

**Trey Ellis’s *Platitudes*:
Synthesizing Black Voices**

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Trey Ellis has emerged as a prominent African American writer of the late-twentieth century, despite the small number of his published works. “The New Black Aesthetic,” an essay that he first published in *Callaloo* in 1989, one year after the publication of his first novel, *Platitudes*, stands as a manifesto that defines and articulates his perspective on the emerging black literary voices and culture of the time, and on “the future of African American artistic expression” in the postmodern era.¹ According to Eric Lott, Ellis’s novel parodies the literary and cultural conflict between such male *experimental* writers as Ishmael Reed and such female *realist* writers as Alice Walker.² Thus, Ellis’s primary purpose in writing *Platitudes* is to redefine how African Americans should be represented in fiction, implying that neither of the dominant approaches can completely articulate late-twentieth-century black experience when practiced in isolation. In its final passages, *Platitudes* represents a synthesis of the two literary modes or styles, and it embodies quite fully the diversity of black cultural identities at the end of the twentieth century as it extends African American

literature beyond racial issues. In this way, the novel exemplifies the literary agenda that Ellis suggests in his theoretical essay.

While Ellis's essay has captured positive attention from authors and critics, *Platitudes* unfortunately remains obscure, although it best represents the literary ideology that he describes in "The New Black Aesthetic." Too few critical articles have been written about *Platitudes*, and those articles generally have focused more interest on his essay than on the novel itself. Yet the novel demonstrates Ellis's virtuosity in employing innovative postmodern techniques in a narrative, and in "Hip-Hop Fiction," a review article on *Platitudes*, Lott notes that the novel is "a call for truce in the black literary world" and that Ellis accurately perceives the prevalent "Reed-Walker paradox" within African American literature, in which *male* authors tend to focus on sexual freedom while *female* authors emphasize black folkloric heritage and domestic harmony.³ Lott categorizes Ellis's *Platitudes* as parody,⁴ but Doris Jean Austin treats it as satire.⁵ The terms *parody* and *satire* often overlap in their definitions. J.A. Cuddon points out that parody itself "is a branch of satire,"⁶ so the two critics place Ellis's novel under related rubrics, which I shall refer to henceforth as satire. Unarguably, *Platitudes* is an innovative literary work that thematically and stylistically deviates from the mainstream of African American literature, which traditionally has focused on racism, slavery, oppression, and black identity.

T.S. Eliot argues in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1920) that the individual writer of the Modern Age could create aesthetic unity by joining the "timeless" and the "temporal," or the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of the culture, in new works, so that a continuity with earlier literary works by "dead authors" is maintained even as "living authors" speak meaningfully to the audiences of their time.⁷ In a very innovative way, Ellis attempts to synthesize the tradition of black literature and his own individual talent in *Platitudes*, and this effort of synthesis is particularly discernable in Ellis's satire. In "The New Literary Blackface," Jennifer Jordan observes that a verbal tradition of satire has long been associated with African

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American literature because “[t]he very language that black people created once they arrived in America is filled with ironic rituals and stories, which like all satire point out failures and foibles using humor.”⁸ According to Jordan, postmodernist black writers draw upon the Western tradition of satire in their works because it imbues African American literature with a sense of vitality.⁹ Trey Ellis himself states that *Platitudes* is “a satire of every type of writing imaginable.”¹⁰ Ellis extends the use of this African American tradition in satire innovatively, without straying far from the African American literary mainstream in the exercise of his individual talent. It is undeniable at least that his novel is fraught with humor, irony, and sarcasm, and that it parodies writings by some of Ellis’s notable contemporary African American authors.

Ellis states that the New Black Aesthetic has the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement as its most proximate antecedents.¹¹ Thus, it is crucial to examine how *Platitudes* both preserves and extends these two movements in the arts in order to posit a new, post-nationalistic African American aesthetic in the post-1980s era. Since the appearance of *Platitudes* in 1988, the few critics who have given consideration to the work have focused their attention on how Ellis’s literary manifesto, “The New Black Aesthetic,” shapes his novel. Their assessments of the work have been both positive and negative. On the positive side, Bertram D. Ashe notes that “Ellis’s multi-dimensional exploration of a fluid black culture, combined with his experimental approach to narrative form, first coalesced in *Platitudes*.”¹² Doris Jean Austin praises Ellis for his success “when he’s being irreverent about sacred subjects, social and political, American and un-American.”¹³ Maurice J. Bennett argues that *Platitudes* “is more than just another story of adolescent initiation (the loss of virginity, the discovery of love), [and] more than another picture of the writer writing (about how to tell a tale).”¹⁴ On the negative side, Penny Kaganoff says that the novel is entertaining, but it “degenerates into tedious attempts at wit and humor.”¹⁵ J. Martin Favor questions the authenticity¹⁶ of black voices that Ellis attempts to represent in

his novel, and he concludes that Ellis's overall vision of the New Black Aesthetic is "impractical," both in his literary manifesto and in his novel.¹⁷

According to Ellis himself, however, the primary goal of the New Black Aesthetic accords with the spirit of T.S. Eliot's perception: it is to "expand the boundaries of traditional Black art"; he suggests that African American literature should not be characterized by its presentation of such common themes as jazz, Africa, and poverty, because "Black folks deserve and crave more choices."¹⁸ Ellis employs the word *traditional* broadly, but in his writings, he suggests that the New Black Aesthetic movement actually originates in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. In general, *Platitudes* illustrates Ellis's concept of the continuity of the traditional amid the experimentation of the postmodern age. Thus, Ellis's view recalls in his own period, through either direct or indirect influence, the similar vision that Eliot had articulated for the modernist period: the aesthetic dialogue taking place in Ellis's novel is between the tradition of African American creative experience and the individual African American writer who lives and creates art in his own era.

In *Platitudes*, Ellis presents a novel in which two author-characters, Dewayne Wellington (who speaks in a voice strongly reminiscent of that of Ishmael Reed) and Isshee Ayma (who speaks in a voice similar to that of Alice Walker)¹⁹ interact and collaborate to construct a novel-within-the-novel, which constitutes the focus of the literary discussion contained within *Platitudes*. In the end, Ellis's two narrators, as well as the main characters whom they create for the novel-within-the-novel, are reconciled harmoniously. Ellis is a "post-soul-era" author, according to Nelson George, "[and] despite the rise of Afrocentric consciousness ... many young-gifted-and-black post-soulers practice integration without anxiety," as Ellis recommends and does. George goes on to explain that because most post-soul black authors have not experienced ghetto life and have been educated in predominantly white schools, they tend to make "race consciousness less central to their being,"²⁰ which is an important observation for understanding how Ellis

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differs from the black modernist authors of earlier decades. Dewayne has the primary narrative gaze within Ellis’s novel, and his view of the events and the interactions of the characters affirms George’s observation: nowhere does Dewayne focus his attention on racial discrimination or social injustice—the themes that dominate earlier twentieth-century African American literature. He effectively incorporates new scenarios in his writing that obviate the boundaries of race and class, and his characters live relatively comfortably and happily, bridging the various gaps between the black world of their families and friends, the racially diverse metropolitan milieu in which they live, and the dominant white culture of America.

The novel-within-the-novel that Ellis’s characters, Dewayne and Isshee, create actually is used to contrast their differing perspectives on the social and economic circumstances of their own two main characters, Earle Tyner and Dorothy Lamont. Employing this innovative device, Dewayne and Isshee portray Earle and Dorothy as two ambitious black teenagers, but from Dewayne’s and Isshee’s differing authorial perspectives simultaneously.

In Dewayne’s version, Earle and Dorothy represent second-generation, urban, middle-class African Americans whose economic situations allow them to enter into mainstream American life. As Ellis states in “The New Black Aesthetic,” Earle and Dorothy are “*cultural mulattos*, [who are] educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures and [who] can navigate easily in the white world” (emphasis added).²¹ In parallel to the opening of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), the opening chapter of Dewayne’s novel depicts a morning in a black household. However, while Bigger Thomas (the main character in Wright’s novel) and his folks live in a dilapidated, rat-infested, ghetto apartment, Earle lives in a decent, comfortable, middle-class apartment: “Light pours through the apartment window over the large schefflera leaves; it filters past [the plastic models of a] P38 Mustang and the four-stage Estes Saturn 5 rocket.”²² The words *light*, *Mustang*, and *Estes Saturn 5 rocket* suggest a higher level of optimism and imagination in Earle’s personal

environment than that suggested by the gloomy, impoverished, cramped conditions in which Bigger Thomas's family lives. As an author, Dewayne is moving beyond the themes of anger, desperation and poverty that prevailed in much of African American literature of the previous era; he is depicting an optimistic expectation of success for his protagonist. He is interested in portraying black characters who have an education and who anticipate opportunities for personal and professional advancement similar to those of middle-class white people. For instance, Earle's collection of college pennants and his ultimate dream of studying at Cal Tech or MIT suggest his reasonable aspirations for higher education—as a potential passport to a comfortable, stable life in the postmodern era. The late twentieth century witnessed a growth of black contributions in fields that previously had been closed to them. Thus, Earle represents an active participant in the social dynamic toward American ethnic diversity and greater inclusion, especially in an era dominated by the consumer ideal. Earle, along with two of his friends, is a member of a group of computer buffs, the "Trinary"; thus, Earle in himself debunks an assumption held by many people around him—the myth that the computer world is owned by white people, so all computer nerds must be white.

Dorothy Lamont, in Dewayne's version of the novel, attends St. Rita's Catholic School, where she is at the center of the popular social crowd. She wishes to escape the stifling atmosphere of her mother's family-style restaurant in Harlem and live as a liberated middle-class sophisticate. Constructing her own American Dream, she looks forward to the day when she can say, "*Goodbye ghetto*,"²³ and begin earning a good salary in a business corporation. Her dream is clearly conceptualized in her young consciousness:

after college and biz school I won't have to worry about that [family business] no more 'cause it'll be Morgan Stanley investment banking and Fifty Grand a Year City, yeah buddy. No more crashing on Julie's or Olivia's floor like a slave 'cause you absolutely cannot train it past one [a.m.]. Yeah, I'll have me a dee- luxe apartment in de skyaaaaay.²⁴

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Basically, Dorothy just wants to be “*rich and black*.”²⁵ She wishes to establish her black identity first by pursuing higher education at a prestigious academic institution and then living a luxurious life. Although Dorothy lives in Harlem, she attempts to ignore that community and her working-class family background as she immerses herself in New York urban life, partying with such rich white friends as Janey Rosebloom and Richard Manilow.

Ellis came from an educated family himself; his parents graduated from the University of Michigan and Yale University, and he completed an MFA at Stanford University. In Dewayne’s version of the novel, it seems that Dewayne’s authorial voice echoes Ellis’s, at least in terms of the importance of the character’s academic ambition. Dewayne’s teenage characters come from middle- and working-class families, but they either plan to attend or already attend elite educational institutions. They herald a movement among the second-generation, metropolitan blacks who are capable of pursuing success as defined by mainstream values and experimentation in the arts. Both Earle and Dorothy are urban black teenagers who successfully integrate themselves into metropolitan society and who are not constrained by their black ethnicity. Earle desires to earn a degree in computer science at Cal Tech or MIT; Dorothy plans to transfer to Stanford, and one of her sisters already has become a Yale graduate. These characters represent Ellis’s “rapidly growing group of cultural mulattos,”²⁶ a loaded term that Ellis seems to have coined. By emphasizing the value of academic degrees from prestigious schools, Dewayne suggests that second-generation African Americans no longer need to accept the limited aspirations of “second-class citizens,” that their future is promising, and that they no longer should be disadvantaged by a slave mentality or a culturally instilled sense of inferiority.

It is important to note that throughout his novel, Dwayne describes black characters as beautiful and confident, and they, in general, are appreciated in white society. In fact, in Dewayne’s narrative, it often is difficult to discern which characters are

black and which are white. Chapter 28 of *Platitudes* describes Dorothy's successful integration into the sexuality of the white world surrounding her, in which wealthy white people live comfortably and happily. In this urban milieu, Dorothy is just as beautiful and seductive as white teenagers, and the distinction between blond hair and blue eyes or black hair and ebony skin does not exist. In one nightclub, for example, Richard, a charming, elegant white model, "was aiming for her [Dorothy] from the start,"²⁷ and they "go to the dance floor and spin and bop like maniacs and together they make a great couple because she's gorgeous of course and he's an absolute hunk."²⁸ In Dewayne's novel, black people are equal to white people, and neither group feels superior or inferior to the other. Sexual desire is a cultural, as well as biological, phenomenon, and the interracial couplings in Ellis's novel both embody and symbolize the "cultural mulattoism" that he describes and to which he calls attention.

In the Introduction to *Post-Soul Nation*, Nelson George makes a valid point that the black authors of the post-soul era have "challenged the traditional views of black politics and values,"²⁹ and Ellis's *Platitudes* unarguably challenges common, stereotypic images of African Americans. In an interview for the *People Weekly* conducted by V.R. Peterson, Ellis comments, "Unfortunately, there are people who still try to pigeonhole black men and see us only as Africa, as a problem, or as something to be pitied and feared."³⁰ African American literature of the Harlem Renaissance period and of the 1960s typically portrays a crisis of racial and personal identity in the struggle of black communities against the ethnic constructs projected upon black people by the racist society around them. Characters in African American literature of the pre-Civil Rights, Modernist era, generally focus their thoughts and actions upon the rift that blatantly separated the black and white worlds into two strictly delineated realms of consciousness. For example, in Wright's post-Harlem Renaissance novel *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas is constantly conscious of his skin color, which he believes to be the main cause of his family's poverty: "We

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black and they white. They got things and we ain’t.”³¹ However, Dewayne’s narrative approaches skin color with a different mindset criticizing the generalizations or assumptions made about or among black people. For instance, when Dorothy proudly declares that “black most always are [good kissers], ... Sheena always objects, because she says you *can’t* stereotype our race” (emphasis added).³² In this exchange, Ellis articulates his stance on the cultural discourse as it pertains to racial authenticity. Mark Anthony Neal, in his discussion of the “post-soul intelligentsia,” accurately observes that Ellis’s New Black Aesthetic “attempts to rearticulate traditional conceptions of blackness [and] ... to animate and deconstruct popular assumptions of black identity” by parodying and democratizing black critical discourse.³³ Readers should perceive this effect in the scene mentioned above.

Another racial cliché that Dewayne addresses in his version of the-novel-within-the-novel is the relationship between skin color and the sexual revolution, which is another of Ellis’s prominent themes. On this topic, Mark Anthony Neal points out that “for some African American men it has been difficult to separate their race pride from their anxieties about their masculinity,” which represents their black identity.³⁴ As his narrative illustrates repeatedly, Dewayne’s black and white characters live harmoniously, and racial differences do not characterize their sexual encounters. Richard dances and flirts with Dorothy in a club, as mentioned above, and both seem preoccupied by each other’s physical beauty, while remaining unconscious of their differing skin colors. Interestingly, a sexual encounter between Earle and Janey (a white friend), presented in immodest detail in Chapter 54, focuses upon each character’s libido. The description of consummation is purposefully explicit: “She kisses his *dark* ear. Both his *brown* hands replace the *white* bra,” and “[h]er *pearl* hands pad his *inky* shoulders” (emphasis added).³⁵ It is obvious that Dewayne gives attention to skin color, but it is not the attention that Earle and Janey give to each other in their erotic play. It is the attention that Dewayne, the author, gives his characters, using his own authorial gaze. Color loses its usual defining importance for the characters,

and the readers' interest remains on the sexual fulfillment that the scene conveys, but attention to racial differences appears only in the author's perspective. According to Susan Koshy's discussion of sexual naturalization in American history and culture, interracial heterosexuality and miscegenation have demanded a new way of reconsidering issues of "race, representation, and nationhood" in ethnic studies. Koshy states that the early twentieth-first century has witnessed a "reemergence of mixed-race identity as a sign of beauty and desirability in popular culture." She also argues that multiracial beauty will be considered a "seductive symbol of America's hybrid racial feature, by figuring hybridity as a sign of beauty rather than of unmanageable conflict or violence."³⁶ Ellis's description of his characters' interracial sexuality illustrates Koshy's argument. Earle is neither a dangerous nor a pitiful character; Janey, a white, rich schoolgirl, trusts and shares with him even her depression after she learns to appreciate his kindness and intelligence. Thus, Earle and Janey come to embody the liberalized social integration that Ellis advocates. Another significant point that Ellis addresses in his essay is this: "Today, there are enough young blacks torn between the two worlds to finally go out and create our own [identity]. The New Black Aesthetic says you just have to *be* natural, you don't necessarily have to *wear* one."³⁷ Earle's and Dorothy's behavior and lifestyles are natural, and they do not need to pretend or wear a mask to please the white world (a condition that is described quite memorably by Paul Laurence Dunbar in his famous poem "We Wear the Mask").

Martin Favor rightly notes that *Platitudes* presents black voices that are new in black literature: Ellis is concerned with new middle-class black voices that have not gained sufficient attention in the history or tradition of African American literary expression.³⁸ However, Tera Hunter summarizes Ellis's avoidance of creating certain types of inauthentic voices as follows:

It [the New Black Aesthetic] re-appropriates black culture by black artists for black people, stresses the importance of [their] individual expression without dispensing [with] social and political responsibility, draws on traditions across race and class boundaries, and rejects bourgeois preoccupations with portraying pristine

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Cosbyesque images.³⁹

Still, she questions Ellis’s credibility in establishing truly representative black voices. She says, for example, that Ellis has had little personal connection with the larger African American community who lived through the pre-Civil Rights era: he attended an elite, predominantly white university, he has not lived around black people except his own family until he went to Stanford University, and he has proclaimed himself to be an “alienated junior intellectual.” Thus, Hunter challenges Ellis’s credentials to discuss “an aesthetic that is homegrown in black culture.”⁴⁰ In his response to Hunter’s critique, Ellis states that although he has spent most of his life around white people, his education has given him opportunities to access books written by black artists, and programs in African American studies have given him an aesthetic distance necessary to understand his characters;⁴¹ thus, his education helped to form his literary ideology and define his literary production.⁴² In terms of Eliot’s dichotomy of “the tradition” and “the individual talent,” Ellis places great emphasis upon the position of the literary artist living in his own era and writing about his own times, and less upon perpetuating the paradigms that prevailed in earlier periods of the literary tradition.

With such an understanding in mind, Eric Lott maintains that Ellis treats his material unfairly by investing more attention in Dewayne’s experimental agenda than in Isshee’s traditional plan for the novel. In the end, Dewayne’s novel reaches a conclusion while Isshee’s is left unfinished, and her joking criticisms of Dewayne’s writing are left without response.⁴³ Although *Platitudes* parodies the writings of both Ishmael Reed and Alice Walker, Ellis shows a preference for the former, and in the end, both Dewayne and Isshee seem to advocate an experimental approach to creating their own private lives, which runs in parallel with the experimental approach taken by their characters Earle and Janey, whom they create in their fiction. In their private lives, both Dewayne and Isshee resist any scenarios that the social and cultural mainstream would create for them, and they adopt a scenario that they create for themselves. To replace the term *post-postmodernism*, Raoul Eshelman coins the term *performatism*, to characterize conditions “in which subject,

sign, and thing come together in ways that create an aesthetic experience of transcendency," in which new meaning is created.⁴⁴ Conditions in Ellis's *Platitudes* affirm this definition. The ending of Ellis's novel achieves such transcendency, in which Dewayne and Isshee create something new in their lives and in their fiction, just as Ellis suggests that writers should in his essay, "The New Black Aesthetic." T.S. Eliot defined the nature of the dialogue that exists between the literary tradition and creative expression through individual talent for Modernist writers, but he probably would be surprised by Ellis's innovative way of representing this dialogue so literally in his post-postmodernist novel.

Platitudes succeeds in parodying the main dichotomy of late twentieth-century literary politics within African American literature and the African American community: the dichotomy between the use of the tradition and the development of the individual talent among people who live their lives creatively. However, such critics as Hunter and Favor, who assume that Dewayne actually represents Ellis, defictionalize parts of the novel and read them as autobiographical. Hunter stresses that "Ellis ... tends to conflate class status with class origins," and she questions whether the art presented in *Platitudes* is "true to the black,"⁴⁵ and Favor questions how Ellis's novel defines and reflects reality in terms of African American experience and expression.⁴⁶ In Dewayne's version of the novel-within-the-novel, Earle, like Ellis himself, is detached from his African American heritage, except for one of his pastimes—he watches *The Jeffersons* on television, a situation-comedy focusing on the lives of affluent African Americans living in New York. His experience with Harlem is accidental, and his exploration of Harlem derives from distanced curiosity rather than from existential necessity. For Earle, who comes from a middle-class family, Harlem is a dangerously exotic place where he must put to use the black behavior patterns portrayed in the popular media: Earle says to himself, "God, what a weird place. Mom'll kill me if she finds out I ate up here," and "Stop fooling around and just look mean so they won't know you're not from uptown."⁴⁷ Dorothy lives in Harlem, but she feels scant connection with it and spends most of her time with her white friends at school and in up-town New York—and

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she herself hums the theme song of the TV-series *The Jeffersons* on the subway. For Dorothy, Harlem is where she serves food to customers while dreaming of escaping and becoming more “booj” (bourgeois) than her rich, white friends.⁴⁸ Both Earle and Dorothy want to attend prestigious universities such as MIT and Stanford. However, Eric Lott argues that there is a “gap between the hope for such institutions and their actual paucity.”⁴⁹ In his interpretation of Ellis’s fiction, Lott notes that Ellis’s characters do not share the same life experience and educational background that the majority of African Americans have, so they represent at best only Ellis’s own ideological aspirations and *not* the realistic aspirations prevailing in the black community as a whole. Thus, Lott tends to view Ellis’s text as autobiography, but he also perceives that Ellis is hoping for the “further democratization of American culture,”⁵⁰ in which all races will have the same opportunities to pursue happiness and attain success and wealth, much as Martin Luther King, Jr. projected in his powerful speech “I Have a Dream.” In other words, Lott does seem to acknowledge that, with his own individual talent for writing, Ellis is bearing witness to the possibility of a new African American mindset that many critics around him, possibly due to constraints passed on by the tradition, fail to perceive, but Lott admits this only for the lucky few, and not for the many. Without striving to fulfill a dream, a dream seldom comes true. Ellis is not suggesting that serious effort is not required for advancement, but he does suggest that defeatism and anger are not the only responses to adversity in the society. Striving to realize the dream is presented subtly in Earle’s political efforts to register voters for a mayoral campaign. Ellis, however, affirms in his novel that the individual talent needs to transcend the tradition, in life as well as in fiction.

In Madhu Dubey’s discussion of racial presentation in U.S. black cultural studies, Dubey states, “Blind to the ways in which class privilege buffers the experience of racism and expands the scope of individual agency, Ellis implies that the principle of bourgeois individualism is equally available to all members of the race, regardless of class.”⁵¹ Although racial and ethnic relations, boundaries, and identities have been transformed significantly since the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led a march across

the Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, Timothy J. Meagher maintains that, in the post-1980s era, race remains socially, economically, and politically significant and that “racial division seem[s] as intractable as it ever had been in America.”⁵² Because the racial gap between black and white people was perceived to be so intense in the 1990s, the Clinton administration launched two initiatives to promote cultural and racial understanding: the National Endowment for the Humanities’ National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity and the President’s Committee on Race.⁵³ Viewed in this critical and political context, Dewayne (or Ellis) either does not notice or intentionally ignores this on-going racial conflict in the portrayal of his “cultural-mulatto” characters. Earle and Dorothy both represent cultural mulattos whose black identities become neutralized in the white world and who choose to have little connection with the ethnic tradition that preceded them. They have black skin, but they have made, it would seem, a “quantum leap” from ghetto frustration to bourgeois happy-ever-aftering in a relatively painless way. There is nothing uniquely black about them, and in Dewayne’s novel, it would make little difference if they were white characters, because *Platitudes* is more about teenage romance, entrance into adulthood, and youthful pursuit of ambitions—common themes of contemporary adolescence literature—than about a struggle to achieve one’s own African American identity or American dream in *white America*. Ellis’s vision entails accepting the Civil Rights Movement as having been effective, and then moving forward.

Nevertheless, Ellis does address “the conflict percolating in the black literary community that concerns *perceived disparities in the reception of black male and female authors*”(emphasis added).⁵⁴ Thus, Isshee Ayam’s attempt to revise Dewayne Wellington’s novel-in-progress draws Dewayne into a dialogue with her, presenting two different approaches to perceiving, experiencing, and representing the life of African Americans in the postmodern or post-postmodern United States. Isshee’s first chapter, “Rejoice,” for example, depicts Earle as a respectful, obedient child of a poor-but-honest black family living in Lowndes County, Georgia, and also in a different historical period. She presents her scenario in contradistinction

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to Dewayne’s depiction, in which Earle is a young-but-ambitious urbanite. Isshee’s novel is fraught with images of poverty and social struggle: “[Baptist] thighs that shook with the centuries of injustice and degradation,” “the long and stout dirt road,” and “the schoolhouse.”⁵⁵ Dewayne’s novel presents images of marginal success and of the normal economic struggles of middle-class urban life. Thus, Isshee attempts to reposition Dewayne’s black characters into the traditional black molds and contexts found in earlier African American literature, removing Earle and Dorothy from a city and placing them into a community of strong black women in a rural Southern area. Isshee’s version of the novel, with its poverty, rural setting, and class struggle, establishes the conditions of the literary realism or naturalism that prevailed in much early twentieth-century African American literature, whereas Dewayne’s urban and potentially upwardly-mobile setting creates conditions for an optimistic resolution to the plot. Concerning Dewayne’s authorial voice, Favor asks a very significant question: “[I]s it the voice that the New Black Aesthetic is looking for?”⁵⁶ Ellis, of course, is satirizing African American authors who “affect ... ‘superblackness’ [by trying to] dream themselves back to the ghetto.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Favor’s question is valid: Does Ellis’s voice suggest more “fairy tale hope” than social and economic realities will allow?

When characters are introduced in *Platitudes*, or in the novel-within-the-novel (by the same title), they stand as separate, isolated individuals with very limited connections with each other, but as they interact, they develop understanding and mutual appreciation. Although Dwayne asks Isshee for help with his novel, he ignores her advice and suggestions. Their dialogue, nevertheless, develops into a relationship that parallels the one that forms between Earle and Dorothy: as Dwayne overcomes his lack of self-confidence, Earle becomes successful with women; when Isshee apologizes to Dwayne for missing an appointment, she makes Earle the hero of her novel. In the end, the characters (Earle and Dorothy, as well as the fictional authors who created them, Dwayne and Isshee) arrive at harmony after learning to appreciate each other’s individuality. The potential for sexual fecundity between Earle and Dorothy, as

revealed in sexually explicit passages in the novel becomes the potential for artistic fecundity between Dwayne and Isshee, which is revealed in Dwayne's need to create a fictional reconciliation for his characters: "He [Earle] is choking, trying to swallow his tears, then shakily, convulsively he breathes out and cries and cries one continuous siren and she [Dorothy] cries too and they hold each other, lock each other with their arms, their tears wetting each other's cheeks."⁵⁸ Dwayne, having narrated a tearful reunion for his characters, finally is ready to consummate his newly formed relationship with Isshee. Thus, romantic love becomes a device in the literature that helps new black artists (such as those representing Reed and Walker) to resolve their differences in order to generate something new in African American art. Behind Ellis's harmonious resolution lies the metaphor of America as the "melting pot," which derives as an appellation in literature from Israel Zangwill's play by that name, *The Melting Pot*, of 1909. It is propelled by the Christian precept that love is the key to a utopian future. It also derives from T.S. Eliot's famous essay of 1920, "Tradition and Individual Talent," with which Ellis must have been very well acquainted.⁵⁹

In "Double Vision," Marcellus Blount commends Ellis for his ability to "insulate himself from thematic censure by manipulating his point of view in order to make his characters bear the brunt of his criticisms, instead of the real contemporary black writers and white audiences whom they represent."⁶⁰ At first, however, Isshee's *blackening* of her characters and plot and Dwayne's *whitening* of his own characters and plot place their individual literary approaches into opposition. As the title of Ellis's novel suggests, each fictional-author's approach, when practiced in isolation, creates hackneyed platitudes. Ellis's new black artist must wed traditional black folkloric culture with mainstream general popular culture in order to articulate a black voice that can speak representatively for African American culture in the post-1980s era. One question raised by Ellis's innovations in the structure and style of his novel has important implications for African American culture, and for all culture in general, at the threshold of the twenty-first century: Does art imitate life or does life imitate art? If art imitates life, then Isshee's realism or naturalism would seem to be validated. If life

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imitates art, then Dewayne’s optimistic view appears to present the approach of choice. Ellis’s ending suggests that individuals must write their own scenarios as opportunities present themselves. This implies that a certain amount of freedom can be granted to the will, and perhaps that each moment in a life needs to be created as individual talent permits. Neither Isshee nor Dwayne lives life according to the fictional models presented by Ishmael Reed or Alice Walker, and in the end, a new scenario must be invented to accommodate new circumstances. This is necessary if the fictional authors, such as Dwayne and Isshee, are to transcend the potential platitudes that their lives otherwise might comprise.

In Trey Ellis’s artistic and intellectual manifesto of 1989, “The New Black Aesthetic,” a movement which he sometimes abbreviates to its acronym NBA, one of the most ringing lines concerning his postmodern generation of black authors and artists is: “We’re not saying racism doesn’t exist; we’re just saying it’s not an excuse.”⁶¹ From the larger context in which this sentence occurs, readers understand what it is that Ellis means by “not an excuse.” Racism is not an excuse for debilitating anger and rage in a new era in which optimism and opportunity are not only possible, but very evident. A few paragraphs earlier in the essay, Ellis posits two advantages that his generation of the New Black Aesthetic of the post-1980s has over black writers and artists of earlier decades:

For the first time in our history we are producing a critical mass of college graduates who are children of college graduates themselves. Like most artistic booms, the NBA is a post-bourgeois movement driven by a second generation of middle class. Having scraped their way to relative wealth and, too often, crass materialism, our parents have freed (or compelled) us to bite those hands that fed us and sent us to college. We now feel secure enough to attend art school instead of medical school.

Another great advantage we have over the artists of the Seventies is that today’s [of the 1980s] popular culture is guided by blacks almost across the board.⁶²

These highly educated and highly motivated individuals are the black subjects that Ellis chooses to treat in *Platitudes*, at least through the vision of Dewayne, the primary author of his novel-

within-the-novel that develops the college-bound characters Earle and Dorothy. In spite of negative comment, they are among the characters in black literature who escape the paradigms of anger and rage that had characterized the literature of previous generations, and they participate in the optimism and opportunity that propelled the careers of the almost hyper-educated Barack and Michelle Obama in the first decade of the twenty-first century.⁶³ As Ellis rightly observes in his prophetic essay of 1989, the rise of the Obamas is supported by the positive image of the black people presented in American popular culture: "the world is not only now [in 1989] accustomed to black faces in the arts, but also hungers for us."⁶⁴

Ellis uses satire generously to help Dewayne, and perhaps Isshee, eventually, to move beyond traditional characters, who were representative of intelligent people hindered in their social and economic development in the pre-Civil Rights era, and create more accurate role-models for the 1990s and beyond. In *Platitudes*, Ellis satirizes the literary conventions that prevailed in earlier decades of the tradition in which he worked, even as he drew upon the positive influences that allowed him to develop his own remarkable individual talent in the post-modern period. Critical statements have been delivered, suggesting that Ellis's characters are not true to the tradition. In some ways, this might be true, but they tend to be true to their individual talents, and history seems to be affirming the decision that Ellis made for them.

Notes

1 Martin J. Favor, "'Ain't Nothin' Like the Real Thing, Baby': Trey Ellis' Search for the New Black Voice," *Callaloo*, 16, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 695.

2 Eric Lott, "Hip-Hop Fiction," *The Nation*, 247, no. 19 (Dec. 19, 1988): 691.

3 *Ibid.*, 691; Erik D. Curren, "*Platitudes*," Literary Reference Center, EBSCOHOST.

4 *Ibid.*, 692.

5 Doris Jean Austin, review of *Platitudes*, by Trey Ellis, *The New York Times Book Review* 94 (19 February 1989): 20.

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6 J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 1992), 682.

7 T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Criticism: Major Statements*, 4th ed., ed. Charles Kaplan and William Davis Anderson (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), 214-222.

8 Jennifer Jordan, “The New Literary Blackface,” *Black Issues Literary Review* 4, no.2 (Mar. 2002): 26.

9 *Ibid.*, 26, 28

10 Trey Ellis’s official website: <http://treyellis.com/ellis-books.htm>

11 Trey Ellis, “Response to NBA Critiques,” *Callaloo* 38 (Winter 1989): 250.

12 Bertram D. Ashe, Foreword, *Platitudes and “The New Black Aesthetic,”* by Trey Ellis (Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003), xv.

13 Doris Jean Austin, review of *Platitudes*, by Trey Ellis, *The New York Times Book Review* 94 (19 Feb. 1989): 20.

14 Maurice J. Bennet, “The Black Preppie and the Sharecropper’s Son,” *Book World* 18 (Oct. 1988): 9.

15 Penny Kaganoff, review of *Platitudes*, by Trey Ellis, *Publishers Weekly* 234, no. 1 (1 July 1988): 72.

16 *Authenticity* is a controversial term in post-structuralism because of the question: Based on what criteria is *authenticity* defined? Also, according to post-structuralists, meaning is subject to destabilization.

17 Favor argues, “Far from being an ‘anti-aesthetic that defies definition’ (1989a:251), Ellis’ NBA is a class-conscious manifesto concerned with the repositioning of certain types of epistemological power. To be heard is not necessarily to be completely understood, but it does afford the possibility of attaining leadership positions and the power to attempt to ‘perfect society and perfect the soul’ (1989a:250). If this is the case, however, it falls to the artist to create an overall vision of this new ideology. It becomes his/her task to say what is real and what is not. This is where Ellis’ project, in both the novel and the manifesto, becomes impractical” (704).

Concerning the authenticity of black voices in African American literature, Favor criticizes the reality that Ellis attempts to portray in his work: “Ellis seems comfortable in claiming that reality is diversity, but isn’t he really insisting that the power to make reality lies with the black middle class? If anything, Ellis seems uneasy with the privilege he has made for himself. He can parody

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certain formulations of blackness but is hesitant to define a new one beyond the broadest (and, unfortunately, most masculine) terms. To insist on one, specific, 'authentic,' voice emanating from the black bourgeoisie would generate enormous controversy..." (704).

18 Quoted in Tonya Bolden Davis, "Word Star," *Essence* 19 (June 1988): 36.

19 In his discussion of the critical context of *Platitudes*, Curren writes,

Dewayne Wellington is reminiscent of African American male writers such as novelist, poet, and social critic Ishmael Reed. Reed has criticized black feminist writers for their negative portrayals of black men as sexist. His own satirical fiction is known for its portrayal of a conspiracy against African American men, as in his novel *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). Reed's narrative style relies on experimental techniques that blend black folk culture with material from white American culture in a playful postmodern style.

One of the female writers criticized by Reed is Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker. Like Isshee Ayam, Walker is a well-known novelist and feminist critic. Her best-selling novel *The Color Purple* (1982) focuses on the warmth and vitality of black folk and family life in the rural South, where black people are protected from the corrupting values of white society. Isshee's version of the story of Earle and Dorothy is a broad parody of the folkloric style of Walker's fiction.

20 Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: Harper, 1992), 6.

21 Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 38 (Winter 1989): 235.

22 Trey Ellis, *Platitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 3.

23 *Ibid.*, 107.

24 *Ibid.*, 106.

25 *Ibid.*, 106.

26 Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 235.

27 Ellis, *Platitudes*, 99.

28 *Ibid.*, 103.

29 Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation* (New York: Penguin, 2004), ix.

30 Contemporary Authors Online, "Trey Ellis," Gale Literary Databases <<http://galenet.galegroup.com>>.

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31 Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 20.

32 Ellis, *Platitudes*, 104.

33 Mark Anthony Neal, “‘It Be’s That Way Sometimes ‘Cause I Can’t Control the Rhyme’: Notes from the Post-Soul Intelligentsia,” *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noir* 1, no. 3 (31 July 1988): 15.

34 Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 6.

35 Ellis, *Platitudes*, 168.

36 Susan Koshy, *Sexual Naturalization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005), 12-13, 18.

37 Ellis, “The New Black Aesthetic,” 236.

38 Favor, 694.

39 Tera Hunter, “‘It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World’: Specters of the Old Re-newed in Afro-American Culture and Criticism,” *Callaloo* 38 (Winter 1989): 247.

40 *Ibid.*, 247.

41 Ellis, “Response to NBA Critiques.” Although Ellis does not state which black authors he has read. He merely says, “It has always been impossible to have been educated in America without having been greatly influenced by non-black artists. Phyllis Wheatley never read any poetry written by a black person other than herself. Ironically, thanks to black-studies programs, today’s black artists, including the “cultural mulattoes” (blacks who grew up in white neighborhoods), have probably been exposed to more black art than any other black people in any other age. And being a middle class artist, black or white, has always been the rule rather than the exception” (251). However, in his essay “The New Black Aesthetic,” he refers to author James Baldwin and singer James Brown.

42 *Ibid.*, 251.

43 Lott, 691.

44 Raoul Eshelman, “Performatism in Architecture: On Framing and the Spatial Realization of Ostensivity,” *Anthropoetics- The [Online] Journal of Generative Anthropology* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2001/Winter2002). Available online at <<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0702/arch2.htm>>.

45 Hunter, 247.

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46 Favor, 694.

47 Ellis, *Platitudes*, 22, 23.

48 Ibid., 106.

49 Lott, "Response to Trey Ellis's 'The New Black Aesthetic,'" *Callaloo* 38 (Winter 1989): 244-246: 246.

50 Ibid., 246.

51 Madhu Dubey, "Postmodernism as Postnationalism? Racial Presentation in U.S. Black Cultural Studies," *Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 8.

52 Timothy J. Meagher, "Racial and Ethnic Relations in America, 1965-2000," in *Race and Ethnicity in America: A Concise History*, ed. Ronald H. Bayor (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 193-240: 221-22.

53 Ibid., 222.

54 Bennet, 9.

55 Ellis, *Platitudes*, 16, 19, 49.

56 Favor, 699.

57 Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 235.

58 Ellis, *Platitudes*, 183.

59 I assume that because Ellis studied literature and Creative Writing, he must have been familiar with T.S. Eliot's essay.

60 Marcellus Blount, "Double Vision," *Village Voice* 33 (29 Nov. 1988): 66.

61 Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 240.

62 Ibid., 237.

63 As I am writing this article, Barack Obama, a black graduate of Columbia and Harvard University, is running for President of the United States in the 2008 general election.

64 Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 237.