



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

## **Beyond the Orbit of Racial Identity in James McBride's *The Color of Water*<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

... There are always selves – a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires – and always some elements of deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity.<sup>2</sup>

*The Color of Water* is an autobiographical narrative about the development of a racial identity of the young American mixed-race James McBride. The story is of a quite realistic illustration of “double consciousness,” one of the black American psychological predicaments as termed by W.E.B. Du Bois. According to Paul Gilroy, Du Bois used that concept to convey the “special difficulties arising from black internalization of an American identity.”<sup>3</sup>

Identity is the definition of the self in relation to other people. It calls for the qualities of a person or group which make them different from others. It is as Rockquemore and Laszloffy argue “the way we understand ourselves in relation to others and our social environment. Our identities are constructed through a [reflexive process] involving interaction between our self and others in our environment (e.g., families, schools, neighborhoods, and houses of worship).”<sup>4</sup>

In *The Color of Water*, James McBride, the young protagonist goes from a state of doubt and confusion to the experience of self-discovery, self-identification in a context of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> James McBride, *The Color of Water. A Black Man Tribute to his White Mother*, New York, The Berkley Publishing Group, 1996. Subsequent references of this book will appear in this paper with the initials (CW), followed by the reference pages.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980. Our quotation is from the introduction of this book that appeared as an article in *Literary Theory: an Introductory Reader*, edited by Saugata Bhaduri and Simi Malhotra, Wembleton, Anthem Press, 2010, P. 368.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999, P.126.

<sup>4</sup> Rockquemore K. and Laszloffy Ta, “Moving Beyond Tragedy: A Multidimensional Model of Mixed-Race Identity”, in *Raising Biracial Children*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Lanham, AttaMira Press, 2005, P. 4.



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diversity and racism in the south of the United-States of America. Actually, the novel describes the realization of James McBride's hybridity and his struggle for an identity across the racial boundaries. There are diverse ways in which mixed-race people identify themselves racially, and in the process of their identity development, they face particular challenges. In other words, there are multiple ways whereby mixed-race people understand their racial identity.

Historically, a mulatto could cross the color-line and pass for a white whenever he or she wished if he or she was white enough. "Passing" implies that an individual, who is not socially considered as white, pretends to be white in order to cross the physical boundaries set between the races for various social and economic reasons. This crossing of the color line is based on lightness of the skin and physical characteristics. In *The Color of Water*, the young mixed-race or hybrid, James McBride, is taught by his white mother to cross the color line in a different way.

Thus, in the perspective of McBride's identity construction, the essence of my argument in this paper is the exploration of some of the problems arising out of the overlapping of two racial consciousnesses. Ultimately, the paper investigates the struggles for hybrid identity as James McBride tries to transcend racial boundaries. Toward that end, the leading question underlying this study is: How is self-consciousness framed across racial boundaries? Or, how does James McBride construct his identity across racial boundaries?

As a matter of fact, self-identification is a natural part of growing up process. It requires the simple question "who am I?" However, this question is not always easily answered, for it involves the individual's entire experience. Identity is therefore a lifelong and dynamic social process, as K. Rockquemore and Ta Laszloffy rightly put:

It is not something that individuals achieve and then maintain unaltered for the remainder of their life. Instead, racial identity is an ongoing process of understanding one's self racially in relation to others and amidst societal definitions of racial group membership. Identity, therefore, is constantly in a state of development, modification, adjustment, negotiation, and evolution.<sup>5</sup>

The formation of one's identity depends upon one's dialogical relations with others. As Koen Van Laer and Maddy Janssens observe, "In defining ourselves, we position ourselves by

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<sup>5</sup> K. Rockquemore and Ta Laszloffy, Op. Cit., P.5.



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establishing relationships of sameness and otherness and by erecting boundaries between the self and different others.”<sup>6</sup>

Identity is thus a dynamic process, for our self-understanding is in a continual state of evolution based on the dialectical interplay or the contradictions between the individual’s internal and the external definitions. This justifies our approach which is grounded in the dialectics. It allows us to investigate and account for the articulation of the different dynamics in James’ identity formation. This approach is reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois’s conceptual framework of “double consciousness,” about which, Huey-li Li pointed out: “To a certain degree, Du Bois’ conception of double consciousness appears to also reflect Hegelian dialectics. After all, the formation of double consciousness is a dynamic and never ending process striving to remove varied “veils” that inhibit true self-understanding in order to re-integrate one’s consciousness.”<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, identity construction implies a psychological dimension in that the quest for identity is a process of self-realization or self-consciousness. Consciousness includes conceptions, thoughts, and ideas. Therefore, our work also draws on psychoanalysis, an appropriate tool for commenting the unconscious motivations of characters, and analyzing the significance of some events in the novel.

This paper falls into four sections. The first one investigates the past of James McBride’s mother: Ruth McBride. Next to that family background, a significant parameter of James McBride’s racial identity, the second section is concerned with the mother’s attempt to fashion her son’s identity. Then, in the third section, we examine James’ burden of double consciousness. Eventually, the paper closes on his transcendence of the racial boundaries.

### **1) The Family Background: Ruth McBride’s Personal History**

Koen Van Laer and Maddy Janssens write: “The process of identity construction is always a contextualized phenomenon, in the sense that an individual draws on available ‘identity

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<sup>6</sup> Koen Van Laer and Maddy Janssens, “Lives Beyond Boundaries: Exploring Hybrid Identity Constructions of Second-Generation Minority Professionals,” <<https://lirias.kuleuven.be>>, Pp. 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Huey-li Li, “From Alterity to Hybridity: A Query of Double Consciousness,” in *Philosophy of Education*, Edited by Scott Fletcher, University of New Hampshire, 2002, P. 144.



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material' and uses social categories, groups, cultures and history to achieve a feeling of belonging and to make sense of the world and his or her place in it."<sup>8</sup>

James McBride's psychological development does not take place in a social void. As Marx prescribed, the individual's consciousness is determined by his social being. The process of James McBride's identity construction starts with his identification with his mother. In other words, the process of James' identity development depends on an important factor which is the parental context: his mother's personal history.

James McBride, the son of Andrew McBride is from a bi-racial family. His father is black and his mother a white Jew. When Andrew McBride died, Ruth McBride remarried with Hunter Jordan who was "a crossbreed of quiet Indian and country black man" (CW, 6). "He married my mother, a white Jewish woman, when she had eight mixed-race black children, me being the youngest at less than a year old" (CW, 6).

Rachel Deborah Shilsky or Ruth McBride was born in Poland from Fishel Shilsky, her father, an Orthodox rabbi, and Huddis Shilsky, her mother. They migrated to the United-States, particularly in Virginia. Not from the mainstream white community in the south, the Shilkys family experiences daily issues due to their ascribed low-status. Rachel recalls some of her feelings as a youth facing racial discriminations:

Nobody liked me. That's how I felt as a child. I know what it feels like when people laugh at you walking down the street, or snicker when they hear you speaking Yiddish, or just look at you with hate in their eyes. You know a Jew living in Suffolk when I was coming up could be lonely even if there were fifteen of them standing in the room, I don't know why; it's that feeling that nobody likes you; that's how I felt, living in the South. You were different from everyone and liked by very few. There were white sections of Suffolk, like the Riverview section, where Jews weren't allowed to own property. It said that on the deeds and you can look them up. They'd say "for White Anglo-Saxon Protestants only." That was the law there and they meant it. The Jews in Suffolk did stick together, but even among Jews my family was low because we dealt with shvartses. So I didn't have a lot of Jewish friends either (CW, 80-81).

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<sup>8</sup> Koen Van Laer and Maddy Janssens, Op. Cit., P.5.



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In addition, Rachel Shilsky was exposed to stern family rules at home, especially the rectitude of an authoritative father who was deeply imbued with the social and religious traditions of the Jewish community. “They were too many rules to follow, too many forbiddens and ‘you can’t’s’ and ‘you mustn’t’s,’ but does anybody say they love you? Not in my family we didn’t” (*CW*, 2). Soon, Rachel became exasperated with the situation, and when she transgressed one of the imposed tyrannical rules, by getting married with a black, a man of “low-down status,” her family rejected her. “My family mourned me when I married your father” (*CW*, 2). Subsequently, she left Virginia, her parents’ home, declaring that “Rachel Shilsky is dead as far as I’m concerned. She had to die in order for me, the rest of me, to live” (*CW*, 2).

Leaving her parents, Ruth McBride has also decided to definitely reject her racial heritage. Yet, rigidity and the lack of family affection, as the novel discloses later on, were not the only reasons for her disconnection from her parental heritage. Indeed, she was deeply affected by the incestuous relationship imposed on her by her father during her youth:

Anytime he [her father] had a chance, he’d try to get close to me or crawl into bed with me and molest me. I was afraid of Tateh [her father] and had no love for him at all. I dreaded him and was relieved anytime he left the house. But it affected me in a lot of ways, what he did to me. I had very low self-esteem as a child, which I kept with me for many, many years; and even now I don’t want to be around anyone who is domineering or pushing me around because it makes me nervous. I’m only telling you this because you’re my son and I want you to know the truth and nothing less. I did have low self-esteem as a child. I felt low. Folks will run with that, won’t they? They’ll say, “Oh, she felt low, so she went on and married a nigger.” Well, I don’t care. Your father changed my life. He taught me about a God who lifted me up and forgave me and made me new... (*CW*, 42-43).

This incestuous relationship with her father destroyed her self-esteem, and as Ruth concludes, it was out of a feeling of low self-esteem that she has chosen to marry with a black who occupies the lowest scale in the social construct of racial hierarchy. According to the then social laws and prescriptions, a Jew was not entitled to marry a black:

The law wasn’t for the black man in Virginia in those days, it was against him. You know, the thing was, I was supposed to be white and “number one,” too. That was a big thing in the South. You’re white, and even if you’re a Jew, since you’re white you’re better than a so-called colored. Well, I didn’t feel number one with nobody but him, and I didn’t give a boot



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that he was black. He was kind! And good! I knew that! And I wanted to tell folks that, I wanted to shout out, “Hey y’all, it really doesn’t matter!” (CW, 113)

Thus, blacks are sorts of “forbidden fruits” for white girls. Unconsciously, this fact is a psychological insignia for Rachel’s to uncover the “mystery.” Moreover, Rachel’s union with a black man also holds from a rebellious attitude, her desire of self-affirmation against her father’s tight authority. Actually, she knew that her father despised blacks. So for her, there was no better way of giving him a blow, to offend him than marrying a person of black origin:

If there was one thing Tateh didn’t like more than gentiles, it was black folks. And if there was one thing he didn’t like more than black folks in general, it was black men in particular. So it stands to reason that the first thing I fell in love with in life was a black man. I didn’t do it on purpose. I was a rebellious little girl in my own quiet way, but I wasn’t so rebellious that I wanted to risk my own life or anybody else’s life (CW, 107).

Although she was linked to the black community through marriage, Ruth McBride continued to experience rejection, for her new ascription was not validated by some blacks. The reason was that, within the black-white dichotomous framework, Jewish as a category of representation was seen as white by default. Thus, given her affinity with the dominant race, blacks were reluctant to accept her in their community. Indeed, the relationships between both minorities (Jews and blacks) were also tainted with racial discriminations. As a consequence, her inbetweenness was not accepted by some blacks:

Some black folks never did accept me. Most did, but there were always a few running around saying “Nubian this” and “Nubian that” and always talking about Africa and all this. Well, I’m a mother of black children, and nobody will ever deny me my children, and they can put that in their Nubian pipe and smoke it. All this Nubian (CW, 231-232).

This discrimination occurred even in the church where Mrs. McBride expected to be welcome heartedly, for she had helped her husband build it. Instead, she was disappointed by the black pastor’s attitude toward her: “Instead he treated her like an outsider, a foreigner, a white person, greeting her after service with the obsequious smile and false sincerity that blacks reserve for white folks when they don’t know them that well or don’t trust them, or both” (CW, 252).



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On the whole, Ruth became an alienated character. Her whiteness was denied to her, she suffered the pressures of racialization by mainstream society, and at the same time, she was not welcome within the black community. She turned to be a sort of marginal person, who took insults from blacks as well as from whites, as her son recalls:

I remember two black women pointing at us, saying, 'Look at that white bitch,' and a white man screaming at Mommy somewhere in Manhattan, calling her a 'nigger lover.' Mommy ignored them all, unless the insults threatened her children, at which time she would turn and fight back like an alley cat, hissing, angry and fearless. She had a casual way of ignoring affronts, slipping past insults to her whiteness like a seasoned boxer slips punches (*CW*, 31-32).

Marginalized by both races, Ruth McBride, as a tragic character became, according to her son, "a flying compilation of competing interests and conflicts, a black woman in white skin, with black children and a white woman's physical problem" (*CW*, 260). She had her concerns about both races: white and black; and what she decided to do was simply to be reasonable in her relationships with each race:

White folks, she felt, were implicitly evil towards blacks, yet she forced us to go to white schools to get the best education. Blacks could be trusted more, but anything involving blacks was probably slightly substandard. She disliked people with money yet was in constant need of it. She couldn't stand racists of either color and had great distaste for bourgeois blacks who sought to emulate rich whites by putting on airs and 'doing silly things like covering their couches with plastic and holding teacups with their pinkies out' (*CW*, 29-30).

In the end, she attempted to carve out a new definition of self by developing a new consciousness about race. Indeed, she decided to overthrow the old conventions and prejudices about races and started a new outlook on the existing and preconceived racial assumptions. This racial emancipation underpins her spirit of independence and her insistence on freedom, which are most clearly seen in her willingness to shape a new identity for her children. In other words, her personal experience played an important role in her children's identity construction. More specifically, she purported to influence or fashion their identities beyond the racial boundaries.

## **2) Fashioning James' Identity Across the Racial Boundaries**



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Fashioning may suggest, as Stephen Greenblatt argues, “the achievement of a less tangible shape: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving.”<sup>9</sup> James McBride’s process of identity formation is subject to processes of power and identity regulation at home as well as outside home.

Identity is something that is carried out by an individual within a particular social context, and Home is, as Nicola Yau observes, “a significant player in identity formation.”<sup>10</sup> In Wilmington, Delaware, where the McBride family has just settled, race was a prevailing daily issue. They lived as minority people with a lower status in a majority-dominated society:

We were shocked by the racial division of the city and surrounding county, where most of the black kids attended understaffed and underfunded city schools while whites attended sparkling clean suburban schools with fantastic facilities. The segregated schools came as a complete surprise to Mommy, who had not even considered that problem, and the southern vibe of the city – anything south of Canal Street in Manhattan was the South to us – brought back unpleasant memories for Mommy. She hates the South (*CW*, 180).

Beside this external world, there was the one of Ruth McBride where race, though a silenced experience sealed within the psyche, was haunting. James McBride introduces that particular world: “The question of race was like the power of the moon in my house. It’s what made the river flow, the ocean swell, and the tide rise, but it was a silent power, intractable, indomitable, indisputable, and thus completely ignorable. Mommy kept us at a frantic living pace that left no time for the problem” (*CW*, 94).

Though race was a prevalent matter in the McBride’s household, it was underplayed in the name of what Stephen Greenblatt designates as one of the governing conditions common to most instances of self-fashioning: “The power generated to attack the alien in the name of the authority is produced in excess and threatens the authority it sets out to defend. Hence self-fashioning always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Op. Cit.*, P. 370.

<sup>10</sup> Nicola Yau, “Celtic Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Exploring Identity among Second Generation Chinese in Ireland,” online <<http://www.translocations.ie>>, P. 62.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Op. Cit.*, P.377.





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At home, Ruth McBride was the central pillar in the upbringing of her children, and as they were growing up, she taught them to rise above race matters. “Matters involving race and identity she ignored” (*CW*, 9), was her philosophy, and in order to instil this guiding vision in her children, she created a private world that was different from the real world and that she intended to hide from the external world:

She insisted on absolute privacy, excellent school grades, and trusted no outsiders of either race. We were instructed never to reveal details of our home life to any figures of authority: teachers, social workers, cops, storekeepers, or even friends. If anyone asked us about our home life, we were taught to respond with, “I don’t know,” and for years I did just that. Mommy’s house was an entire world that she created (*CW*, 27).

Moreover, during conversations with her children, Ruth McBride avoided or refused to address racial issues. Whenever she was asked questions related to her racial origin, she simply found ways to elude the subject:

When I was a boy, I used to wonder where my mother came from, how she got on this earth. When I asked her where she was from, she would say, ‘God made me,’ and change the subject. When I asked her if she was white, she’d say, ‘No. I’m light-skinned,’ and change the subject again. Answering questions about her personal history did not jibe with Mommy’s view of parenting twelve curious, wild, brown-skinned children (*CW*, 20).

Yet, Ruth’s disposition to inculcate her philosophy about race to her children was threatened by the social and racial prejudice of the American society. In other words, the mother’s teachings about race collided with the violent white/black opposition of the time. Ruth acted against the racist prescriptions, and as a result, people from the outside world ceaselessly bothered her:

Yet Mommy refused to acknowledge her whiteness. Why she did so was not clear, but even my teachers seemed to know she was white and I wasn’t. On open school nights, the question most often asked by my schoolteachers was: “Is James adopted?” which always prompted an outraged response from Mommy (*CW*, 23).

Another example is the following when her inquisitive son James McBride asked her why she didn’t look like the other mothers:

“Because I’m not them,” she said.



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“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m your mother.”

“Then why don’t you look like Rodney’s mother, or Pete’s mother? How come you don’t look like me?”

“I do look like you. I’m your mother. You ask too many questions. Educate your mind. School is important. Forget Rodney and Pete. Forget their mothers. You remember school. Forget everything else. Who cares about Rodney and Pete! When they go one way, you go the other way. Understand? When they go one way, you go the other way. You hear me?”  
(*CW*, 13)

In her responses, she always tried to rebuff societal pressure and convince James not to value the “supposedly differences” between her and the other women of their neighborhood. In the meanwhile, she urged him to forget about racial differences and set his mind on school, religion and economic success, which for her, constitute the real axes of human identification. Since race was not important in her eyes, she tried to transfer a new type of awareness to her offspring:

She had little time for games and even less time for identity crises. She and my father brought a curious blend of Jewish-European and African-American distrust and paranoia into our house. On his end, my father, Andrew McBride, a Baptist minister, had his doubts about the world accepting his mixed family. He always made sure his kids never got into trouble, was concerned about money, and trusted the providence of the Holy Father to do the rest (*CW*, 28-29).

Her refusal to acknowledge her racial identity and living oblivious of racial considerations sometimes prompted her to some attitudes and behavior that appeared quite strange to her children as well as to other people, whites or blacks. An example of such marginal attitudes was her love for riding bicycle in spite of her old age: “She would ride in slow motion across the street, Murdock Avenue in the St. Albans section of Queens, the only white person in sight, as cars swerved around her and black motorists gawked at the strange, middle-aged white lady riding her ancient bicycle” (*CW*, 7).

This riding of bicycle is characteristic of her quality of an independent person free from the social stigmas linked to race. It is exactly what she wanted to pass on to James: “The image of her riding that bicycle typified her whole existence to me. Her oddness, her complete



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nonawareness of what the world thought of her, a nonchalance in the face of what I perceived to be imminent danger from blacks and whites who disliked her for being a white person in a black world. She saw none of it” (*CW*, 7-8).

This attitude, however, caused some trouble in James who feared for her security. It was a period of interracial hostilities and confrontations brought about by the Black Panthers who set out to fight for blacks’ civil rights: “I thought black power would be the end of my mother. I had swallowed the white man’s fear of the Negro, as we were called back then, whole” (*CW*, 26-27). Yet, Ruth was not moved by this movement, she seemed unconcerned, as James asserts, “her motto was, ‘If it doesn’t involve your going to school or church, I could care less about it and my answer is no whatever it is’” (*CW*, 27).

On the whole, Ruth McBride tried to fashion her children’s identity beyond the orbit of race, a transcendent identity that makes race a social invention. Her efforts were likely to have effects upon James’s identity development during his childhood. Yet, over the years, James tended to struggle with an insecure and obscure sense of self, making the question “who am I” salient: “It had gotten to the point where I didn’t see why she made such a secret of it, and the part of me that wanted to understand who I was began to irk and itch at me, like a pesky mosquito bite that cries out to be scratched” (*CW*, 205).

### **3) James’ Burden of Double Consciousness**

Here, we deal with James’ struggle with what W. E. B. Du Bois calls the double consciousness of the black man in his quest for a self-identity and authenticity. Generally, the individual’s growth process from infant to adulthood necessarily calls for a conflict between the parents and him. This conflict portends the germs of the child’s self-affirmation which is opposed to the parents’ vision and the social conventions. In James’ case, this growth process to the adulthood involves a problem of self-identification in a multi-racial society.

When James grew older, particularly when he became a teenager, the contradictions between the parental input and the external world, as we have discussed above, loomed large in his self-discovery process. In other words, as an adolescent, James McBride became deeply concerned with the opposition or confrontation between the two worlds; the daily realities of the



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outside world which reflected the racial prejudices and discrimination and the world of his mother where racial matters should be excluded. A consequence was the collapse of his mother's microcosm:

We did not consider ourselves poor or deprived, or depressed, for the rules of the outside world seemed meaningless to us as children. But as we grew up and fanned out into the world as teenagers and college students, we brought the outside world home with us, and the world that Mommy had so painstakingly created began to fall apart (CW, 95).

His self-perception was opposed to his perception by others. This led him to periods of confusion and maladjustment. To start with, he could not match his physical characteristics with the ones of his mother, nor with his relatives and other people he wished to resemble or connect. In a nutshell, he was without peers:

I had what black folks called 'good' hair, because it was curly as opposed to nappy. I was light-skinned or brown-skinned, and girls thought I was cute despite my shyness. Yet I myself had no idea who I was. I loved my mother yet looked nothing like her. Neither did I look like the role models in my life – my stepfather, my godparents, other relatives – all of whom were black. And they looked nothing like the other heroes I saw, the guys in the movies, white men like Steve McQueen and Paul Newman who beat the bad guys and in the end got the pretty girl – who, incidentally, was always white (CW, 91).

James was thus exposed to questions and dilemmas of belonging, integration and identification. Out of this internal conflict that created a feeling of confusion and anguish, James eventually entered into an identity crisis, developing the trauma of double consciousness. Trauma refers to, according to Ase Lundell, "the very strong emotional feelings that torment" James.<sup>12</sup> One of the manifestations of this trauma was his tendency to reject his white mother in public places:

By age ten, I was coming into my own feelings about myself and my own impeding manhood, and going out with Mommy, which had been a privilege and an honor at age five, had become a dreaded event. I had reached a point where I was ashamed of her and didn't want the world to see my white mother. When I went out with my friends, I'd avoid telling her

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<sup>12</sup> Ase Lundell, "Jess-who-wasn't-Jess' "Double Consciousness and Identity construction in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*," <[www.essays.se/essay/acbc27c68/](http://www.essays.se/essay/acbc27c68/)>, Karlstadts University, 2010, P. 4.



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where we were playing because I didn't want her coming to the park to fetch me (*CW*, 100).

Actually, James was confronted with a process of internalization of his double origin. As a product of miscegenation, his physical hybridity is doubled with a double consciousness. Within the same soul, there is a coexistence of a Euro-American consciousness plus an African consciousness. To use Paul Gilroy's terms, James McBride stands "between two cultural assemblages," and his concern springs from a mental confusion about the social realities he was faced with in that multi-racial society locked in an antagonistic relationship. Through blood, he was connected with both races, yet he had the feeling of not belonging to either. Confused, he took the question to his mother:

"Am I black or white?"

"You're a human being. Educate yourself or you'll be a nobody!"

"Will I be a black nobody or just a nobody?"

"If you're a nobody, it doesn't matter what color you are."

"That doesn't make sense" (*CW*, 92).

As a matter of fact, James was able to see both sides of his racial identity, but the oppositions between both races made it difficult for him to integrate. Thus, he developed some pathological disturbances. Shao Yuh-Chuan is right when he argues that, "In the process of reconstructing their individual and cultural identity, black subjects must experience and confront the pathological disturbances caused by ideological fantasy and the burden of racial trauma."<sup>13</sup>

The ideological fantasy involves the myth of inferiority and superiority concerning human races, and especially here the representation of God. Granted that God has created the world and its inhabitants, including human beings, He is the measure of reference for all human beings. Thus, for the young James, it became necessary to disclose the color of His skin in order for him to understand his own social position and comfort his identity which was torn between two opposed races. His psychological trouble called in him a metaphysical question, whose aim was for him to legitimate his identity and relieve his anguish. To the question whether God was

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<sup>13</sup> Shao Yuh Chuan, "The Double Consciousness of Cultural Pariahs – Fantasy, Trauma and Black Identity in Tony Morrison's *Tar Baby*," in *EURAMERICA*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2006, P. 553.



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black or white, his mother responded: “It [spirit] doesn’t have a color. God is the color of water. Water doesn’t have a color” (*CW*, 50-51).

Ruth McBride’s statement “God is the color of water” holds from her desire to make her son transcend the constraints of racial particularities. It is an invitation to awaken a new definition, a new consciousness, and ultimately a new sense of self. God is the color of water can here be linked to personal identity, which for Ruth McBride lies beyond the orbit of racial identification. Richie, one of James’ elder brothers was offered quite the same response by Reverend Owens, a black pastor. And Richie replied that if Jesus “ain’t white and He ain’t black, they should make Him gray. Jesus should be gray” (*CW*, 52-53).

“Gray” is the blending of the white and black colors. According to Richie, this color should be the color of the Creator of all human beings. Human beings are supposed to reflect the image of God or Jesus, and God is supposed to be universal. Hence, He should be representative of all his creatures’ colors. Thus, in Richie’s symbolization, “gray” stands for racial syncretism and equality. And to resolve his color confusion, “he believed he was neither black nor white but green like the comic book character the Incredible Hulk” (*CW*, 52). Thus, Richie tried to transcend boundaries in his identity construction by undermining reality.

As far as James is concerned, the question of his identity remained unresolved. He still felt the trauma of being unable to clearly define who he was. In order to achieve a relatively stable unified identity, he had to reach a psychic wholeness; which means that he had to suppress the feeling of insecurity and attain a sense of stability. Meanwhile, the permanent condition of the unresolved double consciousness prompted him to self-effacement, a necessary strategy for survival.

A first attempt in this perspective of solving his identity crisis is his escape from reality. Indeed, he tried to comfort himself by creating his own hypothetical world, an illusory assumption of reality:

To further escape from painful reality, I created an imaginary world for myself. I believed my true self was a boy who lived in the mirror. I’d lock myself in the bathroom and spend long hours playing with him. He looked just like me. I’d stare at him. Kiss him. Make faces at him and order him



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around. Unlike my siblings, he had no opinions. He would listen to me. “If I’m here and you’re me, how can you be there at the same time.” I’d ask. He’d shrug and smile. I’d shout at him, abuse him verbally. “Give an answer!” I’d snarl. I would turn to leave, but when I wheeled around he was always there, waiting for me. I had an ache inside, a longing, but I didn’t know where it came from or why I had it. The boy in the mirror, he didn’t seem to have an ache. He was free. He was never hungry, he had his own bed probably, and his mother wasn’t white. I hated him. “Go away!” I’d shout. “Hurry up! Get on out!” but he’d never leave (*CW*, 90-91).

This scene of the mirror points out to James’ doubleness, his dual identity, and it is also one of the manifestations of the pathological dimension of double consciousness. Indeed, in order to relieve some of the pressures he felt, his feverish imagination created an imaginary ego which was supposed to be screened from the “painful reality.” In psychoanalytical term, it is a strategy of resistance or a defense mechanism.

Nevertheless, this psychological flight was just a temporary and evasive solution which did not relieve James’ wonders about his identity. Then, his desire to feel secure led him to a second attempt, which was a flight into the street. The reasons for this choice are provided in the following:

The men [the men in the street] did not seem to be afraid of the police, nor did they dislike them. Their lives just seemed complete without the white man. I liked that. Their world was insular, away from the real world that I was running from. They called me “New York,” and let me sit out there all day, practicing my flute and smoking all the weed I wanted. I turned fifteen on the Corner but could act like I was twenty-five, and no one cared. I could hide. No one knew me. No one knew my past, my white mother, my dead father, nothing. It was perfect. My problems seemed far, far away (*CW*, 147).

James’ flying into the street can be interpreted as his wish to escape from situations that were confusing. This further translates his will to break free from the daily limitations that he experienced. Street children are children without home, and living in the street is to live anonymous, free from the troublesome realities of home. Furthermore, the street gives way to an open expression of James’ hybrid identity, which is characterized by uncertainty, marginalization and feeling of homelessness.



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All things considered, both attempts to escape were perhaps temporary solutions, but fruitless answers to his identity issue. They were even illusionary defense mechanisms, some desperate acts of hope of recovering from his traumatic experience of double consciousness, and James was still destabilized as he was not able to reconnect his dual heritage. Eventually, he moved toward a transcendent understanding of himself.

#### **4) Crossing the Racial Boundaries**

James had problem with his identity because he was associated with two worlds. He developed in-between feelings in the process of his identity construction. He was divided into two conflicting beings striving against each other. How to reconcile identity positions that were considered as mutually exclusive? Or, how to develop cohesion between the two parts of himself? To answer this question is to provide the answer for James' identity crisis.

Boundary crossing refers to the emergence of a new identity through the fusion of elements which are constructed as belonging to his white and black origins. Hence, the resolution of James' double consciousness occurred when he became aware of his dual origin: black and white. Under considerable conflicting pressures, he sometimes wished he were only black; yet, over the years, he came to admit his maternal heritage, his Jewish origin. Eventually, he considered his belonging to both races as a privilege:

My own embarrassment overrode all other feelings. As I walked home, holding Mommy's hand while she fumed, I thought it would be easier if we were just one color, black or white. I didn't want to be white. My siblings had already instilled the notion of black pride in me. I would have preferred that Mommy were black. Now, as a grown man, I feel privileged to have come from two worlds. My view of the world is not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul. I don't consider myself Jewish, but when I look at Holocaust photographs of Jewish women whose children have been wrenched from them by Nazi soldiers, the women look like my own mother and I think to myself, *There but for the grace of God goes my own mother – and by extension, myself* (CW, 103).

As a biracial individual, James had the challenge of reconciling identity with two opposing groups while belonging to neither. Adding to this challenge is living with society's desire to classify him into one or the other of his differing backgrounds. James' self-conception was influenced by his internalization of outside prejudices and values ascribed to the races. So,





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in order to integrate his two conflicting selves, he decided to deny or suppress the myths about the races. Here, he deconstructs some of the myths held by blacks about the Jews:

Conversely, when I hear black “leaders” talking about “Jewish slave owners” I feel angry and disgusted, knowing that they’re inflaming people with lies and twisted history, as if all seven of the Jewish slave owners in the antebellum South, or however few there were, are responsible for the problems of African-Americans now. Those leaders are no better than their Jewish counterparts who spin statistics in marvelous ways to make African-Americans look like savages, criminals, drags on society, and “animals” (a word quite popular when used to describe blacks these days). I don’t belong to any of those groups. I belong to the world of one God, one people (*CW*, 104).

Over the years, James McBride’s awareness of race and self reached a certain stage which allowed him to know himself and understand the world around him. For instance, as a college student in Boston, he learned that race could be simply an ideological matter, and it was sometimes mixed with the issue of class, politics, and education. He explained: “Boston was not an easy place to have a racial identity crisis either. Its racial problems are complicated, spilling over into matters of class, history, politics, even education. It was more than I wanted to face, and I had to run” (*CW*, 204).

Race is a social construct. Upon this realization, James tried to foster a sense of self by simultaneously rejecting the societal limits, and accepting his dual nature as a biracial individual. James’s self-knowledge and self-acceptance are also due to his awareness that not all whites adopted discriminatory attitudes towards him.

This discovery occurred when he traveled back to Suffolk in his search for his mother’s family members. He was pleased to see that he was accepted by some of his Jewish relatives. This different treatment stirred up a new consciousness:

Like most of the Jews in Suffolk they treated me very kindly, truly warm and welcoming, as if I were one of them, which in an odd way I suppose I was. I found it odd and amazing when white people treated me that way, as if there were no barriers between us. It said a lot about this religion – Judaism – that some of its followers, old southern crackers who talked with southern twangs and wore straw hats, seemed to believe that its covenants went beyond the color of one’s skin (*CW*, 224).



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The meeting with his Jewish relatives engendered a great emotion that would reinforce his link with the Jews, and above all, usher him in to a new awareness about himself and human beings in general. This new self-discovery is a qualitative bond, a sort of new birth of himself, a psychological awakening that was made possible through the dissipation of all the superficial considerations about race. He relates:

A penetrating loneliness covered me, lay on me so heavily I had to sit down and cover my face. I had no tears to shed. They were done long ago, but a new pain and a new awareness were born inside me. The uncertainty that lived inside me began to dissipate; the ache that the little boy who stared in the mirror felt was gone. My own humanity was awakened, rising up to greet me with a handshake as I watched the first glimmers of sunlight peek over the horizon. There is such a big difference between being dead and alive, I told myself, and the greatest gift that anyone can give anyone else is life. And the greatest sin a person can do to another is to take away that life. Next to that, all the rules and religions in the world are secondary; mere words and beliefs that people choose to believe and kill and hate by. My life won't be lived that way, and neither, I hope, will my children's. I left for New York happy in the knowledge that my grandmother had not suffered and died for nothing (CW, 229).

So far, James was located in between the existing classification systems, and in between the accepted social positions. He could not feel totally free and at ease, he needed to present himself as a whole, an authentic person, so what he did was to discount racial categorizations, and “fly solo”, as he put:

During the rare, inopportune social moments when I found myself squeezed between black and white, I fled to the black side, just as my mother had done, and did not emerge unless driven out by smoke and fire. Being mixed is like that tingling feeling you have in your nose just before you sneeze – you're waiting for it to happen but it never does. Given my black face and upbringing it was easy for me to flee into the anonymity of blackness, yet I felt frustrated to live in a world that considers the color of your face an immediate political statement whether you like it or not. It took years before I began to accept the fact that the nebulous “white man's world” wasn't as free as it looked; that class, luck, religion all factored in as well; that many white individuals' problems surpassed my own, often by a lot; that all Jews are not like my grandfather and that part of me is Jewish too. Yet the color boundary in my mind was the greatest hurdle. In order to clear it, my solution was to stay away from it and fly solo (CW, 261-262).



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As James grew up, he realized that race was an abstraction, a social construct, the reason why his mother had always encouraged him to understand himself as a “human being.” Hence, James opted out of the racial categorization and nurtured a self-understanding that was not grounded in race, but beyond the racial boundaries, and secured an identity of “a world citizen.” Thus, his traumatic experience of double consciousness was not left in a status quo.

Yet this achievement did not put an end to his search for identity, for, identity is, as Nicola Yau notes, “a multifaceted concept which signifies states of becoming as signposts guide individuals on their route to identity.”<sup>14</sup> Identity is a lifelong process, an unresolved struggle; and this explains why at the end of the novel, the question “who am I” is still salient in James’s preoccupation. He has reached thirty, but he is still seeking for his identity:

But I did quit, partly because I got tired of running, and partly because the little ache I had known as a boy was no longer a little ache when I reached thirty. It was a giant, roaring, musical riff, screaming through my soul like a distorted rock guitar with the sound turned all the way up, telling me, get on with your life: Play sax, write books, compose music, do something, express yourself, who the hell are you anyway? There are two worlds bursting inside me trying to get out. I had to find out more about who I was, and in order to find out who I was, I had to find out who my mother was (CW, 266).

Thus, definitely, identity is not a definite work, it is never complete; this explains the following statement by Koen Van Laer and Maddy Janssens: “Identity has been a story of fantasy all along, one which we write to suppress insecurities and attain a sense of stability.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The story of *The Color of Water* unveils an intricate quest for identity. James McBride has parents with a non-western background, living in southern America. His double origin makes his identity process extremely precarious. As an infant, he was easily satisfied with the teachings of his mother Mrs. McBride about identity.

James, along with his other sisters and brothers, was taught to conceive of identity as a concept beyond the orbit of race. For their Jewish mother, the skin color is not central to one’s life. What are really important for human being are not his or her physical characteristics and

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<sup>14</sup> Nicola Yau, Op. Cit., P. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Koen Van Laer and Maddy Janssens, Op. Cit., Pp. 4-5.



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racial features. Rather, if differences exist between the people, the differences lie in some mental abilities, which are essentially developed through education and religion. It is in that logic that she leans on education and religion as the basic pillars of her beloved mixed-blood family.

When James became an adolescent, his desire for self-assertion and more importantly his self-definition led him to an opposition with his mother as well as the societal categorizations about race. In other words, James' self-affirmation process is a process that involves on the one hand the necessity of negation of different myths about races; and on the other, the assimilation of other realities or social conventions.

Some of the sources of these conflicts are James's willingness to be independent from his mother, his choice for a personal ideal free from his mother's influence, and mostly his double consciousness within a social and historical context characterized by racial confrontations. James McBride's autobiographical fiction takes place in the United-States during the racial turmoil of the 1960s.

It is in this historical context that James, a biracial individual has to foster an identity. As we have tried to show, the process of his identity development consists in striving, in Du Bois's term, "to merge his double self into a better and truer self."<sup>16</sup> This identity could not be achieved without a constant struggle with the self and others.

In the end, he opted out of racial categorization for a transcendent identity, exactly as the title of the book suggests. "The color of water" which stands as the title of the novel is indeed Ruth McBride's answer to James's question: "What's the color of God?" His question goes back to the essence of life, the essence of human being, and especially to God who is the Creator. It is an attempt to better understand some logic of life. And, "God is the color of water" is to underline the transcendental and universal character of God. God does not have color, as water does not have color. God does not favor any skin-color, any race. Thus, the phrase: "the color of water" seems absurd, nonsensical; so are any human considerations based on race.

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<sup>16</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York, New American Library, P. 45.



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