Agnese Marino

Displacing the American Dream in Mat Johnson's *Drop*

Abstract

Mat Johnson's first work, Drop *(2000), explores the themes of the American Dream and Nightmare in relation to issues of racial and national identity, racial inequality, and personal growth. The protagonist, a poor but talented African American man, decides to expatriate to England to chase the dream which he is denied at home. When his English Pygmalion dies, he is forced to return to the US and face the nightmare of racism, exclusion, and fear. However, he has also the chance to reconcile with his community, which will eventually help him leave the country again. This paper analyses Johnson's use of the theme of expatriation in light of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia and argues that, through heterotopia, the author is able to enact a decentring strategy which undermines national ideology and focuses on the active role played by the Black community in its members' self-improvement.*

Keywords: *race studies, American dream, Mat Johnson, Foucault, heterotopia,* Drop

Mat Johnson's first work, *Drop* (2000), explores the themes of the American Dream and Nightmare in relation to issues of racial and national identity, racial inequality, and personal growth.[1] In *Kirkus'* review, we read that "Johnson's debut novel reworks a venerable theme: the young American who travels abroad to forge a new identity but ends by discovering

[1] These themes will reappear in his last novel, *Loving Day* (2015), where, in a relation of narrative continuity with his first work, the author approaches some of *Drop*'s unresolved issues. The protagonist of *Loving Day*, returned from the UK after having chased and lost his dream, reluctantly restarts his life in Germantown, gripped by the fear of gun fights and burglars, and dreaming of flying away again. In Philadelphia, he will have to come to terms with his mixed Irish/Black identity and the permanent fear of being excluded by the local African American community. The theme of the American Dream returns in transgenerational terms, as his father's dream of restoring a white colonial mansion is interrupted by his sudden death and passed on to his son, who however rejects the house (the symbol of his Irish heritage) and even tries to set it on fire. Here, more than in *Drop*, the protagonist's dreams and nightmares appear as projections of racial tensions and rooted in the need of self-acceptance. It is perhaps not too daring to suppose that the autobiographical character of most of these elements of continuity traces the evolving arc of the author's relation with writing as an instrument of self-liberation from his own nightmares and a means through which his own subjectivity and agency are restored in the process of self-definition.

that he is far more American than he'd realized" (2000). In contrast, this paper reads the novel in non-nationalistic terms, interrogating the possible effects and meanings, inside and outside of the narration, of a displacement of the American Dream.[2]

Chris Jones—self-ironical, witty, and honest—is a thirty-one-year-old African American living in Philadelphia. He has just graduated and dreams of becoming a Madison Avenue advertiser. However, as a low-income and inexperienced Black man, he has trouble breaking into the job market and feels trapped within the social borders of his neighborhood, Germantown, which he sees as condemning him to a miserable life. When a bohemian, brilliant agent from London, David Crombie, finally notices his work, Chris leaps at the chance of starting a new life abroad. Here, he enjoys a bourgeois life among the Black community of Brixton. No drug dealers on the streets, no gunfire, and no pervasive climate of racism: African American Blackness is cool among Brits. London seems to offer a truce from the constant fear of pointless violence and indigence, which haunted Chris in the US. Furthermore, David provides him with a house and a good salary; he covers all of Chris's bills, travels with him around Great Britain and Europe, and allows him to concentrate only on his creative work. But Chris's Pygmalion is unreliable: he is an alcoholic and a drug addict who, one day, sets his own house and office on fire and tragically dies, leaving Chris totally unprepared for an emancipated life in England. Forced to return to Philadelphia, homeless and unemployed, he dreams of flying away again. Meanwhile, urged on by his friend Alex, he starts a poorly paid job at the electric company, where he helps insolvent people pay their bills through federal aid. His anger grows as he finds himself miserably poor, living in a squalid apartment and brutally beaten by a Black man whom Chris had offended for no reason. In an attempt to participate in another British advertising contest and make his way back to England, Chris takes a photo of a Black prostitute from Kensington, Philadelphia, whom he considers a representative of the reality he is living in and of universal human misery. However, the job at the electric company offers an opportunity of contact with the Black community of Philadelphia, which he learns to appreciate. The mere fact of surviving awful working conditions offers him a chance to explore an unexpected space of solidarity and respect. However, Chris remains determined to make a life elsewhere, preferably in England. When the protagonist, thanks to his skills as a photographer, is finally able to move back to London, he finds out that David is not dead; the man had manipulated him, staging the tragedy,

[2] I will use the capitalized word 'Dream' (and 'Nightmare') to refer to the American Dream ideology, while the non-capitalized term, in both the singular and the plural forms, will indicate individual hopes and aspirations. At the same time, my use of 'America' in place of USA must be understood as emphasizing the exceptionalism at the base of the American Dream ideology, not as endorsing it.

in order to force Chris to grow up and emancipate. The novel thus ends with Chris turning his back on David and walking out of the door, finally independent and free.

1. At home: chasing the Dream

The title of the first chapter, "A hungry man," situates the theme of individual desire at the core of the story. Chris Jones is a dreamer, and throughout the narration, his character develops through a series of (mostly hopeless) wishes:

> Me: poor and broke, alone, thirty-one-year-old and only just finishing as an undergrad at a third-rate Pennsylvania state college, no work experience except for comforting my mom before she passed. (2000, 1)

The protagonist's initial idea of success has a strong spatial connotation and is driven by a centrifugal movement, which entails self-detachment from the streets, the buildings, and even the trees that occupy the places of his life:

> A man with no connections, and even if I did have contacts they'd be back in Philly, and I'd be stuck going up and down Lincoln Drive to 176 for the remainder of my life, East River Drive or West, cursed to pass the same buildings (windows, facades, steps), the same people (skin, breath, voices), the same damn trees (spruce, poplar pine). (2000, 1)

Chris's desire to escape affects not only places, but also the people who inhabit those places, whom he mentions as mere props of a hated urban scene, as inhuman corporeal attributes—"skin, breath, voices." This suggests a condition of total alienation from the African American community, which he openly blames for being wrong connections: an obstacle to his personal accomplishment. At the beginning, not only does Chris crave the Dream, but he also desires to embody it, that is, he is determined to become a desire-creator who perpetuates the neoliberal imperative of stimulating ever-new needs and appetites:

> For all the assets I lacked (work, experience, money, a family, decent clothes, athletic skills, charm, self-confidence, a background that was middle class), I knew that I had been given one great power: the ability to see things the way others couldn't, or more specifically, as others did but were unable to articulate, identify. I had the power to infect others with my own desire. […] I could sell it to you and make you like it, make you think you'd been begging for it all the time. (2000, 5-6)

In this passage, the protagonist's self-perception appears clearly in line with the country's self-understanding as the land of dreams and with its epistemological approach to human

fulfillment. The first-person narration contributes to strengthening the identification between the protagonist's self-description and America's self-representation as a country capable of fueling desire, keeping dreams alive, and spreading them to the world. This passage also shows that the main character is perfectly conscious of the technology of desire, which deceptively articulates human aspirations according to specific ideological codes and "sells" them as spontaneous needs. In this sense, the American Dream itself can be understood as manipulative advertisement, the ideological articulation of the desire of success, which turns a present reality into a fantasized national future and disseminates it inside and outside of America, according to specifically coded and normative chronotopes of happiness and self-fulfillment. Not accidentally, the most frequently quoted definition of the American Dream is the one provided by Governor Bill Clinton in a speech during his 1992 presidential campaign: "The ideal that if you work hard and play by the rules you'll be rewarded, you'll do a little better next year than you did last year, your kids will do better than you" (qtd. in Ifill 1992, 24).[3] This statement sounds straightforward and clear. Like a brand slogan, it makes the Dream appear as a universally affordable product, as it utterly lacks specifications of gender, race, and class. Actually, Chris is aware of structural obstacles: for example, he knows that public school by no means "provides futures" (2000, 4) and that the entire system of graduate students' facilities, which covers just a part of the expenses, has been created for the benefit of middle-class people, who can rely on family credit for extra expenses, while it systematically excludes low-income households. This, however, does not prevent him from believing that, despite his adverse starting condition, his own inclusion in the Dream *must be* guaranteed by his natural capitalist skills—after all, being excluded from upper mobility because of one's family background is totally at odds with the Dream's ideology (Hochschild 1995, 23). In the first part of the novel, Chris pays little attention to racial issues: racial exclusion is never mentioned among the obstacles that he enumerates in his own self-analysis, which is focused mostly on contingent situations and class matters. He never questions the structural state of poverty in which the Black people of West Philadelphia live and, as we will see, in many points of the text he blames it on personal weakness. He seems to embrace the idea that the American Dream does not only represent an advantage for American (or want-to-be American) individuals, but also *for* the

[3] Jennifer Hochschild reports an alternative version of this definition from Clinton's speech to the Democratic Leadership Council in 1993, which is also famous: "The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one—if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you" (1995, 18). This version makes no reference to the intergenerational character of the Dream but emphasizes the religious aspect of success as a sign of virtue and grace.

American society: the ideal of a nation of individuals who, struggling to fulfill their own desires, will contribute to the development and prosperity of the whole society, or even of the world. The alleged capacity of the Dream of spreading benefits on a global scale (the ideological background of cultural and economic imperialism) had been emphasized by its theorizer James Truslow Adams, who defined the American capacity of believing in dreams as "the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world" (qtd. in Cullen 2003, 4). However, in Johnson's text, the analogy with a disease, suggested by the term 'infect,' introduces a strident, negative connotation, especially in relation to the dynamics of its *transmissibility*: the author seems to suggest that, like an infective disease, pre-assembled desires are transmitted from individual to individual, until they form a collectivity of desiring individuals who look for their own benefits rather than committing themselves to the common good.

It has often been noted that the faith in the American Dream survives by reinterpreting the material conditions of structural inequality into obstacles that the individual must overcome, so that adverse conditions end up strengthening the myth more than disproving it. Thus, as Jim Cullen suggests, the interplay of reality and myth, which characterizes the American cultural approach to social and economic issues, has historically manifested itself in the deliberate dismissal of pursuing an *equality of conditions* in the name of an (alleged) *equality of opportunity* (2003, 108). Jennifer Hochschild sees the Dream's emotional dimension as playing a key role in what she describes as a collective amnesia about all its fallacies:

> The emotional potency of the American dream has made people who were able to identify with it the norm for everyone else. […] Those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait. Thus the irony is doubled: not only has the ideal of universal participation been denied to most Americans, but also the very fact of its denial has itself been denied in our national self-image. (1995, 26)

In the first part of the book, this 'emotional potency' affecting the national community appears stronger than the protagonist's emotional connection with Black people and seems to produce disaffection. Indeed, only in the second part of the book the reader realizes that Chris' self-centered dreams are not the consequences of his adherence to a national individualist principle of self-advancement, but they derive from a situation of personal discomfort and self-alienation from his own community. In brief, his dreams stem more from rage and solitude than from an optimistic faith in the opportunities offered by the American Dream. Thus, when the protagonist must negotiate his own pursuit of happiness with the living conditions of African American people, the focus of narration shifts from the theme of the American Dream to that of the relation between individual and community in terms of personal development.

2. The American Dream as a located utopia

Two aspects characterize the American Dream: its locatedness and its processual/operational connotation. Strictly speaking, the American Dream is not a utopia. A utopia is the object of an ideal aspiration without possible practical realization, or, in Michel Foucault's words,

> Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case, these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. (1984, 3)

Contrarily, usual representations of the American Dream describe it as an aspiration which is (1) realizable (2) in the definite geographical area of the United States of America: you can see examples of its realization in very restricted groups of people mostly composed of individuals who fit into it in terms of color, culture, gender, and so on. However, the American Dream operates as a utopia on a social level in the sense that, in Ernst Bloch's words, "[i]maginative thought is the foundation of hope" (qtd. in Johnson 2012, 2). The American Dream, like any other political and ideological utopia, puts the human capacity of dreaming at the service of material achievements, which are concrete and attainable; it generates hope through the anticipation of a possible success, constituting a bond between present and future, and inspiring optimism in the daily struggle against all sorts of social constraints. The American Dream, however, is not an international, cosmopolitan Dream. It depends on the structure of American society and reality: its entrepreneurial thrust, associated with its labor conditions, its natural resources, its spacious territory, and so on. Thus, what distinguishes the American Dream from other types of utopian expression in human history is that its realization depends on its 'placedness': in this sense, it is a *located utopia*. But what would happen if it were removed from the United States? In *Drop*, Johnson employs a strategy of displacement which takes advantage of the unreal character of this ideology to deconstruct it. The American Dream is turned into an almost surreal experience, which takes place in a dreamlike context, and is orchestrated by a mysterious, magical figure: David Crombie. Through this narrative strategy, the Dream does not result imperialistically *exported* or sold to another country (in this case, the UK) but only *transported* out of the United States to another place, an *unreal* place. Therefore, the protagonist is not an expat who seeks his self-fulfillment abroad, but instead a dreamer who, sooner or later, must wake up. As we will see, this strategy, which avoids a real comparison between America (in its self-representative terms) and other social contexts, deconstructs the Dream by revealing its illusionary nature and avoiding reiterating its exceptionalist narratives.

In the first part of the novel, Chris's faith in the Dream appears undermined, sometimes resigned, but fiercely persistent: he believes in its operational aspect. Rejected by the university facilities system, he sees his chance in an advertisement contest: the symbol of meritocracy and fair competition. "The contest," he says, "where the pauper and prince were on equal footing. The only way that the pauper got to be king" (2000, 4). The dislocation of the Dream does not entail a modification of its operational connotation ("work hard, play by the rules, and you will be rewarded"); instead, it offers to the reader the benefits of an external view—an insight into its real functioning. Although Chris's confidence in the characteristics of the Dream (opportunity, hard work, accessibility, and desire) has not collapsed, the fact that his realization will not occur in America marks already a change in his perception of it. The fact that his talent is appreciated overseas and not in the United States represents the first move away from the traditional trajectory of the Dream—the immigrant's centripetal one—in favor of a similar, but centrifugal movement. Thus, Chris simply abandons the Madison Avenue Dream to embrace the London Dream.

3. The English Dream as the American Dream's heterotopia

In *Of Other Spaces*, Michel Foucault describes heterotopias as certain sites "that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites but in such a way to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, and reflect" (1984, 3). Heterotopias are spaces which are both different from and the same as what they reflect, both real and unreal (Johnson 2016, 8). The reflective connotation of heterotopias implies that they contain, or maintain, the structure of relations of the reality they are reflecting. It is not a coincidence that the mirror is the quintessential heterotopia: to quote Foucault again, heterotopias "are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1984, 3). Through a displaced, revelatory perspective, these places offer (but do not necessarily implement) an opportunity to deconstruct and subvert the mirrored reality. Heterotopias, which may be considered as neutral spaces, have nonetheless the power of disquieting and undermining the "ordered," "coherent whole" which utopias represent (Johnson 2016, 3). We may associate the experience lived by the protagonist of *Drop* in England to the last of the six principles that Foucault provides for the identification of heterotopias:

> The last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. […] Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory (perhaps that is the role that was played by those famous brothels of which we are now deprived). Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation, and I wonder if certain colonies have not functioned somewhat in this manner. (1984, 8)[4]

This 'remaining space' could be interpreted as a space of exclusion or self-exclusion—the kind of exclusion/self-exclusion with which, according to the philosopher, the English Puritans experimented at home and which pushed them to look elsewhere for the settlement of their community. If exclusion/self-exclusion produces illusion and the search for compensation, when Chris is awarded the fourth place in the American advertising contest, he is driven to look elsewhere for the achievement of his own life objectives. The condition of being excluded from the benefits and honors reserved for the winners opens the door to a heterotopia in which his work is considered brilliant by a successful Black man, that is, in a context where class and racial issues do not represent a real obstacle to self-fulfillment. Indeed, the way in which London is portrayed suggests that it is more an experiential space than a real geographical and social context which may be considered as an alternative to the US. Though a physical place, it narratively plays the role of an anti-place, functional for the story only to the extent that it *is* and is *not* (mirrors and subverts) the American reality. Johnson creates a space within the *outer space*, in which the protagonist finally experiments with *inclusion* in the Dream. In this way, the author can show the manipulative, advertising character of the Dream. The English Dream is a subverted reflection of Chris's homeland condition, which has the temporary compensative function of putting order into the wilderness of Chris's life—his "pain, and anger, and fear" (2000, 1)—by re-enacting and subverting, in a positive way, the power relations which oppress him at home. It has been noted that Johnson's description of England is superficial and stereotyped: "Johnson's portrait of West Philly is as nuanced, elegant and witty as his portrait of Brixton is lifeless and flat, and the urban American supporting characters seem alive and genuine in a way none of the English figures begins [*sic*] to be" (*Publishers Weekly* 2000). Several elements validate this 'mirroring and subverting' interpretation. The chapter devoted to Brixton is entitled "Home," just like the one set in the US. The mirroring function of toponyms is

[4] In this case, Foucault refers to brothels and colonies as examples of historically realized and geographically located utopias, and thus of heterotopias able to compensate for the lack of a specific order in the real society.

emphasized by the fact that they refer to utterly opposite realities: English Camden "was a place of wealth and joy and not just a place in New Jersey for negroes so poor they couldn't even afford to live in Philly's ghettos" (2000, 44). London's Kensington Street, described as the "real" Kensington (2000, 169), is nonetheless portrayed in such idealized terms that it sounds like an utterly unreal place, while Kensington in Philadelphia "was all wrong. It was people with bad skin and brown crooked teeth and thin gold chains, hair forced to attention high over female heads and violent boys with harsh mouths" (2000, 169). Moreover, when David offers Chris the job of his dreams, the way in which the British workplace is structured mirrors and subverts Madison Avenue standards. This is how David describes the company he wants to create with Chris:

> No secretary, no graphic design staff, no production team, no clerks, no receptionists, but also no infighting between creative teams for a chance on the same bone. No locking your office door when you go to lunch because you're scared someone might steal your ideas, no control-hungry project managers or account executives to impose their mediocre visions […]. (2000, 33)

Such an environment calls into question the actual attractiveness of the working life at big companies, that is, it calls into question the taken-for-granted idea that the Madison Avenue kind of success, which exasperates internal and external competitiveness, is the best one can have.

David Crombie—this evanescent, almost magical figure—is more than Chris's boss: he becomes a sort of protector, or family, the solid basis on which the young advertiser can count while building up his own future. With his constant financial support, David embodies the welfare state or the well-off family which Chris did not have at home: this means that Chris is finally enjoying the privilege of being fully supported, so he has the impression of operating in a place where he can 'play by the rules' and be meritocratically rewarded. The subversive/mirroring role of this heterotopia is fully explained: seemingly, the *English Dream* contradicts the American Dream by representing a situation in which the protagonist achieves his goals without passing through individual growth and where his success is based on external financial support. In reality, it reproduces exactly the way in which the American Dream functions: the fairytale of the free-man's rags-to-riches rise through hard work and abnegation gives way to a middle-class dream, which usually rewards only the efforts of the privileged. Johnson never dwells on racial and class issues or on any other social constraint of the English context. Chris is a stranger who enjoys the benefits of non-belonging and what matters to the author is the (distorted, temporary,

and superficial) perception that the narrator has of being Black in a non-American context, or better, of being an *African American* in a non-American context:

> And here I am, David's newborn pride: an ambassador of the most successful (hah!) Black folks in modernity, the culture to which this new community looked for definition, (mis)guidance. A people who, despite defining the popular culture of the new world, barely knew of this other's existence, who rarely made it across the Atlantic for a visit and almost never came to stay. (2000, 45)

On the one hand, Chris is perfectly aware that African American coolness is part of the American brand, a product of American cultural imperialism. He also knows that American imperialistic attitude rarely leaves room for real intercultural exchange, knowledge, and recognition of otherness outside its borders. On the other hand, he takes advantage of this lack of knowledge to construct a stereotyped American identity by pretending to come from New York or by preparing a full American barbecue on the Fourth of July. His African Americanness is also performed: when Chris's African girlfriend asks him to talk "Black," he gives her what he considers the worst African American talk—an act which results into a display of virility and, at the same time, into the most profoundly humiliating step back: "Give ear to me, Fionna. Hear the voice of the life I want to smother. Listen to what the niggers on the corner have to say to you" (2000, 59). Chris's performance of American Blackness in front of his African girlfriend reflects, in fact, the White American gaze, the colonizer's gaze, and so it represents the highest expression of Chris's double consciousness.[5] We may say that this performance represents a break in the compensation provided by the heterotopia: the moment in which the illusionary character of this constructed perfection is revealed. Yet, watching Fionna dancing, with her proud, African sense of being Black, Chris learns that a Black body displayed on a podium does not necessarily provoke laugh. The English Dream reproduces the objectivation of the Black body, voice, and culture in a subverted way, through its orientalization and eroticization. In this alienated, dreamy context, even slavery becomes something one can laugh about—or rather, something that David, the model Black Brit, the emancipated and liberated one, can laugh about:

> [David]: 'The Nigerians?'

[5] If the Dream is a planetary advertisement of the American myth, heterotopic England represents the deluded buyer of such an invention, it represents the place where an African American man can buy the Dream and feel part of it as long as he performs the kind of Blackness which is sponsored by the American brand.

> [Chris]: 'Right […] I hate those bastards. They come over and talk in Yoruba the whole day. The only time they talk to me in English is when they're asking me to pass something or telling slavery jokes. That shit ain't funny.' David started giggling though, staring past me. 'Well, maybe a little funny,' I admitted. (2000, 77)

Karou Miyazawa, commenting on Foucault in relation to the immigrant's construction of the Dream, points out:

> The construction of identities is spatial. The meaning of who we are is shaped by meanings of spaces that we occupy in our lives. As we enter and exit various spaces in our lives, we construct multiple senses of ourselves and negotiate the meanings of those selves. When it comes to new immigrants, we need to examine not only "real" physical spaces (e.g., host countries) and self, but also their imaginary space and self. (2013, 63)

The meaning that Blackness acquires in the heterotopic space influences Chris's self-perception. David invites Chris to look *through the glass*, into the mirror: the "anticipation of success" occurs in a confined, closed Black space within the larger White city, which is, at the same time, a reproduction and a subversion of the ghetto: "I know there's not much at the moment, but see this, look and dream. We are at the beginning. Two Black boys, in pretty Black Brixton town, in a very White and very old city that won't know what hit it" (2000, 32).

This passage anticipates the final message of the book: Chris's real growth will occur within the socio-cultural space of the African American community, through the reappropriation of an identity and a space that he has always rejected. Brixton is a cosmopolitan, emancipated "burgeoning outpost of negritude": its Black population is "as worldly as its American counterparts were provincial" (2000, 45). Thus, for the protagonist, African Americans ignore the existence of a different way of being Black. The fact that, for Chris, the British Black community "looks at itself, trying to figure out what it was" (2000, 45) emphasizes Black individuals' subjectivity and agency, which, from DuBois on, has been considered the basic principle denied to the African American community. Such idealized view of Black Brits' subjectivity and agency, while showing a temporary way out of his pessimistic view, also reveals Chris's incapacity to recognize the broader technology of Blacks' exclusion, which operates in England as well as in the US. Significantly, Chris never even wonders about the causes of David's alcohol and drugs addiction.

To a certain extent, *Drop* proposes the themes of the Black expats' literary tradition: from Langston Hughes and Claude McKay to the so-called 'New Lost Generation' of post-World War II expatriates (James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, William Gardner Smith, and others), Black American authors have represented expatriation to the Old World as "a matter

of survival" (Miller 2008, 55)—the response to social exclusion endured at home. The feeling of being rejected turns into a desire of self-exclusion and "the desire for and acceptance of an alternative place" (Pizer qtd. in Miller 2008, 55). As an artist, Chris is moved by the same "rage in the blood" (Baldwin qtd. in Miller 2008, 54) which pushed Baldwin to emigrate in search of his own individuality and authorial voice beyond racial labels. As James Miller remarks, for Baldwin "[g]oing to Paris was a chance to escape from what he called "the 'nigger' who surrounds him and the 'nigger' in himself," to seek release in an intensity of writing that would eventually lead Baldwin to demand recognition from the nation he had fled from" (2008, 54).

Commenting on Baldwin's "A Question of Identity" (1954), Miller emphasizes a series of elements which characterize Baldwin's idea of expatriation. The first is the illusory character of living abroad: "The expatriate, he [Baldwin] contends, has come to a city 'which exists only in his mind' and prefers to 'cling' to this 'image' rather than face the shock of reality" (2008, 56). The American expat in Europe is estranged from the host society and "lives in 'a kind of social limbo'" (2008, 56). Part of this estrangement stems from the fact of being constantly perceived and appreciated as *an American*, and not as a person. Therefore, the expat feels trapped into an externally attributed identity: "When perceived by the other, the American realizes that his being in France only confirms his American identity" (Baldwin qtd. in Miller 2008, 56). According to Miller, Baldwin's expatriation experience shapes his multi-ethnic sense of Americanness as Paris provides a vantage point for the observation of racial relations at home. In Paris, the author realizes that White and Black Americans have much more in common than they have with, respectively, Europeans and Africans: "they 'reflect' and 'repeat' each other" (Miller 2008, 60). Thus, for the critic, the exclusive reciprocity which distinguishes American Black and White people from the rest of the world represents the basis of Baldwin's multi-ethnic view of his national identity.[6] In *Drop*, however, the expat experience does not produce any reconciliation between Chris and his homeland. There is no nationalism in the novel, but a strong sense of local belonging which the protagonist develops outside of the American ideological context. The author focuses on the relationship between Chris and the Black community of West Philadelphia: the community is re-centered and solidarity is represented as

[6] According to Miller, in Paris the author learns that the fact of being American plays a more relevant role in the determination of identity than skin color, historical heritage, or the shared memory of racial oppression: "By asserting that all Americans share an experience of cultural-historical severance from the rest of the world, Baldwin imagines a potential resolution of the social and political divisions of 1950s America" (2008, 66). This conclusion, to which the author comes abroad, pushed him to go back home and engage in civil rights struggles. However, his hopes were soon thwarted when he discovered that the white majority had no interest in recognizing a common, multi-ethnic national identity including African American people.

the only possible alternative to the deceptive mechanisms of the American Dream national ideology.

4. Back home: facing the African American Nightmare

The second part of the book displays Chris's immersion in the past from which he has been trying to flee: "Wee-ha, my fucking home, my fucking people. Wee-ha, my fucking source, my own fucking kind. Everything I was, loved, and wanted to run away from" (2000, 141). Here again, Chris feels at the same time included in and excluded from his own community: Johnson therefore digs into the conflict between the desire of self-emancipation and the fear of being accused of compromise with the White system—the conflict between individual aspirations and community commitment. After David's alleged death, Chris is compelled to go back home and get a poorly paid, social-service type of job, for which no skills are required but compassion. His expeditions to the neighborhoods of Grey Ferry (white) and West Philadelphia (Black) represent a full immersion in human misery: "Eyes that kept looking until they hurt, until it was, Mama, please turn away, Mama, please walk away and heal or die because whatever void is there I can't help to fill, whatever pain I am useless to erase" (2000, 141-142). This experience fuels his pursuit of the Promised Land (London), which is now surrounded by an aura of predestination: "This was the place where my life was supposed to happen" (2000, 97). Chris's re-immersion in the African American experience is connoted by a constant impulse to escape, which recalls what in critical race theory is known as the "fugitive movement." This is how Fred Moten describes it in "The Case of Blackness":

> What's at stake is fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic—a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in to break every enclosure, every closed circle, every enclosure. This fugitive movement is stolen life, and its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression. (2008, 179)

Although utopian horizons have accompanied the narrations of America from the times of its colonial foundation, the traditional theorization of a "Dream" only came in 1931, when James Truslow Adams wrote his famous *The Epic of America.* At the time of the Great Recession, Adams's book—as well as Arthur Hobson Quinn's *The Soul of America* (1932)—was inspired by the need to find national unity and a common hope, in spite of the social and economic issues which kept the country in a state of fragmentation. In the Dream, associated with the frontier myth, Adams saw a shared spiritual resource for the future, which had to be found in the

national past. According to Demetri Lallas, in Walter Lippmann's *Drift and Mastery* (1914) and Adams's *The Epic of America* (1931) there emerges "the American preference for drifting, dreamlike thought" and "distaste for the critical, analytical reflection," especially in relation to financial insecurity (Lallas 2014, 167). It is clear, therefore, that the idea of the dream is closely connected with the fear of the nightmare: the fear of chaos and lack of control. From the Pilgrims' wilderness to the crises of industrial overproduction, in times of need America has drawn on its collective imagination. In a way, the African American Nightmare (the constant denial of civil rights, of humanity, of recognition and respect), which the American Dream tries to obscure, represents that chaos, that lack of control which, since slavery, has been part of the American national experience. Afropessimist thinking posits slavery (and so the negation of Black subjectivity) at the basis of Black identity. Slavery represents therefore not a segment in African American history, but an intrinsic condition:

> The Black is not a sentient being whose narrative progression has been circumscribed by racism, colonialism, or even slavery for that matter. Blackness and Slaveness are inextricably bound in such a way that whereas Slaveness can be disimbricated from Blackness, Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness. (Wilderson 2016)

If the fugitive movement, as a means of survival, represents an expression (in radical terms, the only expression) of African American subjectivity and agency, in *Drop*—the reader now understands—the protagonist's imagined movement was not a run *toward* his dreams, but *from* his nightmare. This fugitive movement, however, will end up reconnecting him with the people he has despised. Johnson seems to suggest that, unlike mere self-realization, the development of an identity cannot happen in an individual sphere. The second part of the book, therefore, focuses on community binding and relationality. Working at the electric company, the protagonist is forced to reconnect with the unattractive, frightful reality of race. He is sent to the poorest neighborhoods of his town and when he finds himself back in West Philadelphia, he feels the need of being recognized as part of that community. The tone of the narration becomes dark and desperate:

> I wore a tie, hung from a shirt with collar, so I let my accent shape my words so that they would know I was one of them and not part of the machine, so they would stop being so damn humble and polite to me, like I was an ofay. 'Excuse me Mr. Sir. Excuse me?' No, fuck that, I'm here to help you. I am you. Spit on me as I if I was yourself. (2000, 141)

In another passage, Chris encounters a man who, in his eyes, embodies "the archetype of Black mediocrity" (2000, 150). The identification of Chris's gaze with the oppressor's gaze is explicit:

"Just another brother walking in the dark, coming from trouble or walking toward it like I was" (2000, 149). Faced with this common failure, commenting the song lyrics that the man was rapping, Chris starts a reflection on the meaning of power:

> […] people he was going to shoot, women he was going to bone, products he was going to acquire. As if power had anything to do with guns anymore… As if power meant being free of empathy, compassion, self-control, or any other distinctly human emotion. As if power meant personifying everything the people who hated you were afraid of. (2000, 149)

After having gratuitously insulted the man, denying his humanity, Chris is brutally beaten. Here we see enacted the paradox of the Nightmare. Ibram X. Kendi's (2020) recent reflections on the Black Lives Matter's riots clarify how Blackness ends up being narrated as both the cause and the effect of social exclusion and general violence. His voice on *The Atlantic* sounds impetuous:

> *How does it feel to be the American nightmare?* While Black Americans view their experience as the American nightmare, racist Americans view Black Americans as the American nightmare. Racist Americans, especially those racists who are white, view themselves as the embodiment of the American dream. All that makes America great. All that will make America great again. All that will keep America great. (Kendi 2020)

The Black body is the embodiment of White fear—the nightmare, the opposite place of the dream. Yet, one of the harshest criticisms that the narrator levels at the people of his own community concerns the way they are blinded by the illusion of power which comes with expensive brands, luxury commodities, and the sparkling of fame. He describes Kensington as "a place where niggers die, where field reporters come on TV talking about tragedy and then interview neighbors who stand in the cold and say 'It's a shame' in steamed vocals into the camera, then rush home to see themselves on the television for the first time" (2000, 169).
Here again we find displayed the double-consciousness habit or temptation of watching oneself through the camera, through the hegemonic eyes of the White man. As long as Chris looks at himself through White eyes and at his life through the eyes of the White interpretation of success, he finds himself afraid, angered, and excluded. Therefore, Johnson suggests that the only alternative to this mirroring is a recuperation of Black subjectivity. In the third part of the book, the African American community becomes an active agent in Chris's growth. His best friend Alex plays a key role in this re-centering movement as she materially and emotionally supports him in the pursuit of his dreams of self-emancipation: "I'm going to make you get better" (2000, 156), she declares while she tidies up and cleans Chris's filthy apartment. She

embodies the healing power of solidarity and sharing. Differently from David, instead of creating an illusory escaping scenario, Alex enters Chris's reality to change it. "Just lie down with me for a second. I'm tired," he begs (2000, 156), and as she goes down to reach him and falls asleep beside him, his hated past and present, his neighborhood, his escaping impulse are immediately pushed into the background:

> In minutes, Alex's breath became heavy and steady with dreams. I could feel her sound through her back. An oblivious whisper underneath the growl of cars, the *pop-pop* of local guns, the sustained thunder of jet planes trying to distance themselves from this ground. (2000, 156)

Like her body in the room, also her presence becomes central again in Chris's life.

5. Recentering the African American community

The pattern of Chris's growth is articulated through three moments, crystallized by three photographs of the people of Philadelphia. Chris needs to sell them in order to buy his plane ticket back to London. The people portrayed are both the subjects of Chris's creative work and the objects of Chris's self-identification; thus, while he still chases the English Dream, he is forced to immerse himself in the African American reality. In the novel, photographs also function like mirrors in creating heterotopias: they represent the conjunction between Chris's reality (the place where he is, the nightmare) and the place where he dreams to be (idealized England). Thus, much more than a utopia, they are a heterotopia: a place of contestation of reality. Photographs contain both the real and unreal places; through photographs, Chris is able to see himself (or a reflection of himself) in another place (the dreamed London): he sees himself as "absolutely real" and "absolutely unreal" (Foucault 1984, 4). What does it mean? Through the photographs of poor Black people, Chris imagines himself where he is and where he wants to be—they represent the dream by portraying the nightmare, and they keep together these two opposite dimensions in a paradoxical dialogue. But above all, they represent Chris's evolving relationship with Blackness, with the American Dream, and with himself.

The first photograph, taken for an English condoms brand contest, portrays a Black prostitute of Kensington, Philadelphia. The passage displays Chris's inherited sense of imprisonment and misery, and his inability to recognize humanity in this condition:

> The face stared back at you, that anger, desperation, the sex and danger, that was real too. And that was all you cared about. At the bottom of the page, the copy provided the mortal blow. *This is Karen. Karen services six men an hour, thirty-two men an evening, 192 men a*

> *week, 9408 men a year. If Karen trusts Lionskins Condoms to protect her life, don't you think you should, too?* (2000, 172)

According to Chris, who looks very proud of his work, the power of this picture resides in its authenticity, while Alex, who is outraged, explains that the realness it reproduces is just that of an enslaved, objectified female body. It represents the condition of perpetual danger essential to the Black experience, the fear, and the constant need for self-protection. The increasing number of male bodies who may hurt Karen, in this inexorable, mechanical accumulation of hours, days, weeks, and years, recalls the historical perpetuation of violence on the Black body. And yet, the one who uses the condoms as protection is not Karen, but—as the advertisement suggests—whoever is afraid of being infected by *someone like her*. In this sense, Karen simultaneously embodies the hurting individual and the possibly hurt one. She is the African American nightmare: the object and the perpetuator of danger. Furthermore, the photo embodies the collective dimension of depersonalization which is at the opposite end of the Dream's individualism: 'Karen' does not exist—Chris has invented her name, depriving that body of its real identity and humanness. In the attempt of reaching his dream, Chris has appropriated the quintessential attitude of the slave owner, depriving the woman of any real identity and imposing on her a made-up one. He has thus thrown her into the same oblivion he experienced when he was excluded from the first contest, occupying the fourth place, the place where your name does not even matter, "where no one even knows you played" (2000, 8).

The second step of Chris's growth is represented by a photograph taken during the Fourth of July celebrations. I interpret this picture as displaying the protagonist's process of self-detachment from America and his new consciousness about the operational character of the Dream. In "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852), Frederick Douglass wrote that "shouts of liberty and equality" were "hollow mockery" for Black people devoid of their civil rights (qtd. in Cullen 2003, 114). Although moved by a shallow nationalism, made of barbecue sauce and fireworks, Chris decides to represent people from different areas of Philadelphia, from different races, ethnicities, and classes, all united for the event. In order to obtain the perfect view, he climbs on the statue of George Washington, helped by the people below, sits beside him on his horse, and takes a picture from above. The ascent is described in an ironical, almost grotesque tone, with the exaggerated triumphalism that is usually attributed to patriotic manifestations:

> […] it stuck out about two feet from the ground. This would be my final victory. […] The main stage was forgotten: the acres of faces were on me now, the crop of arms wagged in my

> direction. Inflate me with your joy. If they could have seen my tears, they would have known they were thank-yous. Together we cheered as the symphony began to play, as the sky finally exploded in my honor. (2000, 182-183)

While celebrating the beauty of his multi-ethnic nation, the protagonist still enjoys the feeling of elevating above it and self-separating from the crowd. However, there is an interesting element in this narration which suggests that the protagonist is also self-distancing from the country's ideologies and mythologies. Chris sells the picture of the crowd to the tourist office with the caption: "Philadelphia: Celebrating a Local Holiday" (185). Even a non-American reader would be surprised by the downscaling of the Fourth of July's magnificence, its reduction to a mere "local holiday." The adjective 'local' places the United States on an equal footing with other countries and undermines the exceptionalist ideology which sustains national self-representation. Obviously, he has acquired such a perspective abroad and now he can see his country through the eyes of a foreigner.

In the final step, the protagonist appears in control of the mechanisms of heterotopian creation. He is preparing a shooting set for a project about the people of Philadelphia in Love Park. Since the actor he has hired does not show up, he is forced to employ a Black homeless man who is taking a bath in the park's fountain. After dressing him with the scene costume, the man looks transformed: "He was so good in that suit, his dreads clean and brushed to order, looking like a redbone Frederick Douglass. This was the man somebody had wanted him to be, the one some mother had imagined" (2000, 191).

Through photography, Chris is able to create a space that mirrors and subverts reality; the pictures put order in the chaos by creating a parallel reality which is as dignified and neat as it is temporary and illusionary. The reference to Douglass is of course a tribute to one of the Black Americans who fought strongly to make "the nation's life consistent with the nation's creed," as he wrote in his 1883 address (Douglass qtd. in Cullen 2003, 114). Differently from the first photograph, if the Black body is represented again through eyes and desires of someone else, this time it is not an objectifying gaze. The dreams he is recreating in his pictures are not the man's dream nor the nation's Dream, but merely the loving dreams of a hypothetical mother: the ideological approach has given way to a more realistic attitude, which reflects the perspective of a loving community. Because it is through the loving eyes of Alex that Chris looks at himself now.

6. Dislocating the Dream: revealing the Dream

At the beginning, the narrative pattern of *Drop* seems to reproduce the rags-to-riches plot which sustains almost all American Dream stories: a hero who has nothing except his/her dreams and talent seeks his/her fortune, undergoes a crisis having obtained success too fast, acquires maturity and skills to overcome misfortunes and social obstacles, and finally achieves the dreamed-of wealth. However, the path of Chris's growth will lead him first to a different place, England, and then to a different goal, which is less about individual success and more about reconciliation with Blackness, his community, and himself. This path entails a gradual detachment from the national ideology with which he initially self-identified, with its individualism and its myths (such as Madison Avenue lifestyle), but above all, it entails an immersion in the nightmare of his fears and all the feelings which pervaded his pessimistic representation of the African American condition. The author operates a decentering strategy on multiple levels, undermining both the American Dream's locatedness (American exceptionalism) and its operational connotation (illusory hope), especially in relation to the inclusion of the Black community. The story is divided into three parts. In the first one, the theme of the Dream is central: its English heterotopia provides Chris with the success he was pursuing at home but, since "fantasies are fine so long as people understand that that is what they are" (Hochschild 1995, 26), the role of this heterotopia is to show Chris how the American Dream works, for whom it works, and what its effects are. The subversion of power relations in Brixton provides him with a different representation of Blackness, which will lead to a different representation of his people as well, once he reconnects with them at home. This is an important point: Chris's dislocated dream provides him with an external view, free from the burden of the violent and dehumanizing history of the United States. However, as such, it cannot be easily applied to the American context. For what concerns the Dream itself, if throughout the narration Chris believes that its realization is possible, albeit in a different country, at the end of the book he discovers that David has lied to him about his own death and has manipulated him for his own benefit: this twist in the narrative disintegrates the English Dream too, so that, at the end, both the English and the American Dream reveal themselves as illusory propaganda. However, what is interesting in Johnson's writing is that it is never openly disruptive. At first, when Chris goes back to the USA, his determination to self-improve in another country invalidates the idea that the Dream is American because it is realizable *only* in America. By decentering the *locus* of the Dream's realization, not only does he undermine American exceptionalism, but also the very foundation of the Dream's ideology, which must be *American*. In fact, even the models of American success, such as the Madison Avenue companies, are

replaced with more intimate family-based operative ideals. The effects of this change in perspective persist as the protagonist remains resolute to leave the country and look for his fortune abroad. In the last scene of the book, when Chris finally turns his back on David and goes away, we do not know whether he will go back to the States, stay in England, or go to some other place: we can surmise that the author has omitted this (crucial) information because *the place* is no longer relevant, as there is no ideology to pursue any longer.

In parts two and three, the protagonist's relationship with race and community becomes the main theme, while self-realization, although still important for the protagonist, becomes secondary for the reader. The role of the Black community in Chris's achievement represents a strategy of re-centering the African American community in its members' personal success. Chris's best friend, Alex, provides Chris with all he needs to emerge. She lends him a small sum of money, a camera, and contacts with the tourist office, which will pay for his pictures of Philly and, eventually, for his flight back to the UK. It is Alex who cleans his filthy apartment, makes him reflect on his own anti-Black attitude and prejudices, and urges him to reconnect with his people; finally, she drives him to the airport, letting him free to follow his own path. She represents, at this stage, a better and more reliable support than mercurial David was in England. Unable to provide him with an alternative job, house, or dream, she operates through solidarity. Alex represents that part of Black community which Chris had always refused to see while chasing his White Dream. The decentralization of national ideology in Chris's path of self-emancipation is proved by the fact that it is not 'America' that provides Chris with an opportunity of real self-improvement, but his new-found community. Thus, if the traditional role of the African American community is that of disproving the veracity of the American Dream, in this novel the community does not only play a mirroring role, but becomes an active subject, participating in the realization of another kind of dream, which is *non-American*, and has its own operational connotation and rules.[7] In place of a direct critique of the ideology of the Dream—be it in the form of the Black counter-narrative tradition, from Frederick Douglass onwards, or of the call for an African American Dream of Equality, as in the Civil Rights movement tradition, both of which put America and its contradictions at the center—Johnson

[7] A real, concrete, re-appropriation of the Dream would involve a deep transformation of its individualistic structure: as Cullen suggests, the African American community has already attempted this enterprise. Martin Luther King, Jr., with his *beloved community*, was the first who gave the Dream a communitarian value, describing it as an achievement of human civilization rather than a right of individuals in their own lives. As Cullen remarks, the Dream of the African American people has mostly envisioned "an interracial vision of family and friends savoring the fruits of equality" (2003, 115), but its achievement is yet to come.

uses the heterotopian tool as a decentering narrative strategy. At the same time, he operates a re-centering of Black subjectivity, making the African American community the real supporter of Chris's upward move. In conclusion, the displacement of the exclusive Americanness of the Dream and the substitution of the Dream's operational connotation (individual struggle and illusion) with that enacted by the Black community (self-liberation from the White gaze and solidarity) have the effect of disclaiming the traditional categories and discursive patterns of the American Dream without reiterating American exceptionalism.

Agnese Marino *gained her MA degree in Comparative Literature and Cultures from the University of Naples "L' Orientale." Her MA thesis on post-ethnicism in contemporary US literature was awarded the Lombardo-Gullì Prize by the Italian Association of North-American Studies. She concluded her PhD program in American studies at the University of Heidelberg, with a dissertation on the influence of new cosmopolitanism on post-civil rights biracial authors. She has published on* RSA – Journal of American Studies *and is currently working on the publication of her first book. Her main research interests focus on cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, post-ethnicism/post-identity theory, multiracial identity and literature, autobiography, utopia and heterotopia.*

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