

**"IT'S A KIND OF DESTINY":
THE CULTURAL
MULATTO IN THE
"NEW BLACK AESTHETIC"
AND SARAH PHILLIPS
AN ESSAY**

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In "The New Black Aesthetic," published in *Callaloo* in 1989, Trey Ellis identifies a rupture between the black aesthetics of previous generations, and the "new" aesthetics of black artists who came of age in a post-integration era. These younger artists, unfettered by concerns over racial authenticity or, more pertinently, black cultural traditions, borrow as easily from white culture as from black, and are therefore what Ellis refers to as "cultural mulattoes." He writes, "Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world" (235). This easy navigation between black and white worlds is the key distinction between a "new" black aesthetic—which, according to Ellis, encompasses such varied forms as the comedy of Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock, the films of Spike Lee, the jazz of Wynton Marsalis—and older black aesthetic movements, most notably the Black Arts Movement, which often focused on delineating an essential blackness through art and meaning. Ellis proposes that the young black artists who came of age after integration form a black arts movement that constantly challenges what blackness "is."

Ellis argues that the older problems of the color line need not daunt a younger generation of black culture makers. In order to make this claim, he creates a number of elisions in his overall depiction of who these black artists might be or what they might want. It is the nature of these elisions that informs some critical responses to the essay. In his introduction to a 2003 edition of Ellis's first novel *Platitudes* (1988) that also includes "The New Black Aesthetic," Bertram Ashe refers to the decidedly cool reception that followed publication of the 1989 essay. Early responses by Tera Hunter and Eric Lott, for instance, critique Ellis's overly masculinist stance and silence with regard to a class analysis, respectively. William Banks, like Hunter, points to the lack of aesthetic unity among the artists Ellis identifies. Conversely, Mark Anthony Neal points out that Ellis does not draw the possible lines of unity between the second generation, middle class artists he focuses so closely on and the hip-hop artists who also "borrow across" racial and class cultures in similar ways. But Ashe emphasizes that these responses temper their cynicism over the New Black Aesthetic with recognition of its potential. He writes, "like any other exploratory formulation, 'The New Black Aesthetic' was bound to have its critics, some of whom raise insightful and legitimate points. But these same critics almost invariably acknowledge, sometimes grudgingly, that Ellis was holding a

novel and engaging lens through which to view late twentieth-century black cultural production" (xiv).

The "grudging" way in which the New Black Aesthetic's usefulness has been acknowledged indicates an interpretive impasse that lies between an on-going allegiance to historical, politically based concerns, and a post-historical present and future. In other words, while the lens that Ellis holds up may be fresh and potentially liberating, its scope is so narrow that it leaves out some of the most pertinent concerns surrounding black cultural production over most of the twentieth century. The impasse, therefore, is a profound uncertainty over what the political and cultural stakes are of positing "postmodern blackness" in such a way as to neutralize facets of a complicated past. The degree of discomfort that critics have had with the essay may result from the way in which Ellis casually ignores the emergence of this impasse. The essay makes an offhanded attempt to suture a complicated trajectory of blackness fraught with intraracial tensions and large-scale struggles with a postmodern perspective that decides not to take history too seriously. But while "history" is a reality from which some postmodern black folk are liberated, it seems just as certain that other black subjects—by virtue of omission—are inescapably linked to history's disappearing relevance. These subjects—implicitly marked by femininity, sexual orientation, economic disadvantage—are rendered nearly invisible by Ellis's formulation of the postmodern. Indeed, this invisibility can stand as another name for the impasse that separates a history of black cultural production from a "post-liberated" present and future.

This impasse that Ellis attempts to write over—this space of political and cultural uncertainty within the effort to define postmodern blackness—is at work in the term "cultural mulatto." Indeed, the term "mulatto," fraught as it is with static and retrograde implications, is a decidedly complicated way of describing a postmodern perspective, to say the least. While Ellis's essay attempts to render the cultural mulatto as a figure of cohesion, referring to mulattohood as the glue uniting a generation of black cultural movers and shakers, I will now turn to a text that fully illustrates the concept's awkward dimensions. Andrea Lee's 1984 novel *Sarah Phillips* precedes Ellis's statement on the New Black Aesthetic by five years, but it demonstrates the phenomenon he defines: Sarah Phillips is a young, middle-class black woman who is part of the first generation to come of age in a post-civil-rights, post-integration era. In both the U.S. and in Europe, Sarah seems willing and able to fashion her own, untraditional brand of au-

thentic blackness. At the same time, however, she is continually placed in situations that require a negotiation between her personal sense of freedom and the racist vestiges of history. While critics have expressed their discomfort with the New Black Aesthetic, as Valerie Smith and Adrienne McCormick have noted, readers have also been discomfited with Lee's novel, and particularly with Sarah as its protagonist. Sarah is at times strikingly passive, and often too complacent to pursue questions of identity that would deeply trouble her sense of comfort. Nonetheless, these questions emerge in the text as points of negotiation. This continuous stream of negotiations is how the novel *Sarah Phillips* delves into the stakes regarding black postmodernity. Through Sarah's black, female perspective, the cultural mulatto is figured as a lens through which we investigate the omissions, uses and limits of defining a postmodern blackness.

Sarah Phillips begins with the end of the narrative, or with Sarah as a young woman living in 1970s Paris in an attempt to cut ties with her black bourgeois past in Philadelphia. The novel then leaps back to 1963, in a chapter illustrating Sarah's decidedly ambivalent relation to the New African Baptist Church, where her father was a minister, and thereafter proceeds to illustrate one episode after another in which Sarah is confronted with realities and perspectives that exceed her own insulated worldview. Often, these alternative realities have the potential to disrupt the ostensible ordinariness of Sarah's status as a black, middle-class female, as in the instance where a poor, dark-skinned "Gypsy" family passes through Sarah's privileged black neighborhood, or during her shock of recognition regarding the black servants who work at the nearly all-white private school she attends. During her time at this school Sarah makes one friend, a politically liberal white girl named Gretchen. As a way of extending her hand in friendship and expressing sympathy with the struggle for civil rights, Gretchen says without any self-consciousness, "Don't you think it's rather romantic to be a Negro? [...] My father says Negroes are the tragic figures of America. Isn't it exciting to be a tragic figure? It's a kind of destiny" (55).

In a sense, this statement, which is represented rather casually in the text and takes place in the middle of the novel, brings the narrative's concerns to the very beginning of *Sarah Phillips*, which is also the narrative's temporal end. All of the chapters to come after the very first one seem to do two things at once. On the one hand, they introduce realities that would disrupt, if not Sarah's, then the reader's sense of comfort with positing post-integration blackness as a narrow perspective unrelated to a history. Indeed, as

many critics have noted, there are numerous episodes in the text—from the invisible black servants maintaining white institutions, to Mrs. Jeller, an older black woman, recounting her story of rape—in which historical circumstances surrounding black community pointedly interject themselves. In this way, even as Sarah resists identifying with black traditions, even as the numerous class-based options available to her would suggest that her “destiny” is not bound with historical, race-based limitations, the text allows us to read her as a historical figure, a product of a larger, communal past.

On the other hand, however, all of the chapters after the very first one also have the contradictory impulse toward normalizing Sarah’s insulating sense of perspective. Her perspective often replicates context; for instance, the Romany family who passes through Sarah’s suburb in Philly, spiteful as they are of black people who live privileged lives, is an anomaly, falling out of the text as quickly as they emerge. In a chapter called “Marching,” the 1963 march on Washington, D.C. becomes less and less real for Sarah as, once left out of the actual experience, she watches a simulated reality on television, and ultimately is unsure of her belief in the event at all. Also, Sarah and her mother listen to Mrs. Jeller’s story of rape—the violent reduction of a black female body to the level of flesh—but after leaving her presence, the most salient effect the story has is, mundanely, “that ever afterward I was allowed to pick out my own clothes” (86). In other words, while history becomes a force that can potentially resonate with how Sarah’s contemporary experiences are read, the dual possibility is that it can neutralize the continued relevance of history for reading black culture. This duality—the insistence and rejection of a relevant racial past—demonstrates the impasse that Ellis’s essay on the New Black Aesthetic marches over in its depiction of black postmodernity.

But it is through this duality that *Sarah Philips* dramatizes this impasse, rather than overlooking it. The representation of “history” in the novel becomes most effective on the level of language when Gretchen makes the historically potent yet unwitting statement, “Isn’t it exciting to be a tragic figure? It’s a kind of destiny.” Rather than only existing as a matter of personal or collective experience that characters in *Sarah Philips* can either choose to remember—albeit satirically or ironically, as in Ellis’s postmodern mode of black aesthetics—or choose to ignore, the impact of the past is also about how familiar stories are unconsciously dredged up, told and retold unwittingly. Gretchen’s speech suggests that Sarah, the “cultural mulatto” of Ellis’s discussion, slips as easily as a slip of a tongue into becoming the “tragic mulatta” of American mythol-

ogy. While Sarah’s class is ostensibly the primary way in which the novel enters the terrain of black postmodernity, it is this, along with an inscription of femininity, that conjures an aporic rift between the modern and postmodern. In a sense, one question that the novel posits, and one question that emerges through Ellis’s many silences, is this: how does the black female body, which, as Hortense Spillers expounded, is always and already embedded in a national grammar or mythology that cannot “speak” about it without historical racist and sexist connotations, become postmodern? The novel is exploring this question through the narrative’s temporal arrangement. This is why *Sarah Philips*, a story of a black female character with more options and less restraints than many, begins—and ends—on a profoundly mythical note.

Sarah’s dual status of cultural mulatto and tragic mulatta, which is part metaphorical and part mythical, is strikingly rendered in the novel’s beginning/ending, the novel’s most potent moment. In the first chapter, we learn that, in Paris, Sarah has cut ties with “the hermetic world of the old-fashioned black bourgeoisie,” has recently graduated from Harvard, and is “tall and lanky and light-skinned, quite pretty in a nervous sort of way.” We also learn of her involvement with three European men, one to whom she is romantically attached. It is over lunch that this romantic interest, Henri, decides to clarify for one of his white male companions the story of Sarah’s origins: “Did you ever wonder, Roger, old boy [...] why our beautiful Sarah is such a mixture of races, why she has pale skin but hair that’s as kinky as that of a Haitian? Well, I’ll tell you. Her mother was an Irishwoman, and her father was a monkey.” He goes on to explain that Sarah was conceived as a result of the woman’s rape by the jazz musician, who was “black as King Kong.” While Henri considers this fiction “a very American tale,” the more troubling aspect of this episode is Sarah’s inability to reject it. She retreats to the restroom, which becomes a site that underscores the problem of modernity with regard to her racialized femininity—it was a “room labeled Dames, which was surprisingly modern”—and reflects on how the story she had just heard “summed me up with weird accuracy” (12). Sarah’s response has less to do with false identification or with a misreading of the conditions that circumscribe her identity than with an acknowledgment that pervasive mythologies inscribed onto the category “black womanhood” are a reality that rivals her actual experience. In this way, what Sarah recognizes is an impasse between the two stories that could “sum her up”—the mythical version, with its grotesque and static images to be circulated across space and into the future, and the

subjective experience that contributes to a framework of what blackness can be at the end of the twentieth century.

In her essay, "Is This Resistance?: African-American Postmodernism in *Sarah Phillips*," Adrienne McCormick argues that the novel occupies the intersection between literary postmodernism—narrowly defined by a set of techniques simulating disjuncture, open-endedness, and indeterminacy—and the traditions that define black literature. What McCormick identifies as a "resistant postmodernism," borrowing from Hal Foster, is similar to Ellis's suggestion that the New Black Aesthetic looks awry at older traditions by resisting strict adherence. McCormick suggests that the novel asserts an African-American literary postmodernism by representing the presence of history as being unfixed and uncertain, though continually relevant. She writes, "The novel problematizes both the idealized past and the redeeming future; there can be neither the idealized/redeeming return to or escape from community. Hence, the novel does not conclude, but leaves its reader with an enactment of indeterminacy and indirection, a character who doesn't know where she is heading or where she has been" (818). While "The New Black Aesthetic" makes a fetish of "indeterminacy," imagining that it protects the "blackness" of black cultural production from the rigidity and deprivation of essentialisms, *Sarah Phillips* refuses to interpret what such a condition can do or what, in theorizing black postmodernity, the next move ought to be. As a cultural *mulatta* in two senses—in the one that Ellis exuberantly celebrates in his post Civil Rights-era essay, and in the older, "tragic" sense, harkening back to slavery and the color line—Sarah Phillips the character, like the novel bearing her name, reveals that concerns over black female embodiment and sexuality are fundamental to the problem of defining and critiquing "black postmodernity," rather than simply auxiliary. As a figure of the indeterminate 1980s—with its historically large population of African Americans comfortably in the middle class, and its dismantlement of civil rights reform—Lee's "cultural mulatta" expresses a need to deliberate on the messy residuals of the moment. The leap from "modern" to "postmodern," however exuberant and ostensibly liberating, is contingent on the fruits of this labor.

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