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# These - Are - The "Breaks": A Roundtable Discussion on Teaching the Post-Soul Aesthetic

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# These—Are—the “Breaks”: A Roundtable Discussion on Teaching the Post-Soul Aesthetic

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**W**e met at Duke University—mid-summer, in the mid-Atlantic, at mid-campus—to talk about teaching courses that focused on the post-soul aesthetic. We met outside the John Hope Franklin Center, and soon enough we five youngish black professors were walking a hallway towards a conference room near the African and African American Studies program. Not at all surprisingly, the walls of the hallway were lined with framed photographs of the esteemed John Hope Franklin at various stages throughout his long and storied career. For me, given the topic I was about to raise among these professional colleagues, walking that hallway was something like running a gauntlet: Franklin’s career is one of continued, sustained Negro uplift, as the photomontage of him documents. The post-soul aesthetic, on the other hand, critiques and questions certain black assumptions and traditions, and most professors who teach the art and literature of this post-civil rights movement aesthetic must, to apprehend the course material, assume a peculiar, if not precarious, pedagogical stance in the classroom, one that respects careers like Dr. Franklin’s, but also constructively interrogates—and sometimes explodes—the very presumptions and precepts on which such a career stands.

And so, a mere hallway removed from the intense, startlingly direct gaze of Professor Franklin, I gathered together four professors who have had various experiences teaching the post-soul aesthetic in a variety of locales: among the five of us, we have taught at large public schools and small liberal arts colleges; at mid-list colleges and elite universities; at Midwestern, northern, and southern universities. Additionally, the experience of teaching post-soul material ranges from several years to one course to the planning stages for a first course.

Sitting around the table were Crystal Anderson, then of the University of Kansas but now of Elon University; Mark Anthony Neal, of Duke University; Evie Shockley, of Rutgers University; and Alexander Weheliye, of Northwestern University. We began when Alex confirmed that he had titled his course “Post-Integration Blues.”

**BERT:** And you, Evie, said you’re going to call yours “21<sup>st</sup>-Century African American Literature.” Crystal, what do you call yours?

**CRYSTAL:** “post-soul aesthetic.”

**MARK:** “Post-Black Culture.”

**BERT:** And I used “post-soul,” as well, even though I started out with “The New Black Aesthetic.” Why the variety of names? And how do you define what helps you choose the names that you’ve chosen?

**MARK:** I think we all feel a sense of “break,” and we’re trying to articulate that break in some way. For me, at some point, “post-soul” really didn’t encompass all the things that I wanted that break to represent. So when Thelma Golden began talking out loud about this notion of post-black, that became helpful for me, but that was actually the middle move. For me the thinking is to go from a post-soul to a post-black to what I term a NewBlack—one word.<sup>1</sup> That’s what we try to do in the post-black course—to identify post-soul texts, and what becomes post-black texts, and what becomes NewBlack texts. The idea was to work that chronologically, but that doesn’t actually work. [laughter] What do you do with someone like an Audre Lorde who as early as the 1960s is articulating this notion of “break” in much more complicated ways than Trey Ellis was thinking about it, particularly around gender and sexuality? So, yeah—[chuckling] I’m grappling with this notion as we speak.

**ALEX:** It’s interesting. I just want to follow up really quickly on the whole idea of post-black because that was one of the terms that a lot of students brought to my class and that they really wanted to talk about. But they were also resistant to it—for obvious reasons—just as the whole idea of post-black was attacked in relation to what Thelma Golden was trying to do in the art world. So I would just like to hear you say more about why. . . . I mean, you talked about the kind of temporalization of how you’re looking at it, but I would just like to hear you say why you thought that [post-black] was a more apt term to encompass the “break” than post-soul, or New Black Aesthetic, or all the different terms that are out there?

**MARK:** Well, I think post-soul, at least as Ellis articulated it (and I think [Greg] Tate does a much better job of articulating it—both of them, actually, as opposed to Nelson George) was really about a kind of post-civil rights freedom, if you will, in the art world that on some level wasn’t critical of anything, but very celebratory. Whereas, for me, post-black, on the one hand, was a more conscious attempt to de-essentialize blackness. Not to reject it. Not to jettison it. But to be much more critical of essentializing blackness in some kind of way that I don’t think the post-soul does. And even though my initial thinking of someone like, say, [Paul] Beatty, is of his work being post-soul, when you actually get down to it he’s probably closer to what’s happening around Thelma Golden’s concept in that regard. The NewBlack move was really about how to integrate gender and sexuality in this context. For me, [the interest is] to look at Me’Shell NdegéOcello as a text of the NewBlack—where there is something much more complicated going on than post-soul and post-black really encompasses.

**CRYSTAL:** For me, the short answer would be that I saw Mark Anthony Neal’s book [*Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*], and I said, “I need a book for my class. Let’s use this—” [laughs]. The more complicated and intellectually challenging answer would be that for me post-soul has a resonance in at least two ways. When I saw your book, I was reminded of a chapter in Robin Kelley’s *Yo Mama’s Disfunktional*, in which he talks about soul initially being inexplicably linked to blackness, but also being something that other groups could take on for themselves, so that it’s black and then it’s not black in some ways. That also put me in the mind of Du Bois and *The Souls of Black Folk*. I envision the post-soul as a manifestation of another kind of black aesthetic. I conceived my course as within this continuum: what makes this particular moment different from what happened in 1903 or the 1960s or any of the permutations in between? And so for me it’s a term that allows me to explore those kinds of temporal manifestations of what a black aesthetic is.

**MARK:** Post-Soul strikes me as something that is more historical than anything, whereas post-black is more about issues of hybridity in ways that I don't think post-soul necessarily acknowledges. I think about Du Bois for a second, and it's very rudimentary, obviously, but Du Bois is really articulating this notion of hybridity that I think we attach to conversations of African American black identity at this point in time without thinking twice about it. He's actually articulating a kind of "break" then.

**ALEX:** I'm glad you brought up *The Souls of Black Folk* because I think that's a very important marker in terms of the whole concept of soul moving from the spiritual to the secular. And *Souls of Black Folk* emerges from this moment where it still has the overtones of the spiritual, but Du Bois is using it in very clear political ways and trying to secularize it in a way that will later be picked up by a lot of people in the 1960s. Those are both moments of "break" where the idea of soul becomes so prominent.

**EVIE:** Well, as the one person whose course title doesn't include the word "post" . . . [laughter] I have to actually go on record, but I'm *fairly suspicious* of the "post" and in many more arenas than this one. I've written about Thelma Golden's "post-black" and Trey Ellis's "New Black Aesthetic" in the context of looking at the work of poet Ed Roberson; he's an experimental poet who's been writing in nonlinear disjunctive forms since his first book was published in '70.<sup>2</sup> I talk about his work as one way to complicate that temporal narrative that says that after something that's definitely later than 1970—at least according to the kind of timelines I'm hearing—that's when people began to complicate blackness, and that's when people began to challenge essentialism and those kinds of things and. . . I just am not convinced that that "break" —

**MARK:** — is there.

**EVIE:** *Yeah.*

**MARK:** That's why Audre Lorde and Bayard Rustin, and [James] Baldwin to a certain extent, are critical in that moment because they're really working through some stuff before the time that we think that stuff is happening.

**EVIE:** Yes. I don't resist it entirely, but I have a wary distance from it right now.

**BERT:** Okay, well, but that does sort of raise some pedagogical questions for you. Do you conceive of yourself teaching a course that demonstrates *not* having a "break" or seeing a "break"? Or is it one that explores whether there *is* a "break"?

**EVIE:** The latter. I see it as an exploratory course. The secret reason I'm teaching this course is that I wanted to read some very contemporary African American literature and the opportunity to do that is so limited when you're constantly teaching the Harlem Renaissance and so on. And I thought, well, to make this challenging I want to explore how the criticism of previous literature stands up in the face of what's clearly some kind of a generational shift. Maybe I'm more comfortable with "shift" than "break" as the terminology to apply. What I'm going to decide, and what we as a class might decide, is really still up in the air.

**MARK:** See, that's part of the ongoing crisis of thinking about this stuff chronologically. They're having the same discussion around Afro-Futurism.<sup>3</sup> [Samuel] Delaney's first book is '66. Sun Ra's recording in the 1950s. Can we really think of Afro-Futurism as a '90's phenomenon or '80's phenomenon in that regard?

**EVIE:** That's something I appreciate about Sheree Thomas's anthology (*Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*)—that she goes back and pulls out people like Du Bois and [George] Schuyler; she draws it through the century. . . .

**ALEX:** You know, it's just a different day and age. Maybe there is the post-soul in literature, but it's not really there, you know, in terms of student population. It's really hard to get students to think outside the box when it comes to a number of different things.

**BERT:** Well, then, what do you do? How do you address the reality of teaching post-soul aesthetic texts to contemporary college students?

**MARK:** Every day there is a new strategy. Some of it is just kind of fly-by-night. What ways can you push them to think differently about things that may work in this course that are just not going to work in that course?

**ALEX:** Sometimes there are a couple of students who really get it. That makes it easier because it doesn't feel like you're preaching to them and saying, "Why don't we think about this explicitly sexual scene not only in terms of the sexual aspects but in terms of what it's trying to do regarding power and redefinitions of gender and sexuality," and so forth. If there are a couple of students in the class who are willing at least to listen to you and to go along with you, then that makes it a lot more palatable for the rest of the students.

**CRYSTAL:** Another strategy that I use is to just up front tell students, "Look, we're going to be doing things that may challenge your world view." Just get that out there from the get-go. Explain to them that that's not a bad thing. Like, it's not all supposed to be ice cream and cake. We're going to work through some things that may be uncomfortable. The students that I've been teaching, they're mostly white students from the Midwest—if that makes a difference.

[laughter]

**ALEX:** Uh huh. It does.

**CRYSTAL:** I'm used to having the confederate student in my class. [laughter] The Midwest student is a completely different thing. At least the confederate student will talk to you about race—in predictable ways, but he will at least engage you on that. The Midwest student doesn't want to hurt your feelings; doesn't want to cause any conflict. So it's especially hard to get them to engage in these things. But I try to get them used to the notion that I'm not going to spoon-feed them everything, that there is a challenge to be overcome. And not just in doing this literature, but literature in general. There is difficult literature, and you've just got to slog through it.

**ALEX:** Actually, I've had the experience that students were much more willing to talk about race across racial lines in the post-soul class than in any other class that I've taught before because there is so much going back and forth between the white and the black world that the white students felt they had . . . not necessarily an authority, but they didn't feel as shy as in other kinds of situations. And then there were a lot of black students, because it's Northwestern, who could really relate to the experience of a Gunnar [Kaufman, in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*], for instance, or the characters in [Martha Southgate's] *The Fall of Rome*. I was really surprised at how open the dialogue was and that they would also talk to each other about race as opposed to having me mediate it, which I haven't really experienced in any other sort of setting, whether in the northeast or in the Midwest.

**BERT:** Do you find that to be a constant every time you teach the course?

**ALEX:** I've only taught it once. So maybe it was the group . . . you never know. I was really surprised. We ended the class with some episodes from the first season of *Chappelle's Show*. And I think the popularization of that sort of humor—everybody, everybody except one person in the class, had seen every single episode. They could quote the lines, you know, regardless of their racial or gender or age background. Having those kinds of materials in some ways really helps because they are not as loaded, perhaps, even though they are dealing with very serious issues. There's a different style, perhaps, of thinking about identity and race.

**BERT:** Well, let's stay on race for a second, then. In Trey Ellis's essay, Robert Townsend says something like, "I'm not saying racism doesn't exist. I'm saying it's not an excuse." And in some ways a line like that speaks to the sort of nuanced perspectives that a lot of these texts possess in terms of race. It doesn't seem as if there are a lot of post-soul texts where you have characters who are outraged about racism, for instance. And I'm wondering if white students in your classes may say something like—it's rare that they're this upfront—but say something like, "Yeah, he's right, good for him for quitting that whining about race," you know? It seems that the way that some of these texts approach race gives white students, in particular, a sense that the "post" in post-soul is also post-everything-screwy-and-uncomfortable-about-race. In fact, you know what? There were kids, including black kids, who would constantly, almost reflexively use the phrase "*in slavery days*" when they were referring to past racist behavior! [laughter] I'm like, "What is this 'slavery days' business?" In other words, even though you're right to be suspicious of this "break," in students' minds they clearly see—and I'm talking about both black *and* white students—they clearly view themselves as distant from a racialized past—and in ways that some of these texts encourage. I'm not saying the authors intentionally do this, but I am wondering how—since it's clear you guys have noticed this phenomenon—how do you respond to that in class?

**CRYSTAL:** I definitely get that from white students in my course. I had two black students, both of whom had spent time in the South, when I was teaching this course. Say, for instance, in Paul Beatty's *White Boy Shuffle*?—both of those students had an actual reference point for [the characters] Betty and Veronica. They knew people like that. That resonated with them in a way that was just beyond anything that the white students had . . . they didn't know what to make of Betty and Veronica. I think that there are places in those texts that, particularly for my students who like to be a little bit more theoretical, Postmodernism they hug like a pillow. That was the thing: "It's Postmodern. Isn't it great?" They used the Postmodern in ways that did not articulate the kind of complex discourse about race that I felt went on in the text that I used. So, Postmodernism was kind of their shelter. An uncritical Postmodernism. But every time they would kind of hide under the shelter of Postmodernism, my two black students would come back and say, "Wait a minute, I know about this, there are people like this." So, in some ways, a certain air of authenticity comes in to challenge those white students. My [black] students *so* did not want the white students to be able to get away with that attitude. [Black students] liked the course and in student evaluations they said it was one of the few courses where they had authority even when they weren't doing [Mark's] book . . . and my two black students could not believe that the white students had never seen that *Good Times* episode where James died, and she's like, you know . . .

**BERT:** [imitating Esther Rolle's Florida Evans character in *Good Times*] "Damn . . . damn . . . DAMN!"

**CRYSTAL:** Right! They're like, "Can we get this on DVD?" "Where can we see this?" They had nothing. And the two black students immediately knew that, and they liked that because that gave them a kind of authority that they don't feel in studying Milton or Chaucer.

**BERT:** Yes. Yes.

**CRYSTAL:** So I think that happens, but I think it depends on who your students are because in some ways you have students who—black students and also white students—who are knowledgeable of black culture. I had an older white student in my class, and he actually knew that reference. But he was older. He had this kind of really unusual cultural experience; he had lived next door to a black family for a long time, so he was coming at it from a different perspective. For the most part, my white students just did not get that whole scene, and they were missing huge parts of the literature that we studied.

**EVIE:** I've seen that, too. But I'm also made to think about teaching some of the more contemporary post-soul African American poets in the poetry course that I taught. What I found myself struggling with was the black students . . . well, *despair* would probably be too strong a word, but their discomfort with not being able to immediately access these poets who didn't seem to be saying what they knew and what they could translate for the class. I had to deal with my own empathy for them, wanting them to feel empowered in my class, if no one else is, but yet wanting them to be challenged even within their own comfort zone.

**CRYSTAL:** Do you think it's a genre thing? Because I've taught African American poetry courses, too, and it's fine until we get to the contemporary poets, and then they're just like, "What happened?" And I don't get that with the fiction, because the fiction is narrative. It's narrative they can grasp. Those popular culture references are there that they can easily embrace. But the poetry, maybe because of the genre, the fact that it's so invested in the language as opposed to the narrative. . . .

**EVIE:** I think you may have something. It's been a few years since I've taught *White Boy Shuffle*, but I have had students who couldn't relate to Gunnar, couldn't relate—students who were still much more authentic than that.

**BERT:** These are black kids who couldn't relate to him?

**EVIE:** Black kids. Yes. Black kids, who thought, you know, "How does he not know who he is? Where is this confusion coming from?" That kind of response. But, yeah, that example aside, I would say that there is something about the relationship that's constantly reinforced now by spoken-word and performance poetry in black students that this is something they are going to be able to tap into, if not immediately begin to recite originally on the moment.

**MARK:** Something Evie said around black students' reactions. . . that's one of the things I find very interesting about post-soul frameworks: it does challenge a certain kind of nationalist thinking around black identity and politics. It hasn't been as much of an issue here at Duke because that national sensibility on some level is muted by where these folks are coming from in terms of economic class.

**ALL:** Mmm hmm.

**MARK:** But, public schools, right?<sup>4</sup> The post-soul—I mean there are lots of students who are really uncomfortable with just the frame of reference of post-soul, let alone a character like Gunnar. It was like, "Okay, I don't know what to do

with this." When you deal with [Danzy Senna's] *Caucasia* and Birdie, and ultimately Birdie's critique of the work that her father is doing—there are students who are very uncomfortable with that kind of line of rationale.

**ALEX:** And there is a certain kind of nostalgia, also; for [some students wonder,] What does blackness mean in the absence of an explicit form of resistance or struggle? A couple of students actually said, "Why isn't there more struggling here? Why is everybody just making fun of the struggle?" Right? And it wasn't only black students. You know, "That's what you go to African American literature for, right?"

**ALL:** Right. [laughter] "Where's the protest?"

**ALEX:** And, I mean, that's sort of the whole critique of *White Boy Shuffle*. That sort of narrative of, you know, black people always having to fulfill that role.

**BERT:** Yep. Yep. It is particularly interesting when you have black students—I just taught a class where I had a black student who really could not sign on. His feeling was, "I'm from the 'hood"—he never said anything like "I'm keeping it real" [laughter]—but he said, "I can't identify with any of these folk." And sitting three or four spaces down is this black girl who has two Ivy League-educated parents and was raised in the 'burbs and can *absolutely*, can *all too readily* identify with a lot of these protagonists. Right there in the same class. And kids in between. I had two or three black kids who would fall some place else on that spectrum. Does this difference in terms of black identification or lack of identification with the protagonists affect the classroom dynamic? Is it an issue? Because these texts are designed to do, as all texts are, a certain cultural work. It's designed to get us to think about the very sorts of things that Alex just referred to. I'm assuming that you guys drive class discussion in the same way that I do. I personally think that the best way to get students to learn is by having them invest in the learning process. But if getting a discussion going about these texts means dealing with "I don't understand this" or "I can't sign onto this," how does that enable—or disable—any cultural work that's going on in the text itself?

**EVIE:** I point to it as a teaching moment for the white and the black students and whoever might be in the room. At Wake Forest it's usually one or the other.<sup>5</sup> I use those moments to stress, "This is where you see there's not one blackness. There's not one essential way of being black. We get to disagree. All of us and any subgroups of us." But you know, it's hard to shift gears, and you try to move on to something else.

**BERT:** I've begun using the term "blaxploration" to describe this exploration of blackness that characterizes the writing of the authors we've talked about.<sup>6</sup> And I've found this exploratory stance presumes a certain amount of understanding of race theory, starting with the idea of race as a social construct, for instance. This understanding is presumed on the part of, or it should be on the part of, black and white readers as well. Do you guys find that your students walk into class or walk into these texts with that sort of bottom line understanding of race that allows them to participate in the author's exploration of race? Or do you need to create a pathway for them to come along?

**MARK:** I'm not sure there is an ongoing context that allows them to think about race when they come in the classroom. I think if you're talking about a graduate class, yes. But I think that the average undergraduate is not processing race in



such a complicated way. They can acknowledge race; they can recognize it. But their thinking about it is very rudimentary, unless you're talking about someone who comes out of an exceptional environment. Really, we're talking about 18 year-olds, when all is said and done.

**EVIE:** I play games in my classes when I find that students are really hung on old definitions of race. And it has about 60 percent effectiveness. There are some people who won't let go. But I ask them, I say, "We're going to talk about race. Let's name the races." I just stand at the board with my chalk. They say, "Black, white," and then . . . [laughter] They know there are more, but, you know. "Hispanic" comes out. "Asian" comes out. "Native American." I start saying, "Okay, is race—I thought race was colors? Or is it where you're from?" I just mess with them. And that at least gives them some way to begin to accept that there is no scientific, biological support for the ideas of race that they might have grown up with. But getting them to then think about race as something that you can define for yourself, which is what a lot of the authors insinuate. . . that's another move.

**MARK:** That's why *Caucasia* is such a great text. That's why, even though we don't think about this novel as a post-soul text, [James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a great text. I'm always struck by students who respond to the protagonist's plight with the kind of critique that he's selling out. It's like, "Okay, what does that mean to you?" Selling out is kind of an over-rated concept here. [Our job is to] work through what race means to him in this particular era, and how we articulate race and the possibility of even being in a position to sell out in 2005.

**ALEX:** The post-soul course was actually the first course that I've ever taught where there was a consensus about race as a social construction from the beginning. It might have just been the luck of the draw that allowed in students who had taken African American literature, but I didn't even bring it up. In the first class, when we were talking about [Mark's] book and Trey Ellis, people just said, "Well, race is a social construction." Then someone else, and people just sort of kept referring to it without me ever actually having to define it. I think also that a lot of the black students in the class really felt that the literature spoke to them because of their experiences of going to exclusive, almost all-white prep schools, and then coming to Northwestern, that they didn't want the authenticity but wanted texts that explored the different ranges of blackness. So, to answer my own question, it probably was the luck of the draw. But it was really surprising that it was in this course and not in any other Af Am Lit classes that I'd taught before.

**CRYSTAL:** Well, Mark, you mentioned that with graduate students they come in with that idea of race. Better prepared, at least, than the undergraduates. I found that my white students use [the social construction of race] as a *club*. It's like, "Because race is a social construct, we don't have to talk about it. We don't have to be critical of it—"

**MARK:** "—It doesn't exist, right?"

**CRYSTAL:** "—It's just *there*. We don't have to look at *how* race is constructed," which would be the next move after you say race is a social construct, you know? Well, *how* is it being constructed?

**MARK:** And who *benefits* from its being constructed, because then you've got to talk about white privilege and *they don't want to go there*—they don't want to go down that road. . . .

**CRYSTAL:** Exactly. That's a little bit more than they bargained for when they bring up the idea that race is a social construct.

**BERT:** Do you find these texts helpful in enlightening students, undergraduates as well as graduate students, about these sorts of issues?

**ALEX:** I think that *Caucasia* is a really good text because it brings up the question of passing in such a different way from *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and [Nella Larsen's] *Passing* and all of the other passing narratives. Again, a couple of the students who were in the course had read those early texts, which was useful as a pedagogical tool. I would think about teaching it in relation to one of those texts because the question that *Caucasia* ultimately asks in the passing chapters is, In what sense is Birdie even passing? Right? It's really clear in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and in *Passing*, that the characters *choose* to pass; it's not really that clear in *Caucasia*.

**CRYSTAL:** Also in *Caucasia* the use of culture as opposed to physical appearance really comes out.

**MARK:** And political ideology.

**CRYSTAL:** And political ideology. I tried to illustrate this distinction in my class. I actually brought in the Pat Benatar song that's in the book, and then I played the Earth, Wind and Fire, and my white students went, "What? What? Earth, Wind and—who? Earth, Wind . . . and Fire?" [laughing] Music actually serves as a way for Birdie to submit her identification with whatever group she is trying to get into.

**ALEX:** And it's actually also really interesting because it's not only the Pat Benatar song, but a couple of other songs that she professes to liking are all—it was Hall and Oates and someone else—they were all blue-eye soul. Which is a really interesting emphasis. I forget who the second group is besides Hall and Oates.<sup>7</sup>

**MARK:** I'm not surprised that students wouldn't know Earth, Wind & Fire. There are black students who are kind of like, "What the hell is this?"

**ALEX:** —From the days of slavery.

[laughter]

**BERT:** At Holy Cross, I once had a young black man who was involved in the athletic department—he was, like, assistant director of marketing or something like that—ask me if he could come and sit in on my class. I said sure, come on in. Virtually everything that we talked about, every time we referred to a text, you could see this horrified look on his face, and he was shaking his head as if to say, "No, no, no."

**MARK:** "What the hell are y'all talking about?"

**BERT:** "This is not good. We need to stop this right here!" He expressed utter, just rank dismay with the idea of these texts doing this particular type of exploratory work. It seemed obscenely counterproductive to him. Afterwards, he said, "How does this help black people move on, move forward, move up? How does this uplift the race?" And it's a fair question. So I guess my question is, is there a moment in your classes when you engage this question on a more or less conscious, obvious level?

**CRYSTAL:** It comes up in my class in *The White Boy Shuffle* when they realize what the *mass suicide* movement is about. [laughter] It was all fun and games until Scoby dies. It's like, "Wait a minute—what happened to the fun stuff?"

And I ask my class, "What is he saying with this?" Because they are so used to that uplift. At the end they were thinking that Beatty was going to have this program, it was going to be subversive, and we're going to take over. . . .

**MARK:** And they don't know anything about Jim Jones.

**ALEX:** Or David Koresh, for that matter.

**CRYSTAL:** So I ask them, "What do *you* think What is he doing with that?" That's a challenge for them. When they get to the end of the book they're like, "What's the point?" And I answer, "Well, don't you think it's significant that in the midst of all these people writing haiku and killing themselves that *Gunnar* is alive at the end of the book?" And I think that reading rationalizes why he's still there—he's got a little girl, and he's married to Yoshiko, and they're taking correspondence courses and living in a hotel. It's interesting because I don't think he says, "I have the answer," which I think is significant in and of itself. In fact, it's at the *rally* where he gives his "what are you willing to die for" speech, and that really critiques that notion that we need this big all-encompassing Answer.

**ALEX:** And a Leader.

**CRYSTAL:** And a Leader—a leader to tell us where to go. One of the things that I found interesting about Beatty's book is the fact that he articulates what the problem is for contemporary black people. It's not—and this goes back to your notion, Bert, about the part of Trey Ellis's essay where he cites Robert Townsend on racism. Beatty seems to be saying, I think, that the big thing for the contemporary black generation is not the same thing that it was for the Civil Rights Movement generation. Because we are supposedly reaping all of the benefits of integration. So for the most part—although it does still happen—we're not being lynched on a regular basis. We can go to the schools for the most part. We can get an education. We can *read*. These are things we should have realized, celebrated. But Beatty says, even though we can do these things, there is still something radically wrong, and we can't use those techniques from the Civil Rights Movement to address those things. He doesn't tell you what kind of tools you *can* use, but I think that's really significant.

**MARK:** And I think he actually gets closer to that with *Tuff*, as a response to what kind of leadership do you grow to deal with those very specific kind of concerns. Unfortunately, I don't think *Tuff* gets as much coverage as *White Boy Shuffle* gets.

**BERT:** Well, but in both books the protagonists are baldly political figures who are dealing with this question of black politics in very distinct ways.

**CRYSTAL:** I think when you ask the question, "What does this do? How can we get a political discourse out of it?" that's a very significant statement to make even as we keep having, you know, Tavis Smiley keeps having forums on Black America and having people come together. And that's really fine and great, but we need to think about it in a different way.

**ALL:** Mmm-hmm. Yes.

**ALEX:** And there's not really, in the general populous, or in the media, there's not really this willingness to think about it in that way. We had a good discussion of *White Boy Shuffle*. I came in and started playing devil's advocate, and I said, reading the end of the book, does this mean that it all doesn't matter? That we should all just go ahead and kill ourselves? That capitalism will stay forever? And racism? The students favored the more positive way of reading the ending as you did—and one thing they seem to be saying is that politics had to happen

at a local level, specific to a particular event, if you will, as opposed to trying to find a global way of dealing with every problem that faces not only black people in the United States but black people around the globe.

**MARK:** Which is what *Tuff* does, right? It makes it very localized.

**BERT:** Now, Alex, you mentioned that your students liked your post-soul course. My students certainly like mine. And I believe it's for some of the reasons that we've talked about, you know, this sense of them having some authority over the material and not feeling as if they're being led. The thing is, when I last taught my black vernacular course, there were some uncomfortable white students in there. In part they were uncomfortable because the black students' mastery of that material was . . . well, was just that: masterful—there was just no way the white kids could compete. Now, they could see this black vernacular, because I used examples they could sign onto. But they didn't grow up in a black church. They didn't hang out in the school yard playing the dozens. They just didn't do that. What I'm heading toward is the idea of a kind of productive discomfort that white students not only sometimes feel, but sometimes *need* to feel in our classes. And I'm wondering whether this post-soul course, where students have felt so happy and so comfortable—is it a *problem* that they feel so good about these classes?

[long pause.]

**CRYSTAL:** I'll go out on a limb here and say I don't think it's a problem because I think the courses do two things: it gives them [whites] this feel-good sense that "I know this, and I can talk about this." And this goes back to your question about where to put the theory in the course. It also validates that knowledge as being critical and valuable. They're struggling with Derrida over here, but this is just as important as Derrida. It's not less than Derrida. It not only gives them a facility of using all of this black popular culture they have in the back of their heads and wondering, when am I going to use this knowledge? But it also creates space where that knowledge becomes critical and functional in a way that they don't get in their other classes. I think that, for white students, it allows them to see that everything that's critical and theoretical doesn't come from the French. I think that's important in the overall picture when you talk about African American literature in general and the courses that we teach—the validity that this is something that not just black students should know, it's something that white students should know also if they're interested in having this become a comprehensive, intellectual experience. So that discomfort, I think, is a good thing. I've had students come out of my course saying, "I haven't gotten this anywhere else; I feel cheated."

**MARK:** I've had white students tell me that. "How come no one has mentioned, whatever, to me before?" I think that for a lot of white graduate students who take Af-Am courses, there is this sense, particularly if they're coming from certain theoretical environments, that they believe they can beat African American vernacular culture or popular culture over the head with theory. That ultimately, actual knowledge of African American culture doesn't matter if you're armed with theory. And I think courses that take black cultures and the vernacular seriously are the kinds of courses that put white students off guard because then they realize, "Okay, I actually have to know what *Good Times* is, right?" [laughter] There's a historical narrative that has to go with the theory.

**CRYSTAL:** And they're very resistant to that. In my class they were like, "We don't understand these references." So I said, "I can tell you where to look. I'm not going to do it for you." This is the same thing you would tell any student, in any graduate course; you need to know that—

**MARK:** —the theory doesn't work if you don't know the text. That's what it comes down to.

**CRYSTAL:** Exactly. But they did not want to do it. How can you not want to watch a couple of episodes of *Good Times*?

**EVIE:** As research goes, that's pretty good.

**CRYSTAL:** But they really did not want to do that kind of work. In part, because they didn't think it was valuable in the way that if somebody told them to go, you know, read [Michel Foucault's] *The History of Sexuality*, they'd be all over that in a minute.

**BERT:** You know what's interesting, a text that actually hasn't come up yet, but perhaps should, is Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks*. That brother's constantly, consciously playing with cultural knowledge that you may or may not have—he'll say some stuff and it will be the point of the strip itself, and then he'll move on. He won't explain what it means; he won't tell you. And then he'll make fun of you in the last frame for not knowing!

**MARK:** I guess I'm elitist on some things, because sometimes I hear people respond that *The Boondocks* is not funny, and I'm like, That's because you didn't get it.

**ALL:** Yeah. That's right.

**MARK:** That's why it's not funny—you didn't get it. . . .

**CRYSTAL:** The one that I have on my door is when Huey is playing with Jasmine and she wants to play *Gone with the Wind*. I found it appropriate when I was teaching at O[hio] U[niversity]. So not only do you have to understand *Gone with the Wind*, you have to understand the black reaction to *Gone with the Wind*. There is a whole series of strips where Jasmine is like, "Who is Richard Roundtree? Who is Angela Davis?"

**BERT:** And that's where the fourth frame ends. That's where the strip ends. With the question.

**CRYSTAL:** And I have graduate students who ask, "Who is Angela Davis?"

**MARK:** That's . . . you wonder . . . this is totally off. Watching episodes of *The Sopranos* at four o'clock in the morning one night. There is a fight in the yard. A black guy stands up and goes, "I'm going to call the police." Eventually, he gets beat down when one of Tony's guys picks up a pipe and as he's about to hit him up 'side the head, he goes, "Who the fuck are you—Ralph Bunche?" [laughter] I'm like, Who would be watching this episode and would know? You know, you're talking about a real finite group of people that gets that joke. And, you know, McGruder does that kind of stuff all the time.

**BERT:** He's made a career out of it.

**MARK:** I mean, Chappelle, the Chappelle thing is really fascinating because he's working on a water cooler level. Right? When you consider the way "I'm Rick James, bitch" circulated, he's working on that kind of level, which is why he's on. That's what sustained. Yet, there's this deeper thing that he's able to put out there that folks who are talking about him at the water cooler are oblivious to. I think the best post-soul stuff does that. . . . incredible multiple levels that you have to work through.

**ALEX:** And to go back to your original question, I think that the comfort level, at least in my class, I think [teaching the Post-Soul Aesthetic] worked really well

because it opened up both sides of the students to be able to talk about these things. I wasn't surprised, but there were certain moments that made me think, okay, 10 years ago this conversation probably wouldn't have happened in a class, people able to disagree with each other and go back and forth on these different things. I think the ideal classroom scenario would be that you have a combination of the comfort and the discomfort. The discomfort—that's our job, right?

**MARK:** In terms of the whites, the discomfort is so politically important because we [faculty of color] . . . and our students of color are always placed in positions where we are at a disadvantage, you know, as knowledge is accepted. I mean, talk to any African American or black graduate student about that first theory course and it's like "Who . . . ?" And you can't say that, right?—you can't raise your hand and go, "Who's?" You just can't do that. So, to put white students in the kind of position that says, "Here's a whole other body of knowledge that other folks have a comfort with that you don't." One of the things I've tried to do with varying degrees of success, is to take [Greg] Tate at his word [in his essay "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke"].<sup>8</sup> When Tate talks about this idea of a popular post-structuralism, well, let's do that, right? Let's *do* post-structuralist theory in vernacular language. And it's like, folks said, "What the fuck is this?" Well, yeah, that's what you're supposed to say, because that's what I said when I read Derrida! That's what I said when I read Foucault. Right? If we're going to be serious about this theory thing. . . . In the grand plan, it's like, theory's dead—oh yeah, because now there are people of color and women who are doing theory that are putting you at a disadvantage. So, yeah, we've got to kill it now.

[laughter]

**ALEX:** It's not as if theoretical language weren't a vernacular in and of itself. I mean, I teach intro to theory classes, and I teach a lot of things that are generally not considered theory. Like Du Bois. Like Audre Lorde. In relation to a Derrida and a Foucault, and the students always think that they have immediate access to that in a way that they don't to other things. I have to do a lot of work to say that these are different kinds of vernaculars and that it takes different kinds of reading skills to read them as complex, conceptual ideas.

**ALL:** Yes. Mmm-hmm.

**BERT:** Let's return to the names for this era. Mark, I didn't want to get sidetracked earlier into a kind of theoretical post-soul debate. But the idea of linking the post-soul to generations is one that's interesting. The way that I envision the post-soul aesthetic, it's an umbrella term that speaks to the "break" that we all see [glancing at Evie]—or, well, most of us see. . . .

[laughing]

**EVIE:** The "shift"—

**BERT:** There you go—the "shift." And in much the same way that Postmodernism is going to be this lasting formulation in play for years to come, I see something similar in the post-civil rights movement era. I called it the post-soul aesthetic, but I wish that there was some umbrella term that somebody like you, Mark, would be comfortable using even as you have a specific sense of what *post-soul* means, and a specific sense of what *post-black* means, and a specific sense of what *NewBlack* means. If there was an umbrella term that spoke to the idea that all of these things were in play in this post-civil rights movement era, I think we'd all be able to exist underneath that umbrella. You know what I mean?

**EVIE:** And why does “Post-Civil Rights Era” not do it?

**MARK:** It doesn’t speak to the radicalness of the “breaks.”

**BERT:** And it also speaks specifically to a political movement that was the signal for the break. It might very well have been the cause of the break, but it’s not what those artists who are in play after the break are specifically responding to.

**EVIE:** What about “Integration Era”? I mean, that’s what it is.

**MARK:** What does Winston Napier say? “Post-Rage”?

**EVIE:** *Post-Rage*? [laughing] I’m not ready to get rid of rage.

[laughter]

**BERT:** I’m not ready to get rid of *black*. I had a hard time with “post-black.”

[laughter]

**EVIE:** Someone needs to say to me, “post-whiteness.” Can we get rid of something that I *don’t* like? And I’m not trying to say I’m all about the essential blackness. That’s not what I am. I’m ragingly against that. But. . .

**MARK:** You mention that, Bert, but you know this is the same conversation that folks around Afro-Futurism are having. I talked to this guy yesterday about [the documentary film] *Afro-Punk*. And all these folks who are in *Afro-Punk* are thinking about this same thing. So you’re really talking about how do you encompass not just what we are thinking about, about post-soul, but a whole range of folks?

**BERT:** Yes. Yes. Which is why there are so many names. And we haven’t even scratched the surface of the number of names that there are out there to try and signify this break.

**EVIE:** So . . . there’s “Postmodern blackness” that’s out there, which speaks to the fragmentation that you’re just citing.

**BERT:** Sure.

**MARK:** Which is such a, for some of the old school African Americanists, they *hate* that term, because for them it just signals stuff that has nothing to do with the race works that Black Studies is supposed to do.

**BERT:** Yeah. Of course, those are the same people who have a huge problem with the *idea* of a “break,” let alone exploring it and naming it. . .

[laughter]

**ALEX:** Isn’t it just the nature of the fragmentation of the times that we can’t really agree on the terms. I don’t even know if I want a term—

**EVIE:** Yes. Right.

**ALEX:** In the classroom we ended up using three or four different terms, and talking about them constantly, and re-evaluating them. This sense of an umbrella term . . . it just won’t work.

**MARK:** That’s how my grad students were, you know? They kept wanting me to give them a hands-on definition of what this stuff is, and I said, “Really, the purpose of a grad class is actually for y’all just to spin out, right? And work through these issues in ways that impact your work.” This is not about coming up with a definition that you can use and feel comfortable with.

**BERT:** Of course not. These artists are against definition, *per se*. But the lack of *some* sort of umbrella term also makes it difficult to talk to each other with any degree of coherence about these issues because we all have different definitions for what anything means. So, first we have to figure out a kind of landscape: “Okay, well, what I mean when I say this is this, and what you mean is that, and *then* we can try and talk to each other as scholars.” And it seems to me, in fact we’re going to be able to study this, this “post-break” era [laughing], then we’re going to need to talk to each other in ways that enable the study of these post-civil rights movement texts. Now, in some ways what we’ve been doing here is an example of how that can work. I had to consciously *not* engage that whole idea of when I say this I mean this and when I say that I mean that, because if I had we would indeed have gotten way off-base. Know what I mean? I wish we had the space to have a certain set of terms, even if, especially if, those terms—in exactly the way that we use them—are terms that speak to the complexity and the lack of being able to nail down with any degree of specificity what these terms mean. A term like “anti-essentialist,” I guess. Which itself means non-closed. Not locked down. Do you know what I mean? It’s hard to play with, but at least everybody knows what it means and you can talk about that thing in a way that makes some sort of sense. That, to me, is why an umbrella term like “post-soul” would be to our advantage. I’m about, Let’s get some terms that we can talk about.

**MARK:** So we can have the conversation.

**ALEX:** Well, with this issue coming out, you know, in *African American Review*, it’s going to solidify “post-soul aesthetic” for a whole lot of people who aren’t necessarily thinking about it. This is going to have the weight of authority and it’s partly going to be on you, as the guest editor. Whatever frame you set up in the intro is going to circulate in a certain way, so you may have a chance to make your wish come true. [laughter] But it might also open up new dialogues. Right? That’s the thing about terms, they constantly change.

**EVIE:** People will argue with *you* about what the terms mean.

[laughing]

**BERT:** But that presupposes that I would actually be locked down on “post-soul” as a term to the exclusion of any others. I really haven’t decided yet, but it’s entirely possible that if somebody writes an essay where they use New Black Aesthetic, I’m not going to be on their back about changing it. . . . At this point, I feel like, you want to use that, use that, just make sure you define that so everybody understands what it is you’re talking about. Because if in fact that does hold some sort of currency as a term, if people use it, it’ll become a term of record and people will use it, even if it’s grudgingly, the same way they use the Harlem Renaissance—even if they put that little sneering “so-called” in front of it. . . . [laughter] Because we all still know what “Harlem Renaissance” means!

**ALEX:** Kinda, sorta.

**BERT:** Fight about when the years are [in terms of the Harlem Renaissance]. Fight about who should be in and who should be out. But the sense of the terrain on which the battles are fought? Everybody knows what that is.

**ALEX:** But I think that all of us came up with quasi-similar texts. Right? And we somehow do have a fairly similar idea of what this post-soul, post-black, Afro-Futurist is. Everything has its own inflection. It shows that there is a collective project perhaps.



## Notes

1. For conventions of the post-soul aesthetic, see Ashe; George; and Neal, *Soul Babies*; for “post-black” see Golden; for “NewBlack” see Neal, “The Birth of NewBlackness” (122).
2. See Shockley.
3. A *Callaloo* call-for-papers describes Afro-Futurism as “an emergent literary and cultural aesthetic that combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy and magic realism with non-Occidental cosmologies in order to critique not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color, but also to revise, interrogate, and re-examine the historical events of the past. Examples of seminal Afro-Futuristic works include the novels of Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler; the vibrant, frenetic canvases of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the provocative photography of Renée Cox; as well as the extraterrestrial mythos of Parliament-Funkadelic and Sun Ra, and the recombinant sonic texts of Paul D. Miller/DJ Spooky” (932). For more information, see the Afro-Futurism website at <http://www.afrofuturism.net>.
4. Before arriving at Duke, Neal taught at State University of New York at Albany and, briefly, at the University of Texas at Austin.
5. Shockley currently teaches at Rutgers University.
6. See Ashe, pages 611-16, for a discussion of blaxploration.
7. In the passage in question, Senna writes: “Besides my mother’s folk and country-western, the last group I had really loved on my own was Earth, Wind, and Fire. I was glad I had befriended Nicholas over the summer. I repeated some of the groups he had played for me: ‘J. Geils Band. Kim Carnes. Hall and Oates. You know. Rock’ ” (221).
8. See Tate.

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