

The Role of Colour and ‘Ethnic’ Autobiography: Fanon, Capécia and Difference

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This paper argues that in many recent life narratives a new openness about the part played by colour undermines what have historically been the fixed essentialisms of race. In particular, memoirs that acknowledge difference and division amongst people ‘of colour’ (such as the fierce criticism by Frantz Fanon of Mayotte Capécia’s autobiography) highlight the complexities of racialized categories, and problematize the nexus between ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’. Analysis of the genre of ‘ethnic’ autobiography has until recently been largely dominated by American scholars, whose understanding of black–white positions has been premised on homogenous racial identities, which have taken for granted that ‘ethnicity’ implies ‘minority’ or coloured status, neglecting discussion of white as a colour. As ‘in-between’ and alternative colour positions make their voices heard, and those for whom colour/race is in some sense at odds with culture/ethnicity, it is necessary to rethink the role of ‘ethnic’ autobiography, to reconceptualize the role of colour within it, and perhaps to reject its usefulness as a category altogether.

INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning field of ‘ethnic’ life writing contains many examples of unashamed discussion about the writer’s colour, while, by way of contrast, few ‘white’ autobiographers would feel the need to consider their whiteness. Yet ‘ethnic’ life writing is no longer clearly demarcated from ‘white’ in the simple binary that has so long marked the field. Waves of post-colonial migration and generations of interracial relationships have resulted in writers of colour who speak from within the ‘whiteness’ of the dominant discourse and who occupy positions that can both understand whiteness and critique it. This article examines some

of the complications caused to the black–white binary by autobiographers writing from ‘in-between’ positions, and questions overly simplistic equivalences of ethnicity with colour and race. What ethnicity is a ‘white’ Aboriginal woman, or an assimilated Chinese migrant, or a third generation Japanese-Canadian? The nexus of race and ethnicity is troubled, casting doubt on the interchangeability of those terms, particularly when people of ‘pale’ colour can talk and write about their marginalization within black communities. As A. Robert Lee reminds us, ‘the very terminology of ethnicity and race is itself partial and Westernized’ (2001). In understanding that the field of auto/biography need not be divided into ‘ethnic’ and ‘non-ethnic’ life writing, we may perhaps dispense with that strange term ‘ethnic’ altogether, and face up to the challenges of deconstructing the role of stereotype in all our lives, of whatever colour or culture.

The term ‘ethnic’ is made to serve multiple purposes: as a euphemism for race, to denote cultural belonging (often to a minority community), and to mean non-white. In a detailed study, Marcus Banks calls the term ‘[A] collection of rather simplistic and obvious statements about boundaries, otherness, goals and achievements, being and identity, descent and classification’ (1996: 190). I will concentrate on the use of ‘ethnic’ to mean non-white, and will argue that the question of what constitutes ‘white’ and ‘non-white’, in other words, what constitutes colour in the formation of racial identity, is a major feature of many recent works of autobiography, which break away from an acceptance of ‘ethnic’ as ‘black’. In doing so, they prepare us for what would surely be the most revolutionary development in ‘ethnic’ autobiography: an acceptance that, just as we all have race, we all have ethnicity and colour. Such an acceptance would encourage so-called ‘white’ autobiographers to consider their own racial identity models, and to discuss the powers and privileges of whiteness (McIntosh, 1990). An increased discussion of racial formation, rather than a shying away from it as a non-material reality, would contribute to a truly human solidarity in which we would accept that all autobiography is the autobiography of race.

IS ‘ETHNIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY’ THE SAME AS ‘BLACK AUTOBIOGRAPHY’?

Until whiteness studies make more impact on the general reader, it has to be accepted that an ‘ethnic’ autobiography is usually understood to be one written by a person of colour, since the correlation of ethnicity and race is widely accepted, and ‘white’ is seen as not racial. There is also a category of ‘immigrant autobiography’, sometimes considered part of ‘ethnic life narratives’, and in these the portrayal of the immigrant community does not necessarily consider colour as an issue, although

Italian, Irish, Jewish and Greek heritage have all, at various times, been considered non-white.

There is a considerable literature on 'ethnic autobiography', but it is dominated by US perspectives, which determine that the authors included are black. Laura Browder (n.d.) conceptualizes the readership of ethnic autobiography, as opposed to its authorship, as 'white':

Ethnic autobiographies have fulfilled, and continue to perform, a number of cultural functions, but one purpose has remained the same: to offer the authentic voice of a minority group to a reading audience composed primarily of white middle class Americans ... [T]he memoirist is not telling his or her own story as much as the story of a people.

This communal character of 'ethnic' autobiography is reiterated in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's 'Fifty-two genres of life narrative' in *Reading autobiography* (2001: 194). The authors describe the 'ethnic life narrative' as 'emergent in ethnic communities', implying the same representative role described by Browder. This function is also claimed by Kenneth Mostern in his study of *Autobiography and black identity politics*. Mostern stresses that a theory of autobiography 'caught inside the "I"' does not render as rich an analysis as one that 'recognizes that all autobiography includes, in some measure, testimony – the construction of a "we"':

I will suggest that African-American Autobiography Studies has tended to place autobiography in a relatively stable location in the field: where 'I' tends to have a determinate relation to a specifically racial 'we'; and where the text provides for its audience a way to symbolize racialization as a version of the real.

(1990: 30–31)

As well as this emphasis on writing to inform an audience concerned with understanding racial groupings (from the readers' own presumably 'non-racial' position), ethnic autobiography is often described as having an individualistic quality that is based on its presumed roots in American slave narratives. Such narratives traced a journey of liberation from downtrodden member of an exploited class to empowered, free individual. That trope has had wide influence in other countries, too, for example in Sally Morgan's Australian classic *My place* (1987), in which the young Aboriginal woman finds her heart liberated by the hard-won knowledge of her Nyungar heritage. This important aspect of 'ethnic' life stories still underpins much scholarly understanding of the genre and its pedagogical use as *bildungsroman*. The Yale–New Haven Teachers' Institute posts a web page that argues the benefits of autobiography: 'Students are looking for something, often they are looking for themselves. Often, they don't

know where or how to look.’ The website suggests that this search is best served by helping the individual reflect on their ethnic grouping:

The study of autobiography / biography with varied readings and activities based on their ethnic group and the ethnic groups of those around them can help to provide answers to the age-old questions of, ‘Who am I,’ ‘Where do I come from,’ and ‘Who do I want to be?’

A quotation from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible man* is used to summarize ‘the way many adolescents feel’:

All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned, someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I could answer.

(Ellison, 1995: 163)

The recommendation to ‘ethnic’ students of this black American classic is not necessarily to suggest that they would not enjoy literature by white authors, but it does imply that it is best to attract them to the genre as a whole through work that seems particularly relevant on the grounds of race.

A more inclusive model of readership has been suggested by Nancy K. Miller, who says, ‘When you read the lives of others, you can’t help but remember your own.’ For her, the ‘others’ are not demarcated in any racial or ‘ethnic’ way. They are simply other people, like the reader in some ways, unlike in others. For her, this complex pattern of identification and disidentification is an aid to ‘interactive remembering’, the construction of the reader’s own memory:

So what happens when beyond even disidentification there seem to be no commonalities between your life as a reader and the writer’s, when it’s another zeitgeist entirely? What have you to do with a woman who had an affair with her father, a man who was a sexual addict, fill in the blanks with the person most unlike you that you can imagine? If the task of memoir is to pull away from the face you see in your mirror to contemplate a face that doesn’t look like yours, what does it take to make an intimate connection? Put another way, can we respond only to memoirs written by our twin, as though we had been separated at birth?

(Miller, 2000: 430)

In making her impassioned plea for memoir to be considered as much more than navel gazing, Miller offers a way out of the ghetto of ethnic life writing. According to her model, all readers can engage equally with all stories, whatever the ethnicity of the writer.

The black–white binary, so evident in much writing on American autobiography, is no longer a sufficient framework for understanding life writing. In 1993, William L. Andrews noted that criticism of African American autobiography was increasingly recognizing the international context (1993: 1–7). Indeed, the ‘international context’ is demanding to be heard. In 1999 an international conference on autobiography, held in Beijing, ‘saw pressure being exerted to move away from the dominance of United States scholarship in autobiography studies’. A trend towards globalized terms of reference, Indigenous scholarship, and the development of white studies, all undercut the unproblematic acceptance of ‘black’ and ‘white’ as the overriding framework by which ethnic autobiography should be understood. In the 2001 *Encyclopaedia of life writing*, A. Robert Lee provides a trenchant critique of the category of ‘ethnic’, exemplifying a scholarship of ambivalence at its very best. Not only does he ponder on why the writings of the Buddha, St Paul, Augustine or Christopher Columbus might not be known as ‘ethnic’, but he also considers ‘white ethnicity’, and subtly conveys an engaging complication of the ‘supposed’ mainstream culture.

Homogenizing attitudes to colour, vital though they may have been when minority groups sought solidarity to challenge the ‘dominant’, are giving way to the complexity resulting from huge waves of postwar migration and the resulting ‘interracial’ children. Those whose physical appearance marks them as ‘ethnic’ may actually have a community that does not appear to relate to their phenotype, or may feel an allegiance to a ‘white’ community, or to no community at all, challenging the traditional function of autobiography as outlined above by Browder. Some may even feel marginal to their communities because of their colour. Kathe Sandler’s 1992 documentary, *A question of color*, featured interviews with African Americans of many shades who agreed that their own communities had hierarchies based on colour. In a collection of recent essays problematizing the relationship between racial identity and autobiography, Lisa Kahaleole Chang Hall reports a Latina friend’s comment: ‘I don’t think Black people really truly believe that any other people of color exist’ (Chang Hall, 1996, 241–51). Hall herself gets labelled ‘high yellow’ by black friends, but this same label offends another, as if it signifies not-quite-black-enough, and Hall is ‘torn between laughter and despair’, as she responds to the complex connotations of hierarchy and recognition that are afforded to different kinds of colour. Her ‘yellowness’ (that is, her particular shade of ‘black’) means marginality, even in a community that ostensibly accepts her. As Omi and Winant point out: ‘[E]thnicity theory isn’t very interested in ethnicity among blacks. ... There is, in fact, a subtly racist element in this substitution – in which whites are seen as variegated in terms of group identities, but blacks “all look alike”’ (1994: 22).

'Mixed race' autobiographies also problematize the issue of colour. As 'mixed race' has become more speakable, the ability to take positions within the black community that claim a colour other than black has become more widespread. Gloria Anzaldúa is recognized as being a major influence in compelling white feminists to rethink the homogeneity of feminism through works such as *This bridge called my back: writings by radical women of color*, but she also creates a space for all mixed race writers. Her theory of borderlands is a reminder that the 'margins' are too powerful and heterogenous to be clumped together in one undifferentiated group that has in common only its members' deviation from the 'norm'. Writers of mixed race are marking out a territory in which colour is defined by neither black nor white. Janice Gould writes:

[W]e are left with a legacy that allows us to speak of Euro-Americans as whites and African Americans as blacks. We say, 'a white woman I work with' or 'a black woman I know'. But we do not say 'a red (or yellow or brown) woman I know', because this has somehow lost favor, as James Clifton has pointed out. We imagine that color coding the rest of us is somehow racist. Instead, we tend to speak of reds, yellows, and browns as Native Americans, Asians, and Hispanics.

(1992: 81–90)¹

Gould goes on to say that, because she is 'mixed', she does not fit into any one of these ethnic/racial categories. She talks about the role of colour, the response of others to this, and her coming to a sense of identity. She tells the story of Louise Erdrich, a mixed-blood Chippewa writer, who when told by someone she meets, 'Funny, you don't look Indian', responds, 'Funny, you don't look rude!'

Colour is not a reliable indicator of ethnic identity, just as 'racial' community may also easily be misread by physical appearance alone. Lynette Rodriguez, an Australian Indigenous woman of 'fair-complexioned' appearance, growing up in the Kimberley region surrounded by darker-skinned Aboriginal family, writes: 'Many times I have looked at my skin and while I knew the colour was white I *saw* black.' In the late sixties, Rodriguez's mother was given the good news by the Native Welfare Office that her children could now be classified as white: "[B]ut unfortunately you can't be, because you fall just below the mark." I asked Mum, "What was this mark?" She said, "I don't know" (Rodriguez, 2004).

Rodriguez successfully completed a year-long course designed to help Indigenous students get in to university:

As part of the university's promotion of having a group of Aboriginal students studying in rural areas, a photo session was arranged. All of the students in this group were obviously Aboriginal in terms of skin colour.

Of the whole group I was the fairest. As the staff and the photographer arranged the students, I was asked to step aside, away from the group being photographed. I remember feeling very, very upset and alienated. Why was I the only one being asked not to be in the photo? All my friends were there and here I was standing at the back of the room by myself while my fellow students were being asked to 'smile'. I never saw myself as being any different to my friends so it wasn't until a few years later that I realised that it was because they only wanted students who obviously looked 'Aboriginal'. I would have spoiled their photo session.

(Rodriguez, 2004)

Rodriguez's white skin could not be allowed to disturb the dominant definition of Aboriginal as 'black'.

ESCAPING FROM THE BINARY

In Australian society, where one is either black or white, Rodriguez's position requires a very great deal of reflection. Happily, given the rejection by Aboriginal communities of any kind of blood quantum measurement, she is able to identify completely as Indigenous. The binary need only impact on her in the gaze of 'others'. For immigrant, 'hyphenated' Australians, like Annette Shun Wah, an ABC (Australian Born Chinese), the binary is, perhaps, more internalized:

I recall a well-meaning friend at university telling me that she'd forgotten I was Chinese, and that she only ever thought of me as Australian. I was thrilled at first, revelling in the warm glow of acceptance. Only later did I wonder what that meant about the parts of me that are Chinese. If we simply ignore them, do they go away?

(Shun Wah, 2004)

Shun Wah's use of 'we' signals her complete comfort in an Australian identity, born and raised in Queensland, and living in Sydney. It could be said that she is culturally 'white'. Yet as her humorous and insightful memoir makes clear, she is also Chinese.

Eric Liu is an American memoirist who also cannot fit within the black-white binary. He remembers being surprised as a boy when he caught sight of himself alongside his friends in a mirror, and realized how much shorter than them he was. Growing up in an era of assimilation, like Annette Shun Wah in Australia, there are now many ways in which he is culturally white. Is this, then, an 'ethnic autobiography'? The choice of Henry Louis Gates, Jr, to commend the book on the front cover indicates that the publishers, at least, regard it as belonging to that genre. Liu, after all, is 'not literally white. That is, I do not have white skin or white

ancestors. I have yellow skin and yellow ancestors' (1998: 34). Yet *The accidental Asian* does not fit into the 'construction of a "we"' described by Kenneth Mostern. It is much more part of the 'cultural borderlands', where hybrid, unstable identities are rendered palpable through the negotiation 'between conflicting traditions – linguistic, social, ideological' (Woodhull, cited in Smith and Watson, 2001: 100).

In James McBride's *The color of water*, McBride's 'white' mother tries to escape from the binary that would position herself and her 'black' son on opposite sides of the great American divide, by appropriating an alternative term that could be interpreted as a position on a colour spectrum. She rejects the term 'white' and prefers to call herself 'light-skinned', a quality that she might even share with 'light-skinned' black women. Only by insisting that God does not have a colour ('God is the color of water') can his mother reassure the young James that their own difference in colour is not a problem. Her reassurances to her son are an attempt to find a position outside racial discourse, in a transcendent divinity, where the burden of her in-between position, neither black nor white, can be removed.

The title of Ien Ang's *On not speaking Chinese* suggests that her book is going to be concerned with cultural rather than racial difference. Here, perhaps, is an 'ethnic' autobiographical work that takes ethnicity entirely in its cultural sense and does not touch on biology, race, or colour at all. Yet in her earliest pages, Ang writes: 'Throughout my life, I have been implicitly or explicitly categorized, willy-nilly, as an "overseas Chinese" (*hua qiao*). I look Chinese' (2001: 23). Ang, who was born in Indonesia and was educated in the Netherlands, before migrating to Australia, has at some early stage been on the receiving end of the 'white gaze', of knowing that she herself was 'other', and the powerlessness of that position is only subtly hinted at in one reticent, condensed word, 'willy-nilly'. To say that this was her position 'willy-nilly', whether she liked it or not, is in fact to say that she did not like it, and had to learn to accept it. Indeed, the very purpose of the title is to allude to strangers' expectation that she will speak Chinese. The role of physical appearance, then, presumably including colour, is clearly a formative experience in the writing of this memoir.

All of the above life stories would seem to fit with Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's plea for the use of 'multiple, provisional axes of organization' rather than 'some totalizing system in which autobiographers speak from a priori fixed positions' (Wong, 1991: 160). Although I am cautious about Wong's conclusion that 'reading by ethnicity is a necessary act', her critique of the 'trans-ethnic' paradigm underlying William Boelhower's *Immigrant autobiography in the United States* (1982) is a welcome reminder that individuals often fail to recognize themselves in accounts of their 'group'. Unfortunately, she states quite clearly that her discussion

leaves out 'borderline' cases such as 'those of mixed blood' (1991: 162). These would surely be the very people who would provide clear examples of the shortcomings of the ethnicity model.

ETHNIC DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE 'BLACK' EXPERIENCE

A cautionary example of how hierarchies of colour might be used to silence difference within difference and to impose group solidarity is that of the famous response of Frantz Fanon to the autobiography of a woman of colour from his own Martinique. In *Black skin, white masks*, Fanon spends a chapter angrily demolishing *Je suis Martiniquaise* by Mayotte Capécia. Capécia was the pseudonym of Lucie Combette, who was born in Martinique in 1916 and died in Paris in 1955 (Macey, 2000: 169). *Je suis Martiniquaise* was published in 1948, but has drawn most attention for Fanon's fierce response to it in 1952. It is through the reaction of Fanon, a man of colour, to the autobiography of Capécia, a woman of colour, a reaction that appears to be totally unsympathetic, that I want to suggest one approach to the cultural work done by colour in 'ethnic' life writing.

Fanon's dislike for *Je suis Martiniquaise* has been interpreted by some as a matter of gender. Certainly, the authors who came to praise negritude, like Fanon at an early stage, took part in what David Macey has called 'a very masculinist discourse' (2000: 180). Gwen Bergner comments on the sympathy that Fanon affords the male protagonist in the second semi-autobiographical work he refers to, *Un Homme pareil aux autres*, in comparison with his disapproval of Capécia, and declares that '[I]n transposing Freud's question of the other from gender to race, Fanon excludes black women' (1995: 75–88).

Macey, however, believes that 'what is really at stake in Fanon's reading of *Je suis Martiniquaise*' is a philosophical issue, 'pure Sartre'. Fanon believes that Mayotte is living in bad faith and is lapsing into inauthenticity:

Bad faith is, in Sartrean terms, a form of self-deception, a denial of human freedom and an abdication of responsibility towards oneself and others. The repeated 'I know [that is impossible]' that Mayotte appends to her wish to marry a white man is the index of her bad faith and of her inability to be what Heidegger would call 'resolute' or what Sartre calls 'authentic'... 'It is because the negress feels herself to be inferior that she aspires to being admitted to the white world.'... In terms of the philosophical framework of Fanon's analysis, Mayotte's bad faith is more important than her gender.

(2000: 176–77)

On this important issue then, that of truly knowing oneself, Mayotte seems to fail. 'Mayotte Capécia is barred from herself.' This would endorse those who see the value of ethnic autobiography as being to

teach young people the success of achieving a strong individuation, of 'knowing themselves'. In one sense, *Black skin, white masks* is about Fanon 'finding himself', through the traumatic experience of realizing that he is 'the object the other is looking at'. On this count, Mayotte fails, and Fanon is right to condemn her autobiography. It would not be a suitable text for those adolescent readers whom the Yale–New Haven Teachers' Institute wants to be helped towards self-understanding.

However, there is another important question on which Fanon believes that Mayotte Capécia fails. Nearly all his criticisms are expressed in terms of her beliefs about skin colour. She declares that she could never love anyone but a white man. Fanon responds: 'We are thus put on notice that what Mayotte wants is a kind of lactification. For, in a word, the race must be whitened; every woman in Martinique knows this, says it, repeats it' (1967: 47). Mayotte fails to identify with her black heritage, taking pride instead in having had a white Canadian grandmother. Again, those critics who have commented on Fanon and gender have juxtaposed *l'homme noir*, represented by Fanon and all black men, against the black woman, represented by Mayotte Capécia. Bergner refers to Capécia as a black woman. Yet this elision between the woman of colour, which is what Fanon in fact calls Capécia, and the *négresse*, with whom he at times suggests she shares common features, is to miss an extremely important point about the specificity of colour that is subsumed within the collective term 'black'. Capécia's second book, which Fanon briefly mentions, is called not *La Négrresse*, but *La Négrresse blanche*; the difference matters. One Martinican writer, critiquing *Je suis Martiniquaise* at the time of its publication, thought that the title was in error, and should actually be *Je suis une martiniquaise*. In other words, Capécia was only one of many different Martinican women, not a representative (Alpha, 1948: 844–45).

It is Mayotte Capécia's failure to realize that she is in fact 'black' that constitutes her inauthenticity. In a story by Abdoulaye Sadjí called *Nini*, a Negro tries to woo a girl who is 'almost white'. She rejects him, and Fanon writes, 'We have seen here how a girl of color reacts to a declaration of love made by one of her own' (1967: 57). Fanon may be counting 'colour' as 'black' but it is not in any sense of equivalence, rather of what ought to be a common purpose. In fact, 'colour' leads those who experience it to be alienated from their true selves. His experience of growing up in Martinique meant that he was all too aware of the multiple variations on skin colour. Macey refers to the hierarchies of colour as an extraordinary 'shadism', which carried (and carry) complex distinctions made on the basis of degrees of pigmentation (2000: 46). The significance of Mayotte Capécia is not as a representative of black woman, but of mulatta or *métisse*.

Although Fanon seems to be criticizing Caribbean society, where 'every woman ... whether in a casual flirtation or in a serious affair, is determined

to select the least black of the men', he nevertheless chooses as his exemplar not a black woman, but a 'mixture'. It is ironic that in choosing to use *Je suis Martiniquaise* to convey his thorough distaste for racism and the lack of pride of the black 'man' in his blackness, Fanon should tap into one of the most enduring and significant stereotypes associated with colour: that the woman of mixed race is dominated by her uncontrollable sexuality. Mayotte Capécia submits to all her white lover's demands, despite the fact that 'love is beyond [her] reach' (1967: 44). It is sex that is the exchange between Capécia and her lover, and a child is the outcome, but there is no love as Fanon understands the word. In using Capécia to act as an example of the inherent hatred of blackness even amongst black people, he perpetuates a contempt for the 'halfie', the mulatto.

Je suis Martiniquaise fails, then, because Mayotte Capécia does not come to a recognition and embracing of what Fanon regards as her true colour, her blackness. Is it possible that one feature of what is regarded as 'successful' autobiography written by a member of a 'visibly different' minority is the narrative of coming to an awareness and acceptance of colour?² The key moment in Fanon's own autobiographical reflections is when the young French child says, 'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' (1967: 112). Many memoirs of people of colour have as a pivotal point such a moment of realization of how they appear physically different. Janice Gould, just like Fanon, relates the words of a child: 'A little girl called me a "dirty Jap".' In her case, the child misreads the colour, since Gould is not Japanese at all, but Native American. The fame of that moment in which Fanon experiences the white gaze is somehow premised on its accuracy. Yes, thinks Fanon, *Je suis nègre*, I am black. What would have been the result of that encounter if, as in Gould's experience, the child had been mistaken and allocated the wrong category to Fanon, if he had, in fact, had to face the perennial mixed race question that Rodriguez faces, 'But who are you *really*?'

By 2002, it comes as no surprise to find Frank H. Wu including colour in his experiences of growing up Asian just outside Detroit: 'I learned I was not white', he writes. Indeed, the importance of colour could hardly be more clearly proclaimed than in his 'in-your-face' title, *Yellow*, and the gloriously yellow dustjacket of his book. Wu declares:

I'd like to be as honest as possible in explaining why and how race matters, because it shapes every aspect of my life – and everyone else's. I'd like to do so in a manner that allows my white relatives and my white friends to understand and empathize.

(2002: 7)

Here Wu seems to be taking us back to a traditional reading of the role of 'ethnic' autobiography, that of informing and educating the white,

middle-class audience about what it means to be ‘raced’. However, there is a crucial difference between his goals and those, say, of Malcolm X (Eakin, 1993). For Wu, *all* his readers are ‘raced’, and that is what they have in common: ‘race matters, because it shapes every aspect of my life – and everyone else’s’.

Steve Olson writes that the only logical conclusion of recent biological research, which has concluded that we all share common ancestors arising from the veldt of East Africa, is to suggest that every single human being is ‘mixed’. Whatever a person’s skin colour, they have all sorts of different colours in their ancestral heritage. He concludes that the day will come, after this fact is widely enough acknowledged, when it will be accepted that people ‘choose’ their ethnicity, and he uses present-day Hawaii as an example of what this might mean:

The logical endpoint of this perspective is a world in which people are free to choose their ethnicity regardless of their ancestry. Ethnicity is not yet *entirely* voluntary in Hawaii, but in many respects the islands are headed in that direction. State law, for example, is gradually coming to define a Native Hawaiian as anyone with a single Hawaiian ancestor. But at that point ethnicity becomes untethered from biology – it is instead a cultural, political, or historical distinction. People are no longer who they say they are because of some mysterious biological essence. They have chosen the group with which they want to affiliate.

(Olson, 2002: 237)

In claiming a universality for mixedness, Olson dissolves the whole problem of race, not simply by labelling it a scientific illusion, or looking to some future utopia in which the ‘melting pot’ has erased all differences, but by casting doubt on the possibility of ever drawing the parameters of any grouping accurately enough to signify where one group ends and another begins. There is no ‘other’ that we can be absolutely sure does not include one of ‘us’. We are all ‘we’.

If we are all mixed, and we are all ‘raced’, then the term ‘ethnic autobiography’ may be redundant. Autobiography is *always* the autobiography of race and ethnicity. If we include white as a colour, then it is always the autobiography of colour as well, which is, after all, what the term ‘ethnic’ has usually meant. The dustjacket of *The accidental Asian* proclaims it to be ‘Beyond black and white’, yet Eric Liu does not deny the significance and power of colour: ‘So long as we speak of whiteness as the social norm and “passing” as the option of choice, no amount of census reshuffling will truly matter’ (1998: 194). Knowing that his embodiment as Chinese can never be put aside, his subtle balancing of the many aspects to his identity calls to mind Fanon’s famous prayer: ‘Oh my body, make of me always a man who questions!’ (1967: 232).

Embodiment in a racialized body is a crucial part of one's 'origins', predetermining later 'life-choices'. For those who are white, neglecting the role of colour may be possible, but the privilege and ease that whiteness allows should not suggest that silence equals unimportance (Perry, 2001; McIntosh, 1990). Only if race is recognized as an aspect of *all* modern life writing, whether white, Indigenous, black, brown, or yellow, will a real commonality be possible, one that does not overlook difference, but sees it and incorporates it into the universal. 'Ethnic autobiography', in which the coming to an awareness of colour is so crucial, will be written by white people too.

NOTES

1 The Clifton reference is to James A. Clifton, *Being and becoming Indian: biographical studies of North American frontiers* (Chicago: Dorsey, 1989).

2 I am not suggesting a hierarchy of success in autobiography, but some texts are recommended for adolescent and student reading, others are not. Although I have not done a survey of such lists, the publishing history of *Je suis Martiniquaise* suggests that it is not.

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