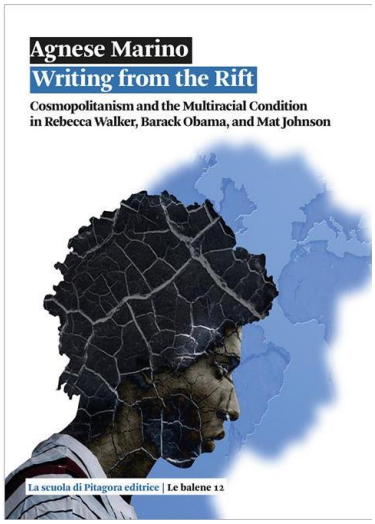
Agnese Marino

Writing from the Rift

Cosmopolitanism and the Multiracial Condition in Rebecca Walker, Barack Obama, and Mat Johnson



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Review by Giuseppe Polise

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Writing from the Rift: Cosmopolitanism and the Multiracial Condition in Rebecca Walker, Barack Obama, and Mat Johnson (2022) by Agnese Marino is a compelling study that breaches into the complex positionalities of three mix-raced authors as they strive for self-definition while dealing with the infamous questions of (un)belonging and home(lessness) in the multicultural—yet at all times racially polarized—America. Building on a non-traditional, post-colonial approach to cosmopolitanism that intercepts both the anxieties towards and the strategies in response to the constricting grip of identity politics, the author engages with a decades-long conversation on the painful multiracial experience in the US that encompasses an entire generation of mixed-race writers—the so called 'Loving Generation'—who grows progressively disillusioned in the dream of racial reconciliation passed on by their parents. As a matter of fact, the hope of racial hybridization that these authors embody soon becomes inconsequential when confronted with the persistence of the strict categorization of Jim Crow on a cultural level that not only exacerbated white nationalism but also expanded the ramifications and affiliations of black descendance in the process. As Marino accurately explains, "in the 1970s, the first post-civil right generation of biracial children saw the ideals that had inspired their parents' romantic and political project collapse under the dividing force, on the one hand, of continued white racism, and on the other, of black cultural nationalism, which excluded all connections and alliances with whiteness" (53). From Barack Obama's

Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance (1995) to Rebecca Walker's *Black, White, and Jewish: an Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2000), and concluding with Mat Johnson's *Loving Day: a Novel* (2015), Marino's observation of this collapse brings her to theorize a profound connection between the multiracial experience of these authors and a critical understanding of being cosmopolitan that does not simply relate to the idea that all human beings are citizens of the world. Because of the discomfort that their unbelonging to either race generates, these authors allow for a re-definition of cosmopolitanism as a process of dislocation, a physical and psychological state of being "not fully comfortable—never fully at home—anywhere" (Patell 2015, 1). Investigating the powerful act of self-narration—which one encounters in Marino's corpus in a plethora of forms, from the autobiography to the memoir and the autobiographical novel—the author searches comfort in the discomfort of loneliness and displacement that being multiracial meant in a culture of either/or imperatives. What comes forth in Marino's research is a multiracial, cosmopolitan 'I' that troubles any traditional approach to race as a monolithic representation because, at its very core, the subject embraces "the fluid idea of identification over that of [racial] identity" as something that is pre-constituted, coherent, and fixed (48). In each work, the cosmopolitan 'I' painfully grows to exist outside of the nation's neurotic requirement to reduce the self to regimented, legible racial categories, and finds solace in their openness to the other. As Marino's analogy goes, the cosmopolitan 'I' appears as partly immersed in water—partly belonging and partly detached—as expanding circles cover the whole space around the individual until they blend into the universal diversity of humanness. (This 'I' stands out in its significant shift from the ontological to the ethical, from the search for recognition to a propulsion towards civil responsibility and empathy with marginalized communities and individuals.

While the painful experience of an undefinable multiracial self is at the center of all three works, *Black, White, and Jewish* by Rebecca Walker particularly insists on the protagonist's never-ending state of emotional suspension, as she feels torn not just between the ethnic backgrounds that she inherits from her parents, but also between the even more articulated cultural and religious references that those backgrounds entail. Suspended between unbridgeable worlds, Walker experiences a growing racial discomfort that transcends the epidermal to include her dis/connection with the whole nation. Clear in Walker's memoir is how, within the borders of a racially divided America, rejection occurs at several concentric levels for the multiracial woman, the same that would positively shape the cosmopolitan subject in their contact and communion with otherness. First, there is the rejection of her racially indeterminate body; then, that of her nuclear circle through her parents' failed marriage, and her extended circle with the impossible

reconciliation of the Jewish and the African American sides of the family; next comes the estrangement from the community life, with the cultures of her friends; and last, that from the national history and culture "which does not contemplate her being both black and white" (113). Still, an escape from such dislocation occurs, as Marino suggests, when the author experiences three transformative encounters, that unsurprisingly, take place outside of the US soil. If, before the travel section, Walker appears as a misfit that is each time forced into racial performances in the attempt to accommodate external expectations, in the last part of the book Walker moves from a quasi-obsessive focus on her identity issues to dealing with the question of human connection by getting in touch with strangers with whom she does not share neither language, nor blood or culture. This profound sharing, Marino concludes, a sharing that takes place at a pre-discursive level, turns into a revealing warning against "the discursive practices that create identity in her country and their normative, limiting action on individual self-assertion" (145).

In *Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama, the cosmopolitan nature of the work stands out in two different forms: what Marino addresses respectively as the cosmopolitan rhetoric—that is, a codified thinking emerging mostly through reflections and commentaries on personal and social issues—and the cosmopolitan condition, or the *rift*. If a cosmopolitan rhetoric informs Walker's writing only by the end of her transformative journey and upon her return in the US, the same rhetoric appears, instead, as a fully fleshed discursive practice in *Dreams from My Father*, where Marino reads it as "an antidote to the pain deriving from his biracial heritage and transcultural upbringing […] that transforms the author's self-perception as a 'stranger' and an 'unknown' into a relational subject: someone able to see the others, recognize them, and take care of them" (162).

The cosmopolitan condition, instead, is described as a feeling of existential unbelonging and homelessness that emerges from the clash between the Movement Child's symbolism inherited by Obama's family and his need to act against the racial injustices and several forms of oppressions that black people face. Like Walker's, Obama's cosmopolitan condition expresses the painful necessity of the multiracial subject to continuously perform both blackness and whiteness to keep the balance between his two inner worlds. Contrary to Walker's self-perception as a bridge between two or more identities and worlds, however, the theorization upon the notion of the *rift* in Obama's autobiography points to that space/non space between races that simultaneously connects and divides, cracking the ground of fixed identities. "A rift," Marino argues, "is a break in the continuity of space […]. Therefore, a rift implies two surfaces: one visible and broken, and the other hidden and intact. These two levels recall Walker's idea of the external and internal worlds (the world of external ascription and that of inner self-

identification) that biracial people inhabit" (177). In a world where people are arbitrarily labeled based on race (racialization) and have limited options for self-identification (internalization of racialization), the rift represents a space where there is no physical categorization according to cultural norms or distinctions between oneself and others. The rift is not a place of fixed multiracial identities, but rather a place of cosmopolitan possibilities, where individuals exist everywhere and nowhere, constantly reinventing themselves based on their allegiances rather than conforming to societal expectations.

In talking about his past experiences, inhabiting the rift for Obama means to have slowly mastered the ability of speaking in the 'languages' of his two worlds of origin, decoding and replicating both black and white modes of expression as well as their cultural references. At the same time, however, such mastering also implies the insurmountable discomfort in being always confronted with the feeling of unbelonging to neither language nor culture or world. As a non-native speaker, a translator—an image to which the author resorts in describing the rift in the multiracial subject—Obama may have mastered a language but does not identify entirely with it. He "may have a primary language (of belonging) and a secondary one (of mastery) […]. However neither can fully describe his personal experience of the world" (192), hence his legible emotional turmoil.

If the first two works deal with the supposed representation of the real on paper, *Loving Day* by Mat Johnson merges the fictional with autobiographical elements to reflect on the implications of being a mixed-black person in the Obama Era, bringing to the fore the extent to which race deeply affects people's interactions. Through the fictional character of Warren Duffy, a half-Irish half-African American man who reconnects with his teenage daughter after the death of her mother, Johnson creates a world that exposes both the rigid constructedness of racial identity and how mainstream society categorizes and marginalizes people of color. Using wit, irony, and humor as integral components of a strong social commentary, Johnson expresses his profound skepticism towards the naturalization of such a constructedness of race. This happens, for instance, upon the introduction of the Mélange School in the novel, a nomadic charter institution that praises hybridity over racial authenticity and distinguishes students based on their racial self-identification only. Questioning any form of essentialism, this approach clearly marks a significant shift in perspective with regards to identity politics, according to which racial identification mostly becomes the intuitive result of external ascription. In this respect, another strategy through which authenticity is questioned is by resorting to more than ten derisive words—from 'mulattopia' to 'halfros' and 'melungeons'—to describe the school and its multiracial members. And while, as Marino suggests, these words may sound as a "monstrous

combination of morphemes" in their belonging to two different cultural worlds, "they are not so different from Walker's and Obama's attempt to create modes of expressions for their mixed experience" (222).

As rich and varied as the cases in Marino's corpus are in terms of life experience, all three of them—Walker, Obama, and Johnson—suggest through their work the feeling of being prey to a dichotomic view of the world in which the multiracial subject stands as a paradox, an uncalculated inconvenience that has no choice but to fit in. Through their writing, these authors continually search for adequate representations of this paradox, of this life always lived in between—in *Loving Day*, for instance, Johnson compares Warren to an asterisk, a connecting symbol that certainly exists in the text, but that does not belong to the text's meaning. At the same time, these three acts of self-narration also expand the notion of membership to the entire world in response to a global urgency that was animating the US upon their publication. From the admittedly uncomfortable position of the stranger, Marino concludes, they can move away from the constraints of identification and "develop an appreciation (and narration) of themselves capable of transcending racial binaries and attaining the universal community of oppressed and outcast people" (248).

Giuseppe Polise *is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of L'Aquila. His research interests and publications include African-American folklore, representations of black female and queer sexuality, and Afrodiasporic spirituality in the US. In 2019 and 2020 he was a Fulbright Scholarship recipient, spending one semester at the College of Charleston (SC) as a Visiting Student Researcher.*

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