

A Rage for Authenticity:

Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*, Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*, and the Quest for Pure Hybridity

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"The desire to emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry," writes Homi Bhabha in "Of Mimicry and Man," "...is the final irony of partial representation" (88). He goes on to outline the strategies of mimicry—the potentially subversive echoing of an original discourse that in the course of its mimicking is itself ruptured and displayed as artificial, impure, constructed—in short, hybrid. But he never returns to the insight raised before, about the possible alliance of authenticity and mimicry which belies the common assumption that the hybrid and the authentic must be seen as oppositional terms. In what follows, I want to delve deeper into the dialectics of authenticity and hybridity, a dialectics that is complicated by the joint reliance of these conditions on the practices of mimicry. My focus is on two recent fictional texts which celebrate hybridity while ultimately aiming at an aura of authenticity rather than pursuing the effects of irony, parody, alienation, or disbelief which are commonly associated with textual strategies of mimicry.¹ With that these texts go beyond the speculation raised briefly by Homi Bhabha that mimicry can be employed to elicit an effect of authenticity, since they indicate that hybrid circumstances and the play-acting of mimicry may very well bring about authentic experiences—the real thing.

Both authors who interest me here—Richard Powers and Jonathan Lethem—have been allocated to the group of "neo-realist" or "new neo-realist" writers associated with a literary turn after postmodern

1 For a more detailed definition of hybridity see my *Diaspora*, 108-10. The writer of the literature of hybridity in the sense alluded to here might very well be Salman Rushdie, who from *Midnight's Children* to today developed an aesthetics of the hybrid which relies heavily on ironic detachment and absurdity, abrupt changes of register and style, and the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruent subject matters. In *The Time of Our Singing* and *The Fortress of Solitude* I see an altogether different concept of hybridity coming to the fore.

experimentation.² In contrast to master texts of the trend like Raymond Carver's short stories, about whose aesthetic appeal Winfried Fluck wrote that "it would appear beside the point to use words like authentic," the novels of both authors rediscover the authentic—in the sense of a "redeeming force of initiation or transformative potential" (72)—through the backdoor, as it were, by means of exploring seemingly inauthentic scenarios. In this respect they resemble Don DeLillo who has rightfully been made out as a pioneer of the new trend. As I will show, Powers's and Lethem's "rage for authenticity" (to quote one of the novels [Lethem 495]) does not necessarily and exclusively rely upon authenticating techniques of narration, but in fact proves to be most effective when closely connected with the counter-realist narrative techniques which both authors also employ.³

Yet the issue of authenticity affects both texts not only on the level of narrative; it also informs them on a paratextual level, determining their very mode of production and presentation. Both novels run counter to Jonathan Franzen's diagnosis of a contemporary literary market in which a naive understanding of cultural identity rules supreme. "[T]here's... evidence," wrote Franzen in 1996, "that young writers today feel imprisoned by their ethnic and gender identities—discouraged from speaking across boundaries by a culture in which television has conditioned us to accept only the literal testimony of the Self" (80). *The Time of Our Singing* and *The Fortress of Solitude* (both 2003) are novels by white authors which defy this logic of identitarian writing, capitalizing on the subject of race and taking into scope the stark contrasts of whiteness and blackness rather than focusing on the white ethnicity of, say, Jewishness. Although Jewish ethnicity plays a somewhat larger role in *The Time of Our Singing* than in *The Fortress of Solitude*, what a reviewer wrote about the latter novel could also be applied to the former:

It goes without saying that the Ebduses [the main characters in Lethem's novel] are Jewish—actually, it does go without saying until Page 460, where it is mentioned in passing. But on Dean Street in the 70's, unlike at other

- 2 On this development cf. Fluck, Leypoldt, Versluys's edited volume (which contains a version of Fluck's essay), Rebein, and McLaughlin.
- 3 On the mix between realist and fantastic elements of narration in the writing of, among others, Powers see Bukiet.

intersections of Brooklyn history and geography, such a fine ethnic distinction barely registers in the stark diorama of black and white. (Scott)⁴

Both Powers and Lethem address the subject of blackness in a manner that performs a marked split between author persona and narrative voice(s), while nevertheless playing with the conventions of autobiographical narration—and thus making use of a genre which could be called the epitome of authenticating literary representation. By dint of their subject matter and political stance, moreover, *The Time of Our Singing* and *The Fortress of Solitude* could be placed within a “culture of authenticity” which had its heyday in the multicultural ethos of the 1980s and 90s, according to Charles Taylor—a period in which the very idea of authenticity came to be closely linked to the notions of “difference, originality, of the acceptance of diversity” (37). Ironically, of course, both Powers and Lethem associated themselves with a different camp at the time: Instead of identifying with the multicultural ethos of authenticity, both of them clearly adhered to a postmodern aesthetics of “ironic inauthenticity” (Grossberg 227-28). To this day, both show strong links to the postmodern tradition of writing which vehemently aimed at dispelling rather than generating a claim to literary authenticity and the tenets of identity politics.⁵ This affiliation shows in the fact that

- 4 This focus on the contrast between black and white—rather than on Jewishness in contradistinction to blackness—is perhaps the most evident difference to another recent novel which otherwise traces similar themes and concerns as Powers’s and Lethem’s texts: Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*. Eric Sundquist discusses Roth’s novel in detail in his study on the interactions between black and Jewish American cultures. Interestingly enough, Sundquist mentions *The Time of Our Singing* only in passing. This preference of one text over the other implicitly reflects the latter novel’s marked marginalization of the issue of Jewish ethnicity in favor of a representation of blackness and anti-black racism—a marginalization which Sundquist seems to register, yet does not address explicitly.
- 5 Of course, for Taylor the postmodern—and by extension, the poststructuralist—scene figures as just a variation of an all-pervasive culture of authenticity. The gestures toward a “deconstruction” of the ideal of authenticity remain futile, according to him—“all this [i.e. poststructuralist and postmodern ethics and aesthetics] emerges, I want to claim, from the same sources as the ideal of authenticity” (61). This is not the place to go into poststructuralist reflections on authenticity and authentication, which are swept away quite cursorily and simplistically by Taylor. The concepts of postmodernity and postmodernism which inform *The Ethics of Authenticity* would also have profited from some deeper engagement with the cultural and literary expressions of the day. But Taylor has a point when he mentions the aesthetic appeal emanating from the ideal of authenticity. While this appeal did not register in all postmodern writing

the ideal of authenticity manifests itself only indirectly in the two novels. While they trace patterns of identity formation and identification, and reflect upon the question of authentic representation, they give a markedly new and critical slant to the mechanisms of testimonial identity politics which Franzen demarcated so critically. Thus, Powers and Lethem complicate the easy self-authentication which ruled supreme in multiculturalism and which suffuses contemporary media cultures.⁶

Both authors approach the subjects of race and racism from similar vantage points—and both show themselves very much aware of the fact that “neither America nor the fiction that seeks to represent it can return to a state of pre-postmodern innocence regarding language and the processes of representation,” as Robert McLaughlin wrote about a predominant insight in contemporary fiction (65). Both texts reflect upon literary and artistic traditions, experiment with complicated techniques of reader address and narrative time management and work with intricate self-referential and intertextual devices of representation. Thus, the insight which one of Powers’s characters voices with respect to musical creativity could very well be related to his author’s literary expression:

Everything I wrote down came from somewhere else....There wasn’t an original idea in me. All I could do—and that, only without knowing—was revive the motives that had hijacked my life. (494)

But then again, while registering the lack of newness in the world of music and physics, Powers’s novel nevertheless discloses the possibility of using creativity in order to disrupt the cycles of racism and racial identification (“belonging, membership” [62] in the language of the novel), working “its way through a national history of racism and crossing] racial, cultural, and linguistic borderlines” (Ickstadt). The

of the period, it did come to the fore in some of the strongest texts of the tradition such as the writing of Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo and might, in hindsight, also register in the earlier writing of Powers and Lethem.

- 6 I don’t see Powers and Lethem as pioneers in this trend of complicating ethnic and gender identity ascriptions in literature. It started years ago in ethnic minority writing with authors such as Jessica Hagedorn, Sherman Alexie, Chang-rae Lee, or Jhumpa Lahiri, to name just a few examples of writers focusing on ethnic themes yet turning against identity politics. Seen that way, Franzen’s diagnosis of the literary market is simplistic—he certainly misses out on many of the subtleties in the developments since the 1990s. But he does capture—consciously or not—a dominant stance in current popular criticism and media debates on culture which presents the field of literary writing as neatly divided into “committed” identitarians and “navel-gazing” experimentalists.

Time of Our Singing maps out the possibility of authentic and unalienated experience in a world ruled by fake categories, dated conventions, and powerful traditions of thought and expression. I see an analogy here to Lethem's novel, as will become clear. But first I should approach both novels in a more systematic fashion.

Hybrid Vigor: The Time of Our Singing

It is certainly no accident that we encounter the metaphor of the "fortress" in both Lethem's and Powers's book. In the very first place, the "fortress of solitude" in Lethem's homonymous novel, which is steeped in references to comic book superheroes, alludes to Superman's castle in the arctic ice—epitomizing loneliness, isolation, and desertion. One reviewer of the novel pointed out that "motherless Brooklyn"—the title of Lethem's preceding novel—would have worked well for this autobiographically inflected novel, too (Scott). In fact, "motherless" would also be the perfect descriptive attribute for most of Powers's fictional universe in *The Time of Our Singing*. And whereas Lethem's novel bears the "fortress" in the title, it is in Powers's text that a richness of the imagery of fortification, isolation, and sheltering comes to the fore which could very well be re-projected onto *The Fortress of Solitude*. In both novels, the image of the fortress or shelter captures the upbringing of child or teenage protagonists by means of educational experiments in a world which is hostile to the very spirit of experimentation.

And in both novels, this experiment revolves around race. We encounter mothers determined to bring up their children beyond race—to make them live their lives in a racialized world, yet keep them unaffected by its categories of differentiation and segregation. In *The Time of Our Singing*, which in many respects could be said to review the racial history of the late twentieth century, this experiment is principally conducted by Delia Strom, black mother of three mixed-race kids, propping up "her refugee [Jewish-German] husband and [turning] their rented half of the freestone into a fortress" (9). Delia's experiment is inspired by a historical figure: the child prodigy Phillippa Duke Schuyler, another mixed-race kid raised to defy the categories of racialization. Delia hears of her in the 1940s and decides to take her case as a model to pursue:

The principles are simple. Raw milk, wheat germ, and cod-liver oil. Intense education—a two parent home schooling scheme of around-the-clock

instruction. But the real secret is the old western farming trick of hybrid vigor. The basics of agricultural breeding. Twin-race children—that genius girl proves it—represent a new strain of crossed traits more robust than either of their parental lines. (347)

On the basis of this example, isolated from the world around and from their families by the “sheltered fortress of their rented home” (349), the Stroms try to create a hybrid world-order of their own. Music becomes the secret code of this world away from the world:

[Delia] can give them a tune stronger than belonging. Thicker than identity. A singular song, a self better than any available armor. Teach them to sing the way they breathe, the songs of their ancestries. (480)

The authenticity of musical expression is to challenge the workings of identity politics according to this scheme. And Powers leaves no doubt that this authenticity of expression is based upon the structures of hybridity, the “swings and jolts, bends and bops, slaps and tickles, restless, headlong fence rules, resilient hybrid strains, the twists of tonality, the quotes, thefts, arrest, and reparations” which suffuse every musical performance (168).

However, for Jonah, Joseph, and Ruth Strom the scheme does not work. The “sheltered fortress” of their home cannot grant the protection or exclusivity to which Delia aspires. Complete isolation from and defiance of the world outside is not possible, so that a complicated game of make-believe and deception sets in between parents and children, in which both parties try to protect the other from the truth of the world. And Phillipa Schuyler, too, we learn towards the end of the novel, will not live up to the promises of her early fame: “When precocity failed her, all those whom hybrid vigor threatened with extinction turned the full force of purebred unity against her” (399).

Of course, as the biologically tinted and ironically inflected rhetoric of the passage describing Delia’s experiment in hybrid child-rearing already indicates, the experiment is bound to fail. The very biologisms at its core point to the fact that it has more to do with the quest for purity—a term which the novel invests with strong negativity overall—than the imagery of “the mix” lets on. The family’s experiment in fencing themselves off from the world around them by means of musical practice—the time of their singing—does not work or, rather, it works only for the moment and never altogether conclusively. Delia’s death, which sets an end to her effort to “furnish...exile and throw...it open wide enough to make a life in” (140), epitomizes the failure to achieve

“pure hybridity”—or, in other words, to reconcile the hybrid and the authentic. The absurdity of the very quest is perhaps best expressed in an episode in which Joseph, the narrator, describes his struggle to master the piano:

The drill was maddening, dulling, grueling, thankless, exhilarating, addictive, consuming, consummate. It felt like love, like a refiner's fire. I was a child at the beach with a sieve, improving the infinite expanse of sand. In the focus of my will, the sheer hammering repetition, I could bum off all of the world's impurities, everything ugly and extraneous, and leave behind nothing but a burnished rightness, suspended in space. I closed in with microscopic steps on something I couldn't see, something clean and unchanging, pure form and purer pleasure, a delivering memory, music, some glimpse of a still-unmade me. (185)

One has to read this passage in the context of the novel to know that Joseph's dream cannot possibly come about. At least, it cannot come about that way. His quest for purity by burning off the impurities of the world in his musical performance is bound to fail, since the world at large—and the world of music in particular—consists of impurities. And yet, the utopia of pure expression, of an aesthetic experience which is steeped in the rich and variegated world of (artistic) traditions and still achieves wholeness and closure, is what keeps the novel going. In a way it could be described as the quest for aesthetic—and by extension emotional—authenticity without the elitism and estrangement that taints efforts like the one described above: “pure hybridity” of another kind.

Joseph's brother Jonah, the boy genius and later star singer, will come closest to epitomizing the negative career which Joseph dreams about, but never really enters: “Every nub in his sound had been burned away, all impurity purged” (529), we read about Jonah, when he is at the height of his musical career. Later, shortly before his brother's death, Joseph muses about him: “He'd gotten beyond not only race. He'd gone beyond being anything at all” (596). Joseph steers an alternative path, and it is clearly his musical experimentations that are endorsed by the novel. Eventually, he teaches music in the community school which he runs together with his sister in the projects of Oakland, California.

Whereas Jonah's career ends in isolation and emptiness, Joseph's career, though at first glance considerably less impressive than his brother's, soars at the end of the novel. Its climax can be found in the description of an impromptu concert for the estranged brother, in which the underprivileged kids at Joseph's school turn out to be the novel's true artist figures. The scene calls forth a strong, and strange, utopian note,

evoking a sense of accomplishment and wholeness, authentic expression and immediacy. Even for this novel, which routinely indulges in pathos and grand feelings when describing musical performances, the grandeur of this enactment seems outstanding. When Jonah, deeply impressed, remarks on the performance's "hybrid vigor" which is "better than identity," the novel comes back full circle to the utopian educational project of its beginning (615). Joseph seems to have accomplished what Delia never managed to bring about: to totalize the experiment from a private onto a social scale, to turn the fortress into a true shelter and thereby reconcile hybridity and authenticity after all.

Unfortunately, the scene in which this transformation is enacted turns out to be one of the most unconvincing scenes of the novel—involuntarily calling to mind nothing as much as countless trite Hollywood movies in which an inspired music or art or math or literature teacher drives his crowd of underprivileged high school or college or university kids into a frenzy of authentic expression which carries the day, wins the prize, and overcomes prejudice and injustice. Yet this is not to say that the novel as a whole fails. Fortunately, the scene at the community school is not the only attempt the novel makes at presenting an alternative sphere, an authentic space outside the logic of "membership" and "identity." After a glance at some analogies and parallels between *The Time of Our Singing* and *The Fortress of Solitude*, I will return to Powers's text to trace a narrative strain of the novel which also aims at a correlation of hybridity and authenticity and at the enactment of a utopian space "beyond race"—yet does so in a markedly different register, enmeshing the repertory of realistic narrative conventions with traditions of fantastic and mystical narration.

Secret Codes: The Fortress of Solitude

Like *The Time of Our Singing*, Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* sets out with an experiment in education. And again, it is a mother who stands behind the scheme. In Lethem's novel Rachel Ebdus, a hippie Brooklynite married to struggling experimental artist Abraham Ebdus, is determined to bring up her son Dylan in the Brooklyn of the 1970s before gentrification and the middle-class take-over. She aims to turn the sensitive loner into a tough street fighter by sending him to a local public school. Dylan once overhears his mother bragging to a friend on the phone that he's "one of three white children in the whole school" (26). The experiment brings about a situation even bleaker than

the one described in Powers's novel. Dylan gets to know a "second world" outside his parents' home, which is a world of secrets and subtle codes, with complicated laws and rules of its own that he never completely masters yet struggles frantically with in order to survive:

The second world was an arrangement of zones in slate, and the peeling painted fronts of the row houses—pink, white, pale green, various tones of red and blue, always giving way to the brick underneath—those were the flags of undiscovered realms which lay behind and probably determined the system of slate zones. (14)

Like the seemingly sheltered world of the children in *The Time of Our Singing*, the world of this novel is strictly separated in an outside and an inside, its "doubleness" first implemented by Dylan's mother, but bound to rule Dylan's life long after her disappearance—just as it rules the lives of the protagonists of Powers's novel. In the beginning, the outside of Lethem's novel is constituted by the block, while the inside is demarcated as the world of Rachel—"there were things Rachel and Dylan could say to each other and then there was the official language of the world, which, though narrow and artificial, had to be mastered in the cause of the world's manipulation" (38). But then Rachel leaves, and the outside threatens to take over. Now there is only Dylan's black friend Mingus with whom he soon comes to share a similar—though much more fragile—world of secret codes and private language: a world inspired by their shared fascination with comics and later with the "code" of graffiti writing which takes over the city, "conquers" its spaces, and "claims them for Brooklyn" (89).

But matters are more difficult with Mingus than with Rachel, because the language between the friends is irretrievably complicated by the convoluted semantics of race and identity: that is, by what in *The Time of Our Singing* is called the rhetoric of "membership," and is here made out as the fact that the two kids are "stranded in zones, in selves. White kid, black kid...." (89). Again, there is "outside speech" and inside speech, and now the outside speech increasingly turns out to be black speech to Dylan: "Dylan couldn't ask Mingus Rude if black people called liars lions because Mingus Rude was black. Sort of" (81).

At first sight and through their days of childhood and adolescence, Mingus fares better in the Brooklyn streets than Dylan. But this is not to say that the book posits equal opportunities for Mingus and Dylan or belittles the social effects of racism by equating white and black marginalization. While Dylan gets away to California and eventually makes a living as a music journalist, Mingus ends in jail. Their paths will

cross again after many years, but this is not the place for a plot summary. What matters to me now is the complex game of invention and imitation, street credibility and fake—in other words, the game of mimicry—which Mingus and Dylan engage in, in order to determine who they are. Clearly Mingus masters the codes which Dylan copies at best, just as he starts to copy Mingus' graffiti tag "Dose":

he's been allowed to merge his identity in this way with the black kid's, to lose his funkymusicwhiteboy geekdom in the illusion that he and his friend Mingus Rude are both Dose, no more and no less. A team, a unified front, a brand name, an idea. (156)

Yet this illusion of merging, which is precarious from the beginning—"This is Brooklyn, nothing integrates innocently" (156)—is bound to shatter. In the years to follow, it will turn into a strange system of make-believe on the white kid's side, a system which becomes the more pronounced and the more problematical the farther he moves away from Brooklyn and Mingus. It culminates in an act of ghetto toughness performed when—years later—Dylan goes to a fancy college in Vermont, modeled closely after Bennington College.⁷ Here, Dylan's street credibility ironically depends on his childhood friend Arthur, of all people. Arthur is another white geek hopelessly at a loss in the black world of Brooklyn. He visits Dylan in Vermont to deal drugs. To Dylan's privileged friends he comes across as "something real....they were titillated out of themselves by his street sincerity. An actual drug dealer had come to campus at last" (451).

Clearly, a sort of fake authenticity is achieved through mimicry in this instance. Again, Dylan's situation calls to mind *The Time of Our Singing* and the period in which Joseph holds a job as a bar pianist in Atlantic City, performing a New York street credibility that he never held: "I'd do my best to accommodate, keeping my voice low and my answers peppered with mangled Brooklyn street slang. Mumbling always works wonders—an authenticity all its own" (436). Yet both novels eventually move beyond this ironized fake authenticity. In *The Fortress of Solitude* the protagonist sees a self-diagnosed "failure at social mimicry" (492) as the cause of his getting away from Brooklyn eventually—Arthur, the "fake," stays on. But he, too, will eventually become what he performs. The categories of real and fake, original and copy, artificial and authentic

7 Lethem visited Bennington College briefly at the same time that Bret Easton Ellis and Donna Tartt were there. In *The Fortress of Solitude* he calls Bennington "Camden College," paying homage to Ellis (Schiff 122).

are juggled around so often in Lethem's book that they become profoundly questionable in the end. And I argue that this reevaluation of authenticity is closely connected to the resemanticization of categories such as imitation and mimicry, categories which at first glance gesture towards fake authenticity only yet eventually go beyond it—and which are best captured in the book's terminology of the "halfway." This category gains a relevance in *The Fortress of Solitude* which closely resembles the ambivalent function of the idea of "hybrid vigor" for the world of *The Time of Our Singing*.

Dylan's world, we learn very early in the novel, "was all halfway, you walked out of your halfway school and tried to chart a course through your halfway neighborhood to make it back to your own halfway house, your half-empty house" (90). Ironically, what becomes the epitome of improvisation and lack for the child, represents a world of uncompromising determination and artistic absolutes for his father. A trained painter, Abraham Ebdus withdrew from the world of galleries and painting on canvas to explore a strange realm of artistic expression: animated film. His quest for perfection thus hinges upon the very halfway existence which his son finds so unsatisfactory. Like Joseph Strom, Abraham Ebdus makes hybridity the point of departure to achieve authentic (or "pure") artistic expression. For the entirety of Dylan's life he works at hundreds of thousands of film frames which disclose an abstract world devoid of plot and even of movement since for the longest part of his career he refuses to view the projected film material. Abraham's relentless quest for artistic self-realization is related in the same imagery of purity and purification that *The Time of Our Singing* drew upon to describe the artistic enterprise: "By painting [the forms] again and again with the minutest variation he would purify them and the story of their purification would be the story of the film he was painting" (35). In his rigorous pursuit of this pure concept of art, the "austere perfection of the unpublished, unseen film" (112), Abraham Ebdus seems like a Puritan version of his fictional counterpart, Mingus Rude's father Barrett, who has given up a soaring career as a soul singer (in a band ironically called *The Subtle Distinctions*) to do—nothing. He consumes drugs, listens to music, and watches TV: equally withdrawn, if far less productive than that other halfway existence, Abraham Ebdus. Just like in *The Time of Our Singing* hybridity and purity, or the halfway and the perfect, turn out to be far from oppositional terms eventually in *The Fortress of Solitude*. This comes to the fore during a rare public viewing of Abraham's unfinished film at which Dylan gets to see a scene that moves him deeply:

my father had discovered a green triangle with blunted comers, one trying and failing to fall sideways against the phantasmic, blurred horizon. The triangle occupied perhaps a quarter of the frame's area. It trembled, tipped a degree, nearly kissed earth, jumped back. Impossible, though, not to root for it. To feel it groping like a foot for purchase. Daring, hesitating, failing. (412)

The image of this triangle is taken up later again, at the end of the novel, when we are retrospectively acquainted with an episode in Dylan's youth—a car trip with his father through a snowstorm. This experience demarcated a rare moment of almost-understanding between the two of them. The situation in the car marks a “middle space” or, alternately, a “collapsing middle” (581). It is evoked as a meeting ground that is precarious and fragile, barely balanced like the triangle in Abraham's frame:

a middle space opened and closed like a glance, you'd miss it if you blinked....We were in a middle space then, in a cone of white, father and son moving forward at a certain speed. Side by side, not truly quiet but quiescent, two gnarls of human scribble, human cipher, human dream. (582)

The novel, thus, closes upon a moment of healing in which the tom family is partially re-united, at least in retrospect and in memory and for a brief precarious moment. Here, too, it is improvisation, accidentality, and a certain banality of circumstances that brings about a deeply authentic experience: an experience of unquestioning belonging, selfhood, and certainty with expression and perception falling into one. If the scene in *The Fortress of Solitude* is more convincing than what I see as an equivalent in *The Time of Our Singing*—the community school performance—it might be because Lethem is more careful than Powers when it comes to pathos and grand feelings. In any case, both scenes constitute closure and both are set in the “real” world and are conveyed in a realistic style of narration. Both, however, are also complemented by parallel scenes that achieve an even more powerful effect of authenticity, immediacy, and depth on somewhat different grounds. After all, in both books realism does not rule supreme. Both enter a space of fantasy at times; and it seems to me that this transgression from realism to fantasy has much to do with the representation of issues of race and identity in both novels. By way of a conclusion to this paper, I would like to explore this dimension of both novels in more detail.

Fantasies of Authenticity

In *The Fortress of Solitude*, Dylan's "halfway existence" takes its course once his mother leaves him and thus disrupts their tacit understanding, their "inside language." From then on, he will feel incomplete and gain a sense of wholeness and belonging only momentarily—in experiences such as the one with his father in the snowstorm. It is certainly no accident that such scenes of momentary healing are associated mostly with the experience of art—be it Abraham's frames, the music that father and son listen to in the car, or the comics or graffiti art that bring together Dylan and Mingus and form the basis of their friendship. But while the complicated relationship to the father can achieve closure under natural, if special, conditions—a snowstorm, a car, a particular choice of music—more seems to be needed to bring the friendship with Mingus into full-fledged being and to afford Dylan a sense of wholeness and belonging in the black neighborhood of his childhood days. To turn the messed-up world of race-relations into a sphere of perfect understanding, the novel seems to suggest, a snowstorm is not enough. We need magic, or, in Lethem's own words: the "smashing together [of] my commitment to the fantastic and my commitment to realism" (Schiff 128).

Thus Lethem introduces a deliberate break with realism to give scope to the two boys' (and later the adults') friendship. A magic ring turns them into superheroes, allowing them first to fly and then later to become invisible. Using the ring for the first time on the block, Dylan experiences its power as a means of overcoming distance and isolation, while being in control. Wholeness and harmony converge in the halfway world:

As he rose, Dylan saw the whole block complete. He nestled easily in the air, under the branches, above the cars. He was aware of Mingus beside him, rising not quite so high....Maybe your life wasn't bereft, your fortune robbed before it could be spent. Maybe life, sex, everything that mattered was right here, on Dean, not gone elsewhere. At his side, Dylan felt Mingus Rude nestled slightly below him, their bodies clunking sweetly as Mingus tried to match Dylan's leap and fell short, minus the advantage of the flying man's ring. Mingus rising not quite so high as Dylan.

At perihelion Dylan felt himself to be a note of music, one delayed, now floating upward. They might be all notes in a song, the Dean Street kids. (187-88)

It is on the basis of this experience that Dylan's and Mingus's "merging" in the artificial personality of Dose, the graffiti writer, comes about; this time in the form of Dylan "rising not quite so high" as Mingus.

Much later in the novel Dylan will resort to the ring again, when he returns to the East Coast in order to visit Mingus in jail. His rescue plan will not work. Again, however, the ring brings about a magic moment of closeness and understanding between the two friends, culminating in a passage in which the novel's narrative perspective changes for the first time to focalize through Mingus. This switch of perspective, which breaks from the dominant perspective of the white kid closely and obviously modeled after the author, seems to be doubly bracketed off from the preceding narrative: it constitutes the only change in perspective away from Dylan (whose life we follow first in third-person narration focalized strongly through him, later in first-person narration) and it is framed by Dylan's momentary invisibility. The emphasis on an extraordinary situation, bracketed off in several respects from the novel's reality, reflects upon and totalizes the image of the "fortress" that determines the representation of communication and expression in the novel in general. It seems that in order to establish understanding and communication across the boundaries of race and class and to allow for a merging of perspectives across these boundaries, varied signals of the extraordinary—the switch to fantasy—are required.

A similar bracketing off of the experience of interracial understanding (or rather, an understanding which cancels out the category of race altogether, at least for a moment) can be noted in *The Time of Our Singing*. Of course, this novel, too, relies heavily on the imagery of the fortress and the shelter in order to map out a fictional world in which the established ideas of race and identity are profoundly questioned. The focal point for these experiments, the first encounter between the black woman and the white man who are going to be the parents that set the experiment of "hybrid vigor" going, is not only made out as extraordinary, but also related by means of a break with realistic narrative conventions. Even more than *The Fortress of Solitude*, *The Time of Our Singing* is told in defiance of chronological sequence: The novel is structured by means of a complicated logic of back and forth. This oscillation in narrative time culminates in a scene told several times and from various perspectives, enacting the "utopian, the foundational moment of trans-racial union" (Ickstadt). The scene in question suspends the logic of time and history altogether, making the 1930s—when Delia and David meet for the first time in Washington—collapse with the 1990s, when the grandson, who was born after their death, travels to

Washington to take part in the Million Man March. The encounter of the grandparents, before their parenthood, and the grandson, after their death, allows for a perfect moment of harmony and understanding. Powers turns this moment into the point of departure and the end point of the Strom family history—it serves as an inspiration for Delia to risk her experiment and it provides a means of continuation for her children and grandchildren. Like Lethem, Powers uses a marked change of register— from the realistic to the fantastic—to conjure up a world in defiance of identity ascriptions: a world in which self and identification exist in harmony, at least briefly. And while the preceding scene celebrating authentic expression—the scene of the community school performance—falls flat, the final take-off of Powers's novel works exactly because it emphasizes the utopian and magical quality of the scenario on display.

In both novels, the experience of authenticity is related in a bracketed form, as it were. With respect to the representation of race relations, in addition, a turn to something like magical realism seems to be called for. The ideal of a world "beyond race," it seems, is to be achieved only in a precarious momentary escape from or defiance of the world of the ordinary and everyday. Only then can identity momentarily figure as a category of self-recognition rather than a demarcation of masquerade and make-believe. Only then can the paradox of "pure hybridity" be thought.

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