representations of those it represents, or that the aesthetics of withholding always has an ethical or political project in mind. Despite Mr. F.’s feelings of solidarity, the passage ends without a response from Julius, neither in

---

7 Approximately 4% of physicians in the United States identify as black or African American, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges (“Section II”).
sympathy nor in acknowledgment. In a single sentence, Mr. F. discloses that his life has been filled with struggles attributed to racism, but there isn’t much in the rest of the novel to suggest that Julius has experienced the same, save for a single reflection of his during a holiday in Belgium, when it dawns upon him that Europeans may now look upon him with the type of loathing they show the dark-skinned refugees who have arrived seeking asylum.

Not only is the novel uninterested in providing uplifting representations of black characters, it is actively bothered by expectations of racial solidarity. Julius states this explicitly, as he is often burdened by his own recognizable status as a black man, if not in the interaction with Mr. F., then with others. When Julius rushes into a cab driven by a fellow African, the driver feels instantly miffed that Julius has failed to greet him properly upon entering the car. In moments like these, which confront him everywhere he goes, Julius thinks to himself “I wasn’t sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me” (40). In other moments in which Julius acknowledges his blackness, it is with an uneasy consciousness of the racial solidarity that he knows will be expected of him; Julius’s skepticism regarding such solidarity is best captured in his use of scare quotes around terms pertaining to any sense of black brotherhood. Julius, even when he acknowledges that there are experiences partial to blacks, is uncomfortable with staking his membership in a black community. He writes, “Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees. Blacks, ‘we blacks,’ had known rougher ports of entry: this, I could admit to myself now that my mood was less impatient, was what the cabdriver had
meant. This was the acknowledgment he wanted, in his brusque fashion, from every
‘brother’ he met” (55). But even as he understands the nature of the cabdriver’s “claims”
on him, Julius must maintain an ironic distance, offset by punctuation marks, from the
“brotherhood” he cannot help but to acknowledge.

If others force upon Julius the duty to recognize his fellow black man, he feels no
duty to actively foster community with him. Consider the “nod” of recognition that Julius
receives countless times from black men in the city, a nod that he often returns. On one
hand, it is shorthand for a sense of mutual understanding of the experience of blackness,
as Julius explains that the nod occurs “between black men all over the city every minute
of the day, a quick solidarity worked into the weave of each man’s mundane pursuits, a
nod or smile or quick greeting…a little way of saying, I know something of what life is
like for you out here” (212). But at the same time, this nod is not necessarily any more
than a signaling of recognition; and sheer recognition, despite what Julius says, does not
enact solidarity. The solidarity that is presumed to accompany this nod of recognition is
undermined the very moment in which Julius, in the middle of his musings on the
nod, is attacked violently in a mugging by two young black men, the same men with whom, just
moments prior to the attack, he had exchanged that same “gesture of mutual respect
based on our being young, black, male” (212).

*Open City*’s distance from a project of racial uplift is particularly evident when
we examine instances of the novel’s aesthetics of withholding regarding Julius’s
unnamed friend (henceforth, “Friend”), a Columbia University professor. If the revelation
of Mr. F’s identity as a black man occurs as a surprise (and quiet admonishment) to the reader precisely through a lack of tropes, images, or cultural cues associated with blackness, then conversely, the revelation that Friend is a black American (as opposed to, say, black African or West Indian) is enacted through the deployment of stereotypes and familiar anecdotes in the United States regarding black poverty, family instability, and criminality. Friend’s identity unfolds much more slowly than Mr. F.’s, such that his case is perhaps a greater example of the aesthetics of withholding. In a slow unfurling of identity, the novel mentions or involves Friend on four different occasions and discloses specific personal information about him early on:

He was a young professor in the Earth Sciences Department, four years into the uncertain seven-year journey to tenure. His interests were broader than his professional specialty suggested, and this was part of the basis for our friendship: he had strong opinions about books and films, opinions that often went against mine, and he had lived for two years in Paris, where he’d acquired a taste for fashionable philosophers like Badiou and Serres. In addition, he was an avid chess player…. (23)

Aside from rich details about Friend’s hobbies, there is no racially explicitly information provided. What is certain is that Friend’s interests – which are the same as Julius’s, as Julius riffs extensively on classical music, all types of art, and critical theory – are associated with an upper-class intellectualism. Friend’s social class can thus be surmised, and given the lack of explicit markers of blackness, there’s nothing to suggest that he falls outside of the expected universal standard of whiteness. But it is Friend’s profession as an Earth sciences professor that makes it especially reasonable to assume that Friend is white, considering the wealth of quantitative and anecdotal evidence pointing to low
figures of African Americans in the STEM fields in general.\textsuperscript{8} Indeed, given this indicator of Friend’s likely whiteness, to expect him to be black would be to practice essentialist thinking that Julius would or should only have black acquaintances around him.

Given the upper-class nature of Friend’s interests, it is particularly surprising to discover, much later, his family history: a history steeped in dysfunction and poverty, the latter of which is not stated outright but undoubtedly implied by the combination of incarceration, single parenthood, an absentee father, drug addiction, and mental illness. In a discussion on insanity, Friend reports:

My father went crazy and became a cocaine fiend. Or maybe it was the other way around, maybe the cocaine came first. Anyway, he’s out there in South Carolina somewhere right this minute, looking to score some blow. That’s what he lives for. Understand that I use the word father in a loose sense. I haven’t seen the man in four years, and the times I saw him, I wish I hadn’t. My mom, on the other hand: six children from five different men. That’s kind of crazy too, isn’t it? I mean, how do you not quit doing that after the third or fourth kid? I’ve got an older brother who’s doing time for dealing. (203)

This passage is a prime example of the aesthetics of withholding, given the manner in which it evades discussion of race even as it deploys key details that traffic in negative stereotypes of the American “underclass” and the black “underclass” in particular. For those who justifiably assumed that a Columbia University earth sciences professor would be a white man, there is nothing in this passage, necessarily, to prove them wrong. In the

\textsuperscript{8} See: Liana Christin Landivar’s Census report, “Disparities in STEM Employment by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin”; Suzanne O’Connell and Mary Anne Holmes’s article for the Geological Society of America, “Obstacles to the recruitment of minorities into the geosciences: A call to action”; or Cheryl D. Fields’s article for Diverse: Issues in Higher Education, “Black Geoscientists: Between a Rock and a Hard Place.”
in the postrace era, we have developed a shorthand to talk about black people in terms of poverty and criminality (Bonilla Silva, Perry, Ioanide), and the unflattering stereotypes invoked in Friend’s family history are often associated with the black poor. However, this passage sheds light on Friend’s class identity, not his racial identity. As the Fieldses state, the “short, telltale exudations of class in America, not race,” are “unemployment, illegitimacy, jail” (Racecraft 14) – all of which are covered either implicitly or explicitly in this passage, as if boxes to be checked on a checklist about American poverty writ large.

The passage hedges racial identification by trafficking in some stereotypes of blackness, but not in a totalizing way. The absences in this passage are worth examining. Consider, for example, the language used to describe the father’s drug problem. Friend’s father is specifically called a “cocaine fiend,” rather than a “crack fiend,” the latter of which has come to be associated with black users due to a series of predatory and racist drug laws (Alexander 51, 53) and would thus have revealed in quick, coded language that Friend is the son of a black man.

Friend’s identity as a black American male is ultimately revealed obliquely; in the passages attributed to him throughout the novel, he never speaks of this identity himself, not in the way that Mr. F. does. After he shares the story of this “appalling family background” (203), Moji is the one to out him as a black man to readers when she says to him, sympathetically, “the things black people have had to deal with in this country – and I don’t mean me or Julius, I mean people like you, who have been here for generations –
the things you’ve had to deal with are definitely enough to drive anyone over the edge” (203). Moji, the upwardly mobile Nigerian, in this line of thought, is careful not to homogenize the experiences of all black people living in the United States, as she distinguishes the experiences of newer African immigrants, like herself, from those of someone like Friend, whose family has endured the legacy of American racism for far longer, both materially and psychically.

Readers may or may not be surprised by the revelation of Friend’s blackness. They may have assumed from the very start, given his friendship with “black” Julius (in quotation marks, as Julius would likely describe himself) and given Julius’s various black acquaintances in the novel, that Friend is also black, which entails precisely the reductive presumptuousness about black solidarity which irritates Julius. They may have taken the incomplete stereotypes of the poor in the passage quoted above and immediately associated these images with blackness, although there was some hedging to suggest otherwise. Or, they may have only learned of Friend’s identity as a black American, with roots in the American South, at the moment he was directly revealed to be so by Moji. Regardless of where readers stand along this spectrum, what cannot be denied is that Friend’s revelation as a highly successful and cultured black man converges with the revelation of a life tinged with poverty, criminality, and dysfunction. In Friend, regardless of the text’s intentions, blackness and poverty become conflated. The coy, delayed racialization of this character ultimately entails both the resistance and perpetration of
stereotype – revealing to us its slinking resilience, as the very act of debunking stereotype ultimately invokes it yet again.

What do we make of the postrace aesthetics of withholding in a novel like *Open City*? To answer this question, we must ask another question: what is a novel like *Open City*? In his glowing review of the novel in the *New Yorker*, James Wood mentions a passage near the end of *Open City*, in which Julius riffs, “Each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point for normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him. Perhaps this is what we mean by sanity: that; whatever our self-admitted eccentricities might be, we are not the villains of our own stories” (243). Wood, who has heretofore described Julius as a narrator that is “engaged but disengaged” takes this to be a “brave admission about the limits of sympathy, coming as it does near the end of a book full of other people’s richly recorded stories,” and takes Julius’s register of detached observation to be meaningful in the way that it allows the stories of the various characters of the novels to be told. And yet, Wood does not remark upon the way Julius ends his meditation on the sanity of solipsism, with weighty self-preservation: “From my point of view, thinking about the story of my life, even without claiming any especially heightend (sic) sense of ethics, I am satisfied that I have hewed close to the good” (Cole 243). This is a declaration that immediately preempts Julius’s revelation that Moji has accused him of raping her 18 years ago. Julius’s philosophical musings on the inevitability of human solipsism takes on a different tone when we realize they are likely his direct attempt at defending himself
against a serious allegation of abuse. Moji follows her accusation with the demand that Julius have something to say for himself, for all the pain and bitterness he has caused her: “But will you say something now? Will you say something?” (245). That Julius says nothing, or that we are not privy to his response if he does say anything at all to Moji, is precisely a manifestation of the “detached observation” of which Wood writes. Yet, in this case, such coolness highlights not the meaningful, artistic recording of stories, but the inability of the master aesthete to use language in all the necessary ways that the moment demands: to console or to provide accountability in some way and, most significantly, to bridge gaps between individuals.

Given that the novel’s attempts to break the notion of a white universality are also coupled with a rejection of the demands for positive racial representation, what is most clear is that the novel is not working in the service of an overtly political or ethical project. Rather, Open City is a novel that posits in a faint shudder that art alone does not pave the way for human connection. From characters like Farouq, the young Moroccan character who cannot separate critical theory from life, which contributes to his becoming radicalized against the West, to Julius, who is intellectually refined and constantly waxing philosophical and yet does not even know that his own next-door neighbor has died, the novel points at the limits of aesthetics, in general, to solve problems of difference – racial, religious, ethnic, sexual – between people. The aesthetics of withholding, insofar as it is still an aesthetics – one founded on the omissions of language and intentionally hidden information, one that relies on its readers to be participants
willing and able to recognize their ingrained ways of thinking – is not meant to surmount these limits. An aesthetics alone cannot fix the deleterious problems of difference, nor should it be tasked to accomplish such a lofty goal. What the aesthetics of withholding manages to do, instead, is reflect back to us the processes through which we read, flesh out, and make up our minds about characters and perhaps one another.

**On Personal Days (2008)**

If characters are relentlessly raced in *Open City*, to the point that it seems to be the opposite of a postrace novel, the contrary is true of Ed Park’s debut novel: *Personal Days*, which wittily treats the drudgery of office life in 21st-century America, is almost entirely devoid of racial markers but replete with postrace hijinks. Media reviewers tend not to mention the novel’s engagement with race. As for existent critical analyses of Park’s novel, the available resources – tellingly titled “Race and Racelessness in *Personal Days*” (Min Hyoung Song) and “Unmarked Character and the ‘Rise of Asia’: Ed Park's *Personal Days*” (Colleen Lye) – appear to focus, at least on surface glance, on the ways in which race is not present or marked in the novel. But make no mistake: *Personal Days* is the type of deadpan novel in which considerations of race, despite seeming wholly unimportant to the thrust of the narrative, are sneakily, often amusingly, present in the background. For instance, the alma mater of one character, Laars, is

---

9 Examples include Lev Grossman of *Time*, Ellen Wernecke of *A.V. Club*, and Mark Sarvas of the *New York Times*. 
described as a small liberal arts college that “emphasizes feelings rather than performance” and features on its website an image of “a white guy with an Afro reading under a tree” (21). The humor in this passage, about American liberal arts colleges and stereotypical white progressives, clearly relies on a sense of racial incongruity between the “white guy” and his “Afro.” While it is true that characters like Laars seem to be racially unmarked, it is not the case that the novel is entirely “raceless.” Ironically, if the latter were actually true, the novel would not be considered “raceless,” because to call a novel this is to understand that it is still engaging with race in some negative capacity. Paradoxically, the novel’s aesthetics of withholding, manifest in self-conscious playfulness, allows us to recognize that race is quietly important in the novel. In short, if we are aware of the “absence” of race in the novel, it is because the novel knowingly dangles this absence before us.

At the heart of Personal Days is a critique leveled against late capitalism. Song writes that the novel is a “witty reflection on a moment of economic crisis, when no jobs seem safe and when no one wants to take personal responsibility for the economic restructuring that is taking place” while Lye elaborates that the novel’s “sharpest critique is aimed at our post-Fordist cultures of work, into whose global circuits Asian labor has been so integrated as to represent a near-universal standard for human flexibility and disposability” (Lye 248). Tabling for a moment Lye’s discussion of Asian labor, it makes sense that against the novel’s backdrop of widespread economic uncertainty, no one seems safe, not even previously protected classes of people. None of the characters in
Personal Days is indispensable to the company; in fact, most of them are not memorable in the scope of the narrative, either. When one employee is fired from the firm, another is expected to pick up the fallen employee’s work without any additional training or preparation, and without any extra compensation or change in title for the increased work (22). Even the firings seem random: paradoxically, those fired recently are the same employees who had been called in by the manager and told that they had been doing a “terrific job” (33). In such a manner were the characters “Original Jack and Jason and Jules” let go. That these characters all have names beginning with the letter “J” may not be a coincidence, either. Since there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the firings, dismissals according to alphabetical order, ridiculous as they may seem, cannot be entirely ruled out (64, 179).

Just as the employees are disposable and interchangeable to the firm, the characters are disposable to one another, and to readers as well. As the collective narrator of the first section of the novel states, after someone is fired, “The departed sends us e-mails after they leave and we forget to write back forever” (27). The employees even tell each other that they are more or less “interchangeable” (93, 215, 238). The indistinguishability of the characters is by design. Despite occasional details we have of each character, regarding hobbies, love lives, visits to therapists, and maybe educational background, given the “we” voice of the first section of the novel, the characters speak collectively and are never fully individuated. The collectivity of the employees is underscored by the fact that even though the novel encourages us to consider the
physicality of these fictional characters, it is impossible to visualize them as fully fleshed out, separate characters – in part, because we don’t really know what they look like. In the first example of withholding, the novel conspicuously leaves out racial markers while classifying the employees by height order. Only a few pages in, the employees reveal that they are attempting to play team sports to boost “morale” during the depressing period of layoffs at work: “We decide to give softball a shot. There are eight of us. In decreasing order of height: Laars, Jack II, Lizzie, Jonah, Jenny, Crease, Pru, Jill. We need a ninth…” (5). That the employees of this unnamed firm can just as easily be organized around a physical attribute such as height serves, in part, to point out the arbitrariness of using racial markers to group people together or apart. It also underscores the overall sense of randomness that seems to be governing the lives of these employees daily.

Despite the indistinguishability of the employees, racial difference is nonetheless present, if only to be pushed aside soon after its acknowledgment. Lest readers assume that “Laars, Jack II, Lizzie, Jonah Jenny, Crease, Pru, Jill,” characters heretofore unmarked by anything other than race, are all white, the novel teases that this is not the case. In the novel’s most obvious instance of the aesthetics of withholding, it introduces racial difference into the group, but does not specify which characters bear the racial markers:

Every payday we go to Henry in HR and he asks who we are, last names first, though he should know us by now. We oblige him, as if bringing up the issue would risk stoppage of pay. He must have attended an HR meeting in which it was stressed that check disbursers must orally confirm the identity of the recipient. Still, Henry invariably confuses the two Asian workers, giving one the
other’s check before stopping himself, finding the right one. He also did this to the two black workers before one of them was fired. He used to apologize for the confusion but even he realizes how ridiculous it’s become. (40)

The novel introduces racial heterogeneity into the group, but it withholds the full weight of the information by refusing to name which of the characters are “Asian” and “black.” Henry “used to apologize” for mixing up the racially marked employees (some four out of nine people), which shows that even in the world of the novel, his confusion is one with unpleasant implications about the inability of raced peoples to be considered as individuals. Yet, as Song writes, “even this obvious racial faux pas is noted and then put aside as something that, lacking in sense like everything else in the office, hardly seems worth complaining about.” To go a bit further, it actually seems that the only characters who are given even the chance at individuation are those that are somehow marked racially, since “the recognition of racial difference helps to make two of these characters stand out in some way and not be so easily confusable with everyone else in the office, even if they have to be confused with each other in order for this to happen” and “nonwhite racial status becomes one of only a handful of markers that provides a little relief” (Song) from the otherwise drab sense of uniformity and indistinguishability among the office workers. Any gestures toward individuation seem to go hand in hand with racialization.

It is thus not a coincidence that when Personal Days eventually switches into first-person narration, it is in the voice of a racially marked character, Jonah, revealed to be “half black.” As the economic restructuring of the firm progresses, only Jonah
discovers that the firm is being destroyed from within by a rogue worker who turns out not to have even been hired by the company, a detail that crystalizes the hyper-exchangeability of workers in the post-Fordist era. In a confessional e-mail to his fired co-worker, Jonah explains how he has managed to not just stay in the company, but get promoted. By disguising himself as a janitor, wearing an “amazing” beard (181) and the same work shirt that belonged to his father, who was actually a janitor, Jonah is able to gain the rogue worker’s confidence, learn the truth about his identity, and eventually “oversee his removal” (238).

The revelation about Jonah’s role reversal, from office peon to management, comes after the revelation of his racially marked identity. In the culmination of the novel’s aesthetics of withholding, Jonah writes of the positive relationship he was able to enjoy with the former office boss, “the Sprout,” in part due to Jonah’s racial background:

the Sprout had opened up to me in the first place, years ago, because he had inexplicably gotten it into his head that… I was a family man like himself, and as time passed it became harder to inform him that I was in fact not only childless but morbidly single, and it became near impossible to come clean after he confided in me that he and Sheila had been trying to adopt a second child, a little girl from China (a companion for their first child, half black like me), but the paperwork was taking so long… (199)

The casual, parenthetical revelation of Jonah’s being “half black” once again unsettles readers’ assumptions that a racially unmarked character is a white one. In retrospect, Jonah is one of the two black characters that the “we” voice had described earlier in their story about Henry the HR manager, even though Jonah qualifies this description by calling himself “half black.” Although the narrative earlier mentioned the presence of
blacks and Asians among the employees, it has intentionally steered readers away from deducing Jonah’s membership in this raced contingent, as Jonah’s bearded appearance has been said to resemble that of the “Unabomber” (158) – who is, famously, not black.

Aside from toying with readers’ expectations of straightforward racial representation, the aesthetics of withholding operates, in all of its deadpan hilarity, in service of its class critique. As Ly states, “whether we are meant to look back and attribute characters’ nonmention of Jonah’s race to either his effective passing or to the Millennial Generation’s taken-for-granted multiracialism, the surprise revelation of his racial identity retroactively maps racial uncertainty onto a narrative whose central dramatic suspense had involved questions of veiled class identity” (242). Though Ly seems to have found it insufficient that the “we” voice actually does acknowledge the existence of racial difference among its body of employees in the anecdote about HR—and although there is no organic need for Jonah’s race to be singled out from a plot perspective when none of the other employees is overtly raced – the latter point is well-taken. Jonah’s self-outing as a “half black” man at the end of the novel connects considerations of race with considerations of class. His description of himself as “half black” is potentially at odds with the “we” voice’s acknowledgment of “black,” not “part black,” members among its rank. Is Jonah really an equal member of the “we” collective speaking in the first part of the novel if the “we” does not use the same racial language that Jonah would use to describe himself? Jonah’s membership in the collective unsettles expectations of solidarity, first on a racial level, since Jonah himself is the bearer of racial
“diversity” in the group, but also on a class level, since Jonah is the only member to have successfully survived in the company and risen up the ranks to management. Jonah, whose father also straddled class positions as a part-time janitor, part-time teacher, exposes the volatility of class status. At this point, we should remember the way in which the “we” collective has always been aware of its lack of solidarity. The employees might appear to share a class position, but in reality, don’t – “We dress like we don’t make much money, which is true for at least half of us. The trick is figuring out which half” (3) – just as they might or might not be friends – “It’s possible we can’t stand each other but at this point we’re helpless in the company of outsiders” (3).

**Conclusion: Racial Withholding in Narrative**

Though author biographies aren’t necessarily pertinent to the ways in which we consider their works, for the purpose of my broader argument that post-race literary aesthetics are not strictly the purview of “minority” authors, it seems timely to mention that the novels examined in this chapter are written by authors of different “backgrounds,” albeit backgrounds with first or second-generation ties to immigration: Ed Park is a Korean American, Teju Cole a Nigerian American, and Don DeLillo an Italian American. Since *Personal Days*, *Open City*, and *Pafko at the Wall* are very different works, deploying diverse styles of language, themes, moods, and plots, and are written by authors of differing racial backgrounds, we can see that at least one value of studying or outlining the aesthetics of withholding lies in its extreme versatility, in its
very capaciousness. Although the aesthetics of withholding unfolds differently in each of
the novels, it generally serves to hold readers accountable for their biases and urge them
to resist the default assumption of unmarked whiteness among American literary
characters. At the same time, the very moments of withholding, of intentional and
delayed racialization, may actually pave the way for stereotypes to be mobilized, as
potential sources of information about the characters that are being realized so slowly.
The primary revelations of this aesthetics, as a whole, is that racialization does not occur
on its own, but that it is inextricably linked with racism and stereotypes.

Each of the novels deploys the aesthetics of withholding in a different mode, and
the lessons and pleasures derived from each book are slightly different as well. *Open
City*, the most realist of the texts examined here, is written in a melancholic and
meditative register. As a novel that questions the place of aesthetics to solve ethical
problems related to difference, in the U.S. and abroad, it simultaneously sketches out the
portraits of diverse characters with origins in the African diaspora while also addressing
any expectations of racial solidarity with weariness and cynicism. DeLillo’s *Pafko at the
Wall*, the precursor to the postmodernist classic *Underworld*, chooses to filter a pivotal
day in the Cold War through the unlikely eyes of a young Harlem teenager, whose access
to and presence at all-American events, like a historic baseball game, is shown to be open
for question. Intentionally or not, *Pafko at the Wall* reminds us most forcefully that
racialization is not an empirical fact but a morally loaded concept, that Cotter’s being
fully and explicitly described as “black” in the narrative comes precisely at the moment
that his white antagonist calls him “nigger-ish.” Ed Park’s *Personal Days*, unlike the other two works examined in this chapter, is a decidedly funny novel, written largely in pithy witticisms and deadpan language. The humor in *Personal Days*, including the playful way it deploys an aesthetics of racial withholding, actually works in service of a class critique; if anything, the humorousness of the novel allows such a meaty critique to be snuck in almost secretly, which buffers the novel against the risk of seeming overly didactic to its readers. Novels of the paradoxical postrace era are not simply moralizing agents, warning against the dangers of racism or hasty judgments, or blindly bolstering racial solidarity among marginalized peoples and characters, but are complex works that simultaneously expose the link between the racial and the racist and demonstrate the impossibility of uprooting racist discourse without, inadvertently, referencing it.

If these novels are even remotely successful in coaxing thoughtful readers to stunning and unexpected revelations of characters’ racial identities, this is because racial identity, like identity in general, is discursive. Despite the great primacy given to the visual in racial classification – in, say, skin color – racial identity is constituted elsewhere: in language, thought, and social practice. Visual markers of race are limited, imprecise, and historically variable. For instance, nineteenth-century American miscegenation laws in newly-annexed Mexican territories gave Mexicans the legal status of “white,” barring them from marrying Asians or blacks, but their “hybrid genealogies” led county clerks to “grant marriage licenses to such couples based on similar coloration between the partners” (Koshy 6). The broad classificatory category of “Mexican” had an
official meaning but was nonetheless associated with a range of skin tones, so that the category could only be loosely interpreted at best.

That the visible is not the be-all and end-all of race is evidenced by the fact that fictional characters we could never see in person — as they are purely creations of language — can be understood as being raced at all. Race, for all its facile signification through physical attributes and sheer (supposed) visibility, is in actuality constituted by the invisible. As Barbara and Karen Fields write, if race were “eminently visible,” then “no one in America could possibly have understood Martin Luther King, Jr.’s I Have a Dream speech” (207). The focus of racecraft, the “mental terrain and…pervasive belief” (18) in the existence of separate races, is “not the outward, visible color of a person’s skin (hair type, bone structure, etc.) but the presumed inward, invisible content of that person’s character” (207). In the case of the historic Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson, where the “separate but equal” doctrine was born, the fact that Homer Plessy appeared white was of no importance. Though Plessy’s own counsel wrote that Plessy had “one-eighth African blood, with no discernible black features, and [was] thus entitled to the legal privileges of a white man” (210), the Court famously ruled against him. It wasn’t Plessy’s “discernible” and visible race but his invisible essence that resulted in his being moved from the whites-only section of the train. The visible thus works in dubious service of the invisible: “In racecraft, physical features function merely as a visible index of an invisible essence that is separate and different from them” (Fields 211).
Given the discursiveness of racial identity and the limitations of visual markers of race, it would follow that literature, which isn’t bound to the conventions of visual representation like other media, is uniquely suited to underscore the persistent dynamic between the visible and invisible aspects of race, entailed by the postrace aesthetics of withholding. Min-hyoun Song’s appraisal of *Personal Days* ends on the following note:

This leads to my final point about race in *Personal Days*: its brilliant and humorous critique of racial assumptions is made possible through Park's deft, self-conscious use of the form of the novel. In other narrative media like comics or film, or genres like autobiography, the refusal to disclose the race of these characters either would have been impossible to achieve or would have called so much attention to itself that it would have become the reader’s, or viewer's, primary focus. The novel, however, has no such visual or generic component, so the revelation of racial heterogeneity amongst the ranks of office workers who might otherwise seem so much alike with one another has a force that is deployed with optimal comedic effect. (To see this, one might ask how a film version of the novel—certainly adaptable in many ways—could possibly manage the reveal about Jonah.) What *Personal Days* thus demonstrates is how important it is that the reader pay heed to literature’s forms and to the kind of deliberate aesthetic decisions that enable original ways of seeing. Without such attentiveness, without such an appreciation for the literary, the reader risks missing what makes this work, and others like it, so fascinating and exciting to encounter.

Song’s assertion that the aesthetic of withholding, “deployed with optimal comedic effect” in *Personal Days*, is particularly suited for the novel form because the novel form does not have to supply images at all (and certainly not ones in color), is certainly well-founded. Insofar as literature is constituted more through text than through pictures, in language rather than the visual, it highlights the role that words have in conjuring up any type of person, raced or otherwise. Song’s appraisal of Park’s novel ends on a justifiable elevation of the literary form, on the particular significance of literature in this postrace
era in the literary form’s ability to minimize our reliance on visible markers of race in favor of idiomatic markers.

It’s worth trying to answer Song’s rhetorical question, about how *Personal Days* might be remade into a film version that adequately uses the aesthetics of withholding and handles Jonah’s racial revelation. There are a few possibilities. Perhaps Jonah would never be shown on camera, but only heard speaking throughout the majority of the film, and only at the very end would we see him typing the revelatory e-mail to Pru, with the camera perhaps zooming in on his “marked” hands or face, which would be visible by the bright glare of his laptop in the otherwise dark elevator where he is stuck. Perhaps Jonah will never actually be shown on camera, but made to speak in a way that would be racially coded, and thus revelatory. Or, the movie version could be an animated film, with anthropomorphized animals or inanimate objects representing the individual characters, such that they will not be “raced” on-screen in a way that is immediately familiar to viewers. After all, having non-human characters would only emphasize the dehumanizing effects of corporate life in post-Fordist corporations. As Song has written, it might well be the case that in each of these examples, the fact of racial withholding might be overly evident, which would make the aesthetic ineffectual since the “tease” would be less a tease and more a statement demanding attention.

To address Song’s point about the uniqueness of literature to engage in the aesthetics of withholding, I pointing to an existent example of a non-novelistic art form that deploys this aesthetics in a visual medium. The biting 2009 play *The Shipment,*
written and directed by the Korean-born Young Jean Lee for an entirely black cast of actors, shows us how a visual form can withhold the races of characters that are brought to life on stage by real actors, real people. Lee, a one-time doctoral candidate in English, who left academia before completing her dissertation on King Lear, wrote The Shipment in consultation with the actors, who described the kind of characters they would have liked to have the chance to embody. The play is broken up into several distinct acts, in which the black actors ostensibly play black characters. The play progresses with an extended reference to a minstrel show; an aggressive comedy bit in which the “comedian” engaging with the play’s audience exclaims “You think I ENJOY talkin’ ’bout race? I wanna talk about POOP, mothafucka!” (Lee); and a sketch about a young boy who dreams of becoming a rap star, despite the wishes of his mother, who pleads in a parody of the martyr-like, single black matriarch, “I worked three jobs and raised six children and ten grandchildren by myself so that you would be a doctor!” All of the acts up to this point somehow engage with, challenge, or parody ideas about black artistry, history, behavior, language and essence.

In the very last act of the play, however, something shifts. As Hilton Als of the New Yorker writes in his review of Lee’s play, at this point, “All the actors have converged, but they speak differently now, more formally, and their language is more ‘dramatic.’” In this final act, the actors are cocktail party-goers at the swanky home of a character named Thomas. What ensues is a night of neurotic interactions, confessions, and hijinks, reminiscent, for the author of this chapter, of one of the awkwardly hilarious
parties depicted on the set of a show like television’s *Frasier*.

In a single twist, in which the characters engage in a party game that leads them to say naughty, politically incorrect statements, it becomes evident that the characters seem “different to us now, transformed by the affluent setting and by their pinched diction” (Als). Viewers’ suspicions that these characters, played by black actors, seem to be “acting white,” are validated: these characters are acting white because they are now rendered white by the setting, despite the dark bodies of the actors. Als states: “The setting has made them white—another social construct. This is so ingenious a twist, such a radical bit of theatrical smoke and mirrors, that, in rethinking everything that has come before—all that ‘black’ language, all those ‘black’ situations—we are forced to confront our own preconceived notions of race.” This postrace plot twist, an instance of racial withholding involving actors with obviously “raced” bodies, shows us that language and social context, rather than the visual markers of skin color, hair type, and bone structure, dictate the ways in which a person can be read as a member of a particular race.

The undoing of assumptions regarding raced bodies in a work like *The Shipment* is especially explosive because the big reveal that comes at the end of the work is completely unexpected and blatantly meaningful. On the other hand, the corresponding revelation in a novel like *Personal Days* can be either expected, or completely missed. A careful reader of *Personal Days* should know relatively early on that racial identifications...

---

10 See, for example, the episodes “To Kill a Talking Bird” (Season 4, episode 14) or “The Dinner Party” (Season 6, episode 17).
are being withheld, likely in the service of some larger payoff later in the work, while a casual or inattentive reader might miss the lead-up to the racial revelation altogether and ignore its significance. Yet this subtlety of the novel should be seen not as a flaw, but as a virtue. Novels are subtle and can be morally ambiguous in a way that an antiracist manifesto cannot; the aesthetic of withholding in postrace literature is one that is essentially quiet, as it must refrain from certain types of explicit naming. It is precisely the subtlety of novels, rather than the explicitness of antiracist cultural discourse, that can capture the paradoxical nature of racial stereotype as something that can be propagated even as it is being decried – and thus prompt the crucial realization, even for political purposes, that the category of race itself, deleterious effects and all, is not quite so dissolvable.

The postrace aesthetics of withholding outlined thus far is not unique to the form of the novel, as the existence and impact of Young Jean Lee’s play shows us. Yet we cannot help but to consider the fact of its concentration in the novel form, and the recent proliferation of novels that deploy it. The novels engaging in this aesthetic are not compelling us to imagine a world in which race is not in play; as such, insofar as they are invoking racial categorizations that are already existent, they run the risk of reifying these categories and further entrenching extant understandings of race. As the Fields’s remind us in *Racecraft*, what is needed to dispel the myth or construction of race is not better language to discuss racism “but a politics to uproot it” (109). Thus, the projects in which *Pafko at the Wall, Open City, and Personal Days* are engaged, if they can be said to be
undertaking projects at all, cannot be said to be political or revolutionary. But in teasing us about characters’ identities, leaving our minds to fill in these omissions ourselves, these novels ultimately push us to delay the process of racialization by making evident the fact that there is a process involved at all. In slowing down racial categorization, in enacting a slow, intentional, and labored racialization, novels engaged in an aesthetics of withholding remind their readers that race and racial identity, especially tied up on visual and bodily markers, is unnatural and constructed.

But what does it really mean for race to be “constructed”? It is widely understood that race is no longer to be understood as a biological phenomenon; the socially constructed nature of race is something we hear of repeatedly, especially in scholarship. But the fact that race-as-construction is seemingly taken for granted at this point and repeated ad nauseum does little to counteract the underlying belief, among those raced and not raced, that there is nonetheless a sort of essence to race, even if that essence is, paradoxically, not in-born. Anne Anlin Cheng writes that “even as critical race theory has done the vital work of unraveling racial assumptions as entirely socialized and juridicized concepts, somehow the ‘fact’ of blackness continues to signify unproblematically” (169), even for those with high stakes in asserting the wholly constructed nature of race. In Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface, Cheng questions the binary between “essence and superficiality” (171). She uses the figure of Josephine Baker, whose “nakedness has been understood to be a key to her theatrical success and the material evidence of her racial embodiment” (7) to show the intimate relationship
between Modernism and Primitivism and the ongoing interplay between surface and essence. Though Baker, who famously deployed tropes of African Primitivism in her acts, is seen either as a “subversive agent” or the “broken subject that history demanded” (172), her nakedness and ensuing visibility has never been pure nakedness. Baker, whose nakedness “never stands alone and instead frequently exercises an eccentric communion with other epidermises, both natural and inorganic” (7), wears her nakedness. As Cheng puts it succinctly, “with Baker, being unveiled often also means being covered over” (7, emphasis original). The visible is, at once, not visible.

To borrow the lessons of Josephine Baker, via Cheng, is to be reminded of the ways in which skin, and its visibility, is not so available (7), the immutable can actually be mutable, and “authenticity is not an integral or a priori thing but a palimpsest of identifications, layered and ridden with internal contradictions” (170). Cheng’s argument is valuable for refusing to simply binarize race-as-social-construction and race-as-biological-fact. It allows us to consider the ways in which individual identity might be layered, with all of those various elements falling under “race” possibly constituting one or more of these layers. The novels examined in this chapter, insofar as they do not privilege only the visual elements of what is understood as race, uphold the same dynamic vision of identity in words and through narrative time. By deploying the tropes of unraced characters and unfulfilled racial solidarity, effectively slowing down racialization, these novels perform the difficult feat of reminding us of the constructedness of race while also allowing characters to acknowledge and engage with
their identities at large, which may indeed be raced, just as they are gendered, classed, aged and marked by a variety of other experiences that render them human.
4. Coercive Choice in Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*

Despite its setting in a post-apocalyptic world – or perhaps specifically because of it – Octavia Butler’s 1987 novel *Dawn* proves to be highly preoccupied with race on two levels. In *Dawn*, the vast majority of human beings are dead after an undiscriminating nuclear war and the few remaining ones must contend with an alien species at odds with the human way of life, a situation in which humans must overcome their individual identity differences – like race – in the face of a larger notion of the “human race,” or a species identity. This setting perhaps best paves the way for a future that might literally be “postrace,” since individual bigotry, institutional racism, and the concept of distinct human races altogether must forcibly be transcended and an essential sameness insisted upon, in the face of an utter, complete threat to humanity as we know it. In scholarship, however, the most available reading of *Dawn*, at least that which relates to the novel’s engagement of race, tends to be one that privileges *Dawn*’s capacity as a representation of slavery. The lessons to be drawn from the events that befall Lilith are unmistakable: the African American protagonist is forced to interbreed with the aliens and bear children against her will. Yet, while *Dawn* is undeniably compelling as an allegory about the forcible passage of African slaves to the New World and as a representation of the ongoing marginalization of women of color, another register is equally operative in the novel and must not be ignored: a paradoxical, ambiguous, and non-binaristic one. *Dawn*
presents a world in which human choice is drastically limited – in terms of determining and staking a personal identity, of selecting friends and allies and lovers, and of consenting to invasions upon one’s body. It is a world in which sex with aliens can simultaneously be experienced as tremendous bodily pleasure and psychological torture, in which interbreeding is horribly feared and yet necessary for the future sustenance of life. It is precisely the flattening of choice – the presence of coercion – that paradoxically generates a greater diversity in available categories, whether through unexpected interracial couplings among humans or through the dreaded interspecies breeding that may lead to the posthuman. *Dawn’s* meditation on the limits of the human, which it accomplishes through a complicated, nuanced engagement with coercion, thus entails an experiment with an unironic, literal postrace future.

For those who are unfamiliar with *Dawn*, a quick synopsis is in order. The novel begins with Lilith Iyapo, an African American woman who has been “Awakened” from two centuries of suspended animation, in which she had been kept in a very deep sleep inside a plant pod by her captors, the Oankali. The Oankali are a physically repulsive alien species, literally “gene traders” (22) whose biological imperative is to evolve and improve their species by interbreeding with a distinct partner species that will supplement their own shortcomings. They live on a ship, an entity that is living and organic, rather than machinic, with which they have a completely symbiotic relationship; they do not consume meat and have a deep reverence for nature. They are drawn to the humans, whose genetic disposition – what they call a “talent” (20) – for cancer is a highly
attractive prospect for the Oankali’s physical limitations. The aliens have rescued the surviving humans after a nuclear war, hinted to have been between the United States and the Soviet Union, has wiped out most of the planet; most of the survivors have been rescued from the southern hemisphere, leaving us with a motley crew of racially diverse characters. Though the humans are deemed a suicidal species (14) with the potent combination of intelligence and hierarchy (or more specifically, an intelligence that serves hierarchy rather than the other way around (37)), they are nonetheless attractive to the Oankali as a partner species, so the Oankali intend to interbreed with them in a gesture of mutually beneficial symbiosis, regardless of human consent. Lilith is tasked with Awakening the initial group of humans who are meant to mate with the Oankali and possibly re-populate Earth, or what little is left of it by this point. When she does Awaken her fellow humans, they are generally disgusted by the prospect of having their agency compromised by being forced to mate with the Oankali. A significant number of them eventually turn on Lilith, who has been modified with super strength and the ability to speak the Oankali language through the work of Nikanj, Lilith’s “ooloi” partner, a genderless Oankali primarily responsible for mating and genetic manufacturing. Nikanj is the one that eventually impregnates Lilith against her consent, although Lilith has a complex relationship with it – an interdependency marked by both care and intimacy, on the one hand, and coercion, on the other.
On coercion

The Oankali submit the humans to tactics of both force and coercion, which, simplified, I mean to refer to the situations, respectively, in which the humans are given absolutely no choice and in which the humans are given some degree of choice, no matter how minor or unpleasant. The following events in the plot of *Dawn* show the ways in which the Oankali seem to compromise the humans’ wills: having the humans submit to a sexual relationship that they protest verbally but seem to enjoy physically; inseminating Lilith so that she will bear an Oankali-human hybrid without her prior consent; sterilizing the humans so that they cannot bear any “pure” human children of their own; and administering drugs to subdue and relax the humans when they are in modes of panic. For the purposes of this chapter, the concept of “coercion” stands in opposition to its stronger cousin, “force,” both of which appear in the novel, but in slightly different contexts.

Though the words “coercion” and “force” both appear in *Dawn*, it is significant that only “coercion,” which is used twice, is uniquely reserved for human-Oankali interactions, specifically in instances when Lilith considers the ways in which the Oankali extract something out of her. Despite the similarly negative connotations of “coercion” and “force,” in that both terms seem to indicate restrictions on individual freedom, they are different in the important sense that the act of “coercion” nonetheless rests on the ability of the coerced individual to make some choices, albeit limited, unreasonable, or unpleasant ones, whereas an act of “force” removes the possibility of choice altogether. In *Dawn*, the question of choice is a tricky one. Choices seem to be
dramatically limited for humans who have survived a nuclear fallout on earth and now find themselves in the captivity of the Oankali, alien gene-traders who are set on mating with the humans for the supposed benefit of both species. Lilith and the surviving humans are consistently put into coercive situations in which they have two limited choices – either consent to the disagreeable options presented by the aliens, or face other, often unknown consequences. The nature of coercive choice, which pushes the humans to make do with the limited options in front of them, ultimately compact, determine, or reshape the humans’ identities and relationships in unexpected, life-altering, and ontologically significant ways.

Political scientist Craig L. Carr, in his essay “Coercion and Freedom,” provides a useful, though technical, framework for conceptualizing coercion. He takes a rather extreme stand that coercion can even be understood as being paradoxically central to freedom, insofar as coercion presents any choices at all, and choices are a necessary component of being free. Carr does not succeed in securing an adequate definition of “coercion” on its own terms, as there are no logic-based constructions of the term that can’t ultimately be debunked, but what he is able to demonstrate is that efforts to understand coercion in terms of “strong forced-action statements” as well as “weak forced-action statements” are both misguided. A strong forced-action statement (i.e. “X was forced to do S”) is a statement in which the emphasis is on the “outcome of events rather than actions” (Carr 59), in the sense that such a statement tells us only about what uncontrollable circumstances (or “events”) have happened to some agent or person (59).
However, in a statement about coercion, to say that “X was coerced into doing S” (60) is to report on the outcome of action on X’s part as opposed to the outcome or circumstance of an event that has befallen him. Simply put, the latter construction cannot be restated in causal terms in the way that a forced-action statement, reporting on the outcome of events, can; there is a certain element of murkiness as to the reasoning behind X’s action in the statement about coercion or weak forced-action statement, which would not apply in the case of a strong forced-action statement.

Thus, coercion can never be thought of as strong force, but according to Carr, neither can it be sufficiently described as “weak force.” Weak forced-action statements are forced-action statements that seem to report on the outcome of actions rather than events, as in the construction “X was forced to do S,” but when qualified with further consideration of circumstances, such as whether S was the only reasonable thing to do. There are plenty of examples of weak forced-action statements that do not actually seem to be coercive, cases in which we understand that the words “coerce” and “force” simply cannot be used interchangeably. For instance, Carr writes that “A football team forced to punt on fourth down is not coerced into punting the ball away. If we are to understand coercion in terms of weak forced-action statements, something else must be added to overcome this problem of obtuseness,” so perhaps we might try adding the qualification that “in coercive situations some Y has done something, has applied some sort of pressure, such that X now has only one reasonable choice to make, namely doing S” (60). But even this qualification is insufficient, as it “still fails to exclude the football example
from the realm of coercive situations; presumably pressure from the opposing team forced the team to punt” (60). Would it help to add that the “pressure must be unusual, out of the ordinary” (60)? Not necessarily, for even in situations that deal with extraordinary pressure or unusual circumstances, one is not necessarily “coerced” into acting. Take the following example: “A sudden and unexpected collapse of the stock market might force X to sell his holdings at a considerable loss, but X is not coerced into selling” (60). What remains clear is that to be coerced and to be forced are not the same thing.

Even if were to understand coercion as being equivalent to weak forced action, which Carr has already demonstrated as not being the case, the extenuating circumstances surrounding such forced action make it such that coerced individual can no longer be said to have absolutely no choice in his actions. Under this framework, coercion is not antithetical to individual freedom, because the circumstances surrounding the action are nonetheless deliberated upon and navigated by the individual. As Carr writes, “Even if one faces a situation in which there is but one reasonable thing to do, one must still make a choice….There is a point where one must weigh the alternatives and take a stand” (61).

What, then, is precisely the difference between coercion and force? The point of thinking through Carr’s analysis is not to arrive at a perfectly clear distillation of a definition of “coercion,” but for the purposes of this chapter, to consider the ways in which coercion and force cannot be considered interchangeable terms and to emphasize the presence, however slight, of choice in coercion. The haziness around coercion, rather
than frustrate my analysis, is exactly what makes the relationship between the Oankali and humans both disturbing and generative. Carr’s extrication of “coercion” from “force” paves the way for my central claim, that the coercive relationship between the Oankali and humans, the flattening of human identity and choices, paradoxically leads to an opening up of possibilities. Focusing on the contours and results of the coercion in *Dawn* allows us to steer clear of the binary that readings of *Dawn* are often engaged in: whether the Oankali dependence on coercive strategies renders them morally bankrupt manipulators or benevolent rescuers who do what they must to ensure evolutionary survival. The Oankali’s treatment of humans in *Dawn* compels the humans to make decisions they would not have necessarily made otherwise; restrictions on human behavior open new or unexpected configurations in mating and sociality, both within and across species. A limitation of choice thus proves to be oddly generative, if still disturbing and uncomfortable. Coercive situations force the humans to act on their available options, ultimately resulting in a greater diversification of categories, either through racial mixing between humans or through interspecies breeding with the Oankali that may lead to the posthuman.

An examination of the two instances of “coercion” will follow. The first instance of the term “coercion” occurs in *Dawn* after Lilith has been persuaded to consent to an “alteration” (74) in her brain to improve her cognitive abilities and to endow her with instantaneous knowledge of the Oankali language. Lilith at this point is paired with Nikanj, a still-prepubescent and genderless “ooloi,” a third gender Oankali with the
power to heal and manipulate genes. This instance can be considered a weak forced-action situation, as Lilith must accept Nikanj’s proposed modifications to her brain – the only reasonable option in the situation – lest she continue to refuse and end up being secretly modified by another Oankali, Nikanj’s oooli parent, Kahguyaht, with whom Lilith has a contentious relationship. Nikanj admits that “Ooan [Kahguyaht] wanted me to act and say nothing…to surprise you…” though it refuses to proceed without Lilith’s consent. Lilith twice shouts, “I don’t want to be changed!” (74), terrified by the potential of permanent damage, to the point that she associates brain damage with death: “If the Oankali damaged her brain, would they have the decency to keep her die – or would they keep her alive, a prisoner, permanently locked away in that ultimate solitary confinement?” (76). Nikanj repeatedly attempts to persuade Lilith by discussing its competence at performing the procedure or by discussing the merits of the procedure – “Would it be so bad to remember better?” (74) – but ironically, it is ultimately the threat of the reminder that Lilith’s consent does not truly matter at all that leads her to change her mind. Nikanj reminds Lilith, “[Y]ou must trust me or let ooan [Kahguyaht] surprise you when it’s tired of waiting” (77). Lilith’s choices are thus to either submit unhappily to Nikanj, who is still technically a child and thus less physically repulsive than Kahguyaht, and has at least given Lilith the courtesy of knowing that the alteration will have to happen, or resist Nikanj’s efforts at persuasion and wake up one day having already been modified by a much more unpleasant Kahguyaht.
Lilith therefore has choices to make, unpleasant as they may be. In her conversation with Nikanj, she explicitly describes the Oankali tactic of persuasion as “coercion”:

“I was afraid I could never convince you to trust me enough to let me show you what I could do – show you that I wouldn’t hurt you. I was afraid I would make you hate me. For an ooloi to do that… it would be very bad. Worse than I can tell you.”

“But Kahguyaht doesn’t think so.”

“Ooan says humans – any new trade partner species – can’t be treated the way we must treat each other. It’s right up to a point. I just think it goes too far. We were bred to work with you. We’re Dinso. We should be able to find ways through most of our differences.


“No. Ooan would have done that. I couldn’t have. I would have gone to Ahajas and Dichaan and refused to mate with them. I would have looked for mates among the Akjai since they’ll have no direct contact with humans.” (80)

This exchange is the first instance in which the term “coercion” appears in *Dawn*. By the logic of Carr’s analysis, it is appropriate to describe Nikanj’s strategy of persuasion as a coercive one, in that Lilith’s will is impinged upon to a certain extent but she has some say in just how this impinging shall occur. Nikanj, however, seems to have a different understanding of “coercion” in that it is willing to admit that other Oankali believe that there is no moral problem with acting on the humans, modifying them or invading their bodies in some physical capacity, without asking for any consent whatsoever. Nikanj effectively dissociates itself from fellow Oankali who adopt a strategy not so much of coercion or weak force, but of strong force. If what Nikanj is engaged in is a coercive strategy, then Kahguyaht and the other Oankali are engaged in strategies of pure force. Nikanj makes a moral distinction between coercion and force, arguing that it is “wrong”
to “surprise” people with procedures they have not consented to, because it is “treating them as though they aren’t people, as though they aren’t intelligent” (77). In fact, Nikanj appears here to be strong-principled, as it declares that it would rather change everything about itself – reject its designated mates Ahajas and Dichaan, to whom it has a strong, neurological bond, and reject its kin altogether, since to become an Akjai it would have to leave the Dinso “tribe” to which it belongs – than operate on Lilith without her explicit consent. As it says during its efforts at persuasion, it would rather damage itself than damage Lilith (77), which implies a true sense of care and concern for Lilith’s wellbeing.

The second instance of Oankali “coercion” of humans focuses on another human character, Leah, one of the first humans to be Awakened by Lilith from the suspended animation in which all the humans have been kept for over two hundred years. After reading the Oankali dossier on Leah, Lilith learns that she was one of the only humans who was stubborn enough to withstand Oankali coercion:

It was her patience and self-sufficiency that had impressed them. They had not been able to make her obey. She had outwaited them in stolid silence. Outwaited Oankali! She had starved herself almost to death when they stopped feeding her to coerce her cooperation. Finally, they had drugged her, gotten the information they wanted, and, after a period of letting her regain weight and strength, they had put her back to sleep. Why, Lilith wondered. Why hadn't the Oankali not simply drugged her as soon as they realized she was stubborn? Why had they not drugged Lilith herself? Perhaps because they wanted to see how far human beings had to be pushed before they broke. Perhaps they even wanted to see how each individual broke. Or perhaps the Oankali version of stubbornness was so extreme from a human point of view that very few humans tried their patience. Lilith had not. Leah had. (119-120)
Leah answers none of the Oankali’s questions, leading the Oankali to “coerce” her, as the novel states, into providing information by withholding food from her. The coerciveness of this situation is defined by the existence of certain options from which Leah could choose, undesirable as they may be: refuse to cooperate and starve or cooperate and live. Leah’s choice is disregarded when the Oankali end up using pure force on her after she makes her decision to resist them, by drugging her. In the act of drugging her, they completely remove her ability to make decisions on how to proceed with her interactions with her captors. In their dealings with Leah, the Oankali also show that they distinguish between coercion and force, as force is only resorted to when coercion fails. Even if the passage quoted consists not of the Oankali’s explicit report of their dealings with Leah but Lilith’s paraphrase of the dossier – that is, even if the words “coerce” and “drugged” turn out to be Lilith’s interpreting words and not the Oankali’s, as this remains unclear – there is nonetheless a differentiation between the two approaches to Leah. It is significant to note, as Lilith affirms, that the Oankali resort to force with Leah and not with Lilith, demonstrating that not only do the Oankali discriminate between tactics of coercion and force, they also strategize about which situations and humans call for which tactics.

These two instances of Oankali manipulation of humans establish coercion as the gentler cousin of force. Nikanj’s affirmation of the importance of obtaining human consent, even though it denies its own participation in an ultimately coercive act, is significant for demonstrating that a conception of morality, of right versus wrong, exists among the Oankali. It is also significant for demonstrating that beliefs among the Oankali
differ, just as beliefs among humans differ, since Nikanj’s principled stance for human regard seems to set it apart from others like Kahguyaht. Indeed, within the same Oankali family, some members are more merciful or sympathetic to the humans than others. If Kahguyaht believes that the humans must not be treated as intelligent creatures, Nikanj and its other relative, Jdahya, the first Oankali to Awaken Lilith, show some more regard for Lilith’s wishes. Just as Nikanj vows to sabotage its own mission and tribal affiliation instead of damaging Lilith against her wishes, Jdahya offers to kill a panic-stricken Lilith “quickly and without pain” (42) soon after her Awakening, which Lilith acknowledges as a “gift he was offering” and “[n]ot a threat” (42), for allowing Lilith to die would be to go against his own evolutionary survival and personal mission. Differences in beliefs and personalities among the Oankali are also confirmed by the fact that Lilith prefers some Oankali over others.

If we can take at face value that some Oankali are more concerned for human will than others, that Lilith has gentler feelings toward some Oankali over others, and that Oankali can generally distinguish between coercion and force and right and wrong, then Nikanj’s ultimate “surprising” of Lilith – precisely the thing it had sworn never to do – is indeed unexpected and presents a challenge for analysis. Nikanj’s eventual impregnation of Lilith occurs despite Lilith’s stated resistance and despite its explicit promise that it would always obtain Lilith’s consent before conducting any such procedure. Nikanj’s resorting to pure force when it had previously denounced it as morally wrong appears then to be an instance of its hypocrisy or a sudden change of heart, figuratively speaking.
This proves to be a major area of contention among scholars, as different camps of interpretation pivot on Nikanj’s impregnation of Lilith to argue either against or for the Oankali as a whole, to characterize them either as malevolent colonizers or benevolent rescuers who do what they must for the survival of both species. In the following passage from *Dawn*, Lilith is horrified to learn from Nikanj that she is gestating a daughter, especially as the news occurs soon after her human lover, Joseph, one of the five parents required in the Oankali-human mating, has died, killed brutally by some other Awakened humans:

“You said –” She ran out of breath and had to start again. “You said you wouldn’t do this. You said –”
“I said not until you were ready.”
“I’m not ready! I’ll never be ready!”
“You’re ready now to have Joseph’s child. Joseph’s daughter.”
...
“It won’t be a daughter.” She pulled again at her arms, but it would not let her go.
“It will be a thing – not human.” She stared down at her own body in horror. “It’s inside me, and it isn’t human!”
Nikanj drew her closer, looped a sensory arm around her throat. She thought it would inject something into her and make her lose consciousness. She waited almost eager for the darkness.
But Nikanj only drew her down to the log bench again. “You’ll have a daughter, it said. “And you are ready to be her mother. You could never have said so. Just as Joseph could never have invited me into his bed – no matter how much he wanted me there. Nothing about you but your words reject this child.” (246)

This passage is central to vastly differing interpretations of *Dawn*. Rachel Stein, who reads *Dawn* within the “context of the historical colonization of women of color and current environmental justice health movement” (211) sees the novel’s function as didactic, especially in a contemporary era in which the reach and capabilities of
biotechnologies seem to increase exponentially. *Dawn’s* value thus lies in its “provocative cautionary [tale] about the potential for misusing biomedical processes to further exploit and objectify women’s bodies, and to justify such expropriation in terms of environmental necessity” (211), encouraging readers to “examine how environmental struggles may be played out upon/within the bodies of women of color” (210). As such, in her reading of this scene, Stein argues that Nikanj is a colonial figure, one who “overrides [Lilith’s] objections by explaining paternalistically that it believes this decision is for her own good…It discounts Lilith’s verbal objections and claims to know her better than she knows herself” (214-215). Nikanj’s manipulation of Joseph into sex, similarly, “presents the disturbingly familiar situation in which the colonizer overpowers the colonized” (214). In Stein’s reading, there is no question of Nikanj’s paternalism and status as colonizer; if Lilith’s situation “invokes the treatment of enslaved African American women who…were subjected to sexual and reproductive atrocities including rape by their white owners” (212), then Nikanj is indubitably evocative of the white slaveowner.

The same passage, however, produces a different interpretation if Nikanj’s words to Lilith are taken at face value, that only her words reject the child while everything else about her has signaled a readiness for pregnancy. Put another way, Lilith’s words reject the child although her body does not. Amanda Boulter, in “Polymorphous Futures,” writes that “The Oankali claim to understand the nature of humanity through their intimate knowledge of living human flesh,” (174), though nonetheless they are often
wrong about human behavior. Boulter is generally sympathetic to the Oankali. She writes that the body is important to humans as well, as “the human characters also define their humanity in terms of genetic integrity, but for them the body does not in and of itself denote humanity.” The humans “position the body as the lesser term within a mind-body split, which demands that bodily impulses be regulated by social values” (175), as in Nikanj’s reference to Joseph’s reluctance to verbalize his sexual desire for the Oankali, a reference to a split between bodily desires and spoken or conscious desires. As Boulter writes, the Oankali do not “recognize such Cartesian dualism” (175). This attributes to the Oankali less of a self-serving desire to colonialize humans but instead allows for their capacity to make mistakes and miscalculations in understanding a human species that operates fundamentally differently from them, a human species that believes in the primacy of the mind, which is quite literally outside of the Oankali comprehension. In this reading, the Oankali are not so much paternalistic colonizers than a mostly well-meaning species simply incapable of grasping the complexity of human behavior. To understand the Oankali at face value – for, as Lilith remarks, they seem to be incapable of being dishonest, as “their sensory language had left them with no habit of lying” (238) – is to suggest that the Oankali treat the humans the way they do because to do otherwise is literally unthinkable for the Oankali, completely beyond their scope of comprehension.

Similarly sympathetic toward the Oankali, Sherryl Vint adds in Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction that the “Oankali romanticize the body, believing that it inevitably speaks the truth while words and consciously expressed
desires can be used to deceive, even deceive oneself” (69). Unlike Stein who essentially compares the Oankali to white slaveowners, Vint radically asserts that “The Oankali never mistreat the humans in any way – in fact, they saved them and their planet from the consequences of a human-caused nuclear war” (65), at moments arguing that Butler portrays the Oankali much more positively than she does the humans (77). The lessons to be drawn from *Dawn*, for Vint, relate not only to the historical oppression of women of color under slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy, but are applicable to everyone living in an increasingly biotechnological era. The novel reveals the limitations of the Oankali way of thinking – a “genetically essentialist” philosophy that puts all its stock in biology, genetics, and the body – rather than pointing out the colonialist tendencies of the Oankali. *Dawn* and the rest of the *Xenogenesis* series cautions “against too strong a faith in genetics to unlock the mysteries of humanity and warns of the possibility that genetic information could be used in socially repressive ways” (77), to distinguish between what is considered human and not. For Vint, *Dawn* thus works as a “serious discussion of the flaws of the discourse of genetics and its presumptuous separations of the flawed from the normal” (69). As the novel posits the alien’s perspective that all of the human genome is somehow flawed, no human will be able to believe that he alone is genetically unflawed or supposedly normal (68). As a result, according to Vint, the accomplishment of Butler’s entire *Xenogenesis* series is that it “helps everyone empathize with the perspective of the so-called genetically flawed” (68).
Without going so far as to agree with Vint that the Oankali never “mistreat the humans in any way” (65), it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the Oankali’s treatment of humans is intentionally portrayed in the text in an ambiguous manner. When it occurs to Lilith for the first time, early in the novel, that she desperately wants to meet a fellow human being, the novel states: “The Oankali had removed her so completely from her own people – only to tell her they planned to use her as a Judas goat. And they had done it all so softly, without brutality, and with patience and gentleness so corrosive of any resolve on her part” (65). This passage perfectly captures the complicated status of the instances of Oankali coercion of Lilith, for the language surrounding the “corrosive” coercion is not that of atrocity, violence, or pain, or even that of clinical, neutral calculation, but ironically, positive-value affects of “softness” and “gentleness.”

The pregnancy, however, is not an instance of coercion, but of pure force; it does not occur through soft and gentle patience. Regardless of our cerebral understanding of the Oankali philosophy as one that diverges significantly from our own – or rather, even if we allow for a reading of Dawn that does not merely vilify the Oankali for putting restrictions on human will – the Oankali impregnation of Lilith is undeniably disturbing on a visceral level. Even if we accept that Nikanj has (mis-) interpreted Lilith’s readiness for pregnancy and for interspecies breeding due to its inevitable disregard of a mind/body split in humans, ultimately, Nikanj “springs on” (77) Lilith precisely the type of change she had told Nikanj she dreaded, the type of change she expressly wished to be warned about. When Lilith finds out for the first time that a genetic “blueprint” (97) has been
made of humans, to be used in future experiments and exercises in cross-breeding, without their prior knowledge, she asserts that the humans have the right to know of such events. Nikanj confirms multiple times the human desire for consent in this exchange with Lilith:

“Did you really need to know that?” it asked. Should I have told you?”
It had never asked such a question before.

“Did you really need to know, Lilith?”
“Yes,” she said. “It concerned me. I needed to know.”
It said nothing for a while and she did not disturb its thoughts. “I will remember that,” it said softly, finally.
And she felt as though she had communicated something important.
Finally. (98)

The rarity of Nikanj’s question, coupled with its repetition, lends this exchange a degree of sincerity and solemnity, an air of an almost-promise. As Nikanj impregnates Lilith after this exchange, its disregard for Lilith’s wishes would appear to be an informed, intentional one. This instance of Nikanj’s impregnation of Lilith cannot be called an act of coercion, but an intentional act of pure or strong force, as the event occurs without Lilith’s knowledge or even her consciousness and thus without her ability to make even compromised choices. This violation of Lilith is disturbing if for no other reason than Lilith’s own stated disgust and shock at the invasion of her body. When Nikanj informs her of the pregnancy, the first thing she does is try to leave Nikanj’s physical grasp, which she is incapable of doing. Lilith’s efforts to move away are called “violent” in the text – she runs out of breath, and Nikanj catches her “by both wrists” (245). The unmistakable violence of this interaction, the physical impediment to Lilith’s movement,
are representative of the violence of the act of impregnation itself, rendering the pregnancy a violation, fundamentally, of Lilith’s being.

Human readers are far more likely to identify with a human protagonist instead of alien characters, so Lilith’s horror should translate to readers on this basic, visceral level. Going further, just as Nikanj’s forced impregnation of Lilith is attributed to the Oankali’s focus on the calls of the body, we are also pushed to consider Lilith’s physical embodiment as a black woman. The historical reference to the forced reproductive manipulation of black women’s bodies, both during slavery and after, as Stein has reminded readers, thus imparts upon the pregnancy an even deeper sense of gravity regarding Lilith’s lack of consent, despite the Oankali claims that Lilith’s progeny will be better than both the Oankali and the humans. Critics of *Dawn* are generally in consensus that the novel’s engagement with the history of slavery is unmistakable. It is no coincidence that the Oankali vessel, on which the humans are held in a captive limbo, is called a “ship,” a term which Donna Haraway argues “inescapably evokes the reader's memories of the terrible middle passage of the Atlantic slave trade that brought Lilith's ancestors to a ‘New World,’ where a ‘gene trade’ was also enforced” (378). Specifically regarding the pregnancy, Boulter writes that “Lilith’s response to her pregnancy echoes the ambivalent feelings of those women slaves whose pregnancies were the result of forced matings or rape” (177), although I argue that Lilith expresses sheer terror, not ambivalence, at her compromised body and status as the mother of a new species. Lilith’s terror echoes Hortense Spillers’ argument that the distortion suffered by black maternity
was, most significantly, an ontological one (Boulter 177). Spillers writes that the black female became “the principle point of passage between the human and non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference – visually, psychologically, ontologically – as the route by which the dominant male decided the distinction between humanity and ‘other’” (76; qtd. in Boulter, 177). But Spillers’s argument is striking in the case of *Dawn*, for it is Lilith, the black mother, and not the “dominant male” or in this case, the dominant Oankali, who is making the distinction between humanity and other. Lilith whispers in horror that the “thing” inside her “isn’t human” but will be a “monster” (*Dawn* 246). Thus the interspecies breeding that occurs at the end of *Dawn* is, paradoxically, both a reference to slavery and an undermining of that very reference.

That Lilith’s pregnancy references the rape or forced mating of slave women is self-evident. But there are limitations to reading *Dawn* as a clear-cut allegory about American slavery. First, the historical representation of slavery and the middle passage can only go so far, considering the new and special context of the novel’s post-apocalyptic setting, which essentially severs its characters from history. As Haraway argues, “nuclear catastrophe, even more radically and comprehensively than the slave trade and history’s other great genocides, ripped all rational and natural connections with the past and future from her [Lilith] and everyone else” (*Primate Visions* 379). Further, although Butler unmistakably represents the pain of the historical oppression of black women in her portrayal of Lilith’s pregnancy, she also inverts our expectations, for she paints Lilith as the one to deny the humanness of her progeny, as fearing the idea of
‘racial’ or species impurity. Boulter writes: “The structures of slavery subtend this birth, but are inadequate to describe the resonances of this new ‘miscegenation’, which celebrates diversity as the promise and the plenitude of life.” (177). If the slavery allegory were to be taken to its fullest logical expression, Lilith as slave mother would be the one insisting on the otherness of her child over the gestures for open-armed inclusion indicated by her Oankali enslavers or colonizers; the slave mother would be rigidly policing the lines of racial purity in contrast to a colonizer that wishes to enthusiastically and pleasurably celebrate hybridity.

The post-apocalyptic setting highlights the paradox of race in the novel: the setting allows for the encounter with the alien as well as the specter of alien pregnancy, which simultaneously harkens back to the history of racism and slavery and turns this same concept of racism on itself. It is therefore difficult to understand *Dawn* in any Manichean or binaristic way – with Oankali as either evil colonizers or benevolent rescuers, and humans as either innocent victims or self-destructive “xenophobes” who would rather die sterile than interbreed with aliens – when we account for another significant racial paradox, which is that difference is at once dismissed and magnified in the novel. The same logic that would teach readers that racial and cultural difference are insignificant in the post-apocalyptic world of the novel – as human beings of various colors, shapes, and backgrounds are now confronted with a heinously ugly alien species – simultaneously proclaims the enduring significance of difference to human identity. It is
through their difference from the Oankali that the humans of *Dawn* ultimately assert their humanness.

A reading of *Dawn* that takes for granted the fixedness of the category of the human also takes for granted that the human characters should undoubtedly feel united in the face of an entirely different species of “others.” Written in the 1980s, *Dawn* references the deadly clash of ideologies during the Cold War. For example, when one of the humans is Awakened, she demands to know who her captors are and guesses they might be “…Russians” (131). The entire precursor of the plot in *Dawn*, the nuclear holocaust, was a result of the presumed, unassimilable differences among humans, which makes it surprising and inconsistent that explicit differences in culture, race, and/or ideology do not seem to afflict the humans on the Oankali ship – not by much, anyway. Vint writes that the “displacement of differences within humanity onto the figure of the alien / collaborator…suggests why race is not a more explicit concern in the novel” (73) but states this to point out that human differences nonetheless are important among the survivors, in that the difference that ultimately seems to be overemphasized in the end is not racial but sexual. I will address the significance of sexual difference among humans in later paragraphs on the sexual relationships that arise as a result of the Oankali’s coercive strategies, but the notion that racial difference matters only minimally to the humans must be interrogated further, especially as racial and sexual difference are not separate but are deeply intertwined. Vint misattributes or truncates Walter Benn Michaels’s reading of the novel to emphasize her own focus on human sexuality, as she
writes that although the apparent unity of humans in the face of alien difference might “support Michaels’s reading of the novel as demonstrating that racial difference is irrelevant, the need for the Resisters to actively construct and police the larger difference between human and Oankali suggests that irrelevance is not the crucial measure of efficacy in such discourses” (73). Michaels, however, does not simply demonstrate the insignificance of race in *Dawn* in his reading in “Political Science Fictions” (and later in *The Shape of the Signifier*). He states that “the contrast with the alien makes the differences between humans look absolutely trivial” (“Political Science Fictions” 654), but at the same time he also acknowledges that “On the other hand, the contrast with the alien makes physical difference uniquely relevant, since the defining difference between humans and aliens is the difference in their bodies” (655). Michaels thus points out that the supposed insignificance of racial difference among humans, which he codes primarily and perhaps overly simplistically as “physical” difference, paradoxically emphasizes the significance of difference as a whole, in the sense that it is precisely a sense of difference – against the aliens – that supposedly unites the humans. In this way, race is simultaneously minimized and stressed in *Dawn*.

“Race” is thus operative in *Dawn* on two levels: first, in any racial differences among the characters, which are often referenced in the coded terms to which we have grown accustomed in the postrace era, rather than explicit racial language, and second, on the level of what has been colloquially called the “human race.” Central to the policing of racial lines – to the maintenance of racial “purity” – is sexuality, which is deeply affected
by the post-apocalyptic setting of *Dawn*. On a survivalist level, the nuclear blitz on most of the human world has significantly limited the humans’ possibilities for fellow human mates, simply because there are so few people to go around, which arguably leads to unlikely pairings, as in the case of the interracial relationship between Lilith and Joseph. The potential extinction of the “human race” also shapes human sexuality in *Dawn* in that many of the humans feel the need to breed to increase their meager population, such that heterosexuality becomes enforced and equated with humanity or humanness altogether, to a violent extent, even despite the Oankali restrictions on humans’ ability to reproduce with each other; restrictions on choices cannot, after all, result only in positivity and generativity. Finally, the Oankali manipulation of humans into interspecies sex, which reaches its fullest expression in the nonconsensual impregnation of Lilith, hints at the possibility of a world that is fully and unironically “postrace.” Although the term “postrace” can only be used with ironic and skeptical distance to describe a current United States that has indeed failed to transcend the problems of racism, in the case of interspecies breeding in *Dawn*, the hybrid Oankali-human creation points to the dissolution of individual human races or even the “human race” altogether. The potential creation of the next generation of human and Oankali – the posthuman – perhaps provocatively equates to a realization of an unironic postrace dream.
On coercive couplings

The significant limitation of choices in human mates among the Awakened is made manifest in ways both negative – sexual violence – and positive – unconventional interracial relationships. There are two instances of attempted sexual assault in the novel, in Paul Titus’s attack on Lilith and in the attempted sexual assault of Allison, one of the Awakened women who initially refuses the human males around her. Central to both instances of attempted rape is the issue of human reproduction, or more specifically, the women’s adamant unwillingness to become pregnant while in alien captivity. In the first instance, Paul Titus is the first human Lilith meets after she is Awakened. Originally fourteen years old at the time of the war, he has been isolated from human beings in all his time in Oankali captivity. Lilith is thus his only available option for a human sexual partner, and he attacks her violently when she is unwilling to heed his advances. Lilith’s objections – “I’m not interested in putting on a show for the Oankali” and “I’m not interested in…giving them a human child to tamper with” (92) – reflect her awareness that her relationship with Paul would serve as an experiment for the Oankali. Paul’s lack of discomfort at Oankali surveillance and his resignation that his captors have already extracted genetic material from him, converge in his attempt to attack Lilith, to act on one of the only choices that have been presented to him during his captivity. Lilith responds, “No!...Animals get treated like this. Put a stallion and a mare together until they mate, then send them back to their owners! What do they care? They’re just animals” (93), a response coded with the history of chattel slavery in the United States. It is no
coincidence that the first human Lilith meets in *Dawn* is someone who looks “more than a little like one of her dead brothers” (85), someone whose dark brown skin color matches her. Because the first two human characters are implied to be African American, even though there is no explicit mention of race in this exchange in the terms with which we are familiar, Lilith’s refusal harkens back to a history of enforced breeding of African and African American slaves in the United States.

The enforcement of heterosexuality, of traditional gender roles oriented toward reproduction, is central to the second instance of attempted rape. The urgency with which some of the Awakened feel they must organize themselves into pairs, given the limited options they have for human mates, is evident in the attack on Allison, the only person to abstain from choosing a human partner. Although only two men are involved in physically attempting to drag her into a bedroom – Peter assists Gregory for the latter’s benefit – many others condone, even support, the attempted rape, with responses such as: “What the hell is she saving herself for?...It’s her duty to get together with someone. There aren’t that many of us left” (177). The scarcity of humans directly relates to the violent disregard for an individual’s choice, an individual woman’s choice, to have control over her body and reproduction. Allison’s response, “It’s my duty to find out where I am and how to get free…Maybe you want to give whoever’s holding us prisoner a human baby to fool around with, but I don’t!” (177) emphasizes the reproductively-oriented nature of the pairings. The humans seek solace in one another, both emotionally and physically, but despite the radically different environment in which they find
themselves, so far from Earth, the romantic units nonetheless consist only of two individuals, one male and one female, instead of potentially being opened to configurations involving multiple and/or same-sex people. Indeed, these romantic units are being reinforced externally. Allison’s protests are drowned out by the angry call from Curt, a former police officer: “We pair off!...One man, one woman. Nobody has the right to hold out. It just causes trouble” (177). Allison’s attempt to protect herself and refrain from perpetuating intentionally-constructed gender roles ultimately ends in greater violence, as Lilith intervenes physically in the confrontation, earning her great distrust from many of the Awakened humans.

Vint argues that the novel’s treatment of homosexuality and its requirement of heterosexual couples even within the alternative parenting arrangement needed to produce the human-Oankali hybrid – 5 parents, composed of heterosexual human and Oankali pairs and a genderless ooloi – suggests that Dawn is rather conservative (72). Haraway similarly asserts, “Heterosexuality remains unquestioned, if more complexly mediated. The different social subjects, the different genders that could emerge from another embodiment of resistance to compulsory heterosexual reproductive politics, do not inhabit this Dawn” (Primate Visions 380). Once the humans are bonded with the ooloi, they can no longer touch each other directly but must have all sensations mediated through the ooloi, but even in such instances of three-party sex, the descriptions of desire in Dawn “emphasize the continuing desire of the heterosexual couple for one another” (Vint 73).
The topic of homosexuality seemingly takes precedence in *Dawn* in a way that other types of human difference, such as culture or race, do not, at least in the way that homosexuality, or difference in sexual orientation, is used as a plot device in a way that no other type of difference seems to be used. As Vint writes, “Anxiety about homosexuality is, in fact, one of the key triggers for the anti-Oankali response on the part of Resister humans” (73). This anxiety about homosexuality is indeed what leads one faction of the more blatantly anti-Oankali “Resister” humans – Curt, Peter, and others – to finally take their leave from Lilith’s faction. On their decision to leave Lilith’s camp to try to survive on their own, Peter explains to Lilith the Resister males’ discomfort with sex that involves the oooloi:

Look at things from Curt’s point of view….He’s not in control even of what his own body does and feels. He’s taken like a woman and….No, don’t explain!...He knows the oooloi aren’t male. He knows all the sex that goes on is in his head. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t fucking matter! Someone else is pushing all his buttons. He can’t let them get away with that. (203)

The oooloi are technically genderless, and oooloi sex is primarily neurological rather than physical, but for the Resister men, anything other than a configuration involving a single human man and woman is offensive. The Resisters’ demand for heterosexuality can be understood as “one of the may false constructions of difference that Resisters rely upon to maintain the fragile concept of pure human identity” (Vint 73). Paradoxically, rather than suppressing, ignoring, or intentionally rejecting all the various types of human difference for the promise or sake of unity against the Oankali, the Resisters ultimately rely on, even
exacerbate, difference to regulate and police the boundaries of what they consider to be human.

The anxiety over homosexuality is also what leads to a stunning and conclusive plot development: Curt’s murder of a fellow human, the suggestively named Joseph, Lilith’s Chinese-Canadian human lover, whose racial difference and closeness to both the Oankali and Lilith have earned him homophobic slurs from the start. On the level of plot, Joseph’s ghastly death-by-ax both demonstrates the flimsiness of the supposed unity of the human characters against the Oankali and indirectly leads to the creation of the first human-Oankali hybrid, as Nikanj, hastened by the expiration date placed on the now-dead Joseph’s genetic material, impregnates Lilith almost immediately. The figure of Joseph is crucial in two ways. First, he reveals the coded nature of the racial logic operative in the novel, as it is only through Joseph that we see the convergence of homophobic and racist slurs, in his case in the unsurprising conflation of Asian masculinity and homosexuality. Most significantly, he plays a key role in the notion of a generative or positive result of the limitation of choices in Dawn, specifically through his unlikely interracial relationship with Lilith.

The novel’s subtle but persistent engagement with race – what I am calling “coded” racial logic – may go undetected, depending on the readership. Despite Butler’s demonstrated critique of science fiction’s whiteness as a genre, the marketing of her texts does not reflect her “commitment to representing human diversity” (Boulter 173). A quick examination of the original book jackets, for example, “indicates the resistance
science fiction publishers have had to signifying humanity as black and female” (173). Lilith has been portrayed in U.K. editions as a “racially ambiguous female face emerging from a ring of tentacles” (173). The Warner edition in the U.S., according to Donna Haraway, envisions Lilith as “an ivory white brunette mediating the awakening of an ivory white blond woman,” which allows certain readers to read the novel “without noticing either the textual cues indicating that Lilith is black or the multi-racialism pervading Xenogenesis” (*Primate Visions* 381, qtd. in Boulter 173). Haraway’s notion of “textual cues” to indicate race in *Dawn* is mostly accurate, as race is rarely mentioned explicitly but usually only gestured to – except in the case of Joseph. Joseph Li-Chin Cheng is one of the few characters in *Dawn* who is explicitly sketched out along ethnic, national, linguistic, and eventually racial lines: a citizen of Canada, born in Hong Kong, speaker of “Chinese” (*Dawn* 152) with a “slight accent” in English (141). Curt, who ultimately kills Joe by hacking him into pieces with an axe, is Awakened at the same time as Joe, and upon “hearing it [Joe’s accented English], “turn[s] to stare, then to glare at him” (141).

This moment in the novel marks an instance of implicit or coded racial hostility, as there is no explicit reasoning that Curt “glares” at Joe precisely because Joe is or sounds Chinese. Eventually, however, Nikanj reveals to Lilith that Joseph’s life is in danger, and that it must interfere in Joseph’s affairs “[b]ecause there are already two human males speaking against him, trying to turn others against him. One has decided he’s something called a faggot and the other dislikes the shape of his eyes” (159). The
reference toward Joseph’s eyes, of course, is unmistakably a racist one, as they are feelings of hatred toward Joseph for his physiological traits borne of a notion of essential, unchangeable difference.

That racist and homophobic sentiments are uttered in the same breath is no coincidence, for the gendering and racializing of difference go hand in hand; Joseph is racialized in gendered language in the same way that Lilith’s gendering as overly masculine codes her blackness. The explicit racialization of Joseph – as an Oriental male with stereotypically small eyes, which complements the humans’ numerous remarks of his overall small stature and his resultant undesirability as a sexual partner – is in effect a feminization of Joseph, in line with the longstanding trope in the West of the feminized or castrated Asian man. In Henry David Hwang’s classic play *M. Butterfly*, the character Song Liling states, “I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental / I could never be completely a man” (qtd. in Eng 1), while the video artist Richard Fung, in his essay on the racial politics of gay pornography, states blatantly, “Asian and anus are conflated” (web; also qtd. in Eng 1). Fung writes that if black people, both men and women, have been endowed with a “threatening hypersexuality,” the Asian male is either “defined by a striking absence down there” – granting him no sexuality at all – or assigned with “bottom” status, a sex object existing only to fulfill white men’s desires. The feminization of the Asian male is unmistakable in the rare instances he is even visible in gay pornography, for when he can be seen at all, it is to act “the role of the mythologized
geisha or ‘the good wife’ as fantasized in the mail-order bride business. And, in fact, the ‘house boy’ is one of the most persistent white fantasies about Asian men.”

David Eng argues broadly in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* that Asian American men are “materially and psychically feminized” in the United States’ cultural imaginary (2), which is applicable here even though Joe is technically a Chinese Canadian rather than Chinese American.¹ Eng further offers that racial boundaries are regulated both through “symbolic norms” and restrictions on sexuality, which is clearly at work in *Dawn* in the Resisters’ enforcement of heterosexual human sex as the sole, most significant determinant of human identity. In the novel, human identity is likened to a racial identity – as in the familiar notion of a “human race” – as the human is forcibly defined in a binary opposition to the alien. Lilith’s initial fear of the Oankali is called, for example, a “true xenophobia” (22), which serves to liken the Oankali to a foreign people rather than a distinct creature species. Lilith’s xenophobia has been alternatively called “racism” by Gabriele Schwab, who observes that:

> the speciesism in relation to imagined aliens operates according to a logic of radical otherness within proximity. In order even to experience racism or xenophobia in relation to another species, there needs to be anthropomorphic imaginary, that is, a figuration that grants enough proximity both physically and

¹ Some scholarly sources describe Joseph as “Chinese American” even though he is clearly said to be a Canadian national, originally born in Hong Kong. See, for example, Donna Haraway (*Primate Visions* 380) and Jim Miller (“Post-Apocalyptic Hoping” 340). I take this as indicative of the interchangeability Chinese American and Canadian Chinese, or the subsuming of Asian immigrants to North America under the general label of “Asian American.” For this reason, it makes sense to apply a reading of David Eng’s *Racial Castration* to the character of Joseph.
culturally. The aversive reaction to a mollusk, for example, may be phobic but not xenophobic. (211)

The Oankali are technically shapeless but can assume a humanoid figure, which they do in their dealings with the humans for the latter’s benefit and comfort. Curiously, the Oankali are repeatedly referred to as “people” throughout the novel, rather than, say, “creatures,” by both humans and Oankali alike. For example, Lilith asks Jdahya, the first Oankali she meets, “What do your people call themselves?” (22). When Lilith first hears of the possibility of another human, called kaizidi in the Oankali language, onboard the ship, the text describes her as overhearing “another group of people in the same area speaking again of a kaizidi – a male they called Fukumoto” (63). Nikanj also describes its kin as “people.” When Lilith finds out that her genetic “print” has been stored among the Oankali for future use, she asks aloud if the print could be destroyed, to which Nikanj responds, “It’s a memory, Lilith, a complete memory carried by several people. How would I destroy such a thing?” (98). This is a linguistic choice on Butler’s part that, either intentionally or not, brings the Oankali closer to the level of the humans, making them just legible enough, human-like enough, to provoke the combination of fear and hatred resembling a “racist” response.

Given a situation in which the Oankali seem simultaneously foreign and familiar, the humans must work to aggrandize their differences against the Oankali as a species, and any potential differences among themselves becomes a threat to their own species identity. As Boulter writes, “Among the humans, deviation from the heterosexual norm is
synonymous with the non-human. The spectre of homosexuality haunts the inter-species group matings and is constructed as potentially more threatening to ‘human nature’ than the aliens themselves” (175). Heterosexuality gatekeeps human identity, which functions in the world of Dawn as a type of racial identity: an identity based on a combination of phenotypical and cultural traits, and an identity which the humans view as being desperately in need of protection against interbreeding, or miscegenation. The threat of homosexuality becomes particularly high-stakes – of life-and-death importance, as the case of Joe will show – in a setting in which heterosexuality is equated with a racial purity that also predicates a sense of ontological wholeness, a sense of knowing what I am because of my membership in a fixed group. For the Awakened humans in Dawn, the knowledge that they are heterosexual provides them with the sense of security as supposedly unfragmented human subjects.

Joseph, like most of the other humans, immediately couples off with a female, Lilith. Does he then submit to physical contact with the Oankali in a way that makes him queer? Nikanj insists to Lilith that there is something rather “unusual” (Dawn 157) about Joseph because Joseph is the only human to touch the Oankali without having to be placed under the influence of Oankali drugs. Like the other human males, Joseph also claims to be disturbed by his newfound sexual relationship with Nikanj – “That thing will never touch me again if I have anything to say about it” (170), he swears – and is not assuaged by Lilith’s reminders to him that Nikanj is not male. Yet the racist and homophobic slurs uttered about Joseph occur far before he has any sexual contact with
Nikanj at all, such that Joseph’s raced status has always bequeathed upon him a queer status, for one mark of difference is equated with another; as Eng writes about Asian American subjects, their “historically disavowed status as full members of the U.S. nation-state renders them queer” even if they do not readily self-identify as such (18). Joe’s feminization harkens back to a long history of Asian exclusion laws in the United States: the prevalence of bachelor communities of Chinese men in the American West due to restrictions on both interracial marriages and the immigration of Chinese women who would have joined these men, and the feminized labor, such as domestic work in laundries and restaurants, that was made available to Chinese men in the U.S.

The unlikely interracial coupling between Joseph and Lilith, which I posit as a fruitful, positive, and altogether happy result of the coercive choices made available to humans in *Dawn*, is arguably another detail that works in support of Joseph’s queering in the novel: Joseph is paired with a masculine figure in the sense that Lilith’s identity as a black woman has rendered her man-like to the other humans. The unlikeliness of Joseph and Lilith’s pairing is explicitly acknowledged to be result of the limited choices that are presented to humans. After the two reveal their feelings for one another for the first time, Lilith reflects:

Everyone knew everything. She knew, for instance, that people said he slept with her to get special privileges or to escape their prison. Certainly, he was not someone she would have noticed on prewar Earth. And he would not have noticed her. But here, there had been a pull between them from the moment he Awoke, intense, inescapable, acted upon, and now, spoken. (150)
The assumptions among the rest of the Awakened that Joseph would only enter a sexual relationship with Lilith for the practical purposes of receiving “special privileges” underscores the assumption that there could be no other reason – namely, desire – motivating Joseph’s advances, as the others see Lilith as an undesirable mate, at least along the traditional gender roles asserted by Curt and his Resister underlings. Though no characters make explicitly racist remarks against Lilith, Lilith’s supposed undesirability as a sexual partner is undoubtedly racialized, as she is often coded as being too large, too strong, and thus not feminine enough, traits that, given the context of her apparent African American background, harken back to a history of negative racial stereotypes of black women in the West. For example, when unrest begins to foment among the Awakened humans and Lilith breaks up a fight by intercepting physically, one woman begins to tell people that Lilith is a man, that “only a man can fight that way” (147). Though Lilith is never described with ethno-racial labels – indeed, Joe is one of the only

2 See, for example, Claudia Rankine’s essay entitled “The Meaning of Serena Williams: On tennis and black excellence,” in which the author asks of the reader: “Imagine that you have to contend with critiques of your body that perpetuate racist notions that black women are hypermasculine and unattractive.”

See also the study “Ain't I a Woman?: Towards an Intersectional Approach to Person Perception and Group-based Harms,” by Phillip Atiba Goff, Margaret A. Thomas, Matthew Christian Jackson, which finds: “Perceivers associated ‘Blackness’ with ‘maleness,’ and rated Black men and women as more masculine than their White counterparts. This association led to targets who were perceived as more stereotypically Black to be perceived as more masculine. Perceivers rated Black women as less attractive in proportion to their perceived masculinity. Finally, perceivers had more difficulty categorizing Black women as women” (401).

See Noliwe M. Rooks’s article in Time, “Renisha McBride and Evolution of Black-Female Stereotype.” Rooks writes that black women tend to be seen “as more threatening, more masculine and less in need of help, protection and support than white women.”
examples – her presentation as black is implied numerous times in the text in terms of her comparative pigmentation to other dark or brown-skinned characters. For example, Paul Titus, Lilith’s attempted rapist, is described as “tall, stocky, as dark as she” (84) while Sharad, the young boy who is temporarily placed with Lilith before the Oankali reveal themselves to her, is “a small boy with long, straight black hair and smoky-brown skin, paler than her own” (8).

That Lilith is so “certain” that she and Joseph would not have noticed each other on Earth speaks to the statistical unlikeliness of a black-Asian pairing in North America, particularly in the specific configuration of Asian male and black female, which remains the case in the present. The unlikeliness of this particular interracial pairing is frequently noted in popular culture and in social scientific studies of dating patterns in the U.S., from university-run studies\(^3\) to big-data projects like *Dataclysm: Love, Sex, Race, and Identity -- What Our Online Lives Tell Us about Our Offline Selves*, by Christian Rudder, co-founder of the popular online dating website OKCupid – all of which find that in heterosexual dating, Asian men and black women receive the fewest votes of interests, respectively, among all women and men. Rudder writes in the OKCupid blog, “Essentially every race, *including other blacks*, singles [black women] out for the cold shoulder,” whereas Asian men generally receive lower ratings on online dating platforms

\(^3\) In “Racial Preferences in Dating,” Raymond Fisman, Sheena S. Iyengar, Emir Kamenica, and Itamar Simonson find: “For male partners (column (1)), our main finding is that Asians generally receive lower ratings than men of other races. In fact, when we run the regressions separately for each race, we find that even Asian women find white, black, and Hispanic men to be more attractive than Asian men” (126).
than men of all other races (Linshi). In short, popular culture and social scientific
treatments alike find that in the United States, black women and Asian men have been
marginalized for their supposed sexual undesirability or their inability to align with
Western ideals of traditional femininity and masculinity. In Dawn, Joseph is specifically
described as undesirable by one of the women, Tate, who asks Lilith about her sexual
relationship with him: “He’s old, he’s short, and he’s ugly. Haven’t you got any
discrimination at all?” (147). Tate’s question points out what she considers to be the
mismatch between Lilith and Joseph, while Lilith’s response to Tate, “He doesn’t seem
ugly to me, and if he can deal with my size, I can deal with him” (147), acknowledges the
ways in which she and Joe each fail to meet the standards of traditional femininity and
masculinity. But their racialized statuses on the fringes of traditional sex roles is
something the two lovers have in common, which perhaps unsurprisingly would draw
them together in the “intense” and “inescapable” pull they felt upon meeting for the first
time. Indeed, even Nikanj notices the ways in which Lilith and Joseph, despite their
unlikely interracial pairing, share something similar. Though other Oankali had believed
that Lilith would choose as her mates “one of the big dark ones [humans]” because they
resemble her physically, Nikanj tells Lilith, “During [Joseph’s] testing, his responses
were closer to yours than anyone else I’m aware of. He doesn’t look like you, but he’s
like you” (164).

Lilith and Joseph’s relationship, one marked by mutual respect and shared values,
outlooks, and intensity, is a perfect manifestation of the complicated status of coercion in
Nikanj reveals to Lilith that the Oankali had convened before presenting Lilith and Joseph to one another. Nikanj tells Lilith “I set out to find someone for you…someone you would want. Someone who would want you” (164). When Lilith asks, “You….You chose him for me?” (164), effectively asking if even her choice of Joseph is the result of coercion, Nikanj ultimately concedes: “I offered you to one another. The two of you did your own choosing.” Within the limited range of options presented to the humans, they are able to act, to a certain extent. It is feasible that Joseph could be at once chosen by others for Lilith and chosen by Lilith of her own accord, especially given that Lilith has shown herself capable of resisting other humans previously chosen for her, such as her attempted rapist, Paul Titus. The relationship between Lilith and Joseph, no doubt, is one borne of the unhappy circumstances related to a radical compression of choice, and it is a relationship that results in the sudden invasion of Lilith’s body and dignity with a truly alien, unwanted pregnancy. At the same time, it is a union that also brings sexual pleasure, emotional comfort, and happiness to the two lovers, while the resultant pregnancy, though horrible and unwanted for Lilith, promises the further survival and life-affirming evolution of humankind in its gesture toward the development of the posthuman.

**Conclusion: Postrace and Posthuman**

*Dawn* has justifiably been read as an allegory of slavery and race relations in the United States; to ignore its potential as allegory is to deny the truth of the history of
slavery in the United States, to which the novel makes repeated and blatant references. For example, Lilith asks the Oankali immediately upon her Awakening if their “trading” of themselves entails a slave trade. But there are also limits to reading *Dawn* solely in the historical context of American slavery, given the radical setting of the novel in a futuristic, post-apocalyptic alien world, combined with its presentation of a black mother who insists on the otherness of her alien-inseminated offspring despite her colonizers’ celebration of such a hybrid pregnancy. With these considerations in mind, *Dawn* should be understood as a serious meditation on the limits of the human – a reading still intimately connected to the representation of slavery, for the question of the racialized slave’s humanity was always central to bondage, but a reading that also extends past this representation to imagine a future in which notions of the autonomous human might fall by the wayside altogether, a future inhabited by the posthuman. In *Dawn*, there is absolutely no question that the African American Lilith is human; she is in fact the representative human. The relevant question, instead, is if the “human race” ought to be maintained as is for a single generation, only to face a true and impending extinction, or if it should be merge with Oankali in genetically beneficial ways and face perhaps a different type of extinction: that of evolution. This question does not remain as a theoretical consideration for long, however, as in *Dawn* the latter option is enacted, not through mild coercion but strong force, by the Oankali’s nonconsensual impregnation of Lilith.
Nikanj revels in the possibilities for the first-generation hybrid of human and Oankali, as he says to Lilith: “Our children will be better than either of us…We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won’t destroy themselves in a war, and if they need to regrow a limb or to change themselves in some other way they’ll be able to do it. And there will be other benefits” (247). Lilith only responds, “But they won’t be human….That’s what matters. You can’t understand, but that is what matters” (247), before whispering, “This will destroy us” (247). It is important to note that Lilith does not deny that the evolution of human into human-Oankali may entail genetic benefits and, ironically, more humane adjustments to an otherwise negative human ‘nature’ whose commitment to hierarchy will always erupt in a kind of suicidal violence. But for Lilith and the other humans, the potential benefits of any modifications do not outweigh the pain of losing an essential identity. In this way, the humans prove themselves committed to an idea of essentialized difference, a sense of self that is inherently irreconcilable with other creatures or species, an essentialized species identity that we might even recognize as being akin to racial identity.

Maintaining the “purity” of an essential human identity is no longer a possibility by the novel’s end. In its capacity as a meditation on the limits of the human, *Dawn* arguably comes closest to creating a world in which notions of difference among humans – including racial difference, the focus of this project -- might be evacuated in the face of impending threats to all of humanity, although it ultimately dashes this very hope. Put in
other words, *Dawn* comes the closest to creating a world that is fully and unironically “postrace,” in the way the term has been used in the late 20th century and early 21st century, in an aspirational context: a world in which the problems of racial difference and racism will have been completely transcended or superseded. But *Dawn*’s gestures toward the transcendence of race are unsatisfying because racism or racial difference are simply rendered irrelevant (or less relevant) in the new context in which the humans find themselves, rather than actually being solved or overcome. It seems rather bleak to suggest that the problems of race and racism in our world will only be overridden in the face of a massive catastrophe that serves as an equalizing threat to all humanity, which is really to suggest that these problems will never adequately be resolved. If the only way to arrive at a postrace world is through the disastrous deaths of nearly everyone, the general consensus most likely will be that the ends do not justify the means.

If *Dawn* presents to us a version of a postrace world in which individual racial identity is more or less irrelevant and in which institutional racism can no longer exist (though personal prejudices might still be in circulation), the vision of human unity it posits is still a flimsy one, because it has only a negative basis rather than an affirmative one. Even humans who hate one another share as a lowest common denominator the distrust and fear of Oankali. We are to recall that even Curt, whose murder of Joseph can be partially tied to a racially-guided prejudice, had shared with Joseph the fear of being compromised by the aliens, both sexually and ontologically. If the humans seem more or less bound together in their fear of being colonized or overtaken by the Oankali, then the
grounds for human unity are located only and distressingly in a sense of shared vulnerability.

*Dawn’s* gestures toward an unironic, literal postrace society are unsatisfying for its negatively conceived notion of a colorblind humanity, but what it presents much more compellingly is a vision of a posthuman future, featuring what has been called an “embodied,” “critical,” or “ethical” posthumanism by thinkers such as N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti. At the end of *Dawn*, we are forced to reckon with the impending Oankali-human hybrid birth, the first of its kind, such that our focus necessarily shifts away from the existent “pure” humans, who up until the pregnancy have clung hopelessly onto a notion of themselves as autonomous individuals, and toward the posthuman hybrid that entails a porousness with both nature and technology, a dissolution of the concept of the self-enclosed, self- and nature-mastering human. Hayles argues in *How We Became Posthuman* that the posthuman does not imply the end of humanity, but that it instead signals “the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice” (286). Braidotti writes relatedly that “Humanism’s restricted notion of what counts as the human is one of the keys to understand how we got to a post-human turn after all” (16). A “critical” or embodied posthumanism, for Braidotti, is one that “proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the
obstacle of self-centred individualism” (49-50), while Hayles similarly argues that posthuman subjectivity is “emergent rather than given, distributed rather than located solely in consciousness, emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it” (291).

If the posthuman is understood to signal not the end or supposed extinction of man – which can only be a premature notion considering our current population at over a billion strong – but the end of the concept of [hu]man borne of classical liberal humanism, then an “embodied” posthumanism specifically emphasizes and accounts for a self that is physically connected to the world around it, a self that does not ignore difference but understands that it is tied in a web with “others” with whom it has mutually constitutive and interdependent relationships. We are to recall that the Oankali live on a “ship,” a living creature that is at once plant, animal, and intelligent, with which it has precisely this type of interdependent relationship: “We serve the ship’s needs and it serves ours. It would die without us and we would be planetbound without it. For us, that would eventually mean death” (Dawn 33). Sherryl Vint similarly argues for an embodied posthumanism that “remains focused on a subjectivity embedded in material reality and that seems to be responsible for the social consequences of the worlds it creates” (182). She continues, “My posthumanism endeavors to be a promising monster: to acknowledge difference without hierarchy; to refuse to found its subjectivity on the grounds of repudiation and boundary setting.” An “embodied” posthumanism is an “ethical one,” a “posthumanism that can embrace multiplicity and partial perspectives, a posthumanism
that is not threatened by others” (189). Vint’s choice of language – let us pay attention to her intentional juxtaposition of “promising” and “monster” – acknowledges the immensity of her project as something that is perhaps possibly only in theory, in the far limits of the imagination. Historically, a world in which difference is acknowledged without hierarchy has already been attempted; we are to recall again that the apocalypse that has led to the events of Dawn was caused by an ideologically-based war involving the Soviet Union. Tabling for a moment the applied, historical, failed, real-life examples of a state based on a lack of hierarchy, Vint’s notion of “embodied” and “ethical” posthumanism is still an intriguing one precisely for its potential as an aspirational and boundary-pushing, even if completely theoretical, model.

Returning for a moment to the notion of a human identity that is rooted, as in Dawn, only in a sense of shared vulnerability, Braidotti specifically offers up embodied posthumanism as an antidote or a much more promising, generative, and affirmative alternative. A sense of shared vulnerability already binds together humans and non-humans alike in the late capitalist moment, as “contemporary bio-genetic capitalism generates a global form of reactive mutual inter-dependence of all living organisms, including non-humans” (49-50). The posthuman conception of human interaction that Braidotti envisions is not a “reactive” and therefore defensive one, but instead “is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others” (50), which dissolves any “fantasy of unity, totality and one-ness” (100).
Braidotti emphasizes “the priority of the relation and the awareness that one is the effect of irrepresible flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity and desire, which one is not in charge of” (100). The last part of this statement – “which one is not in charge of” – is key. For the humans of Dawn, the fact that they are not in charge of any interactions, encounters, and feelings of desire with regard to the Oankali is made expressly evident in the coercive or force-based strategies the Oankali employ to manipulate both human behavior and desire. The same is true for the Oankali as well, who only appear to have total control over their interactions with the humans; ultimately, they consistently run into situations outside of their reach, such as Curt’s unexpected murder of Joseph.

The impregnation of Lilith takes posthumanism from the level of theory or “principle,” as Braidotti terms it (100), and actualizes it such that it becomes lived reality in Dawn. The forced pregnancy breaks up for the humans any remaining “fantasy of unity, totality and one-ness” (Braidotti 100). That the posthumanism promised by the human-Oankali merge is literally an “embodied” one is clear in the earlier quoted dialogue between Nikanj and Lilith, in which Nikanj breaks the news of the pregnancy to Lilith. Nikanj’s words bear repeating, for they stress the importance of the body:

“Our children will be better than either of us,” it continued. “We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won’t destroy themselves in a war, and if they need to regrow a limb or to change themselves in some other ways they’ll be able to do it. And there will be other benefits.” (Dawn 247)

The differences or ‘improvements’ that Nikanj insists will be bequeathed to this new generation of creatures do not remain at the level of abstraction, but are materially,
physiologically grounded. The promise that the humans’ hierarchical tendencies will be “moderated” still remains vague: How? To what extent? Will the children destroy themselves some other way if not in a war? But the ability to “regrow a limb” or manipulate flesh or shape, in precisely the way the Oankali are already capable, is specific. It is an embodied one.

*Dawn* proposes a negative model of human identity – held together by a defensive sense of difference from grotesque alien creatures and a sense of shared human vulnerability – rather than an affirmative one. But at the same time, it proposes a positive model of a posthuman identity in the impending Oankali-human hybrid birth, a model that exuberantly revels in difference, celebrates nature, and embraces evolution and gene trading over any notion of genetic or species-level purity. Embodied, ethical posthumanism thus operates in the service of a literal, unironic postrace vision, a vision of a world in which the problems of racial difference and racism would be resolved, since ethical posthumanism entails the acknowledgment and appreciation of difference for positive, life-affirming ends instead of oppressive, exploitative ones. But there is a problem at the heart of the move from humanism to posthumanism, a problem with the novel’s method of arriving at an unironically postrace world, a problem that may not necessarily be resolvable: the move from a negative-value concept to a positive-value one, from a policing of difference to a sincere celebration of the possibilities presented by difference, is made possible only through the use of coercion and force.
If we take at face value the Oankali’s opposition to hierarchy, we might say that the imposition of the Oankali imperative to “trade” themselves (*Dawn* 22) is not necessarily a top-down imposition but a lateral one, if such a relationality can even exist. The Oankali describe themselves as being “powerfully acquisitive” (39). Their acquisitiveness exceeds the humans’ ability to act on their hierarchical tendencies in a situation in which the Oankali are capable of manipulating the humans on a biological and neurological level, to the point that even the humans’ physical desires are being dictated from outside, if not from above. That the Oankali cannot help but be terribly attracted to the humans is evident from numerous passages in *Dawn*, as when Nikanj shudders to the humans, “You are horror and beauty in rare combination. In a real way, you’ve captured us, and we can’t escape” (154). But it is also true that the Oankali, as represented by Nikanj, are inconsistent if not intentionally dishonest, best exemplified in Nikanj’s broken promise to Lilith that he will not “spring on” (77) her any procedures without at least letting her know beforehand, if not necessarily asking for her consent. Nikanj turns back on his own vocalized conviction that “There’s something wrong with…treating [humans] like they aren’t people, like they aren’t intelligent” (77). The Oankali’s essential imperative to trade their genes ends up taking precedence over their consideration of the humans’ desires. It is thus possible to acknowledge the Oankali’s paradoxical behavior, that despite being much less overtly violent and hierarchical than the humans typically are, they nonetheless resort to willful coercion and force to reach
their ends, even if the ends are for the larger, generative, symbiotic ends for the two species involved.

Is there a way to enact a posthuman and postrace conception of life without resorting to coercion and force? Butler’s novel provides us with a life-affirming, pleasure-loving, nature-embracing paradigm in which difference is celebrated, declared beautiful, and used in the service of greater good, rather than harm. But it also warns us that it may not be possible for us to arrive at such a model of life without a sense of having been compromised. The decision to willfully embrace the posthuman paradigm may not be a true decision to be made organically, but an imposition executed from outside, even if that outside is relatively benevolent. Put another way, coercion, while potentially useful or necessary or even life-saving in its capacity to generate an unexpected diversity of categories in an otherwise dying world, can still feel like coercion. In sorting through the paradoxical nature of a coercion meant to work in the service of a more humane and diverse world, *Dawn* reveals to us the affective stakes involved in building a world that is not only figuratively or conceptually postrace and posthuman, but literally and materially so.
CONCLUSION: The Postrace in the Era of Trump

In *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the 21st Century*, Catherine Squires charts the use of the term “post-racial” and finds that the term became “exponentially” more popular during the fervor over Barack Obama’s presidential campaign (37). Whereas the term was mentioned in news items just 75 times in 2007, in 2008, the year of the election, it appeared in an astounding 1475 articles. This number increased in the following year, to 1642, before tapering off to 1254 in 2010. In 2008, the tone of the articles proclaiming the arrival of a “post-racial” era was a distinctly positive one, one of hope and racial progress, a celebration of the historical milestone of a black family’s entry into the White House. As Squires writes, “As the 2008 news narratives articulated the ‘Dream’ with Obama’s victory, journalists and pundits made the move of assuming symbolic politics of representation were sufficient for a politics of racial justice to take hold” (45). At this point, few news sources mentioned any skepticism that the Obama presidency would in fact herald an era in which racism would be overcome. By 2010, however, headlines involving the term “post-racial” became distinctly pessimistic, overwhelmingly concluding, for example, that the “election of the first black president had not ushered in a post-racial political era” (56). Fast forward a few years, and the 2016 election of Donald Trump, who openly stoked the racial fissures in American society, would finally cement, as *The New York Times*’ Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote in the days
following the election, “The End of the Postracial Myth.” In her article, Hannah-Jones states that “nothing epitomizes the naïveté of that belief” – that the United States had become “postracial” – more than the election of Donald Trump.

If we can understand that the term “postrace” encompasses multiple, differing positions on the current state of race and racism in 21st-century America – including 1) belief that race and racism have been fully transcended, 2) belief that racism is still a fact of life but perhaps less a dominant force than it used to be, and 3) cynical understanding of the postrace as myth or fantasy – we are better equipped to see how, paradoxically, the same concept undergirds contrasting political choices or actions, including voting. In her article, Hannah-Jones reports on electoral politics in Iowa and chronicles how the same white, working-class voters who voted for Obama in 2008 switched parties to vote for Trump in 2016. In the way that viewers of The Cosby Show, mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, simultaneously developed positive feelings of acceptance of black people and a distaste for progressive policies, including affirmative action, intended to benefit black citizens, white voters felt both positive and negative racial feelings about Barack Obama. For example, Hannah-Jones writes of one Iowa voter: “The Black Lives Matter movement bothered her. Even as an Ivy League-educated, glamorous black couple lived in the White House, masses of black people were blocking highways and staging die-ins in malls, claiming that black people had it so hard.” For this voter, and for so many others, the very fact that a black man could become president, the pinnacle of achievement, undermined any claims that racism is a central force governing or upending
the lives of black Americans, for if Obama could achieve success despite his race, others could too. These voters believed that they lived in a postrace era, which was fundamentally at odds with the claims of blacks and other racial minorities that institutional racism dominated their lives: a disconnection that fueled resentment among white Americans who “believed they experienced more discrimination than black Americans” (Hannah-Jones), a resentment that Trump openly used to his advantage in 2016. The uncritical belief in a postrace era, held by at least some sectors of the American population, ironically paved the way for a xenophobic presidential campaign to emerge and eventually triumph, a fact which, of course, affirms to skeptics of the postrace era that they were right to be skeptics in the first place. As for those voters who were stunned that an openly racist campaign could have won the presidency – whether consciously or not, they too had hoped or believed that they had been living in a postrace era, at least to a certain extent. They could not have been so disconcerted by the election results otherwise.

How is it possible that a belief in a postrace era – as having already arrived – led some voters to support an openly racist campaign, at the same time that it led other voters to be completely stunned by the triumph of the same campaign? Despite the prevalence of headlines – and accompanying public sentiments – that declare that the postrace era can definitively be discredited as mere “myth,” or fantasy, or lie given the election of Donald Trump, I posit that the notion of the postrace era, with all its confusing and contradictory implications, nonetheless remains salient. Even as a myth – or dream, as
Squires writes, of “a time in the distant future when racial discrimination will truly be a thing of the past” (19) – the notion of the “postrace” is significant for what it offers to its believers as well as detractors, and we must understand its powerful and complicated allure.

One of the corollaries of our extremely polarizing and polarized times is that the American conversation on race tends to veer toward extremes, with those who believe racism is a thing of the past or unimportant now in the grand scheme of things on one end, and those who believe that racism is a central force in people’s lives today on the other end. Those who, believing that a postrace era has already been realized, feel that racial minorities are unfairly crying racism to change policies in their favor are labeled racists – undoubtedly one of the worst things to be called in modern-day America. As a result, like the Iowa voter Hannah-Jones discusses, they learn to “simmer” in silence, for fear of being called racists, while their beliefs remain intact. On the other hand, those who want to expose the postrace era as an unattainable myth spend their energy on empirically demonstrating that racial discrimination is still very much a fact of our time, which perhaps does little to change the opinions of their opponents, and which doesn’t necessarily consider the unquantifiable, persistent allure of the postrace era. One side shouts that racism doesn’t really matter anymore; the other argues back that it does.

Let me be clear that my political sympathies are firmly aligned with the latter of the two positions stated above: racism is a central, dominating force in the current-day United States, and representational or symbolic politics, like the election of a single black
president, are not enough to remedy this situation. While colloquial discussions of a postrace era oftentimes predict that one day, we’ll live in a fully postrace society when enough racial mixing occurs, a post-racist society will not simply occur with enough time and co-mingling of different peoples. Gregory Carter, in *The United States of the United Races*, is wary of a progress narrative that posits that racial mixing will lead to racial harmony, for the negative and positive associations surrounding race-mixing have existed since the founding of the United States, and this promise of progress has still not been delivered after over 200 years (5). In attempting to understand the enduring appeal of the notion of the postrace era, however, I am concerned with the distinctly non-empirical aspects of race and racism in the current moment. So far as the only mode to discuss race and racism is an urgent earnestness, privileging arguments that fundamentally and empirically prove the existence of racism, as scholars of race, our arguments run the risk of being unfairly reduced to three words – *racism still exists* – and written off, which would reduce the impact of otherwise necessary, stunning, and undeniable findings.

In focusing on “postrace novels,” following Ramón Saldívar’s terminology, I am highlighting the paradoxical register of American novels written at the turn of the 21st century, novels which are responding to the confusing, chaotic, and contradictory implications of the postrace myth, whether it is registered as myth or reality. Many works of scholarship that discuss colorblindness or the colorblind/postrace era end up pointing out that the paradox of the postrace era is essentially that, in it, racism still runs rampant, if perhaps well disguised, as in Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism Without Racists:*
Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America or Patricia J. Williams’s Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race. I do not wish to reiterate this same argument, urgently needed as it indeed is, if only because I am not interested in empirically proving the tenor of a cultural moment or essentially arriving at the same point from which I am starting, which is the acknowledgment that racism still exists today. Rather, in highlighting paradox that is partially playful, or messy, or darkly humorous, as is the case with novels such as Ed Park’s Personal Days or Jess Row’s Your Face in Mine, I am less interested in participating in an earnest uncovering of the hidden processes of racism in the postrace era. I am, instead, underscoring the ways in which postrace novels both stabilize and destabilize our understanding of racial boundaries, and the ways in which they reflect the deeply complex psychological processes at stake in such (de)stabilization: processes that involve both revulsion and desire, play and exploitation, identification and alienization, admiration and appropriation, and all the modes of relationality in between.


Biography

Raised in Queens, New York, Ellen Song received her B.A. in English from Williams College in 2011 and her M.A. in English from Duke University in 2015. She completed her doctorate in English at Duke University in 2018. She is the recipient of a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship to Madrid, Spain and a Foreign Language Area Studies grant to Seoul, South Korea.