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From Parent to Child, Writer to Reader: Tracing Cultural Inheritance in Contemporary Black
Memoir

In the preface of her 2018 memoir *Becoming*, Michelle Obama writes, “Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own” (xi). Claiming ownership of these stories allows black writers to have a tangible inheritance for not only their children, but also for their readers. Obama encourages her readers to embrace the history that shapes them; in so doing, the narratives they hear and recount become part of their cultural capital. As United States poet laureate Tracy K. Smith writes in *Ordinary Light*, relating a message from her daughter’s school, “When we tell our stories . . . we make power” (278). This power not only strengthens the writers and storytellers, but those who inherit their stories. Such an inheritance contrasts the typical definition of the word, one that relies on money and materiality to indicate value.

A 2016 economic study shows that, in America, inheriting material wealth benefits white families over five times more than it benefits black families. In addition to the disparity of inheritances’ ultimate financial benefits, “More than half of white families end up with more wealth than their parents, while only 23 percent of blacks are able to do the same” (Jones 1). Being the heir of significant amounts of money or property is advantageous in a society that values such material prosperity, but the inequality of this financial inheritance is clearly indicative of a racially divided system. Cultural inheritance, however, is nondiscriminatory and

is received by all people at some level without any particularly quantifiable measures of its effects. Psychologist Dr. Jacob Peedicayil defines cultural inheritance as “an inheritance system characterized by the storage and transmission of information by communication, imitation, teaching and learning” (158), and this definition is widely accepted in the study of psychology and sociology. Culture and information, consisting in this context of stories, beliefs, and attitudes surrounding race, is commonly communicated through writing, whether it be interpersonal communication, poetry, journalism, fiction, or autobiographical writings. Seeing inheritance, then, as a vehicle for cultural knowledge and information through the methods outlined by Peedicayil, shapes the way one views the creation and molding of a sociocultural identity, particularly in regards to race.

A number of recent African American memoir writers and literary critics are concerned with parental influences and the hefty task of sorting out the valuable from the problematic within their cultural inheritances. In writing about Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, G. Thomas Couser explains that what he calls “patriography,” or children writing about their fathers, “is inherently relational and intersubjective life writing; it grows out of and attempts to represent an intimate human relationship. It is also, of course, intergenerational: it attempts to negotiate or understand a family legacy as passed on from father to son, an act I call filiation” (260). Such a form of memoir attempts to interpret family legacies or inheritances, and Couser’s study claims Obama’s memoir to be a part of this subgenre.

Recent examples of black memoir include similar patterns of cultural inheritance. In an autobiographical extended essay written as if a letter to his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates quite clearly positions himself as both heir and father, passing on an inheritance through the writing of *Between the World and Me*. As she writes *Ordinary Light* in the wake of her mother’s death,

Tracy K. Smith tackles the complex gifts and burdens left to her by her beloved parent. In *Negroland*, cultural critic Margo Jefferson reflects on a racial past whose rules and expectations were clearly laid out for her by her parents, both explicitly and implicitly. Each of these three memoirists lend a voice to the defining of a broad and multi-faceted African American culture, using their personal experiences to transmit a conception of blackness to readers and future generations. I will demonstrate how the memoir genre serves as an especially powerful mode of cultural inheritance, both as it transmits and elucidates cultural messages and as it reflects on the inheritances received by its authors. By telling the stories of childhoods shaped by different parents and different conceptions of blackness, Coates, Smith, and Jefferson demonstrate how racial socialization happens in a literary context through silence on racial issues, expectations for achievement, and protection of the black body. Writing about the cultural inheritances they received in turn passes on an inheritance to their readers. A focus on contemporary black memoir writers will shape the conversation around the specific cultural inheritance of being black in America.

Patterns of cultural inheritance passed on from parents to children recorded in sociological, psychological, and literary studies provide a framework through which to view the content and creation of contemporary African-American memoirs. Another way that cultural inheritance is characterized is through the term “racial socialization,” defined by psychologist Ashly Gaskin as “[t]he way in which parents teach their youth how to navigate the often contradictory messages or teach them what it means to be black” (1). She furthers this definition by explaining how parents may approach the racial socialization of their children and at what stages they may address particular topics. Using previously conducted sociological studies to inform her claims and summary, Gaskin provides a background for reading the language of

socialization and inheritance in the memoirs addressed in this paper. Specific racial socialization experienced by Margo Jefferson includes a clear definition of how she is viewed by the Chicago society which surrounds her: “‘We’re considered upper-class Negroes and upper-middle-class Americans,’ Mother says. ‘But most people would like to consider us Just More Negroes’” (43). Whether explicit or implicit, such tactics of transmitting racial and cultural lessons and values are found throughout the memoir genre, especially among black memoirists.

A 2006 study conducted by sociologist Susan McHale and colleagues provides examples of the way that parents influence the outcomes of this racial socialization which prove helpful to the analysis of cultural inheritance within the memoir genre. In this study, “*Racial socialization* was assessed using two subscales . . . that assessed cultural socialization (5 items; e.g., ‘I’ve read and provided Black history books to my child’) and preparation for bias (7 items; e.g., ‘I’ve talked to my children about racism’)” (McHale et al. 1392). Examples of cultural socialization and preparation for bias are found throughout the three memoirs addressed in this paper. Tracy K. Smith describes the bookshelves she grew up with, “*Black Beauty, Anne of Green Gables. To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* stood beside *Yes I Can*, by Sammy Davis, Jr. . . . All of them snugly in place and restful, having made their peace in a past that predated me” (11-12). Such literary examples of cultural inheritance take the terms used to define racial socialization and transform them into a way to reflect on their own identities as influenced by their parents. By writing and recording these experiences for wider audiences than for only their children, memoir writers Smith, Jefferson, and Coates create tangible inheritances for their readers that attempt to transmit the key elements of their black identity.

Literary scholars have remarked upon a pattern of this phenomenon in contemporary African-American literature, noting that inheritance, while seen as something that adds value,

can also be a burden. Scholar Erica R. Edwards writes about the ways that literature, specifically works published after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, explore the inheritance of culture and history, arguing that African-American literature after this time “treat[s] the legacy of civil rights not as a glorious inheritance but rather as a cumbersome burden” (202). This claim attaches value to the use of the word inheritance—deeming it a positive thing that implies gain and wealth and contrasting it with the “cumbersome burden” that the legacy of the past passes on. This paper will trace the ways that such an inheritance can encompass both the positive and negative aspects of racial socialization and how it influences the formation of black identity in the memoir genre. By viewing what is more clinically referred to as racial socialization as a pattern of cultural inheritance, I apply the technical to the literary, showing how contemporary African American memoir writers have reflected on their own racial upbringing to give shape to many of the definitions of what it means to be black in America. The literature created as a result of this racial socialization serves to both recount experiences that shape black identity and to do some of the shaping and socializing themselves, passing on cultural values through their autobiographical works.

As she elegizes her mother in *Ordinary Light*, Tracy K. Smith uses her writing as a form of grieving; she processes the cultural inheritance she receives and in so doing, gains understanding of her cultural identity through the formation of concrete ideas passed down from her mother. Among other influences, the event of her mother’s death was a key to developing a sense of self through writing. In an interview with Charles Henry Rowell, Smith says, “I wanted to write about my relationship with her in ways that didn’t always necessarily end with death, yet the death was all I could think about, all I could really take seriously” (862). In terms of inheritance and legacy, Smith is profoundly influenced by her mother’s life and death. *Ordinary*

Light serves as a vessel for reflection on the ways her upbringing was molded by her mother's actions and attitudes. When grappling with the death of her mother and the religious precepts and conceptions of God that her mother left her, Smith asks, "Was that what my mother felt when she prayed? Was it what she quieted herself to hear so often during the days and nights, calling it *Lord*? Perhaps it was and is external, adrift, moving among the living like weather" (311). These questions reflect Smith's searching for God because of how important she knew that idea was to her mother. As an inheritance, religious belief, though not directly tied to race, is central to Smith's conception of her own place in the world. Through attempting to translate what her mother taught her into a sense of self, Smith demonstrates how the death of a parent is a catalyst to receiving one's cultural inheritance.

The inability to know everything about her mother's past is an obstacle Smith encounters in trying to process her passing, but the very condition of silence surrounding racial issues is a form of racial socialization that her mother passes on to her. Smith's writing is tinged with the uncertainty of her knowledge and understanding of the world and the way she, and her mother, fit into it. When reflecting on a visit to her mother's home in the South, Smith writes,

There was so much I would never understand, so much that would never belong to me, not really. There were even parts of my mother that I might never fully get a handle on— aspects that had come to life upon her return here and that would go dormant once we were back in California—but wasn't there a way to see that as a good thing, to take it as proof that we are, all of us, made up of near infinite facets? (62)

Smith's awareness of the incomprehensibility of the whole of a person allows her to accept that there are parts of her mother that are unreachable and seemingly not meant for her as her daughter. As a child in the South, her mother's experiences differ greatly from Tracy's

upbringing in the San Francisco Bay Area—more tainted by frequent racism and the history of segregation. Tracy’s mother exhibits restraint in sharing these parts of her life with her, and much of what she learns from her parents comes through observation rather than explicit sharing. One of the forms of racial socialization that Gaskin describes is “silence about race and racial issues” (1). Though Smith struggles with the inability to discover more about her mother’s feelings about growing up in the segregated South, it is this very struggle that her mother bequeaths her. This withholding challenges the idea of inheritance because it limits what her mother gives to her, but in recognizing the parts of her mother’s past that are inaccessible, Smith demonstrates a recognition of what she did receive and which elements of her identity are influenced by her mother.

The implicit value lessons Smith receives as a child raised by both her father and mother act as an indicator of how Smith feels about her blackness. Like her mother, Smith’s resists explicitly speaking about race to his children. In writing about the sources of her cultural inheritance, she demonstrates an ability to parse out lessons from what has been taught, fitting the pieces into her sense of self. In describing the precepts of racial injustice she was taught as a child, Smith recounts:

Our father was not what you’d call a race man. The vocabulary of social justice didn’t fit naturally in his mouth. . . . [H]e wasn’t blind to the subtle or glaring evidence of racial prejudice, but as far as he was concerned, the antidote was excellence, plain and simple: showing the world we were just as good, as smart, as adept, as brave, as *necessary* as anyone else. (131)

Tracy’s father subscribes to the idea that black people must do twice as much to overcome the racism that oppresses them. She certainly embodies part of this mantra in her pursuit of higher

education and her determination to succeed, but tries not to internalize the pressure of achievement devoid of passion and solely because she is black. Her father's distinct avoidance of discussions about race affects Smith's own questions about where she fits in a community where being black is unusual. As Gaskin writes, "What some parents also may not realize is that they are socializing their children around race whether they talk about race or not" (1). These implicit lessons are influential for Smith; without direct instruction, she understands her parents' opinions and perspectives and is able to articulate them in her reflections.

Smith's mother's questions are a form of racial socialization as well, giving Tracy power to form her own model of what it means to be black. When confronted at school by a girl who asks, "Don't you wish you were white?", Smith's mother's response is unimpassioned and brief: "When I told the story to my family over dinner, no one was surprised. 'Do you wish you were white?' my mother asked, and I told her that I didn't, by then sure that I never had" (127). The direct question posed by her mother helps Tracy come to an understanding about her own blackness, albeit not through the channels distinctly laid out in the study on racial socialization. *Ordinary Light* contains very few conversations regarding direct ideas about how to act as a black person in America, but the way that this memoir deals with transmitting cultural values serves as an illustration of how racial socialization functions in literary form. The cultural inheritance that Smith receives is received through young Tracy's observations and through the act of writing to process the memory of her mother. By keeping relatively quiet on subject matters dealing with racial identity, her parents nevertheless transmit important ideas about Smith's racial identity—to be black, and especially to be black and surrounded by white people, is to be quietly proud of oneself and to strive to achieve more than their white counterparts, thereby proving one's necessity to American society. Smith's understanding of her own place is

molded by the inheritance she receives, though much of what her parents teach her is an encouragement for her to learn for herself how to create an inheritance to then pass on to her own children.

Margo Jefferson's *Negroland* explores life as an upper-class black woman with roots in Chicago and illustrates the elite cultural history that her parents passed on to her, transforming her own cultural inheritance into a lesson for her reader. With more examples of explicit racial socialization than Smith recounts in *Ordinary Light*, Jefferson reflects on many of the cultural teachings her parents transmitted to her, often related to how someone from "Negroland" should act in society. Many of the stringent rules and recommendations from her parents come from the long and conflicted history of Negroland, the inheritance passed down through each generation. Of this inheritance, Jefferson writes:

Most whites knew little about us; only a few cared to know. We were taught that we embodied the best that was known and thought in—and of—Negro life. . . . We were taught that we were better than the whites who looked down on us—that we were better than most whites, period. But that this would rarely if ever be acknowledged by white people, with all their entitlement. Not the entitlement a government provides, but the kind history bestows. This is your birthright, says history. (37)

Seeing what was ingrained in her from a young age as a "birthright" given to all who saw themselves as part of Negroland anchors Jefferson's writing in the chain of cultural inheritance. She writes to a potentially white audience who might now learn about what it means to be black in an upper-class segment of America, and she writes to a younger generation of black readers who, through her memories and history lessons, might learn the traditions of the past she belongs to. In a 2016 review of *Negroland*, Toni Martin compares it with Clifford Thompson's memoir

Twin of Blackness, addressing the sources of cultural knowledge and the definitions of “blackness” for the two writers. In discussing Jefferson’s parents’ cultural education, Martin writes, “For generations educated black people were the sole keepers of their history, which was at best neglected and at worse effaced by mainstream historians” (10). This assessment of Jefferson’s upbringing highlights the parents as the gatekeepers to learning about the history and culture of her race. Similarly to Jefferson’s explanation of her birthright, Martin’s claim indicates the necessity of black self-aggrandizement and the explicit teaching of history. By demonstrating pride in and ownership over the black culture of their community, the inhabitants of Negroland are able to retain the birthright of their status, while fighting against the inequality of expectation afforded them by the systematic racism inherent in the American past and present.

Jefferson’s parents set forth specific expectations for achievement through the “cultural enrichment course” that they teach their children, helping her to form an idea of the type of black woman that Negroland should form. Jefferson recalls that in reaction to the newly integrated world she finds her children navigating, “Mother began her own cultural enrichment course with evening and weekend contributions from Daddy. Though the aim was national, the focus was Chicago, with a special emphasis on friends and acquaintances” (104). Jefferson begins a list of accomplishments and historical events, each beginning with the instructive phrase highlighting her mother’s knowledge: “Did you girls know that—” (104). The heritage elucidated in this self-proclaimed “cultural enrichment course” aided Jefferson and her sister in not only learning about their community and culture, but also in coming to an understanding of the expectations their parents had for them. In addition to very specific beauty standards set forth by the Negroland community, the expectation to be highly knowledgeable and well-educated laid out by Jefferson’s parents permeates all parts of her life. As a book critic for the *New York Times*,

Jefferson won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994, and reflecting on that experience she says, “I was aware of . . . every black writer who had gotten a Pulitzer or a, you know, MBA, something like that. So it - it mattered. I knew it was entering race history in a certain way. I was also aware that it was entering gender history in a certain way” (Gross). The acknowledgment of her own entrance into race history as the second black woman to win the Pulitzer reflects the expectations her parents set for her and how she continues their legacy by achieving at a high and public level. As a successful product of *Negroland* and her parents’ standards, Jefferson stands as an example of how the specific lessons taught her as a child influence her life moving forward.

The idea of an inheritance as receiving tangible items of value passed from parent to child illustrates the more metaphorical work of inheritance that Jefferson is accomplishing through the writing of *Negroland*. Her text more literally reflects such a conception of inheritance by detailing some of the items she received after her mother’s death. One item that she literally inherits from her mother is a “gold brocade cocktail dress with matching jacket” (232). Wearing the clothing her mother wore helps Jefferson recognize the ways that her mother’s gift of a cultural inheritance influences her now. She writes, “It makes me feel I’ve put on made-to-order armor. My mother’s armor. Armor that helped shield me from exclusion. Armor that helped shield me from inferiority” (232). The figurative armor referred to in these lines is the result of her mother teaching her about *Negroland* and what blackness should do for a young American woman. By internalizing the uplift her mother conveyed to her, Jefferson claims a pride in her race and in her own identity. Acknowledging the struggle it takes to surmount the difficulties of being black in America, she claims for herself the result of the years of progress and work bestowed on her through her parents’ life and teachings.

In his 2015 extended essay *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi uses the format of a letter written to his son to position him as heir to a black literary tradition while also transmitting his own perspective on black life in America. Of the three memoirists, he writes the most explicitly about passing on knowledge to his own progeny, reflecting a form of inheritance that serves to transmit certain ideals and advice. Howard Rambsy II, professor of literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, writes about the publication of *Between the World and Me*, remarking that “The epistolary format of Coates’s composition and the book’s title made it possible for Spiegel & Grau [Coates’s publisher] to link the writer’s work to two notable writers: James Baldwin and Richard Wright, respectively” (Rambsy 200). The publisher’s recognition of a previous tradition of black men writing extended essays in the form of letters allowed them to connect Coates to the writers of *The Fire Next Time* and the poem from which *Between the World and Me* takes its title. Additionally, in marking the key moments leading up to the book’s publication as well as the reactions to it in the media, Rambsy provides a modern look at how culture is transmitted; though the written word is the message here, the medium by which it is dispersed is new and modern—the Internet and television played key roles in *Between the World and Me*’s being read across the country. By both drawing on previous black writers’ models for transmitting culture and values and establishing his own work in a contemporary world that relies on new modes of communicating racial history and identity, Coates connects a long line of black writers attempting to pass on their perspectives and values.

By elucidating the specific points that he wishes to convey about what it means to be black, Coates takes on a role as cultural gatekeeper for his son and those reading *Between the World and Me*; at once providing historical and personal context and offering his interpretation of what must be understood about black identity—specifically, here, how to navigate literal and

figurative attacks against the black male body. At the outset of his memoir, after beginning with the poignant and simple address, “Son,” (Coates 5), he lists reasons why he feels this book is necessary—“I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help. . . . All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people” (Coates 9). By addressing the book to his son, Coates provides a framework through which the reader participates in the inheritance of the history and culture. In naming victims of racial violence of which his son would have already been aware, Coates deals in the dual nature of his task—both writing to pass on his black identity to his son and to explain it to his readers.

The epistolary nature of *Between the World and Me* allows Coates to address multiple audiences, reflecting the part of cultural inheritance that is the “talk”—a warning about the dangers of police brutality—that black parents have with their children, particularly sons. Columbia professor Raygine DiAquoi writes about the repercussions of these conversations about racial violence, saying, “The revelation that these conversations about race seem to be, in many ways, a Black tradition and a rite of passage beg critical analysis of the persistent conditions that necessitate this kind of practice” (513). DiAquoi’s observations reveal the critical attention being given to the “talk” as a specific form of racial socialization. Not only is it a way for black parents to transmit a message about what it means to be black, it also serves as a condemnation of the ways that a racially divided America functions in terms of violence and safety. The format of *Between the World and Me* reflects the “talk” in that it transfers the intimate and sometimes frightening conversations held between a parent and his child onto the page and thus becomes a written legacy of the principles defining blackness for Coates. He laments the inevitable state of American race relations, acknowledging a conflict that exists

between black civilians and white police officers, and thus passing on this information and warning to both his son and his readers.

Coates reflects a common concern among black Americans about violence against their bodies, thereby implicitly explaining his experience with sternness and violence to a partially white readership. DiAquoi writes about the urgency and necessity black parents feel as they tackle the subjects of protection and self-defense in the face of racial violence: “When I asked them to tell me what they felt their sons needed to know, parents voiced that their boys would have to learn very specific skills to minimize their risk of death” (529). In claiming ownership of their black bodies, young boys need to understand the repercussions of specific actions. Ta-Nehisi Coates recognizes this, and as he takes on the more masculine side of inheritances passed from father to son, his description of the black male body is colored by experiences with his own father. Coates describes the aftermath of Prince Jones’s death and writes:

Now at night, I held you and a great fear, wide as all our American generations, took me. Now I personally understood my father and the old mantra— “Either I can beat him or the police.” I understood it all—the cable wires, the extension cords, the ritual switch. Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. (Coates 82)

The fear of violence is powerful in Coates’s memory and that of his father. The legacy of striking children that Coates’s father passed on to him was one whose value was not immediately apparent—only through living the life of a parent was Coates able to recognize the understanding his father had in moments of physical violence. The observation of parental obsession clarifies much about the African-American experience. By writing broadly about black people, Coates

codifies his lived experience and the legacy left him by his father and transforms it into a written inheritance to not only be passed on to his son, but also to his readers.

A racially and socioeconomically divided American society has made it so black families do not currently benefit in the same ways that white families do from the literal inheritance of capital and financial gain. Though this demonstrates a potential lack of progress in the equality of opportunity for financial prosperity, black voices are increasingly being heard through literature, television, and other forms of mass media. With national attention being brought to the release of each of the memoirs discussed in this paper, the chances for individuals' stories to "make power" grows and influence spreads. As cultural messages are passed from parent to child and subsequently, from writer to reader, the heritage of a black cultural tradition is appreciated, altered, and shaped into a myriad of individual black identities. When non-black readers approach such a cultural inheritance with an acknowledgment of its source, they gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of others and learn that to be black and to grow up in America is far from a singular experience. Instead, readers may notice patterns and certain themes such as expectations for high achievement, preparations for discrimination, and a protection against the black body, but these topics are viewed differently by each parent and written about differently by each memoirist.

Reading the cultural inheritance narratives in contemporary black memoir reveals literary insights into the findings of psychological studies surrounding this racial socialization practice. When sociologists write about the ways that parents teach their children about how to be a black person, they illustrate the practice of passing down racial knowledge with specific messages, usually articulated in speech and conversation with children. The messages that sociologists define as vehicles for transmitting black identity are also found in literature. As the memoir

genre allows for writers to recount personal narratives, it serves as a powerful transmitter of cultural beliefs and practices. Writers like Tracy K. Smith, Margo Jefferson, and Ta-Nehisi Coates write as the heirs of a cultural past, one that their progenitors have articulated to them in speech and in action. Smith focuses on her mother's influence on her cultural identity in *Ordinary Light*, while Coates's *Between the World and Me* addresses more specifically the way his father taught him about blackness. Jefferson writes of her parents together, passing down knowledge about Negroland in carefully articulated lessons. The different ways these memoirists recount their own racial socialization helps broaden the view of how such an act can be undergone—through speech, through example, and through writing, as these writers bequeath a cultural inheritance to their readers. By reading black memoir, people of all races inherit culture and stories that reflect blackness in different forms and hopefully gain a greater understanding of the multi-faceted nature of black identity, expanding beyond a superficial reading of history and stereotypes.

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