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Corina Anghel Crisu

"Speak Up, Ike, an 'Spress Yo'se'f" Sentimental Romance Revisited in Ntozake Shange's *Betsey Brown*

Corina Anghel Crisu is Lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Bucharest, Roumania. E-mail: corina.crisu@btinternet.com

Mottos:

> Our humanity has been so little explored and so little made available to us through art that sometimes we doubt it ourselves and live one-dimensional lives because that's all we imagine can be possible. Literature, if it does nothing else, should stimulate one's imaginary to know that there is more—maybe not more 'out there,' but more inside of us that we can use for our own survival (Shange, in Lester 1990, 730).

> The Bildungsroman may be particularly attractive for women writers not only because of its focus on becoming, on individuality as malleable rather than fixed, but also because its conventions foreground the dialectical interactions of the individual and society in a manner also characterizing much feminist theory about the interplay of personal experience and socio-cultural formations (Boesenberg 1999, 6).

I. A Feminist Leitmotif: "Coming of Age"

In many contemporary African American women's works, the pattern of the nuclear family is destroyed. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are suggestive examples of dissipated family lives, torn by racial and social conflicts. Swimming against this narrative stream, Shange creates in *Betsey Brown* a text radiating from the notion of the unified family. As the above epigraph reveals, the writer's intention is to make us aware of the need to explore in depth the positive aspects of humanity—family being one of them.

Women's self-assertion is crucial in Shange's work that shapes racial protest though reconstructions of main itineraries of black female identity in connection with the private and public sphere. Her intense preoccupation with woman-centered issues relates gender to new perspectives on race and class, by means of "tools that are available to [her] as a feminist reconstructing history" (Shange, in Lester 1990, 727). In a black female tradition embroidered with silence, Shange insists on the piercing need of women's spiritual development and on their ability to produce radical change in the literary discourse. Importantly, the power of naming functions as a leitmotif in her life and work. Born Paulette Williams, she adopts a Zulu name: Ntozake ("she who comes with her own things") and Shange ("she who walks like a lion"). Her interest in subtle onomastic connotations is also reflected in her choice of titles for her works of fiction, all of them bearing significant names: *Sassafrass: A Novella* (1976), *Melissa & Smith* (1978), *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (1983), *Betsey Brown* (1985), and *Liliane* (1994).

In an interview with Neal Lester, Shange expresses her wish to write something that fills a gap, something that she dearly wanted to read as a child *coming of age* in a segregated America. Just like Morrison and Walker, Shange's creative impulse springs from her desire to write what she

would have liked to read:

> I'd like to be part of a collection of books by women that someone might give a female child. It simply didn't exist when I was a child; the books weren't there and that's what I meant. I'm lucky that Alice Childress still writes; June Jordan still writes; Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Kitty Tsui... The mere presence of these women in print has to be of moral assistance to young women (1990, 721).

If we correlate Shange's point with African American women's literature written in the last two centuries, we notice that examples of female rites of passage are not few and can be easily found in works by Harriet Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and many others. However, Shange draws attention to the necessity of creating an anthology specially designed to focus on young women's development, with a view on actual problems.

Shange's *Betsey Brown* represents a fine example of a book intended to provide young women with moral assistance, being centered on a female child growing up in a nation marked by racial progress. The book offers an insight into the life a middle class African American family whose inner peace is disturbed by the "changing values in the black community and the effects of legislated integration" (Blain, Grundy, and Clements 1990, 970). It is 1957, the year of school integration, when black children have to "take up for the whole damn race," and "to do battle with the white man" (Shange 1985, 135).

Yoking the aesthetic and the political views, Shange's novel remarkably parallels the personal story of Betsey's attaining self-confidence with the social achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. In the black community of St. Louis, Betsey's private drama becomes emblematic: at age thirteen, her life weaves together the bright threads of an incipient romance with the darker ones of racism and prejudice. In a distinctive female genealogy, the writer places Betsey's story next to that of her mother and grandmother, thus making us conscious that "black women's relation to history is first of all a relationship to mother and grandmother" (Willis 1987, 5). In a house in which three generations of women dovetail with each other, men's stories are not forgotten, the father playing the multiple roles of a positive parental figure, a dedicated social activist, and a doctor for his community.

It is the aim of this article to demonstrate that Shange's *Betsey Brown* can be read in an intertextual dialogue with two basic texts of the black female tradition: Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929).[1] Like her precursors, Shange uses the specific tropes of the black female sentimental romance, such as the insistence on the domestic setting and the heroic quest for racial freedom. Moreover, Shange's claim that she writes "feminist, not feminine" literature lies at the core of her transformative power that reconfigures the genre of sentimental romance (Shange, in Lester 1990, 727).

In order to offer a general framework, the next section offers an analysis of the context of women's sentimental fiction. It is followed by two parts that develop the specific tropes of the black female sentimental romance—the insistence on the domestic setting and the heroic quest for racial freedom—in relation with *Betsey Brown*. In a comparative reading with Harper's and Fauset's novels, the paper further highlights how Shange subverts women's stereotypical representations, creating a polytropic character whose coming of age in a moment of crisis initiates a flight from conventions.

The last section discusses how Shange reconsiders the passing-for-white plot, another common element with Harper's and Fauset's works. If in *Iola Leroy* and *Plum Bun*, the passing-for-white plot is dominant, in *Betsey Brown*, it becomes a subplot unveiled through the elders' memory. Importantly, all three novelists suggest that race is not simply determined by biological factors, but mostly by cultural and social conditions. Even if the act of passing might bring privileges, it implies discarding a valuable racial inheritance and a strong communal belonging.

II. Sentimental Romance: "Consummated Rights of Families"

Centered on the cliché of the woman-as-the-pillar-of-the-house, sentimental romance was a

fashionable genre proliferated by nineteenth century white texts, to be also adopted by African American authors. Examples of black women's sentimental fiction are Amelia Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne* (1890), Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* (1891), Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* (1900), and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929).[2] By adopting the white literary model, these black female writers also adapted the white standard of womanhood, striving to create virtuous self-projections, chaste apparitions forged out of Christian norms.

Significantly, sentimental romance has gravitated to the most dangerous word in the African American past—*love*—whose emotional force had always triggered the mechanisms of conflict on the racial battlefield. Love among slaves simply meant rebellion, going against a repressive system that took the child away from the mother, the husband from the wife. "Thick" love, as Morrison reminds us, was risky (1997, 45). Under the control of white masters, the body of the black woman was not a site of love, but one of procreation, being part of the economic production of increasing the slave population.[3]

For African American women permanently exposed to physical abuse, fiction shaped an unattainable dream of social happiness—almost impossible to reach while in bondage. Working within the limited discourse of white sentimental romance, black women were also "preoccupied with middle-class propriety, civility, domesticity, and commodity consumption" (Tate 1991, 106). The high value laid on marriage represented a mark of both gender and racial liberation, so that these sentimental narratives illustrated "the inalienable rights of black people as the consummated rights of families" (Tate 1991, 126).

Moreover, in their permanent struggle to overcome the conditions of the degrading racial system, black women have undermined the patriarchal assumption about the relationship between women's so-called *weak sex* and their circumscribed domestic roles.[4] Their inferior status both as blacks and women has contributed to the creation of a social context for them totally different from that for white women. African American women's romance has incorporated accordingly the elaborate meanders of the black female existential journey. Their exemplary stories are haunted by forced separations between relatives and by lifelong searches culminating in *deus ex machina* encounters. Projected upon this harsh reality, black women's drama is transfigured into heroic modes of action contributing to racial progress. The darker the background, the brighter the traits of the heroine. Since "black characters extricate themselves from incredible situations, perform incredible deeds, triumph over corrupt forces," romance serves "as the predominant literary mode for transforming black history into mythic fiction" (Campbell 1986, xi).[5]

In this way, African American women have appropriated the white sentimental genre by transforming the static feminine image into a mobile character whose physical and mental movement defies the normative patriarchal and racist system. The female character's audacious trajectory thus reaches its climax in an idealized domestic setting, so that heroism culminates in marriage. As Tate cogently notes, black women's sentimental romance combines "the discourses of matrimony and liberation" (1991, 100).

III. "Happily Ever After:" Domestic Settings

The multiple modulations of black sentimental romance reemerge in Shange's *Betsey Brown*, whose textual motifs rework the ideal atmosphere of the domestic setting and the heroic quest for racial liberation.[6] Numerous intertextual parallels can be traced between Shange's late twentieth century text, Harper's late nineteenth century *Iola Leroy*, and Fauset's Harlem Renaissance novel *Plum Bun*. In spite of the temporal span between their works, all three authors skillfully focus on subverting fixed feminine roles. All of them present key moments in women's existence, drawing on the black character's social and spiritual achievement, either as an activist (Harper), or as an artist (Fauset), or as both (Shange).

Shange, Harper, and Fauset start by adopting a fairy tale scenario, which they later subvert in order to concentrate on the heroine's quest. Thus, the image of the happy-family-blessed-with-children is the background of Harper's and Fauset's story. Both novels present the difference between parents in terms of racial status and skin color: white husband/mulatto wife in Harper's text, and dark-skinned husband/light-skinned wife in Fauset's text. In both novels, the love affair

is shadowed by social compromises.

In *Iola Leroy*, Harper tells us that, twenty years before the Civil War, Eugene Leroy decided to get married to a former slave, Marie, whom he manumits and educates. Even if Marie has a fair complexion and can easily pass for white, her marriage to a white man is seen as an offense against the social customs of the South. Her education allows her to voice her frustrations: "I think one of the great mistakes of our civilization is that which makes color, and not character, a social test" (1893, 84). This is one of the reasons why they do not tell their children about their racially mixed blood, and educate them as white people. This fragile nest so affectionately built by the Leroys is suddenly shattered by the death of Eugene, a fact that reduces Marie to her former slave status. Brutally awakened from her dreams of familial happiness, their daughter Iola is turned into a tragic mulatta, harassed by her white master.

The same fairy-tale pattern is subverted in Fauset's *Plum Bun*, which begins with the common trope of a happy family consisting of parents and two girls living in Philadelphia in the 1920s. The fairy-tale background is also stressed by the stories the mother reads to the two sisters, which always end with "and they lived happily ever after, just like your father and me." At a time when racial conflict manifested violently through lynchings and urban riots, the color line leads to a division in the Murray family: father and Virginia who are dark-skinned are set in contrast with mother and Angela who are light-skinned. While the couple father-Virginia remains caught inside the borders of the black community, the other couple, mother-Angela, can pass for white and freely elude racial limits. Again, like in *Iola Leroy*, the family's equilibrium is unbalanced by the death of the father (shortly followed by mother's death).

In a similar way to her precursors' texts, Shange's novel centers on the main subject matter of the nuclear family. At the end of the 1950s, the writer crayons the daily lifestyle of a black family composed of grandmother, mother (Jane) and father (Greer), three sisters (Betsey, Margot, and Sharon), a brother (Allard), and a cousin (Charley). Their prosperous middle class status is mostly owed to Greer's position as a doctor in a segregated hospital. While Jane has feminist ideas about women's profession (this is why she keeps her job as a social worker), Greer has reformative ideas about racial progress, insisting on the importance of social protests. His standpoint on African-ness is reinforced each morning in a ritual of singing and dancing designed for the whole family in the rhythm of the conga drum.

Through grandmother's perspective, the young couple's progressive attitude is contrasted with an old-fashioned mentality, laying stress on skin color and appearance:

> Jane was lucky, Grandma thought. None of the chirren looked like him, all dark and kinky-headed. Not it was true that Betsey had a full mouth. Margot was chocolate brown. Sharon had a head full of nappy hair. Allard was on the flat-nose side. But in Grandma's mind Jane had been blessed, cause each of the chirren was sprightly and handsome on a Geechee scale, not them island one but the Charlestonians who'd been light or white since slavery. But Grandma didn't like to think about slavery. She was most white. Slaves and alla that had nothing to do with her family, until Jane insisted on bringing this Greer into the family and he kept making family (19).

Beyond the comic undertones in grandmother's monologue, racist ideas emerge subsuming (lack of) color to a physical scale of value—which has nothing to do with mental skills or moral merits. By highlighting how the nineteenth century genteel mentality has survived till the present time, Shange makes us aware that opposite views can coexist in the same family: *old habits of mind die hard*.

As *Betsey Brown's* narrative thread unfolds, like in Harper's and Fauset's novels, the peaceful existence of a black family is troubled. However, unlike in Harper's and Fauset's texts (where the idyllic parental liaison is broken by death) in Shage's novel the harmonious family unit is never broken, even if it is shaken twice: from the inside, by the elder daughter's running away from home; from the outside, by the Black Power Movement and the cultural upheaval of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In this direction, the next section discusses Betsey's private drama, with a view on the social and moral changes of her time. In spite of these psychological and racial earthquakes, the family continues to exist as a whole—to live "happily ever after."

IV. The Female Quest: "Paving the Way"

If novels can heal past wounds, then *Betsey Brown*'s fresh, optimistic tone redeems the black female image by placing her in a familial context imbued with love. Moreover, one of the strongest points of Shange's writing is her ability to redefine black existence, by making us aware of the dangers of a conventional life. Presenting her protagonist's quest, the writer does not shatter this familial happiness (as in the case of Harper and Fauset), but remodels it through crucial interactions between the private and the public spheres.[7]

By analyzing Betsey's image in connection with Harper's and Fauset's protagonists, it can be noticed that Iola and Angela initially feel no need to move away from their family's influence, and it is the tragic death of parental figures that marks the beginning of an existential crisis. In comparison, Betsey's inner struggle is present from the beginning in her escapist thoughts, in her desire to fly away from her family's smug cocoon—this ambivalent receptacle—that both chokes and protects her. To quote Michael Cooke, Betsey's passage is one from "self-veiling" ("an assertive, undemanding adaptation to the environment") to "intimacy" ("freedom from compulsion and a lucid, prompt communication with [the] spirit and world" (1984, 8)).

From the first paragraphs in the novel, the schematic blissfulness of the Jane-and-Greer family is both highlighted and questioned. Betsey's desire to break free from her family's encircling mentality is set in contrast with her siblings' settled life. While the house is asleep, Betsey's awakening at dawn is not simply a physical act, but mostly a mental ritual of watching the horizon that offers her an insight into her own existence through "innumerable perspectives of the sun" (13).

The setting marked by symbols of ascension—the terrace, the porch, the stairs, and the tree—suggestively places Betsey's inner growth in isolation from the others. The young girl's Thoreauvian ideal of self-reliance appears in antithesis with the "lives of quiet desperation"[8] experienced by the black inhabitants of St. Louis: "There was a preciousness to St. Louis at dawn or dusk that was settling to the child in the midst of a city that rankled with poverty, meanness, and shootings Betsey was only vaguely aware of" (14). Ironically, the above lines will be further subverted, since Betsey will later leave her ivory tower and discover on her own the social and racial degradation. By running away from home, she will have access to other social strata, much different from her parents' middle-class way of life.

Placed in contrast with the daily fracas of her big family routine, Betsey's solitude as a watcher-of-the-horizon allows her to deliberately create a private, imaginative sphere by "taking in the world all on her own" (16). "The littlest porch on the third floor" becomes a liberating *topos*, similar to the garret described by Harriet Jacobs in her nineteenth century autobiographical narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. If for Jacobs physical freedom was at stake, for Betsey spiritual development is essential, as disclosed by her rhetorical question with strong moral implications: "How could she become a great anything with all this foolishness going on around her?" (17).

Betsey's question initiates a search for identity, pendulating from self-deception to self-knowledge in a decisive attempt to fulfill her potentiality. Seen through Gabriel Liiceanu's lens, Betsey strives to move way from "this terrible universe of things and beings-as-things," in order to remember the self "as a subject of one's liberty and existence" (1975, 165). And it is the oak tree as a secret place of meditation that allows the young girl to ponder both romantic and political ideas.[9]

The young girl's polytropic character and symbolical ascension is also suggested by her choice to recite Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, a crucial reminder of the importance of self-expression in black people's existence:

> Who dat knockin' at de do'?
> Why, Ike Johnson, yes, fu' sho!
> Come in, Ike. I's mighty glad
> You come down. I t'ought you's
> mad
> At me 'bout de othah night,
> An was stayin' 'way fu' spite.

> Say, now, was you mad fu' true
> W'en I kin' o' laughed at you?
> Speak up, Ike, an 'spress yo'se'f (22).

Selected by Betsey for the Elocution Contest, Dunbar's poem dramatizes the act of self-affirmation on a literary, racial, and morall level.

On the literary level, Betsey's choice of an African American poet inaugurates a change in the literary canon of her school formerly dominated by white authors such as Whittier, Dickinson, Robinson, and Kipling. Shange suggests that this redefinition of literary taste has occurred because students have started to understand literary and social matters differently. If in the past the chosen authors were Shakespeare and Byron, now "Dunbar, Hughes, and Fawcett were the champions of her new changes" (37).

On the racial level, the poem discloses the importance of liberating black identity, of reclaiming the possibility of open speech denied to black people by white ideology. In the poem, the interlocutor is eliciting a response from Ike/the Other, while striving to make him speak, and therefore break a historical silence. The recurrent question also draws attention to the African American's choked feelings of anger and frustration at the imprisoning racial system.

Furthermore, on the moral level, Betsey's reciting individualizes the poem by endowing it with an erotic message that playfully deconstructs the artificially puritan language of romance: "'Who dat knocking at de do'?' took on a more coquettish tease than Betsey'd ever revealed" (38). The message of the poem is thus related with Betsey's incipient romance, with her first thoughts of love knocking at the adolescence's door.

The author reconfigures here the conventional representation of the "good girl" by contrasting Betsey's image with both a debauched and a pure version of femininity: Betsey is neither a Jezebel nor a Madonna. Definitely, she does not subscribe to the modern, cosmeticized model of her age, exemplified by her two colleagues, Mavis and Liliana, whose luring sexuality exposed as a "sign of grown-up-ness" prevents them from studying (38). At the same time, Betsey's portrait differs from the nineteenth century, fair-skinned renderings of femininity—those characters whose virginal minds were never clouded by sexual impulses. In this way, Betsey moves away from stereotypical versions of femininity, inasmuch as she wants to be herself—to be an *Ikette* who *speaks up*.

Notably, the version of pure femininity in *Betsey Brown* intertextually sends us to Harper's Iola and Fauset's Angela—two classic examples of tragic mulattas who strive to keep their purity and remain "good girls," in spite of the unfriendly system that labels them as objects of desire. Both Iola and Angela have to beware white male characters whose courtship offers them either marital security or financial stability. While Iola totally rejects the possibility of passing for white, Angela is dramatically enticed by the advantages of racial transgression.

In Harper's fin de siècle blueprint, a "lady-like" mulatta who can easily pass for white has the option to betray her racial belonging in exchange of social prosperity. Twice Iola refuses Dr. Gresham's marriage proposal. Speaking about race as an "insurmountable barrier" between herself and her white suitor, Iola draws attention to the fact that she would never accept willingly to deny her African American inheritance: "I have too much self-respect to enter your home under a veil of concealment" (1893, 117). Harper takes pains in describing Iola as a heroic woman, "young in years, but old in sorrow" (1893, 59), as disclosed in Dr. Gresham's mixture of sentimental and scientific discourse:

> Yes; and that puzzles me. She is one of the most refined and lady-like women I ever saw. I hear she is a refugee, but she does not look like the other refugees who have come to our camp. Her accent is slightly Southern, but her manner is Northern. She is self-respecting without being supercilious; quiet, without being dull. Her voice is low and sweet, yet at times there are tones of such passionate tenderness in it that you would think some great sorrow has darkened and overshadowed her life. Without being the least gloomy, her face at times is pervaded by an air of inexpressible sadness. (1893, 57)

Harper reconsiders the boundaries of sentimental romance and disclaims a static role for her character.[10] Iola's refusal of conjugal safety in favor of her mother's race initiates what Heller

calls "a feminized quest toward a self-naming or self-mapping" (1990, 93). The slave narrative scenario focused on the search of the absent maternal figure is reenacted here in connection with an ideal of racial advancement. Finally, Iola's domestic bliss is strongly related to her self-fulfillment as a social activist who "casts [her] lot with the freed people as a helper, teacher, and friend" (1893, 114). As she gets married to a mulatto doctor and they go to live in the South, their marriage does not simply mark the beginning of a settled family life, but mostly of an existence dedicated to social activism, placed on the altar of racial uplift.

Forty years later, the avatars of the tragic mulatta reemerge in Fauset's *Plum Bun*. Moving away from the safe paternal home in a black district of Philadelphia, Angela starts her quest as an artist in New York. Unlike Iola, Angela denies her black belonging and changes her name from Murray to Mory to efface all signs of her former identity. She dearly craves for the privileges b(r)ought by marriage to a white man:[11]

> If she were to do this, do it suitably, then all the richness, all that fullness of life which she so ardently craved would be doubly hers... only it would be fun, great fun to capture power and protection in addition to the freedom and independence which she had so long coveted and which now lay in her hand (1990, 88).

Gabrielle Foreman points out that that there is a lot at stake in Fauset's novel so easily overlooked by critics. Thus, Fauset's aim is double, as she employs "the language of the sentimental romance to articulate a stunning invective against white male power" (1990, 651). While Fauset uses the conventional plot of the sentimental romance, her "discourse of love works to veil her exploration of how the dynamics of power hierarchies function. The plot is a skeleton which Fauset fleshes out through her exploration of hegemony" (Foreman 1990, 652). Race is no longer considered a biological factor, but a social construct, and, as Angela's inner monologue subtly discloses, the white skin color can function as an empowering shield: "She was happier; she was living on the crest of a wave of excitement and satisfaction which would never wane, never break, never be spent... She was young, she was intelligent, she was white" (1990, 87-88).

Fauset also makes us aware of women's oppression as an interracial problem at the interface of race, gender, and class. Indeed, Angela's passing for white does not suffice, and the possibility of marriage to the rich Roger Fielding is denied to her. Stealing inside another racial identity is not enough, and class becomes the main issue. At this stage, Angela's quest is a surrogate adventure, since she is caught in the very net she has tried to avoid by coveting freedom through male protection. This is the moment when she realizes that only by means of artistic expression she can transcend her objectified social status. Like Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Angela has a natural gift for painting that becomes her elevated refuge.[12] This creative impulse makes her free, able to move away from a prejudiced New York to a less prejudiced Paris, and pursue her artistic career. Finally, Angela's love affair with Anthony (a mulatto artist) can take place only after her self-empowerment as an artist, and even so their future marriage is uncertain and the novel remains open-ended.

Significantly, the main idea of female liberation can be intertextually traced in Shange's novel by drawing comparisons with Harper's and Fauset's texts. If Iola's quest culminates with her role as a social activist and if Angela finds self-fulfillment as an artist, in Shange's *Betsey Brown* the activist/artist images are conflated. Betsey wants to become a dancer, a singer, an artist, whose mission is to change the face of the world and destroy the white semiotics of power:

> She'd just wanted to see the world. Marry a Negro man of renown. Change the world. Use white folks' segregated restaurant tables to dance on, and tear down all the "Colored Only" and "Colored Not Allowed" signs. She wanted to be somebody. She wanted to be Miss Elizabeth Brown out in the world, not in a house full of children still learning their tables and long division (152).

Initiated by her morning ritual of ascension, Betsey's inner quest reaches its climax when she decides to run away from home, to escape from the conventional circle of her family, perceived as alienating: "I don't belong here," writes Betsey's note (143). Her crisis is generated by her difference from the others, (both from her family and from the white people). Her private language of freedom is set in tension with various dominant discourses. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese affirms, "since emancipation, black women have been torn between their independent relation to the dominant culture and their people's relation to it" (1990, 199). Fox-Genovese's remark suits Betsey's feeling of being caught between her own liberating thoughts and her

community inferior position in a town dominated by white hegemonic forces.[13]

In this light, Betsey's personal escape is deeply related to the racial uplift of the 1960s, the school integration programme initiated by the postwar Civil Rights Movement. Shange carefully chooses 1957—a significant temporal frame for her novel. It is the year when "black students, protected by federal troops, attempted to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas" (Horton and Horton 2001, 268). In 1955, Rosa Parks, a black seamstress, boarded a city bus and refused to offer her seat to a white male passenger, a daring act for which she was arrested. In 1954, in *Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka*, Supreme Court declared public school segregation unconstitutional, so that *separate* was considered "unequal." Mostly, five years before, in 1952, for the first time in seventy years, no lynching had been reported.

In Shange's novel, Betsey's role in the struggle for social rights designates her as one of those children who have to attend a white school, for "paving the way for those yet to come" (91). Supported by her father, against her mother's and grandmother's will, Betsey has "to learn the same things with white children" (92). Her traumatic experience is rendered in the language of loss and mourning, of absence and invisibility: "the new school… loomed like a granite tomb over her head;" "it was like [the white children] were all dead;" "maybe they couldn't see her;" "they chose not to, like the color of her skin was a blight" (98-99). Thrown into a social void, Betsey's estrangement from the others is mitigated only by Mrs. Leon, an unprejudiced teacher who is the first to address Betsey by her name.[14] During Mrs. Leon's lesson, Betsey reveals her knowledge of Africa—a thing that makes the other white pupils reconsider their own understanding of African Americans:

> It was luck or planning on Mrs. Leon's part, but the geography lesson had all to do with Africa. Greer had insisted that his children know every emerging African state's name and location, so Betsey was soaring with information. It turned out that the children didn't hate her actually, they just didn't know what to do with her. They'd never seen colored who didn't work for them or playing in some part of town nobody wanted to live in. But as the words Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Senegal rolled off Betsey's tongue, they sounded as romantic as France, Germany, Alsace-Lorraine, or Bulgaria (100).

Therefore, the young girl's running away from home has deep psychological and moral implications, being triggered by her desire to escape both her familial and social boundaries. Her quest gains momentum from her desire to attain a free, polytropic identity, to refashion herself into an Ikette, to have a room of her own, a name of her own, and a marital status of her own: "I'm Miss Cora Sue Betsey Anne Calhoun Brown, soon to be married to a Negro man of renown" (119). Freedom does not exclude marriage, in a literary frame where ideal domesticity coexists with heroic action for racial liberty. Through Betsey's struggle, Shange draws attention to women's possibility of fulfillment in both the private and public spheres. Women's "pursuit of more self-directed lives" does not exclude their interactions with the community (Boesenberg 1999, 7).

Betsey's story is not one of lost innocence, but one of innocence preserved. Her journey to the colored section of the town—as far away as possible from the white section—represents her first step toward the troubled world of adulthood. Mrs. Maureen, the black hairdresser, is for Betsey the epitome of freedom, in a place "where she could learn more bout satisfaction and earn a decent day's pay by sweeping all the cut hair up off the floor" (124). Ironically, the climax of Betsey's adventure proves to be an anti-climax and reality does not suit her dreams. She learns about class differences in Mrs. Maureen's salon, which is at night a place of gathering for prostitutes, a forbidden zone totally different from the safe haven of the Brown family.

Suggestively, Betsey encounters here Regina, one of the housekeepers who worked for her family in the past—now pregnant out of wedlock and hence reduced to an inferior status. It is Regina who understands Betsey's loneliness in the white school, and tells the young girl about her inner beauty as part of humanity: "There is no such thing as ordinary, Betsey. Nobody's ordinary. Each one of us is special and it's the coming together of alla that that makes the world so fine" (136). In a symbolic gesture of female solidarity, Regina wants to give Betsey' s name to her baby.

Shange's novel suggests the insurmountable class division between characters with different backgrounds. If Regina's love story ends tragically in lonely pregnancy, Betsey's romance is related with the rapture of a protected coming of age: "Regina held Betsey real close to her. "Betsey, your life isn't gonna be like mine. Don't you grow up too soon. Take your time. There's

something so special when you're really in love, let it come to you. Don't chase it" (139). In this way, Shange plays with the pattern of sentimental romance by weaving together several narrative plots. We witness not only the Browns' happy marriage and Betsey's incipient love, but also Regina's failed romance. Regina's free love is contrasted with grandmother's puritan precepts advocating no sexual relations out of wedlock. Juxtaposing these feminine perspectives, the writer connects old and new perceptions of romance and family—bridging the nineteenth and twentieth century mentalities.

V. The Passing-for-White Plot: "Talking Out the Sides of Her Mouth"

Reconsidering sentimental fiction, Shange's text plays with another convention: the-fin-de-siecle/beginning-of-the-twentieth-century obsession with passing, a scenario where the mulatto character is faced with the choice of adopting a *white-masked* identity and of denying his/her black belonging. Initiated by the nineteenth century realities, the passing-for-white plot kept reappearing until the first half of the twentieth century. It can be traced in Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1852), Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), and John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1959). If in the above works the passing-for-white is a powerful plot, after the 1960s—a time when the emergence of the Black Power Movement stressed the importance of blackness as a value *per se*—the plot of passing disappears or is turned into a subplot.

Representatively, in Harper's and Fauset's texts, sentimental romance is subsumed to the novel-of-passing: their main protagonists can be easily ascribed a white identity, having light complexions and refined manners. As shown above, both writers make use of the stereotypical image of the tragic mulatta, which they subvert in order to save their light-skinned characters from the trap of accepting the privileges of the white race and rejecting their darker half. "The best blood in my veins is African blood," declares Iola, "and I am not ashamed of it" (Harper 1893, 209). Even if Iola initially believes that she is white, and even if Angela is lured by the social empowerment of whiteness, both heroines learn to appreciate the value of their racial inheritance.

Shange's *Betsey Brown* reworks the passing-for-white plot in an indirect, covert way. The leitmotif of passing emerges via the older generation, woven by grandmother's memories of grandfather's light skin and ability to pass, to behave like a white man "even when he opened his mouth" (29):

> Fine diction, mighty fine articulation, Vida'd recall. His dark hair hangin like a drop of black honey cross his eye; that part as a Cherokee's aim. Yes, her Frank was a truly fine man. Not on the order of the modern men of color she'd come across in her daughter's life. No, there was a gentleness bout Frank that they'd lost (29).

Shange contrasts here grandmother's mentality with the younger generation's ideas represented by Jane, the light skinned daughter, who prefers to get married to a darker man, thus revealing an understanding of values that transgresses the predicaments of the color line.

In addition, the writer suggests that the passing-for-white plot can also emerge nowadays in a camouflaged way by adopting a white code of conduct. The Browns' middle-class condition is comparable with that of a white family in similar circumstances. Metaphorically, their lifestyle can *pass* for white. As Greer suggests, the feeling of belonging can be maintained only through racial awareness and social protest. Hence, his daily "Africanizing." Hence, his desire to publicly demonstrate together with his whole family against racism: "the time has come for us to do something about our second-class citizenship, and this separate but equal travesty we call our lives" (156).

Greer's enthusiasm is not shared by Jane who in her turn protests by moving away from home for a while. For her, family values must be placed above the racial ones: "My babies aren't cannon fodder" (159). As in her daughter's case, leaving home for Jane proves to be a necessary moment of redefinition.[15]

In the centrifugal forces of Shange's text, one of the most audible voices raised against the adoption of a white code of manners comes from the black mammy/housekeeper, Carrie. At a time of crisis when the mother figure is absent, Carrie's strong sense of values maintains the family's cohesion: "We gonna make this house be as grand as we want it to be" (169). She helps Betsey and the other children consolidate their feeling of belonging to the black community, so that they will not turn into "dicty niggers."[16]

A surrogate maternal figure, Carrie resembles Hetty Daniels, Angela's mammy in Fauset's *Plum Bun*: both Carrie and Hetty are symbolic barometers for the main protagonist's consciousness in time of inner crisis.[17] However, there is a major difference between the two characters. If Fauset's de-sexualized heroine suits the mammy stereotype, Shange rethinks the mammy stereotype and sexualizes her protagonist, who not only takes care of the household chores, but also likes "entertainin' gentlemen callers."

Most importantly, Carrie's guiding role assists Betsey in her most challenging self-assertion. It is Carrie—the black illiterate—who prompts Betsey to use the power of literacy in order to demonstrate the danger of adopting a white literary canon. In the same way in which Carrie physically fought another woman, so Betsey can mentally fight the white teacher who banished the blacks to *another country* and denied them national status, sustaining that "being colored meant you couldn't write poems or books or anything" (183). When Betsey's remarks—"nobody listens to me cause it's just another nigger talking out the sides of her mouth"—Carrie advises her to stand up for herself using the very word meant to diminish her (183). Carrie's advice circles back to Dunbar's poem, the emblematic refrain of the novel: "Speak up, Ike, an' 'spress yo'se'f."

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In conclusion, by relating her main protagonist's destiny with a number of prominent female figures, Shange's novel creates a polytropic character whose liberating adventure subverts the patriarchal and racist system. Like Harper and Fauset, Shange makes use of the specific tropes of black sentimental romance, whose pattern she revises in accordance with actual priorities. The author preserves accordingly the major concerns with domestic setting and heroic quest, and correlates them with contemporary social and feminist issues.

Drawing attention to identity as a literary construct to be disentangled from stereotypical representations, *Betsey Brown* is as a powerful example of authorial struggle to liberate the black self from racist ideology. Shange thus demonstrates that African American literature is shaped by a range of social contexts that determine the emergence or disappearance of narrative types. The African American character emblematically becomes part of a dynamic process that operates cultural revision and change.

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Notes

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[1] Another similarity between the three novels consists in their lack of critical attention. Thrown to the literary dustbin as "sentimental fiction," Harper and especially Fauset are frequently overlooked. It seems that their fate is shared by Shange's novel, a text about which very few academic papers have been written.

[2] In "Allegories of Black Female Desire," Claudia Tate makes the distinction between the black male and female sentimental texts. In the black male romance, the marriage plot has the role to support "the dominant racial discourse of protesting social injustice;" in black female romance, the marriage plot is central, as "these narratives not only culminate in marriage; they also idealize the formation of the family unit" (1991, 105-6).

[3] Even after the end of slavery, its long-lasting effects made men see black women as sexual objects or "mules of the world" good only for hard work (Hurston 1990, 14). In spite of this social drama, literature provided almost no plot about aggressed black women. In 1940, when Richard Wright wrote *Native Son*, the American scene was swept by hysteria over the vulnerable image of the white woman, whose body was thought to be a desirable target for black men. There was no fuss about molesting black women. Alarmed by

this literary absence, Wright's goal was to draw attention to the black female abused body, and he introduced in *Native Son* the subplot of Bessie's rape. From a new perspective, thirty years later, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gayl Jones explored the effects of physical and mental violence upon black women, especially rape and incest. Their fictional universe is haunted by poverty, violence, and loss, disclosing how the strongest social cell—the family—has been affected and could not normally function. The plot focused on the rape of a black female that was underdetermined in Wright's time is now overstressed. Unlike in slavery, when the violator was the white man, now the criminal becomes the black man. All these contemporary narratives rewrite again and again the ancient myth of Philomela described by Ovid as physically and mentally maimed. In some instances, Philomela speaks. This is the case of Walker's Celie or of Angelou's Maya, heroines whose existential growth can fathom the depth of her inner resources. In other instances, Philomela remains silent. This happens to Morrison's Pecola who ends up being caught in the symbolic cage of a racist mechanism that triggers her mental disease.

[4] Claudia Tate draws attention to the way in which African American women's sentimental narratives "construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct Victorian gender conventions in order to designate black female subjectivity as a most potent force in the advancement of the race." Tate reads black women's nineteenth century sentimental narratives as "feminized mediations of what is conventionally understood as male power," so that they can be seen as "discourses of liberation" (1991, 107).

[5] Jane Campbell shows that the romance represents "a mode that has qualities appropriate for depicting the black experience and for enhancing the mythmaking process" (1986, xi). She also stresses the fact that historical romance has been a predominantly male genre, since black women's existence was circumscribed to the homey, domestic sphere. Quoting Tate, Campbell points out that the existential movement of female characters is often restricted by family responsibilities so that they have to "conduct [their] quest within close boundaries, often within a room" (Tate 1983, 185, in Campbell 1986, xi).

[6] Richard Slotkin points to "the myth of regeneration through violence" and the myth of "the heroic quest" as essential components underlying American cultural mythology (1973, 5, 10).

[7] In this sense, the epigraph of the novel sets its tone, by juxtaposing affective and escapist images:"& this is for the man who chases butterflies/ & alcoholics in latin night club dreams/ & kisses me with zoom lenses on the beaches/ of the Hollywood Freeway/ all the hibiscus bloom as you devour iguanas/ & and this is for the men who loved me &/ the one I love/ & and the child who is a mirror" (Jessica Hagedorn, "Something about You").

[8] The novel echoes Thoreau's famous comment: "Men labor under a mistake... Talk of a divinity in man! Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to market by day or nigh; does any divinity stir within him?... The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (1992, 3-4).

[9] A striking comparison can be established between this episode and Sarah Orne Jewett's story, "The White Heron," as in both cases the huge, fabulous tree represents the *axis mundi*, the center from where the female protagonist can start her initiation. Jewett's Sylvia (aged nine) resembles Shange's Betsey (aged thirteen) not only because both girls are inexperienced characters young in years, but also because both manifest contemplative skills. In spite of the temporal and spatial differences, Sylvia's and Betsey's propensity to explore the world from above, choosing nature's peaceful shelter over the noisy, industrial American cityscape, initiates a significant quest. Again, for both heroines, the quest takes place on a vertical, not horizontal axis, the pine tree (for Sylvia) or the oak tree (for Betsey) giving them access to the spiritual.

[10] Pondering this "halo of romance," Michele Birnbaum observes that "Harper's novel, until most recently, has been neglected in part because her characters seemed too brilliantly lit, too idealized in the name of racial service (1999, 14).

[11] The rime representing the epigraph of the novel is significant in this sense: "To market, to Market/ To buy a Plum Bun;/ Home again, Home again,/ Market is done." As McDowell notices, the motto suggests that "the unfulfilled expectations of the speaker in the nursery rhyme stands in ironic contrast to the foiled expectations of Angela Murray" (1990, xvi).

[12] Like Just as Mr. Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Roger offers Angela material comfort, but no real understanding. Even if Angela gives in to Roger, "something quite outside herself, something watchful, proud, remote from the passion and rapture which flamed within her, kept her free and independent. She would not accept money. She would not move to the apartment on Seventy-Seven Street; she still refused gifts so ornate that they were practically bribes" (1990, 204).

[13] Hence, the tension between what Victor Turner calls "communitas," (the relationship through which Betsey can be placed on an equal position with the other individuals), and "structure" (the system that obliges Betsey to obey the moral imperatives of her society (1974, 47)).

[14] Selwyn Cudjoe remarks the importance of names for African Americans: "The inviolability of the Afro-American's personhood is so closely guarded that any assault or presumed assault upon his/her person is violently resisted" (1990, 277-78).

[15] Geta LeSeur affirms that Ntozake Shange's women "must learn to relate to and separate themselves from the men in their lives" (1992, 167).

[16] One of the traps into which the Harlem intellectuals fell was imitating the elitist model of the white people. These African Americans earned the epithet "dicty niggers," a term that characterized those belonging to Harlem's upper class. It is during this last stage of the Renaissance that they realized their mistake of mimicking white values. The result was both a separation of African Americans from American culture and a turning toward the African past.

[17] Anthony Hale observes that "Daniels serves as Angela's 'racial consciousness' as the youthful heroine transgresses forbidden racial boundaries in search of a life free of economic and racial oppression" (2001, 167).

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