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Signifyin' Black Power: *Soul on Ice* and the
Subversion of Normative Whiteness

James David Fife

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Signifyin' Black Power: *Soul on Ice* and the Subversion of Normative Whiteness

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This study emphasizes the methodology of linguistic resistance in Eldridge Cleaver's best-known work, *Soul on Ice*. Through a process of signification, Cleaver works to redefine key words and concepts that form a web of racist and racialist thinking called normative whiteness. By emptying key terms, like those of "life," "liberty," and "property," Cleaver's text attempts to offer a new, less biased foundation on which a more inclusive and pluralistic American narrative can be written, a move that both makes his rhetoric significantly different from that of many contemporary resistance writers and positions him as an important link in a larger genealogy of resistance and African American literature.

Keywords: Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, signification, whiteness

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CLEAVER IN CONTEXT	1
CLEAVER'S DISCURSIVE SITUATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SIGNIFYIN(G).....	6
BECOMING THE SIGNIFIER	13
SIGNIFIER UNLEASHED	18
FRUITS OF RESISTANCE	32

CLEAVER IN CONTEXT

The final lines of Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1967) reflect both the centuries of unfulfilled promises to black Americans and their determination to flourish despite these and other obstacles: "And we had thought that our hard climb out of that cruel valley led to some cool, green and peaceful, sunlit place—but it's all jungle here, a wild and savage wilderness that's overrun with ruins. But put on your crown, my Queen, and we will build a New City on these ruins" (242). The world which presents itself to Cleaver as such a "wild," unwelcoming place is largely built by a particular formation, even corruption, of language. Racial epithets like "negro" and "nigger" that separate black individuals from the American mainstream and sever their connection with "civilized" Western humanity, legal precedents that disqualify them from basic rights enjoyed by others with different colored skin, nursery rhymes that caricature their culture and folkways, and many other linguistic traps and traditions sustained by narratives of racial inferiority linguistically circumscribe non-white individuals' potential actions, choices, and rights of self-definition.¹ Cleaver chooses to assert his right to "build" his new city by beginning with new linguistic foundations that eschew the restrictions and divisions engendered by corrupt discursive traditions. He hopes that, with a new language of equality and respect, the racial antagonism and restrictions that form the menacing jungle around his new city will disappear.

Before he can successfully build his new and perhaps utopic community, however, Cleaver must contend with a society whose narratives about national potential and the definition of humanity are influenced by a discursive tradition which dances "the mechanical jig of Satan on top of Medgar Evers' tomb," slaughters "grotesquely those four little black girls" from Birmingham, and fires bullets that "crashed through the head of John Kennedy" in an effort to

“expunge from the record the March on Washington and its truth” (232). Here, Cleaver casts as his enemy all who seek to maintain a white supremacist American narrative of democratic progress and national identity that would justify the Birmingham bombing or, more likely, forget both it and the thousands who descended on Washington in the summer of 1963. At stake is the “record,” an amalgamation of discursive traditions about American history, access to power, economic potential, and cultural value that the American community accepts as true, correct, or at least binding. The general acceptance of this group of narratives creates a kind of American archive, or codified set of linguistic traditions. Within these traditions, the language of the archival record is the setting for Cleaver’s struggle, and he works to effect a fundamental change in the generally accepted archive of narratives. Such a change could lead to an equally fundamental shift in Americans’ attitudes and actions, particularly as regards race.

Soul on Ice is a strategic foray into the heart of this archival struggle. Cleaver sees stories like the March on Washington as having the potential to add paradigm-shifting narratives to the archival traditions—equal opportunity, guaranteed citizenship, increased respect, and greater access to representative power and economic well-being—that would redefine concepts of race by changing what the community accepts as true or right. On the other side, Cleaver’s enemies wish to expunge these new narratives and the threat of fundamental change they pose. By expunging the memory of the March on Washington from the minds of Americans, these enemies seek to prevent change to the accepted norms, choosing instead to privilege traditions of white supremacy and non-white inferiority that prop up a system called “normative whiteness,” a linguistic system that helps maintain the less-than-normal or less-than-human status of non-white persons (Kobayashi 394). On the other hand, Cleaver, with a concerted effort at redefinition, works to both destroy the linguistic traditions that maintain inequality and pave the way for a

more equitable reorganization of the American archive that questions and learns from, rather than erases, the more troubling moments of the national experience. Without traditions that restrict the rights of Americanness to people with white skin, the definition of “American” can embrace and be embraced by a larger, more diverse group of Americans whose own traditions and experiences can create a more just, vibrant, and accurate redefinition of the American archive which will, in turn, lead to greater access to the civil and human rights sought for in the struggle against myths of racial inferiority.

Like the varied black resistance movements, Cleaver balances his resistance with both offensive and defensive strategy.² In 1957, in one of his earliest addresses, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. remarked on the post-World War II generation’s expanded confidence. Job availability during World War II, greater freedom of movement, and a whole “myriad of factors” had caused “the Negro to take a new look at himself” and come “to feel that he was somebody” (“Nonviolence” 6). This “myriad of factors” produced a new generation of African Americans ready to reassert their humanity by reclaiming the basic rights denied by Jim Crow and general racism. Born in 1935, Cleaver had witnessed this period of optimism and confidence as he traveled with his family, migrating from Arkansas to Phoenix, Arizona and Los Angeles, California towards the increased economic opportunities there afforded by World War II (Rout 2). However, with the end of the war and the subsequent evaporation of opportunity for the newly migrated black folk, Cleaver also experienced the poverty and constant segregation that assaulted his people’s newly asserted identity and made their reclamation efforts even more difficult (Rout 4-5). Cleaver’s dark skin, like that of many in his generation, became the site of contested meaning between personal, racial pride and societal denigration. Significant energy

had to be spent in a defensive struggle that fought to retain the measure of self-respect gained during the good years.

While that defensive struggle had to be fought, Cleaver began to embrace the idea that a significant change in society's definition of black people's inherent rights could make that defensive struggle moot by recreating an America where sitting in a particular bus seat or lunch counter was not considered an explosive issue. As Cleaver matured and spent the majority of his early adulthood in prison, he encountered and entertained numerous beliefs and dogmas, from Buddhism and the Nation of Islam to radical socialism and civil disobedience, that were designed to both reinvigorate the black individual's self-respect and aid him or her in changing the world which sought ceaselessly to erode that self-respect. Cleaver notes, "I have watched the sit-ins, the freedom raids, the Mississippi Blood Summers, demonstrations all over the country, the FSM movement, the teach-ins . . . all of this, the thousands of little details, show me it is time to straighten up and fly right. That is why I decided to concentrate on my writings" (*Soul* 35). While Cleaver first chooses the art of language as his *métier* of resistance "to save myself," he expands that effort in *Soul on Ice* to take on the entrenched linguistic traditions that placed his soul in jeopardy in the first place by fighting for what he would call the "right to define"—define one's self, one's culture, and even the narratives and traditions that lead to a definition of "America" (34, *Eldridge* 55). Thus, Cleaver not only defends the rights he has already gained, but he also works to destroy those traditions that tempt citizens to expunge moments like the March on Washington from their collective national memory. Cleaver fights against both the reactionary racists of the 1960s and the roots of the discursive traditions that cause their racist reaction.

Cleaver's linguistic resistance towards these oppressive traditions takes the form of various rhetorical techniques called "signification."³ Through signification, a method that uses a combination of indirection, word play, insult, and irony to cause connotative chaos amidst the status quo, Cleaver undermines the discursive traditions and common "knowledge" that form the linguistic foundation of normative whiteness. By shifting the meaning of both single words and larger "white" concepts, Cleaver helps expand the idea of who can participate in the American narrative's creation. Such an endeavor underscores Cleaver's hope that "bourgeois or not, imperialist or not, murderous or not, ugly or not—[America's] people, somewhere in their butchered and hypocritical souls, still [contain] an epic potential of spirit which is its hope, a bottomless potential which fires the imaginations of its youth" (*Soul* 232). Cleaver signifies on the white-centered discourses in order to enlist that "epic potential of spirit" against the racist system of difference that has spawned America's "butchered and hypocritical souls."

Parenthetically, *Soul on Ice* is an ideal work for such a methodological study. It works within the criteria established by the Black Arts and Black Power movements that "the artist and the political activist are one" (Neal 656). Furthermore, it reached a wide audience of American readers, white and not, as witnessed by its relatively high sales of 2 million copies by the end of 1970 (White 556). By combining politics and art unambiguously for a wide audience, Cleaver underscores the potential of a single piece of art to change the public consciousness, a message often unexamined in studies of black resistance movements not directly associated with the "black aesthetic."⁴

When viewed as a whole, *Soul on Ice* is both a primer and a pinnacle of linguistic resistance. Cleaver identifies a significant foundation of American racism, racist discursive traditions, and uses his writing to strategically subvert, satirize, and convert the linguistic

underpinnings of racist discursive violence into a new linguistic system that allows all Americans regardless of race to gain the substance of humanity and citizenship that tradition once denied them.

CLEAVER'S DISCURSIVE SITUATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SIGNIFYIN(G)

The discursive practices associated with American's system of normative whiteness, or the linguistic traditions that make non-white inequality an accepted part of life, create a daily assault upon the humanity of non-white individuals as it seeks to erode their self-respect and individual identity by restricting the right of self-definition. Most significantly, this assault usually occurs without a shot being fired or a threatening glance being cast. The linguistic traditions that assume or assert the superiority of white individuals have their roots in early American institutions. From at least the dawn of the Enlightenment, Americans of Western European descent used discourses of (pseudo)science (physiognomy, anthropometry, eugenics), myth, and law to institutionalize discourses that assumed both white racial superiority and non-white inferiority. For example, Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) injects narrative traditions of black laziness, ugliness, and anger into the discourse of natural history. Court decisions like *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857), the *Civil Rights Cases* (1883), and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) codified racial separation and difference with legal precedent. These moments and many others (children's stories, presidential addresses, entertainment) wove racism into the foundational ideas of American life.⁵

While some Americans' attitudes about race matured, marking an end of explicit racism and triumphant white supremacist discourse, the conceptual lacuna around non-white individuals that resulted from centuries of institutionalized racism continued to do the discriminatory work that eugenics and the "n" word once had. Where institutions changed, linguistic traditions that

intersect with race largely did not.⁶ These traditions' accepted usage makes them nearly invisible long after legislative or juridical action extirpates the documented roots of inequality. Richard Dyer's book *White* (1997) explores the less obvious and more pernicious effects of language that assumes whiteness (and the racialized ideas of beauty, goodness, and purity contained therein) as the norm. In the tradition of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Dyer argues that white discourse places darkness in the domain of difference and the unknown. Everyday language assumes blackness as different, inferior, or dangerous. Semantically, this kind of white supremacy can be as innocuous-seeming as descriptions that omit the adjective "white" when they easily use others like "black" or "Chinese" (Dyer 2). The "need" of racial adjectives points to larger discursive traditions that position whiteness as the norm, creating situations where white individuals never have to "speak for the race," never have to explain on appearance why they are particularly successful, and always assume that "white" people have no particular culture that could be celebrated under the banner of multiculturalism (9). Each of these instances presupposes the ubiquity of whiteness, its lack of societal restrictions, and its identification with the individual over the group. On the other hand, racial terms like "black," "Latino," or "Asian" are simple placemarkers that subsume non-white individuals into a group, making them, from a white perspective, potential spokespersons for the race, scapegoats for perceived racial sins, or interlopers with purely racial motives. All of these viewpoints reinforce the centrality and normativity of whiteness. White people are just people, putting all individuals without "white" skin at the immediate disadvantage of having to define themselves with language assumed to be white until proven otherwise.

Cleaver recognized these problems of white-centered language throughout his career, with one of his earliest published pieces in *Ramparts* providing a succinct summation of the

problem. In “My Father and Stokely Carmichael” (1967), Cleaver represents Carmichael’s ideas about self-definition that were also foundational to his own linguistic resistance:

Stokely told his audience that one of the most important aspects of the struggle for Black Power was the right to define. Black people have been the victims of white America’s definitions. White people defined black people as inferior, as Negroes and niggers, as second-class citizens. By reacting to white America’s definitions, the blacks allowed themselves to be put in a bag which white America controlled. But now black people must demand the right to define themselves. (*Eldridge* 54-5)

This “right to define” becomes the central goal of Cleaver’s resistance, and the absence of this right helps explain the difficulties encountered in asserting racial identity in a milieu, like language, co-opted by whiteness. Without the power of definition, non-white individuals fall into a sort of double bind, “a bag which white America controlled.” A member of the black resistance wishing to react against the fact that “white paradigms or models do not correspond to the realities of black experience” (Stewart 3) while still operating under the linguistic assumptions of normative whiteness seems to have only two choices: violent separation or traitorous integration. Or, as one of Cleaver’s contemporaries put it: “Shall the black man in a predominantly white society seek to earn an ‘equal’ status by being assimilated (‘becoming a white man in a black skin’), or shall he aim for equality by going apart and developing a black culture and identity of his own?” (Larrabee 639). Neither of these options undoes the linguistic foundations of non-white inequality. Asserting black difference through separatism reinforces perceptions of white normativity, what Lorraine Hansberry calls “an accommodation to American racism” (48), and integrating blackness into the norm, a norm which of course is already constructed around the

centrality of whiteness, destroys the unique culture and characteristics of blackness that stand in contrast or defiance of the white norm. Both of these choices, creating a more distinct blackness or erasing that distinct blackness, play into the hands of normative whiteness by reinforcing its assumptions. The solution Cleaver and Carmichael present to such a bind is to “come in with an indictment that put[s] white America on the defensive . . . We must not react to white definitions” (55-56). Rather than react by resisting within the sphere allowed by racist definitions, linguistic resistance must act by calling into question that which is “normal” while simultaneously advancing an alternative linguistic tradition that does not contain racial restrictions on the right to self-definition.

Cleaver’s “indictment,” the offensive part of his strategy, must strike at the very foundation of the linguistic traditions and practices associated with normative whiteness if his resistance is to initiate a decisive discursive shift away from racist and racialist traditions. If the linguistic traditions that reinforce racial inequality can be changed, then the right to define can be expanded to new groups who will rewrite those traditions in a way that erases white normativity and supremacy. As Michel Foucault argues, discursive traditions are the result of intricate interplay between the conceptual and linguistic spheres—words, ideas, discoveries, precedents, and more. As one or more of these constituent parts changes, the discursive formation will also transform, and with that transformation comes a change in what can and cannot be said (146).⁷ Once these transformations stabilize, new traditions become accepted as a new archive. Thus, all aspects of language, from myths to contemporary connotation, from colloquial tradition to strict denotation, work together to establish what can or cannot be enunciated in a society, and long-term societal acceptance codifies these rules into an archive of discursive tradition.

Normative whiteness creates a privileged discursive position by maintaining control of the formative processes of enunciability that create such rules. The processes that affect enunciability and the continual formation of the archive, if co-opted by a group in power, can be viewed as what Cleaver calls the “right of definition.” When that group considers itself mono-racial (“white”), it can introduce new “knowledge” of racial superiority into the verbal and written tradition that begins to interplay with established discursive formations to eventually produce narrowed discursive traditions that preclude the presence of nonwhite individuals, like those traditions that interact with ideas of property, patriotism, national literature, and more. These traditions define the parameters of ideas (like literature) to make them uniquely or normally white. For example, calling all literature written by individuals of African descent “Negro” or “African American” literature separates it from the normal, unhyphenated, and white “American” literature. With enough participants, both scholars and schoolchildren, these narrowed discourses are codified into a sort of generally accepted parlance which then helps form an archive. The discourse of normative whiteness survives when this interplay consistently maintains certain linguistic traditions that reserve the place of normativity for the white race while also only allowing members of that race to comment on and therefore preserve that tradition.

However, the formidable continuity that maintains the discursive power of normative whiteness is also a weakness that Cleaver learns to exploit. The discursive formations that prop up rhetorics of racial inequality can be transformed through both the modification of linguistic practice and the introduction of new knowledge that demonstrates the illogical nature of such a discourse. While black individuals’ claims to equality and respect are constrained by the unenunciability of racial equality in narrowed discourses like (white) private property, (white)

American patriotism, and “Negro” literature, changes in something as simple as a word’s connotation could shift normative whiteness’s power by destabilizing the efficacy of the discursive formations that influence/are influenced by it. Aspects of language as small or simple as words’ generally accepted connotations combine to help form the American conception of what an individual can or cannot be or do. By taking on multiple smaller aspects of the white discursive tradition (like connotation), Cleaver works to transform discursive practice and content in such a way that the rights of definition can no longer be impeded by a previously unbeatable system of tacit, racial linguistic assumptions.

The group of rhetorical techniques called “signifyin(g)” provides the ideal method of resistance against systems whose power is maintained through language. For, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and the larger scholarly community have increasingly argued, the signifying monkey or trickster figure in African American literature resists power inequality and the potentially debilitating absurdity of that inequality by engaging in language reinscription as a method of resistance. While American iterations of signification and the signifying monkey often involve trickster tales, folk songs, and schoolyard insults, and while Gates primarily looks at writers’ resistance to restrictive literary traditions, signification is well suited for a contest that goes beyond Plato and the dozens. The signifying monkey manipulates language in such a way that he may both “wreak havoc upon and inscribe order for criticism in the jungle” (Gates 42). When that “jungle” has national proportions and threatens the foundations of Cleaver’s “new city,” the stakes of signification become much higher, and a type of linguistic guerrilla warfare that combines what Houston A. Baker, Jr. calls cryptic subversion and phaneric deformation must be used against such an organized and all-encompassing enemy.⁸

Wreaking havoc and inscribing order from a position of relatively little power like Cleaver's is possible because of signification's indirect methods—an aspect of singular importance when taking on a discursive system whose defenses are not to be trifled with. In *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver sometimes calls this line of discursive defense “the racial Maginot line” to underscore the risks associated with his engagement (222). A proper strategy for overrunning such a line must respect its overpowering force enough to find a method that avoids its heavy defensive artillery and opts for an alternative resistance strategy of non-frontal assault. Signification rarely charges full speed ahead. Instead, the indirectness of signification allows the speaker to avoid visibility as an antagonist. Avoiding visibility also helps the speaker avoid recriminations or retaliations from the “victims” of his or her signification's havoc and new order.⁹ This aspect of signification makes it ideal in a society where the linguistic nature of normative whiteness has matured to a point where real physical repressive power defends the status quo and where open protest or disdain may exact debilitating consequences for the visible protestor.¹⁰ Rather than brave the heavy artillery of the racial Maginot line, Cleaver opts to skirt its vulnerable back-door defenses.

However, rather than simply infiltrate the racial Maginot line, Cleaver works also to extirpate the line by turning its guns upon its masters—an outcome also likely when using the strategy of signification. Signification involves more than just indirectly taunting a more powerful enemy; it changes the stakes of a situation in a way that forces that enemy to do the bidding of the signifyin(g) speaker. Signification changes words or expressions that formerly supported a particular individual into barbs or challenges that cause the individual to either self-subvert or fundamentally change.¹¹ Thomas Kochman argues that when an individual in power is signified upon, “there is also the implication that if the listener fails to do anything about it—

what has to be ‘done’ is usually quite clear—his status will be seriously compromised. Thus the lion [the status quo power] is compelled to vindicate the honor of his family by fighting or else leave the impression that he is afraid, and that he is not ‘king of the jungle’” (257). If the lion chooses to fight, though, his dominance is no longer assured. Using a slave-master example, if a master understands the subversive content of the Exodus story, he can abandon the story to his slaves (a victory against the centrality of whiteness), try to contain “his” narratives from further co-option (a similar recognition that unquestionable white preeminence is a myth), or fight to regain the “correct” meaning of the exodus story (a fight which also recognizes his slaves as combative equals—another victory). When key terms or discursive traditions are modified to the detriment of the status quo, refusing to react will not maintain its power and acting will cause it to speak in a way that undermines its power. If Cleaver can indirectly make the continuation of normative whiteness’s linguistic power contingent on self-destructive or paradigm-shifting acts, he can in fact control the system and, with that power, destroy it. *Soul on Ice* thus becomes an experiment in subverting the status quo by forcing it into convulsions that limit its power or goading it into actions that will alleviate the burdens of the oppressed and unequal and restore the rights of definition to all who desire them.

BECOMING THE SIGNIFIER

While signifying on the discursive practices which prop up normative whiteness looms large as the major purpose behind *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver also takes time at the beginning of the collection to offer instruction about the process and pitfalls associated with other methods of resistance connected to more “militant” black resistance groups before roughly outlining the theoretical underpinnings of his decision to signify. While other readings of *Soul on Ice*’s first entry, “On Becoming,” may interpret Cleaver’s genealogical musings as merely an

autobiographical preface to a larger discussion (Miller 25) or as a calculated attempt to shock and grab attention to the “tortured topography of a black’s soul” (Haslam 19), viewing it through the lens of signification links “On Becoming” to the rest of the collection thereby facilitating *Soul on Ice*’s reinterpretation as a cohesive document instead of a rag-tag group of “uneven” essays (Haslam 19). The autobiographical prose of “On Becoming” asserts the need to signify while the remainder of *Soul on Ice* enacts the signification process.

To assert the need for signification, Cleaver uses “On Becoming” to delineate the limited methods of resistance available to his contemporaries when racist discursive traditions circumscribe the rights of self-definition. The controversy of *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1954) “awakened me to my position in American and I began to form a concept of what it meant to be black in white America,” writes Cleaver retrospectively, eleven years after the controversy began (*Soul* 21). He then lists various responses to the specter of racial bigotry that *Brown* made visible. Some people, in coming to terms with such an entrenched enemy, see little point in resistance and seek to create some sort of artificial barrier between their lives and the senseless racism outside. They “found it necessary, in order to maintain whatever sanity they could, to remain somewhat aloof and detached. We accepted indignities and the mechanics of the apparatus of oppression without reacting” (22). Other individuals, ashamed of their blackness, seek assimilation into whiteness in what Cleaver would later term a “racial death wish,” a belief “that the race problem in America cannot be settled until all traces of the black race are eliminated” (126, 127). Still others give voice to their anger in what initially seems a more active position of protest: “We cursed everything American—including baseball and hot dogs” (22). Thus, Cleaver identifies, as did Lorraine Hansberry, the unappealing options available to non-

white individuals under a racial “apparatus of oppression”—stasis, loss of culture, or violent separatism.

Cleaver then discusses in greater depth his own temporary embrace of violent separatism to underscore the ultimate impotency of such a strategy and to create a sort of prelude to his theoretical epiphany about the means and methods of restrictive racial discourse. He chooses to “take the initiative: instead of simply *reacting* I could *act*” by becoming “an extreme iconoclast” who “attacked all forms of piety, loyalty, and sentiment: marriage, love, God, patriotism, the Constitution, the founding fathers, laws, concept of right-wrong-good-evil, all forms of ritualized behavior” (*Soul* 24). However, his “action” in this case is really a “reaction” constrained by the terms of normative whiteness because Cleaver reaches the same result achieved by the resigned bearers of racial indignity. Whereas they reinforce the artificial barrier between superior and inferior by passively accepting white definitions, Cleaver reinforces this same border by actively separating black from white. Despite his declaration of independence from all things white, Cleaver is still trapped within a cycle of reaction. He actively abandons God, patriotism, and all “idols” he smashes from his life, allowing contemporary discourse to continue considering those ideas as “white” America’s exclusive domain. In this section, Cleaver chooses atheism rather than accept a “white” idea of God and abandons the idea of “America” to whiteness (23). Thus, Cleaver is caught like so many others in the limiting double-bind of normative whiteness. He has further increased the difference already artificially constructed by the discursive formation. He is playing by the white system’s rules.

Cleaver’s confrontation with the idea of the white woman, or “The Ogre,” marks both his recognition of that white-centered system and his shift away from black separatist defense to paradigm-shifting offense. Confronting the white woman as the end product of white-influenced

standards of beauty, Cleaver realizes that language and concepts influenced by normative whiteness can reach him no matter how many idols he smashes. His preliminary reactions after this realization, while leading him towards an understanding of his restricted enunciative capabilities, are also the actions most reviled by literary critics and readers of *Soul on Ice* since Cleaver's jump from angry iconoclast to wiser civil rights leader takes a troubling turn through women. That women play a prominent role in this transformation is no surprise, as Cleaver readily admits that years of prison and the coextensive "lack of access to females" constantly pushed the idea of and his lust for women to the forefront of his mind (Cleaver 25). The white woman, or "The Ogre" as Cleaver reductively caricatures her here, acts as an imperfect representation of white norms' entrenched history. After a guard destroys the white pin-up girl Cleaver has in his cell, he tells Cleaver that a similar picture of a black girl would not meet the same fate. At first, Cleaver is angered that the white woman is forbidden him, but then he is angered that he would even want a white woman. Cleaver's initial solution is complete disavowal of white women, but this solution simply perpetuates the rule of a discursive formation that places the discussion of white women in two camps: allowed or forbidden. Cleaver glimpses that the terms of discussion are the real culprit when he says, "a black growing up in America is indoctrinated with the white race's standard of beauty . . . the whites brainwashed the blacks by the very processes the whites employed to indoctrinate themselves with their own group standards" (29).

Cleaver's actions of rape and abuse after this realization have drawn justified critical and moral outrage, but his inclusion of these reactions acts as a caveat to potential followers and a critical threshold for his own revolutionary development rather than a glorification of sexual violence. In his mind, Cleaver substitutes *white women* for *discursive formation*, an incongruous

assumption whose consequences becomes alarmingly clear when Cleaver's immature understanding of effective and appropriate resistance allows him to rationalize rape as "an insurrectionary act" (33). However, Cleaver's admitted rape does not appear in the text primarily as an apology or as a glorified climax or resolution (as it is sometimes read), but rather as a point of reference in his larger intellectual development. Cleaver's disclosure acts as an instructive caveat, testifying to others what *not* to do when consciously encountering the circumscribing white definitions of blackness. Instead, with his admission recorded, Cleaver declares that his next step, the path he will take throughout the rest of *Soul on Ice*, is "to seek out the truth and unravel the snarled web of my motivations" (34). Experience has taught him that white women are not the problem, but instead a tool used by those in power to obscure the aims of non-white resistance. Thus, Cleaver closes "On Becoming" with a pledge to bring "out into the open" "the sickness *between* the white woman and the black man"—the larger discursive formation which views such racial and sexual antagonism as natural and correct (35, emphasis added).

Cleaver's next interaction with a white woman, his lawyer Beverly Axelrod in the section "Soul on Ice," both asserts a growing understanding of the deep-rootedness of white-centered language and marks Cleaver's self-empowering first use of signification strategy. The mix of experience and intuition that leads Cleaver to identify his new intellectual target—the sickness between white and black, male and female, prisoner and free citizen—causes a maturation in both his attitudes towards race and gender differences and his technique of action as opposed to reaction. Recognizing the strictures that accompany relationships across the matrix of white, black, male and female, Cleaver chooses to neutralize these strictures by playing with readers' assumptions about race and gender in the description of his love for Axelrod. He mentions neither Axelrod's name, nor her race, even waiting to "admit" to the assumption that his lawyer

is a woman until halfway through the piece (40). Instead, Cleaver places the budding relationship between lawyer and convict at the center of his writing, developing it before limiting the possibilities of his discussion through lenses of gender or race. He repeatedly uses the term “my lawyer” instead of a singular pronoun that would betray Axelrod’s gender as he underlines the type of love, that which exists between comrades, which Cleaver feels he can describe without descriptions of gender: “My love for my lawyer is due, in part . . . because we are always on the same side of the issues. And I love all my allies” (40). In moving from a love between comrades to a more romantic love in the next few lines, Cleaver’s self-labeled admission of Axelrod’s gender creates a feeling of expectation about her race, background, and other personal factors. Cleaver never satisfies this curiosity in this particular piece (he does reveal more about Axelrod at a later point in the book), and by so doing, becomes linguistically dominant for the first time. Recognition of an author’s power to withhold, label, and frame a discussion is his first step in a larger fight to change the terms of general discourse. It is at this point that the first hint of a larger rhetorical trope of signification begins to multiply throughout *Soul on Ice*.

SIGNIFIER UNLEASHED

Signification takes many forms, and Cleaver’s varied performances are more than can be adequately analyzed here.¹² However, those he does employ can be classified into two loosely structured categories: signification designed to erode society’s repressive ability and signification designed to change ideas that maintain a certain conceptual status quo, like normative whiteness. Several examples of this first type deserve brief attention as they both elucidate the concept of signification in practice and offer a different perspective on those aspects of *Soul on Ice* that often provoke critical ire.

Perhaps the most apparent form of signification is Cleaver's subversion of genre. *Soul on Ice* follows no easily interpretable genre schematic despite critics' attempts to classify the book as a memoir, a volume of essays, or an autobiography. By defying generic classification, *Soul on Ice* mocks the critical establishment and questions its power and privilege. Its first section illustrates this concept succinctly. "On Becoming," while appearing in a section labeled "Letters from Folsom Prison," bears no mark of a letter save a date and immediately resists its epistolary classification. Cleaver addresses no explicit audience and leaves no ending salutation, thus undercutting any trope of correspondence. He eliminates the need for correspondence further by solving within the "letter" the issues of hatred and rage he raises in the text, finding room enough both to reveal his troubled relationship with the "Ogre" and to close with the repentant maxim: "The price of hating other human beings is loving oneself less" (*Soul* 36). By coming to his own conclusions, he solicits neither response nor judgment nor assistance with his missive, and he negates even further any easy scheme of classification—a resistance that continues throughout the text. Mythology, confession, allegory, threat, love letter, lyric poem, and political treatise, as well as memoir, Cleaver's writing never adheres to a single genre for more than a few paragraphs. Nor does it privilege Cleaver's voice as he enters into a dialogue with the words of Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Richard Wright, and others, which blurs the lines between his work and others' and binding his writing with their fiction, essay, and history in a way unclassifiable. By resisting codified genres, Cleaver successfully harasses the gatekeepers of American letters to a flustered and inadequate response. While the reviews for *Soul on Ice* were mostly positive, describing the book's effect and purpose stymied reviewers as they struggled to express their feelings about this "discordant, jarring," "not tidy, not objective," "original and disturbing" "unique literary document" (qtd in White 557-60).

As critics tried to work through the book's effect, the time spent describing their experience rather than classifying it cast their gatekeeper status into doubt and opened up the work of interpretation to all readers.

Cleaver further signifies on critics' power and privilege by working to disrupt racially distinct "black" or "white" readings of his text with an inclusive display of intertextuality. In so doing, Cleaver cuts across racial, theoretical, and ideological lines to make clear his disdain for any critic, professional or amateur, who would co-opt his signification's surface meaning for any purpose counterproductive to decentering privileged white discourse. In a few pages, Cleaver moves between American folklore, pop culture, Buddhism, and an Edenic serpent (*Soul* 49-51). By so doing, the text potentially creates an unease shared among all its readers, for Cleaver's singular experience overlaps many religious, political, and cultural communities which no one reader, white or black, could likely master. His experiences draw a picture of individual black experience that avoids myths of exclusivity and absolute racial cohesion. Cleaver further resists being drawn as an exclusively "black" writer by discussing his ideological influences. Though most, if not all, black power groups affirmed the revolutionary aesthetic through their approbation of works like Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) and Robert F. William's *Negroes with Guns* (1962), to say nothing of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), Cleaver takes his revolutionary education a step further. For every popular revolutionary text, like Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* (1961), Cleaver adds less revolutionary reading material, like Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) or Norman Mailer's "The White Negro" (1957). Cleaver's penchant to read everything available, from literature ("Hemingway, Mailer, Camus, Sartre, Baldwin") to history ("a book written by a New York judge which gives case histories of prostitutes") and sociology ("Calvin C. Hernton's *Sex and Racism in America*")

shows a writer unafraid to mix, both physically and ideologically, with others and one who defies the stereotype of an angry, soap box black nationalist preacher (70). His inclusion of texts by white authors valorizes certain contributions of the white aesthetic while his blending of genre undermines their primacy. Cleaver constructs an intertextual canon that prevents any one critical school of thought from co-opting his struggle by pigeon-holing his writing into easily forgotten categories.

While these forms of signification are important in that they help Cleaver avoid the all too common three-pronged ritual—classification as a “black author,” judgment as “a credit to his race,” and subsequent relegation to oblivion—the most far-reaching signification takes place as Cleaver destabilizes the linguistic traditions that perpetuate racial inequality. This type of signification takes on key words, phrases, and ideas, empties them of their original values, and refills them with others.¹³ Signification, when orchestrated by the seminal trickster, destabilizes oppressive discourses at the level of the sign by either emptying the signifier (like “patriotism,” “America,” or even “white”) of its connotations’ discursive baggage or overloading the signifier with multiple and often unpleasant concepts that, in effect, cause dominant discourses to relinquish their “sovereignty” over the terms. In either case, signification then seeks to re-fill the signifier with other meanings that allow for plurality, multiplicity, and difference. The linguistic traditions of racial inequality thus change as the signified portion of certain signs is transformed into a more benign meaning or decentralized as additional meanings create a semiotic situation where no one signified is “right” for a particular signifier.

Cleaver’s linguistic work with signification works most fully through these methods, placing him in a tradition of signifyin(g) about race begun at least from the moment when African slaves first co-opted the English term “signifyin’” and told their stories of Brer Rabbit,

Jack-the-Bear, and High John Conqueror. Cleaver develops observational skills in order to understand which words form the foundation of the discourses of inequality. First, he learns by being an “Ofay watcher” until he can become the “Black Trojan Horse” (*Soul* 87, 148). Cleaver claims to have spent “years watching the ofays, trying to understand them, on the principle that you have a better chance of coping with the known than with the unknown” (88). Then, as the Black Trojan Horse, he purports to describe the inner workings of “the ideology of the world system the power structure is trying to preserve” by identifying the key terms that maintain white supremacy and/or restrict from non-white individuals the rights of definition (148). He identifies the “idols” of “God, patriotism, the Constitution, the founding fathers, laws, concept of right-wrong-good-evil, all forms of ritualized behavior” he previously thought of smashing as the central motifs whose signification would destabilize the primacy of white-controlled language (24).

Cleaver’s signification on ideas about race and sexuality manipulates language to both paralyze and demand revisionary action from individuals both black and white, male and female. A perfect example of this method involves one of the most easily dismissed portions of *Soul on Ice*, “The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs.” The allegory presents a combination of absurd characters and troubling narratives about masculinity, femininity, and the inter- and intraracial relationships between men and women. Briefly, a group of “black eunuchs,” young, angry black men, entrap an older “Lazarus,” a black man who has allowed himself to be co-opted by the racial power structure, and question his manhood: “we knew that black rebels his age do not walk the streets in America: they were either dead, in prison, or in exile in another country” (*Soul* 183). What results is a graphic portrayal of caricatured sex and violence as Lazarus shares a troubling monologue about the state of black heterosexual relations polluted by centuries of

racist oppression and racialized sexual stereotypes. While Lazarus' discourse is too long and varied to summarize here, a few excerpts will give an idea of its central themes. Among other statements, he professes physical devotion to white women, ("The white woman is more than a woman to me . . . She's like a goddess, a symbol. My love for her is religious and beyond fulfillment. I worship her. I love a white woman's dirty drawers"), implicates the white man in the destruction of the white woman's wholeness ("The white man turned the white woman into a weak-minded, weak-bodied, delicate freak, a sex pot, and placed her on a pedestal"), and meditates on a cycle of physical and psychological castration between black and white men (188, 191, 194; ellipsis in orig.). Lazarus' mixture of racial and sexual stereotypes and matter-of-fact historically based narrative creates an allegory that attempts to strike readers as both accurate and absurd.

In this hazily defined, surreal narrative, Cleaver attempts to shift the spotlight onto the readers, implicating them in both the accurate and absurd portions of the allegory and pushing them to complicate the ideas promulgated by racial and gender stereotypes. The young men in the allegory are described as "black eunuchs" lacking potency despite their anger and self-righteousness. Even the narrator, though more calculating than his hot-blooded comrades, responds to Lazarus' account with arousal and a pledge, ironic in the aftermath of Lazarus' exposé of the white man's quest to reduce black men to mere corporeal existence, to never betray "the law of my rod" (*Soul* 195). The allegory provides no steady character with whom any group of readers can easily identify, and the sheer number of grotesque caricatures creates a surfeit of meanings for words like "sex," "masculinity," "black," and "white." Faced with such a rapid connotative transformation, Cleaver's narrative confronts readers with an either/or situation. Because no one, black, white, male, or female is presented without motives informed by

debilitating racially-based sexual behavior, readers can either choose to embrace the extremes foregrounded by Cleaver as a new normal and thereby further corrupt the meaning and usage of terms that had tacitly promoted racialized sexual stereotypes for centuries, or they can reject the sum total of the discourse of racialized sexuality and distance themselves enough from the allegory to begin the process of redefining a more accurate discussion of race and sexuality. Cleaver hopes for the second reaction, a reboot that could prevent “a new mad Tower of Babel” from being built “blood upon blood; crime upon crime” with reinscribed, extreme sexual stereotypes (204). If the readers choose to distance themselves from these characters, ideally they also will critique honestly their own sexual motives, desires, and the racial hierarchy (“Tower of Babel”) that informs them. As a result, Cleaver’s indirect and seemingly absurd allegory attempts to push potential adherents of a new discursive tradition to do the work of dissolving aspects of sexuality predicated upon unequal power relationships. They cannot look to Cleaver for either advice or retaliation since his indirect methods allow him to deflect responsibility for action onto the readers. Even readers’ non-response has a consequence since it would implicate them as complicit and loyal to the dysfunctional system exaggerated in the allegory.

Cleaver’s signification upon racialized sexuality also functions in partial fulfillment of his text’s strategic goal to disrupt the perception of an ostensibly unified white race in an attempt to misdirect the ire and attention of the beneficiaries of normative whiteness. One of Cleaver’s efforts in this regard closely parallels the original (or rather, best known) Signifying Monkey tale where Monkey convinces Lion that Elephant has been criticizing the so-called king of the jungle. As part of his plan, Monkey convinces Lion to fight Elephant, and as a result, Lion is badly beaten, giving Monkey full sway of the jungle for a time (Gates 56). Thus, Monkey can pursue his projects without the interference of either potential heavyweight jungle nemesis while they

are involved in their own squabbles. In such a manner we may read Cleaver's rhetorical strategy in addressing whom he calls "the white youth of today" and "the white man," meaning the older, established society (*Soul* 105). Cleaver assigns the white youth the role of Elephant and the establishment the role of Lion; he then proceeds to goad the establishment into what he believes will be a losing battle. Throughout this section, Cleaver builds up the image of a noble generation of youth disillusioned with the status quo, "a generation of white youth that is truly worthy of a black man's respect" (106). With all this praise, Cleaver effects the impression that he is parroting the words of these worthy allies—words "they" are directing at the establishment. Thus, he slips into the role of the signifying monkey to relay to the old Lion (the establishment) all the trash the Elephant youth have been talking:

The white youth of today have begun to react to the fact that the "American Way of Life" is a fossil of history. What do they care if their baldheaded and crew-cut elders don't dig their caveman mops? They couldn't care less about the old, stiffassed honkies who don't like their new dances . . . A young white today cannot help but recoil from the base deeds of his people. (105-06)

Cleaver's narrativization of the youthful frustration and distaste for history's racial crimes, thanks largely to his growing celebrity and wide readership, is able to reach Lion. Each time he calls Lion a "baldheaded and crew-cut" has-been, he makes it clear that it is the youth speaking, not he. When he frames the atrocities of the twentieth century in purely generational terms, painting a picture of the old guard, "their hands dripping with blood," he widens the gap of generational estrangement (106). By rhapsodizing that "black and white, the young rebels are free people, free in a way Americans have never been in the history of our country," he both complicates the meanings of "freedom" and asserts it as a key component of new alliances that

both transcend racial boundaries and threaten old ties (106). Cleaver exploits the 1960s generational rift with the hope that the establishment will turn its anger towards its own youth and fail to assimilate them, thus allowing Cleaver and his blackness to sail through the jungle unobstructed by the establishment's repression.

Beyond identifying and exacerbating the generational schism, Cleaver also empties the key terms of "life," "liberty," and "property" of their privileged connections to whiteness rooted in centuries of discursive traditions surrounding (European) Founding Fathers, (white) inalienable rights, and (racial) manifest destiny. By severing these connections, Cleaver works to make sure "America" and "whiteness" are not automatically associated. These terms, guaranteed by the spirit if not the letter of the Constitution, are absolutely critical to the myth of American greatness. In terms of the rights of property, black people "see property all around them, property that is owned by whites . . . The sanctity surrounding property is being called into question. The mystique of deed ownership is melting away" (*Soul* 162-63). By pointing out both the disproportionate white ownership of property and the racial aspects taken on by that principle, Cleaver sets up a cognitive dissonance between what America promises and what it has actually delivered. Such dissonance calls into question the power of the American status quo while simultaneously robbing the term "property" of its universal application—an application, as noted earlier, normatively linked to whiteness.

Cleaver continues his signification on the foundational "American values" of life and liberty, pointing out the societal hypocrisy associated with them. Life and liberty in America, according to Cleaver, reveal the dissonance between the promises of these values and their guarantee in practice. Instead of promoting traditional definitions of American freedom and liberty as a universal good, Cleaver reminds his audience of "the link between America's

undercover support of colonialism abroad and the bondage of the Negro at home” (*Soul* 142). Where selfless patriots of American history once stood in the American mind, Cleaver places in their stead “slave-catchers, slaveowners, murderers, butchers, invaders, oppressors—the white heroes have acquired new names,” “a passel of drunks, hypes, freaks, and madmen” who “fight for the controls” of a transitioning nation (92, 140). Instead of a picture of the Vietnam War (and other neocolonial actions) as righteous defense of capitalism and democracy, Cleaver paints new images of a “white-supremacy-oriented white man feel[ing] less compunction about massacring ‘niggers’ than he does about massacring any other race of people on earth” (148). Where predominant narratives of world conflict defend themselves with a narrative of exporting freedom as a “friend of the underdog,” Cleaver points out the violence and pain America has been sending throughout the world with “more and more force, increased bombings, gas, napalm . . . the use of any and all effective weapons to kill and defeat the enemy” (144). Instead of defending the fulfillment of high-minded ideals of domestic freedom and equality, Cleaver shows the millions whose voices are purposefully not heard by a government who, with “a few smiles and friendly gestures,” disenfranchises black Americans by “talking out of the thousand sides of his mouth” (149). Cleaver focuses a searing light on the hypocritical policy, violent history, and ignorant exceptionalism that undergird the cherished American conception of itself as a bright light and a city set upon a hill for all the world to emulate. In so doing, Cleaver creates, as he did in his allegory, words overloaded with problematic meanings and a concomitant disinclination among readers to own the America of which he speaks. In that moment of disinheritance, the words “freedom,” “liberty,” and “America” all lose their assured meaning, leaving a gap to be filled by a more representative and equal American population.

Where whites disown this America of the past, a pluralistic coalition of diverse Americans can seize the opportunity to rewrite an America for the future.

By complicating such terms through signification, Cleaver poses foundational questions about national identity that cannot be ignored, tucked away, or forgotten by those who find them inconvenient or damaging. Cleaver recognizes that

even when confronted with overwhelming evidence to the contrary, most white Americans have found it possible, after steadying their rattled nerves, to settle comfortably back into their vaunted belief that American is dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights . . . With the Constitution for a rudder and the Declaration of Independence as its guiding star, the ship of state is sailing always toward a brighter vision of freedom and justice for all. (*Soul* 100)

The level of cognitive dissonance that Cleaver's signification creates places an immovable obstacle in the path of such a course. By signifying on life, liberty, and property, Cleaver takes away the comfortable foundation these white Americans had used in the past to steady "their rattled nerves." Furthermore, Cleaver charts out a new course that will allow for a pluralistic and equal society based on discourse unrestricted by race or racial stereotypes. This contrasts greatly with many other writers of the Black Power or Black Arts movements. In fact, Addison Gayle, Jr. accused Cleaver of having "accepted the moral formula of America's madmen—an eye for an eye—and proposed to deal with the madmen on their terms" ("Revolutionary" 142). Rather than reconfigure the signifiers that formed the core of American narratives, many writers like Gayle sought distinct separation, fully prepared to sit back and watch America and Americans wither away. Once again, Cleaver steers a narrow course made treacherous by the confines of "white"

language, and where other writers might cease their signification once the “ship of state” had begun to burn or sail, rudderless, out to sea, Cleaver’s final task is to expand and recharter that ship toward “a brighter vision of freedom and justice for all” that moves past rhetoric into reality.

Glimpses of Cleaver’s vision for such a society are found in his re-definition, re-filling, or re-writing of “America” in the wake of signification’s emptying “life, liberty, and property” of their uniquely “white” and uncritically positive connotations. This new “America has come alive deep down in its raw guts” (*Soul* 139). This new life will expand upon the national consensus forged in the civil rights movement, “which stands between a violent nation and chaos [and] is America’s most precious possession” (141). The discredited “patriots” of the past have left a void in which Islam (in the tradition of Malcolm X and Muslim Mosque, Inc.’s “retreat from the precipice of madness”) and socialism (helping the “many shackled by unemployment”) can negotiate a peaceful coexistence with Christianity and capitalism as part of a “broader movement challenging the structure of political and economic power in America” to create new norms of benevolent government, economic revitalization, and respect for all individuals (88, 163, 141). With white society’s preeminence paralyzed by the uncertainty resulting from signification, “the initiative rests with people of color” to form a new coalition guided by new heroes and representative of the diverse populations of non-white Americans who are “here to stay” (104, 140). Cleaver envisions this coalition containing not only the new, young white groups whose attention would bring him to brief historical prominence, but also the Chicano (Brown Berets), Puerto Rican (Young Lords), and other allied groups who would momentarily form either a climactic multiracial coalition or a multiracial group of believers ready to plunge “America into the depths of its most desperate nightmare on the way to realizing the American Dream (*Eldridge* 165).¹⁴ Cleaver’s America is teeming with diverse citizens ready to claim American

rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (including possession of property if they so choose), and he presupposes that the status quo discursive traditions that he and his allies fight against are neither America's rightful heirs nor its ideological roots.

Cleaver seeks to rewrite both the founding documents and the underlying assumptions of 1960s American democracy in order to create a national narrative unsullied by lies and posturing, an admittedly utopic action which sets a high standard for the revised national myth. Knowledge of the less glorious aspects of American history opens a door of opportunity—an opportunity to re-name and reconstruct national and cultural narratives and to “build a New City” on the ruins of racist traditions (*Soul* 242). Everyone, including whites who have divorced themselves from racism, can participate in this new history, and Cleaver, with a coalition beside him, can make sure that this new history includes all the stories of those who are “here to stay.” As a result, America is no longer white. When the white youth “abandon the *white* image of America,” they adopt what Cleaver calls the “*black*” image of America (100). This substitution is no mere binary. “Black,” as Cleaver uses it here, means whole, complete, an amalgamation of all colors and all stories. This move is especially impressive as it attempts to fulfill, where others fail, Malcolm X's injunction towards the end of his life to reject any “doctrine of hate and racial supremacy” (79). Across the board, Cleaver rejects the rules of both racially-based hatred and unilateral historical interpretation. With the narrative of American history opened up to multiple points-of-view that acknowledge the influence of race on discourse, American narratives can be rewritten in ways that avoid the possibility of a white, black or other race's reinscription of the same linguistic moves that had made whiteness central and normal.

While the result of Cleaver's signification briefly enjoys utopian and diverse dreams, Cleaver's tactics are not without mistakes, especially as he bitterly signifies on groups he

mistakenly associates with white racist thinking. Aware of this linguistic contest's high stakes, Cleaver sometimes succumbs to a paranoia and hatred that spurs hurtful tangents. The most obvious case is Cleaver's treatment of James Baldwin and his work and Cleaver's connection of homosexuality with white supremacy. The basis of Cleaver's anger towards Baldwin appears at the beginning of his "Notes on a Native Son" in a summary of Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955): "since his African heritage had been wiped out and was not accessible to him, he would appropriate the white man's heritage and make it his own" (*Soul* 125). At first glance, this agenda would seem to mirror Cleaver's own work against normative whiteness, albeit it in a more humanistic, multiculturalist way. However, Cleaver fears that Baldwin, with all his literary power and prestige, is assimilating into white norms rather than complicating, expanding, or revising them. Cleaver's greatest fear is that Baldwin (and others) will be dazzled by white civilization to the point that he becomes "a white man in a black body. A self-willed, automated slave, he becomes the white man's most valuable tool in oppressing other blacks" (128). Cleaver's fear is not unfounded, for he had witnessed a lifetime of black leaders being co-opted by a white system of values and rewards that neutralized racial flash points without making any real progress. However, his desire for black solidarity in overturning normative whiteness devolves into petty and illogical homophobic rants and a crushing ad hominem attack on Baldwin himself. These tangents succeed only in obscuring Cleaver's purposes, as witnessed by the disproportionate scholarly attention paid to Cleaver's tirades.¹⁵ Furthermore, their polarizing views hold the potential to divide non-whites rather than rally them around Cleaver's hastily chosen platform of heterosexual masculinity.

From his schoolyard bullying to Baldwin to his subversion of foundational American concepts, *Soul on Ice* shows little mercy to any aspect of society Cleaver associates with

American racism. His verbal barrages sever the connection between the signifier and signified of terms critical to the definition of America and use the uncertainty of that dislocation to manipulate meanings and ownership in a way that ultimately allows for continued play and improvisation. With whiteness decentered, Cleaver opens the doors of a previously closed session of nation-building to all those once marginalized by a narrative that asserted inevitable and unquestioned white superiority.

FRUITS OF RESISTANCE

Soul on Ice fits into a centuries-long discursive tradition of African American rhetorical refinement and experimentation that is constantly trying to renegotiate the proper balance between direct and indirect methods of social change. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1985), Houston A. Baker, Jr. describes this renegotiation as a dialectic between “the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery” (99). Baker makes it clear that the shift between direct and indirect methods of resistance and self-assertion is not a transition between mere binaries, but rather a mapping of infinite combinations between the two. Like the early 20th century works Baker describes, *Soul on Ice* attempts a combination of approaches under the banner of signification that both directly challenge and indirectly subvert.

Cleaver’s choices, though, mark a distinct historical shift in the black resistance narrative. He wrote at a time when earlier methods of resistance, like nonviolent, often silent, resistance were being called into question. Martin Luther King Jr.’s posthumously published article “Showdown for Nonviolence” (1968) typifies this feeling: “only a few years ago, there was a discernible, if limited, progress through nonviolence . . . The fact is inescapable that the tactic of nonviolence, which had then dominated the thinking of the civil rights movement, has in the last two years not been playing its transforming role” (64). While King prescribes a renewed push for

large nonviolent demonstrations, his recognition that past methods had failed to address underlying structural problems pervades the piece. Even the greatest leader of American civil disobedience was glimpsing the limits of strategies that did not significantly change the nation's discursive traditions.

As older leaders struggled to redirect their efforts against a society seemingly unchanged by the Civil Right Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965), and the federal enforcement of token integration in schools and at lunch counters, Eldridge Cleaver and a new generation of leaders worked to bridge the traditions of racial pride, literary accomplishment, unabated passion for freedom, and steely resolve into a resistance technique that could fundamentally transform, through linguistic signification, a society left largely unchanged by government legislation and mandate. Instead of hoping to be awarded full rights and status as equal human beings, Cleaver and other writers of this period, like Amiri Baraka, John A. Williams, and Nikki Giovanni, set out to use their words to wrest such prizes from the unwilling and hesitant hands of the majority.¹⁶

These writers, like Cleaver, deserve further discussion and critique that attempts to see how their methods and contributions fit into the larger picture of racial resistance, American literature, and the ongoing shift between direct and indirect resistance. Looking backwards, the efforts of the black resistance movements, including those of the Black Arts, Black Power, Civil Rights, and Black Nationalist movements, whose efforts and aims merged and diverged with rapid fluidity, were successful in changing many tacit traditions of white superiority.¹⁷ Given this relative success, there exists a tendency to forget literary work like Cleaver's that no longer seems urgent or no longer fits easily into today's established literary canons. However, greater scrutiny of Cleaver's and his contemporaries' work can shed new light on the literature that both

precedes and follows them. In particular, within the field of American literature, the explosion of what can only be termed a literary renaissance of works by people of color since the 1960s speaks to that need. This renaissance has formed an invaluable collection of writing that has led to a revitalized and exciting contemporary canon. While there are several other periods of burgeoning “African American” literary growth, the depth and breadth of what has been accomplished in the last 30 years is unprecedented. On the pages of Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), black people are human, just as human as any other person of any other skin tone. The blessing of this canon begs further scrutiny of any factors that contributed to its flowering.¹⁸ While the body of work about the struggle for black subjectivity in a hostile nation is voluminous, documenting sit-ins, riots, laws, and cultural practices, the rhetorical process of signification and the resulting partial dislodgment of white normativity deserve further investigation, explication, and partial credit as well. While numerous individuals gave their bodies and lives for the cause, their words also had a significant effect on the changing American racial paradigm.

¹ While I wish to underscore the linguistic risks in using the term “non-white” to describe individuals who would not identify themselves as members of the Caucasian race, in a discussion of normative whiteness, no other term would quite accurately represent the forced binary thinking therein associated. That being said, because of its inclination to totalize the vast and varied cultures, practices, and skin colors described by such an umbrella term, the term “non-white” outside of a discussion of normative whiteness is virtually useless.

² While the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Arts Movement, and Black Power Movement and several other movements are used by scholars and laypersons to describe various periods, methods, and ideologies of the struggle for equal rights, I use the term “black resistance” to describe what these various movements had in common—a unquenchable desire to see fundamental change in the way the United States and the world saw and acted upon the variations of skin phenotype classified as race.

³ Signification has been rigorously studied as it applies to African American literature and rhetoric. While many have written on this topic, see Gates for a thorough explanation of this multi-faceted rhetorical technique.

⁴ My reading of *Soul on Ice* as a “single work” of subversive rhetoric is also a departure from other scholarly readings of the book where writers either look solely at certain sections of the book to examine Cleaver’s masculinity or homophobia (see Ongiri and Reid-Pharr) or examine Cleaver’s interior struggle without looking at how his writing interacted with the outside world (see Henderson). The sum of these approaches has been a scholarly consensus the Cleaver was politically impotent (see Taylor 74).

⁵ For a close study of the complicated and long relationship between race and science, see Stepan for the British perspective and Dain for a masterful recounting of the American part of the story. For more in-depth information about black entertainers resisting the discourses of black face minstrelsy, see Abbott. See also Bernardi for an edited collection of essays about how early American film perpetuated ideas of normative whiteness.

⁶ This shift was large and varied in its evolution. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 sought to repair the legal damage of racist precedents, Nazi war crimes and genocide more or less ended American interest in eugenics, and minstrelsy began to lose social acceptance in the postwar period.

⁷ My explanations of Foucault are synthesized from his very precise and lengthy step-by-step investigations. For a more complete description of the process of change and transformation, see *Archaeology of Knowledge* 166-77.

⁸ Baker’s reading of linguistic resistance before and during the Harlem Renaissance offers an important starting point for any study of linguistic resistance. For a discussion of phaneric vs. cryptic resistance, see Baker 49-52.

⁹ A classic example of this involves two men conversing just within ear-shot of a third. The two men speaking make a general insult about a specific characteristic appertaining to the third, like his pride, size, or a particular behavior. If the third man confronts the other two, they can always deny that they were talking about him. While culpability is easily denied, the signification has hit its mark.

¹⁰ Cleaver experienced this repressive power later on in his life as a very visible leader of the Black Panther Party. Numerous scholars and authors have written persuasive and well-documented studies of the methods employed by institutions, local and national, to maintain the supremacy and normativity of whiteness. See Churchill for a thoroughly researched account of the federal government’s repression of the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement.

¹¹ For example, slaves filled concepts from the biblical story of Israel's exodus from Egypt with meanings of emancipation and escape. Any white master who invoked this story in a sermon or discussion would be using what he thought to be a text proving white cultural superiority in a way that actually reinforced the subversive attitudes of his slaves. However, even when the white master understands the subversive signification, he or she cannot simply ignore its challenge.

¹² For a further discussion of the various kinds of activities that are subsumed under the term "signifyin(g)," see Gates 64-88.

¹³ Gates illustrates this point succinctly with the example of "signify" itself. Somewhere and sometime, Gates argues, slaves emptied the word "signify" of its contemporary connotation and re-filled it with several new meanings. For more information, see Gates 46.

¹⁴ George Katsiaficas documents the coalition that did come together in the fascinating Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention. The RPCC's formation and enactment occurred largely under the aegis of an Eldridge Cleaver-inspired Black Panther Party. For more information, see Katsiaficas.

¹⁵ Both Ongiri and Reid-Pharr's articles (note 2) are often-cited studies of Cleaver's homophobia. Rarely does an article on Cleaver fail to have the terms "black masculinity," "sex," or "homophobia" in either the title or abstract, and no peer reviewed article about any other aspect of *Soul on Ice* has been published since the original reactions to his writing appeared through the lens of the still vibrant Black Arts and Black Power movements.

¹⁶ For an incisive collection of these more "militant" views, see Gayle.

¹⁷ Success, in this sense, is measured by the end of accepted forms of racialism (belief in innate racial differences) and an increasingly diverse society where rising generations are less and less concerned about racial difference. Non-white individuals are succeeding in every kind of discipline and career, and that success has largely evolved away from any form of tokenism. However, it should be noted that even all the gains made by these movements and the continued struggles for racial and personal equality have not made the U.S. or any other society a utopia of equality. Major economic and social problems, like urban decay, penal system injustice, and employee advancement are all impacted by conscious and subconscious racial factors. Armour closely examines these factors and their continued effect on the American psyche. While the discussion and problems are ongoing, I examine Cleaver and *Soul on Ice* from a historical perspective, and the victories achieved in his struggle should not be misinterpreted as conclusive, permanent, or summative.

¹⁸ What work does exist in this regard has largely concentrated on black poetry of the 1960s and 70s. See Gabbin for a significant cross-section of this discussion as well as a description of the Furious Flowering conference of black poets.

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