

## **Composing and Performing the Self: Double-Consciousness and Octavian Nothing**

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M.T. Anderson's two volume young adult novel, *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Traitor to the Nation* (2006, 2008), has been widely praised for its pointed reexamination of early American history. Specifically, in filtering the novel through the voice of the seventeen-year-old slave Octavian, Anderson has been lauded for re-imagining familiar historical events from an outsider's perspective. In making Octavian both protagonist and fictional author of his novel, Anderson represents various configurations of the outsider, all of which offer a sustained meditation on the process of discerning and or constructing subaltern consciousness and identity. Anderson structures his narrative mostly out of Octavian's own recollections, written as he looks back on his strange upbringing in the Novanglian College of Lucidity. Rather than simply presenting a child's perspective, an African-American's perspective or a slave's perspective – all of which, the novels do present – the narrative's intricate structuring of double-consciousness serves to emphasize and complicate the production (and reproduction) of these perspectives. As such, Octavian's ongoing negotiation of identity becomes increasingly complex through the course of the two books, developed through the twinned processes of writing and

performing the self. This article reads these twinned processes in light of Paul Gilroy's writings on double-consciousness and diasporic identity – along with the phalanx of theorists woven through Gilroy's work – processes which become fully articulated through Octavian's persistent efforts to negotiate his alterity via a diverse set of tactics. Configuring and balancing Octavian's selfhood through both language and music, Anderson's novels provide a sustained meditation on the problematic nature of authoring the subaltern self and the significant role music and musical expression can play in this undertaking.

In Anderson's novels, Octavian's writings are folded into a multi-form narrative that is less written by M.T. Anderson than, as the first volume's title page indicates, "collected" from a compendium of sources, personal letters, newspaper clippings, and, primarily "the Manuscript Testimony of the Boy Octavian" (Anderson, 2006). These words stand in sharp contrast to a similar inscription in the beginning of Anderson's second volume, which keeps the narrative conceit alive but notes that the "source material" has been "drawn from the Manuscript Testimony of *Octavian Gitney*" (Anderson, 2008). By Volume II, then, Octavian is no longer a boy, and for that reason this article focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on the first volume, "The Pox Party." In that text, Octavian demonstrates a concerted effort to mine his consciousness in ways that comment both on the early work in the field of child studies and Western notions of identity and self-authorship.

As the reader comes to understand and witness Octavian slowly discover for himself, the boy is a slave. His mother was purchased when pregnant with him and brought to the college in 1759. Born there, Octavian becomes the subject of an experimental pedagogy intended to prove whether or not Africans possess the same human faculties as their white masters. Writing back to his elusive childhood, Octavian becomes both child subject and adult observer, working doggedly to

recreate his own consciousness. He notes, in one of his manuscript's first entries, that it "is ever the lot of children to accept their circumstances as universal, and their particularities as general" (Anderson 2006, 4). But Octavian records these words at the age of seventeen, at which point he knows the circumstances of his childhood to have been anything but universal. The "youth" Octavian has already lost this child vision of himself, confessing, "[I can only] imagine that I was a silent and solemn child" (2006, 7). Why, then, does he expend so much time and exertion in such imagining?

In one sense, Octavian's fascination with his child self betrays how childhood became organized as a clearinghouse for the adult imagination. As Holly Blackford explains, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, developmental psychologists and modernist writers alike came to believe that "while human consciousness should be studied in the child, the precise nature of a child's insight will forever elude, and yet require the interpretation of adults" (Blackford 2007, 372). Blackford describes the figure of the child as an ideal resource for early modernist writers such as Henry James. Foregrounding James's narrative technique in her evaluation of the birth and growth of developmental psychology, Blackford describes how the child became fertile ground for the adult imagination. Expanding on James's famous metaphor of the House of Fiction, where a single pair of eyes is stationed at a single window and granted a limited perspective to the world within, Blackford argues that, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the figure of the child comes to be "the supreme example of a consciousness upon which many apertures opened, but upon which no objective viewpoints could" (2007, 385).

In fact, as Dorothy Hale argues, for James, real life "can never actualize value because it has no point of view, no appreciative capacity; it can yield an "interesting particle" only when something or someone in life matters *for* someone" (Hale 1998,

32). Returning to the metaphorical House of Fiction, Hale maintains that “the character is a window in that house, not the scene upon which the window looks” (1998, 43). Of course in Anderson’s portrayal, Octavian Nothing is both. As author and character he is stationed at the window, gazing into the scene of his own (recollected) childhood, straining to articulate the boundaries of his child self.

Anderson’s layered construction of Octavian as both object and subject, creator and created, comments not only on how identity might be perceived through figurations of childhood, but also on how ideations of the self are constructed at the most basic level, issues central to Nikolas Rose’s efforts to interrogate fixed ontological notions or “regimes” of the self. Rose describes one dominant understanding of the self as “coherent, bounded, individualized, intentional, the locus of thought, action, and belief, the origin of its own actions, the beneficiary of a unique biography.” He argues that the commonly held conviction that “we possessed an identity” was developed from this conception of the self (1998, 3).

Rose labels this notion of the self a decidedly Western conception, stressing that the “invention is a historical one rather than an individual phenomenon” (1998, 2). In divining the sources of this invention, Rose focuses on the “psy” disciplines, most prominently psychology and psychiatry, explaining, “they have brought into existence a variety of new ways in which human beings have come to understand themselves and do things to themselves” (1998, 2). He constructs a “critical history” of the psy disciplines to challenge their powerful tautology of the self, a history that does not merely account “for a particular and often somewhat dubious group of sciences – it is part of the history of the ways in which human beings have regulated others and have regulated themselves in the light of certain games of truth” (1998, 11).

The framework Rose establishes for his re-historicization of the self provide a useful lens for an analysis of Octavian's persistent attempts to fix a "coherent" and "bounded" self through mining childhood consciousness. Rose builds this framework on Michel Foucault's analysis of institutional mechanisms and how they discipline the individual, explaining, "Foucault argued that the disciplines 'make' individuals by means of some rather simple technical procedures," and these procedures rely, at the most basic level on observation. In schools or factories, people are gathered together to be observed so that "these institutions function in certain respects like telescopes, microscopes, or other scientific instruments; they establish a regime of visibility, in which the observed is distributed within a single common plane of sight" (Rose 1998, 105).

This rhetoric of discipline maps neatly onto the child studies movement, in particular the practices of developmental psychologist James Sully. Child studies emerged as a sub-field of psychology in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and Sally Shuttlesworth points out that Sully and others eschewed a heavy reliance on statistical data in the favor of more "individualized studies" based on intensive observation. Importantly, these observations provided insights that extend far beyond the child being observed. Shuttlesworth argues that Sully and others envisioned child studies "at the heart of a whole range of disciplines," wherein "the individual "child is thus to be studied not simply for its own sake but as entry point for all the emerging historical disciplines of evolutionary biology, and psychology, anthropology, and historical philology" (Shuttlesworth 2010, 269).

For much of "The Pox Party," then, Anderson seemingly adopts Sully's methodology. He emphasizes the importance of observation in Octavian's attempted self-authorship, while having Octavian repeatedly look to his child self as a site of recovery, a key to unlocking who he is and was. In one scene, Octavian recalls an

early scene where Pro Bono, a household slave who will later become a father figure, pinches Octavian violently, whispering ominously that he “must learn fear.” Octavian writes that “In such episodes as these, I began to ponder the mystery of who I was, and what this might mean” (Anderson 2006, 24). Octavian’s description reproduces a conventional cultural narrative of growth or development: the casting off of ignorance in the assumption of knowledge. Looking back on his childhood ignorance, he writes,

I, now, with the vantage of years, am sensible of my foolishness, my blindness as a child. I cannot think of my blunders without a shriveling of the inward parts – not merely the desiccation attendant on shame, but also the aggravation of remorse that I did not demand more explanation, that I did not sooner take my mother by the hand, and – I do know what I regret. I sit with my pen, and cannot find an end to that sentence (Anderson 2006, 37-8).

This moment is significant. Octavian laments the ignorance of childhood, but more specifically, he laments the missed opportunity, the inability to mine his child consciousness. If he had asked questions then, he might have answers now. Blackford, writing about Sully, highlights his idea “that nothing was lost in the child mind” as the child embodied “a germ of consciousness” (2007, 370). Following the line of thought, and in keeping with the tenets of early child studies experts like Sully, Octavian spends the better part of the “The Pox Party” searching for that germ of consciousness, trying to write that latent “truth” into being. Notably, in this moment, he is struck by the immense difficulties of the project. He cannot find the words and cannot name the thoughts.

As Volume I progresses, Anderson highlights Octavian’s increased difficulty in establishing a viable subaltern self through the kind of observational methodology Shuttleworth describes. In fact, the more Octavian discovers about the social world around him, the more distant he feels from this project to recover his child self. This

growing distance pushes Octavian toward an increased awareness of his abject subject position. Midway through the novel, the college is threatened with financial ruin and Mr. Gitney must hand over its management to a group of outside investors, and, specifically, their designated overseer, Mr. Sharpe. This change holds profound consequences for Octavian. Mr. Sharpe makes the boy his valet and persistently reminds him of his slave status. Through Mr. Sharpe's abuses, Octavian becomes increasingly aware of how his identity has been inscribed by difference, and he starts to consider the limits this marginalized subject position places on his ability to give voice to the self.

Anderson singles out an exchange between Octavian and Pro Bono to highlight these escalating tensions. Pro Bono advises Octavian to carry a letter from his master with him at all times, one explaining that he is free to be out in the city on his own. Octavian nods affirmation, but Pro Bono quickly reprimands him, "Don't nod when there ain't a need to nod, see? You got to be blank." He explains that their masters indulge in "the exploration of themselves, going on the inner journey into their own breast. But us, they want there to be nothing inside of. They want us to be writ on. They want us to be a surface" (Anderson 2006, 136). This invocation of the blank surface stands as one of the text's many references to John Locke's *tabula rasa*. As Pro Bono sees it, the blank slate presents an opportunity for the appropriation rather than the actualization of the self. He argues that the subjugated slave's only avenue for meaningful agency is to embrace this blankness, allowing oneself, in the process, to become invisible and, perhaps, to draw some small power from being beyond view.

Octavian struggles with this idea throughout the course of the two novels. By the end of Volume II, he can finally construct agency through the kind of blankness Pro Bono describes. In "The Pox Party," Octavian seldom addresses these struggles

directly. Instead he describes the growing awareness of his subaltern status as a product of growth. After one severe beating from Mr. Sharpe, Octavian admits that, to some degree, “this demotion from scholar to servant simplified my lot, for as I had passed from childhood to youth, it would have been increasingly awkward for me to act as a lordling in that house” (Anderson 2006, 38).

No longer a child, Octavian claims to know too much to play the role of lordling. Crucially, what (and how) he knows has been informed by the strange pedagogy imposed upon him, crudely derived from the broad tenets of Enlightenment rationalism. In their lessons, Octavian’s masters consistently emphasize the power of reason and the importance of objective observation. As Volume I progresses, Octavian sees the hypocrisy less in what he is being taught and more in those teaching it, a point underscored by the novel’s recurring references to Locke. While Locke has often been associated with the idea of autonomy and the power of individual choice, Ruth Grant argues that he understood reason to be largely mediated by “custom,” or the power of cultural practices to shape individual behaviors. As Grant describes it, Locke considers custom “the primary determinant of human behavior,” acting through the transmission of “received opinion’ handed down from generation to generation” (2012, 611). This received opinion wields its greatest power during childhood, wherein, as Locke saw it, the largely innocent child acquires “opinions from trusted adults, who are the authorities in our lives” (Grant 2012, 611). Those adult authorities play a pivotal role in securing Locke’s vision of society based on reason, and, by raising Octavian in a toxic environment, his masters have clearly failed in this role.

Coming to grips with this hypocrisy, Octavian discerns that the self may not be discovered, while he hopes it still may be composed, written into being. What is more, he believes that his distinctive training at the college, wedded to the uniqueness



of his upbringing, makes him ideally suited for this task. As he writes, “brought up among the experiments and assays of those artists and philosophers, I was taught the importance of observation” (Anderson 2006, 9). This theme runs throughout the text, strengthening the connections between Octavian’s narrative and the modernist technique practiced by Henry James and others – a technique that, as Blackford and Shuttlesworth point out, grew out of the ideological consolidation Rose locates in his history of the psy disciplines. Octavian, like James, begins to imagine his author-self looking back at childhood, attempting to consciously structure meaning out of observation rather than introspection.

Examining Octavian both as author and character, one discerns in this shifting perspective not merely a commentary on modernist literary technique but a potent metaphor for Paul Gilroy’s wholesale revisioning of the modernist narrative. Gilroy offers the theoretical framework of “The Black Atlantic” for this broader project, explaining how the “intellectual and cultural achievements of Black Atlantic populations exist partly inside and not always against the grand narrative of the Enlightenment and its operational principles.” As such, he argues, the history of modernism needs to be read with those Black Atlantic populations as deeply enmeshed in – rather than merely subject to and subjugated by – the “grand narrative” of progress, from the Enlightenment to the Industrial Revolution and beyond. Gilroy announces that the “time has come for the primal history of modernity to be reconstructed from the slaves’ points of view” (1993, 48). M.T. Anderson’s construction of Octavian Nothing as author/protagonist reads like a direct response to Gilroy’s call.

In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy reconstructs the modernist narrative alongside and through reevaluations of a number of prominent African-American artists and intellectuals, whose efforts at self-authorship are clearly echoed by Octavian Nothing.

Assessing Frederick Douglass's abolitionist writings, Gilroy argues that these texts rework and transform Hegelian formulation of the master-slave dialectic, so that "the slave actively prefers the possibility of death to the continuing condition of inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends" (1993, 63). Harnessing the power of negation, Douglass manages to "express in the most powerful way a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act or process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation" (1993, 69). Later, in his chapter on W.E.B. Du Bois, a pivotal figure both for Gilroy's argument about the Black Atlantic and this article's assessment of Octavian Nothing, Gilroy describes Du Bois's writing as "a systematic account of the interconnections between Africa, Europe, and the Americas" harnessed to construct a "narrative of black suffering and self-emancipation in the United States" (1993, 121). Gilroy argues that Du Bois had a firm "desire to demonstrate the internal situation of blacks" as "firmly locked inside the modern world that their coerced labour had made possible. To this end, he carefully displayed a complete familiarity with the cultural legacy of western civilization" (1993, 121).

Unsurprisingly, the construction of this kind of African-American perspective, the achievement of a "self-emancipated" voice, one attempting to "create" the self, while coming to terms with being "locked inside" a world-view largely imposed from the top down, proves to be a fraught process. For Gilroy, and for numerous influential Africanist thinkers, that process is best articulated by way of Du Bois's description of double-consciousness. In a much-discussed passage from the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a particular sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at

one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 1961, 16).

This passage has been subjected to countless interpretation and re-interpretation, with much of the discussion centered on whether this “veil” of double-consciousness functions as an effective tool for self-actualization. Gilroy is quick to sidestep that debate, arguing, “it matters little, at this point whether this ‘second sight’ is a true privilege rather than some sort of disability.” Noting that Du Bois gestures to both possibilities in different parts of the passage, Gilroy emphasizes, rather, the “seventh son” reference as proof that “Du Bois’s list is derived from a reading of Hegel’s philosophy of history and is taken from a text which is also the occasion for Africa’s expulsion from the official drama of history” (1993, 134-5).

Certainly, these observations seem pertinent to Octavian and his evolving sense of self-authorship. Unsure of who he is or what he is supposed to be, uncertain if, in fact, he ever was a child, Octavian positions himself as a collector rather than a creator of words. He realizes that the text, as an instrument for locating consciousness, is itself a compromised form. Grounded, as Gilroy suggests, in the abject position of the slave, while also conversant in “the cultural legacy of western civilization,” Octavian draws on unique resources in manipulating and employing that compromised text, recording his own words, alongside the words of Mr. Gitney, his mother, Pro Bono, and others, while simultaneously gesturing to his distance from those words.

Through this process, Octavian (and, of course, Anderson) highlights the difficulty in locating consciousness while, at the same time, he becomes a masterful rhetorician, adroit at managing myriad linguistic strategies to demonstrate the

injustice of the experiment he has been subjected to. If the text proves ultimately unyielding of the single “truth” he seeks, Anderson nonetheless shows Octavian employing it as a powerful commentary on his status as other. For instance, Anastasia Ulanowicz points out that Octavian reveals he is a slave “precisely forty pages into the narrative,” forcing “the reader to return to the ominous imagery contained within the novel's prologue.” Through this revelation, Ulanowicz argues, “the reader is able to understand exactly why Octavian is contained squarely within the wall surrounding his childhood garden, and why this wall is constructed to keep him and others from ‘running’” (2011, 279). As author, of course, it is Octavian who orchestrates this reveal, priming the reader’s delayed awareness to maximize its emotional impact.

Fully engaged in the process Du Bois describes, by means of which he becomes more conscious of himself as object, as experiment, and as servant, Octavian learns to see himself as others see him. Yet, victimized by the denial of selfhood, as in Du Bois’s description, he struggles to write selfhood into being. In this guise as author, Octavian’s efforts can be read against a long tradition of African American literature that, as Madelyn Jablon puts it, “has always theorized about itself” (1997, 21). In tracing a tradition of black metafiction, Jablon invokes Henry Louis Gates’s theory in arguing, “black literature, oral and written, is extremely self-conscious, aware of itself as artifice, as fabulation, and in relation to existing literary or aesthetic traditions” (Jablon 1997, 21).

For Gates, black writers create metafiction through “dialogue with literary predecessors” (quoted in Jablon 1997, 21). Cut off from those predecessors, Octavian follows Du Bois’s model, adapting both the language and referents of his white masters to his own ends. In the early pages of his manuscript, Octavian considers the morality he was taught at the college, stressing: “Kindness, humility, piety, respect for other human creatures” (2006, 12). Rather than rejecting these as his oppressors’

beliefs, he embraces them to an extent they cannot – injecting his voice, in a move Gilroy would surely approve of, into the modernist narrative. These virtues, Octavian writes, “are the great desiderata of all who pursue virtuous action, and it matters not whether those who preach them heed their own advice” (2002, 12). As he strains to recall his childhood and the “ghastly purpose of that dim college,” Octavian offers a word of caution – to the reader and himself – that serves as an *ars poetica*: “We must curb our fury, and allow sadness to diminish and speak our stories with coolness and deliberation.” To drive this point home, Octavian quotes Horace, as the English translation reads: “Rule thy passion, for unless it obeys, it rules you” (2006, 13). Octavian employs this rhetorical device repeatedly, first making a point and then invoking a classical allusion to support it. In this way, the classical figures that represent the pillar of his Western education become a potent tool for Octavian, a site of resistance for those left out of the dominant Western cultural narrative.

Nonetheless, it cannot simply be ignored, despite Gilroy’s hesitance to take up the subject, that the Negro’s “second-sight,” as Du Bois clearly states, “yields him no true self-consciousness.” As Hale explains, Du Bois’s analysis reveals the “catastrophe of hegemonic power relations” violating “the inner sanctum of consciousness.” On one level, “this very invasion gives the ‘Negro’ a certain power over his colonizers, the power to represent, if only to himself, the limitations of hegemony as an objectifiable point of view” (Hale 1998, 214). Then again, Du Bois points both to the power the Negro has and the power he does not have, the seeming inability to engage in meaningful self-actualization. Ultimately, what access can Octavian have to the realization and performance of true self-consciousness – setting aside, while not discounting, Rose’s caveat about the viability of such an entity? After his own sobering assessment of the (then) status quo, Du Bois goes on to write about the “history of the American Negro” as a “longing to attain self-conscious

manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self (1961, 17). How is that truer self to be realized?

At this point, it becomes critical to analyze not only the various possibilities for self-actualization but, also, different modalities that might help realize those possibilities. As Jablon and others suggest, the act of writing, of composing the self remains central to African American culture and its practitioners. Nevertheless, both Hale and Gilroy question writing as a useful tool for achieving double-consciousness, and they pose formidable challenges to the feasibility of the written word as a tool for African American actors in authoring the self. Hale locates a paradox in the pervasive critical conflation of Du Bois's double-consciousness with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of double-voiced discourse. This conflation, Hale argues, is highly problematic, as what differentiates Bakhtin from Du Bois is the allowance each makes for the oppressed subject's potential for meaningful self-actualization. For Du Bois, these opportunities for self-actualization are desirable but rarely achievable. "Through the figure of the veil and the metaphor of sight," Hale writes, Du Bois "sets in motion, but leaves implicit, a variety of conflicting notions about how socially constructed identity might work and what its significance might be" (Hale 1998, 207).

For Bakhtin, Hale suggests, the path forward is much clearer. In his mind, "the novelist" remains the "ideal human agent." He, as "the master of linguistic mastery, is able to practice the appreciation of alterity; to realize his own identity by displaying the linguistic identity of others, but giving voice to the social voices in language" (1998, 201). Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse suggests that "just as the voices of competing ideologies reside within the form or body of language, so individuality can itself be expressed through these voices" (1998, 210). Hale expresses considerable skepticism about this kind of "individuality," skepticism warranted by, as Gilroy himself points out, Du Bois's own conflicted statements

about double-consciousness. In fact, Hale suggests, rewriting these uncertainties through Bakhtin's convictions about double-voicedness threatens to erase any meaningful sense of African American identity. "When double vision is read as double voice," she argues, "the distinguishing feature of all African American identity comes to define all subaltern identity" (1998, 220).

Likely, Gilroy would share Hale's skepticism of this process, and his assessment of African American culture prizes the musician over the novelist, moving away from the primacy of the written word as the arbiter of black cultures. To Gilroy, written culture has been persistently over-emphasized through the history of these cultures, so that we lack a nuanced understanding of how "art, particularly in the form of music and dance, was offered to the slaves as a substitute for the formal political freedoms they were denied under the plantation regime" (Gilroy 1993, 56-7). What is more, he argues, in opposition to "the Enlightenment assumption of a fundamental separation between art and life, these expressive forms reiterate the continuity of art and life, celebrating "the grounding of the aesthetic with other dimensions of social life" (1993, 57). Gilroy's strongest statements about music and African American culture urge the reader to focus greater attention on the "distinctive kinesics of post-slave populations" in order to facilitate a full understanding of the traditions of black performance and diaspora musics. All in all, he argues, Black music "has been refined and developed so that it provides an enhanced mode of communication beyond the petty power of words – spoken or written" (1993, 76).

Gilroy is certainly not the first critic to focus on the importance of orality and musicality in the development of African American culture. In *Long Black Song*, Houston Baker Jr. describes how "black American culture was developed orally or musically" first, and perhaps foremost, describing this culture as one "never characterized by the individualistic ethos of white American culture." He claims that

“Black American culture is characterized by a collectivistic ethos,” so that “society is not viewed as a protective arena in which the individual can work out his own destiny and gain a share of America’s benefits by his own efforts” (Baker, Jr 1972, 16). These articulations of “black American culture” clearly inform Gilroy’s work, though in theorizing “the Black Atlantic” he is not as adamant as Baker, Jr. in setting black American culture against white American culture. Rather, Gilroy expresses interest in how black music allows the lines “between self and other” to blur, so that “special forms of pleasure” can be “created as a result of the meeting between one fractured, incomplete, and unfinished racial self and others” (1993, 79).

These observations hold special relevance for Anderson’s Octavian Nothing and Octavian’s efforts to locate a self both through words and music. While he continues the practice of writing the self into being throughout Anderson’s novels, that process becomes an overtly rhetorical project, one employed as a tactic, to borrow a term from Michel de Certeau, whom Gilroy turns to in framing the importance of music to African American cultural expression. “Culture,” de Certeau argues, “articulates conflicts” to ends that “alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force.” Developing “in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence,” these cultures facilitate “tactics of consumption, the ingenious way the weak make use of the strong,” and “thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices” (de Certeau 1984, xvii).

Octavian’s Western education, reconfigured through the written or composed self, is ultimately deployed as a tactic to challenge the institutional forces that have terrorized him. This methodology becomes clear at the end of the Volume II. Having survived slavery, and the ruin of the college, Octavian substitutes his manuscript for the daily log book his former masters kept of his behavior. As such, Anderson concludes Volume II by having Octavian replace the records of the experiments



conducted upon him with a new text, rewriting the “official” history of his childhood. In this act, Anderson presents Octavian’s written self as a meticulously manufactured record meant less to reveal the author’s true self than the horrifying injustices that self has been subjected to.

The power of this rhetoric, along with Octavian’s masterful use of it, resonates not only through the words he uses but also through those he does not. In one of the first novel’s most harrowing moments, Octavian confronts the gruesome remains of his mother’s autopsied corpse; the vivid scene is followed by several blotted-out passages. Ulanowicz argues that the blotted-out page “not only visually intensifies the trauma experienced by the protagonist but metaphorically stands for the forcible ‘blotting out’ of slaves’ sense of history and identity.” The crossed out words suggest “that for every surviving account of slaves’ experiences and for every attempt made by slaves to preserve a sense of history and identity, there were countless lives and stories rubbed out of the ‘master narrative’ of American history” (Ulanowicz 2011 288-9). By preserving those blotted-out pages, Octavian does more than enact a powerful metaphor for those rubbed out lives; he demonstrates a firm sense of authorial self-control and the ability to employ his traumatic memories to powerful rhetorical effect.

In keeping with Gilroy’s arguments about music and Black Atlantic culture, Anderson’s deployment of Octavian suggests that a truer version of the self can more easily be performed than written. As “The Pox Party” goes on, the importance of music in Octavian’s ongoing identity construction becomes increasingly important. From the book’s beginning, learning the violin has been part of Octavian’s classical training, and he has an affinity for the instrument. However, Octavian’s connection to music becomes even stronger after he becomes Mr. Sharpe’s property. Octavian’s new master makes a number of changes to Octavian’s educational training, changes

that comment revealingly on the roles language and music play in his ability to understand and project ideations of selfhood. Most prominently, Mr. Sharpe orders a change in the method of the boy's language instruction. Octavian, Mr. Sharpe insists, has been "nourished on narrative," which, he explains to Octavian's tutor, Dr. Trefusis, "is precisely what we wish to wean him from." The experiment, Dr. Sharpe explains, should "determine whether the subject is capable of growth in his rational faculties. That alone. This would constitute growth away from his hereditary savage nature" (Anderson 2006, 130).

To this end, Mr. Sharpe outlines a plan to teach Octavian in fragments, a plan Dr. Trefusis claims will ruin the boy. And, of course, this is precisely the point. The experiment has already demonstrated significant growth in Octavian's rational faculties, turning him from an asset, in the broader cultural project of legitimizing the institution of slavery, into a liability. Seeking to nullify these results, Sharpe denies Octavian the classical narratives he has proven so adept at processing and employing, and the voice he has so effectively developed.

Mr. Sharpe's comparative lack of interest in Octavian's musical training is notable and revealing. For Octavian, after his other lessons have been stripped down, music becomes a critical tool for self-expression. Noting that "Mr. Sharpe could not abide music," Octavian continues to practice his violin, sequestered "in the top of the house," far from his master's quarters. In these practice sessions, Octavian finds a crucial outlet: "In this secret music, I could tell those tales I was denied, and there being no text, none could read whether I spoke of docility or insubordination" (2006, 147). This notion of a "secret music," unbound to any text, reverberates with Gilroy's argument about the importance of music to black culture during slavery and the ability, developed against the brutal oppression of enslavement, of black musicians to perform the self.

Octavian's use of music here also provides another potent example of a De Certeauian tactic, a point aptly demonstrated once Mr. Sharpe discovers the boy's private music sessions in the attic. Mr. Sharpe makes no efforts to suppress Octavian's music, as he did with the boy's burgeoning sense of written and spoken expression, giving weight to Gilroy's argument about their perceived potency. Eventually, he does seek to use Octavian's musical ability for his own gain, to turn it into a product that can be packaged and sold. As Octavian explains, Mr. Sharpe "had arranged for me to play as a soloist for a subscription concert," a venture that, if successful, would continue "throughout the rest of the season." Through these performances, he explains, Octavian can "pay back the College of Lucidity for the kindness shown in feeding and clothing" him (Anderson 206, 148).

Mr. Sharpe's arrangements for this performance, and Octavian's ultimate response to them, do much to illustrate the potency of music as a tool for self-actualization and the way, as de Certeau explains, the weak can manipulate the strategic impositions of the strong into tactics of resistance. Mr. Sharpe plans for Octavian to perform "The Devil's Trill," and he dresses Octavian in a costume suggestive of the devil. He even publicizes that Octavian had developed his musical abilities "through conversation with the Devil at a crossroads" (Anderson 1993, 150). Octavian's mother objects strenuously to this crass marketing, and even Mr. Gitney acknowledges that the idea "seems somewhat irregular" (1993, 151).

Of course, Octavian has little recourse to refusal. Instead he uses performance to voice his objections to Mr. Sharpe's instructions, which, he records, "stood before me like a rebuke of everything I loved in music." Octavian proceeds to play "the first movement like the lolling of a suicide's head in the tub, the corpse lukewarm, the roseate water lapping at the slackened lips" (1993, 151). He renders the melody as "adorned in equal measure by the harshness of tone and a dismal, languorous

mistuning with which I plagued all but the uneasy cadences.” Octavian records that he played the second movement, “like the kicking of a turtle headed spawn in a woman’s womb.” By the third movement, his “tone was dry and hoarse, a febrile scratching.” He plays “the trill itself,” meant to be “rapid and triple-stopped” as “an insect rattle, almost inaudible,” conjuring “the air ateem with carrion flies, swooping, crawling, rejoicing in Beelzebub their Master” (1993, 152).

The subsequent applause is muted. Mr. Gitney praises Octavian, but Mr. Sharpe reacts harshly, telling him to enjoy sitting since “in a half an hour, my back would be too striped to admit of any respite whatsoever.” At first, Octavian takes no pleasure in this act of resistance, his thoughts running to “how I had, in anger, entertained the Serpent” (1993, 152). Looking back, however, he notes “with pleasure that I marked – that many in the convocation had found my rendition not without merit.” He reports that some young men approached him, “vowing that I had spoke more of the vile institution of slavery in my few moments of sonata than all the preachers of Boston in a year” (1993, 153). Notably the power of Octavian’s musical performance is amplified by his ability to use written language to extend the rhetorical power of that performance through words. Anderson cannot have us “hear” Octavian’s music; rather, he relies on intricately lyrical prose to convey the powerful impact of that music. In doing so, Anderson showcases not only Octavian’s musical fluency but, also, his ability to package his performance as an eloquent indictment on the evils of slavery – one that uses written language while simultaneously gesturing to its limits.

At the same time, Octavian’s ability to speak through music in this scene is reminiscent of Paul Gilroy’s analysis of the Jubilee Singers. Gilroy notes that, in stark contrast to performers of blackface minstrelsy, the “Fisk singers constructed an aura of seriousness around their activities and projected the memory of slavery outward as

the means to make their musical performances intelligible and pleasurable.” With this music, Gilroy argues that “Black people singing slave songs as mass entertainment set new public standards of authenticity for black cultural expression” (1993, 89). Through his performance of “The Devil’s Trill,” Octavian engages in a similar form of projection, albeit with very different results (no pleasure is intended or felt by the audience). Appropriating the music of an Italian composer, configured by Mr. Sharpe into an emblem of Octavian’s status as a commercial product, Octavian creates a vehicle to project the grim realities of that status outward in a way that proves empowering and effective.

Octavian’s performance speaks, as Gilroy suggests, to the potency of non-verbal forms of communication in African American cultural expression and to the viability of de Certeau’s delineation between strategies and tactics. At the same, Octavian’s own uneasiness, bordering on shame, about his actions, reveals a certain ambivalence regarding his ability to perform the self and the willingness to employ that self as a tactic. Anderson highlights this ambivalence through Octavian’s ongoing difficulties in negotiating the processes of composing and performing the self. For the majority of “The Pox Party,” these notions remain tangled and uncertain, and Octavian never completely shakes the idea that his childhood holds that germ of consciousness and by tracing his consciousness back to the source, he can find out who he is.

This tension comes most powerfully to light in the scene where Octavian recalls his mother’s death. In her final moments, he sits by her side as she laments being born, “half a world away.” Unlike the literary predecessors Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls upon, Octavian has no access to his mother’s homeland. He writes, “I could not imagine the face of my grandfather, my grandmother, whom I have never seen.” The absence of this knowledge pains him, intensifying as he speculates whether or

not “an image of my father, blank to me, beckoned in her fancy in a house where I might have grown.” As his mother nears death, Octavian becomes increasingly desperate to recover some portion of this lost past. His mother, up to this point, has only offered him fantastic stories of their African homeland. Before she dies, he insists, “I will, *know one true thing*.” He implores her “not to tell me children’s tales of panthers pulling chariots” (Anderson 2006, 218; original emphasis). In this moment, Anderson shows Octavian aligning himself fully with the objectivist doctrine of his masters/teachers; the self can only be recovered and the germ of consciousness discovered through the excavation of some objective truth.

Ultimately, Octavian’s mother offers a truth that challenges these ideological constructions of knowledge and self: “For the people of your nation, Octavian, all speech is song” (2006, 219). This statement provides powerful redirection to Octavian, ultimately leading him to reconceptualize his ongoing project to excavate the child self. Indeed, at the end of Volume II, Octavian acknowledges his mother’s truth, allowing him to conceive of his written self-excitation as a performance in its own right, one with a clear sense of purpose and audience.

Fully recognizing these various ideations of the self as acts of performance, Octavian approaches the kind of double-consciousness Paul Gilroy argues for. Through “music and its rituals,” Gilroy argues, “we can approach identity as neither a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists, and language gamers” (1993, 102). The notion of identity, then, is to be seen as neither fixed nor performed. It can be both and neither. In theorizing his vision of black identity, Gilroy argues for a new understanding of diaspora, one that attempts “to specify differentiation and identity in a way which enables one to think about the issue of racial commonality outside of

constricting binary frameworks – especially those that counterpose essentialism and pluralism” (1993, 102).

At the end of Volume II, Anderson appears to have Octavian embrace this logic and the collectivist ethos Baker Jr. discerns at the core of African American culture. In the final chapter, Octavian writes of “friends, now gone, who have traveled by my side and dropped away,” and he announces the desire to be their “praise-singer.” Looking back and forward, Octavian states, “I know not what we have been; I know not what we are, but I know what we might be” (Anderson 2008, 561). Octavian’s consistent emphasis on “we” suggests a turn away from the authorial “I,” in itself a turn away from the concept of the self Rose ascribes to the ideological hegemony of the psy disciplines. As his story nears an end, Anderson emphasizes not how Octavian’s identity has been constructed, as through those disciplines, but how it may be constructed in ways that are dynamic and interdependent.

If Octavian looks to the future as a “praise singer,” he clearly sees his written “self” as finished. In the final chapter, appropriately named “Tabula Rasa,” Octavian revisits Locke’s idea of the blank slate, claiming that his own life “hath been one long forgetting, the erasure of what was drawn, a terrible redaction” (2008, 561). He leaves the record of that redaction, now the “official” record of his childhood, affirming this act of creation through an act of negation. With that gesture, Octavian signals his intention to successfully negotiate a sense of identity as a musician and not a writer.

This decision suggests a strong affinity with Gilroy’s vision of an empowered diasporic identity. Gilroy describes how a “countercultural sense of the inability of mere words to convey certain truths inaugurates a special indictment of modernity’s enforced separation of art and life as well as a distinct aesthetic (or non-aesthetic) standpoint.” Music, he argues, “is the best way of examining this final aspect” (1993,

124). Octavian appears to be precisely the kind of countercultural agent Gilroy exhorts, achieving a doubled consciousness that actualizes the latter's notion of a dynamic, truly diasporic identity. Nevertheless, if music holds the key to realizing that identity, the seemingly parallel processes of writing and performing may be more deeply intertwined than Gilroy suggests.

Abdul JanMohamed provides compelling evidence for that notion in his analysis of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Douglass, he notes, "invokes the power of the blues and ascribes to it a central role in his eventual understanding of the horror and power of slavery. The structures and functions of the 'wild songs' that he hears as a child ... can be seen as the model for his narrative." In fact, JanMohamed claims, those songs "provide the form as well as the substance of his narrative." At the most fundamental level, JanMohamed suggests, "the blues and the narrative preserve and communicate a knowledge of the slave's sociopolitical condition; they store rudimentary knowledge for future reconsideration." Finally, JanMohamed insists that, for Douglass, "these songs contain a knowledge of slavery that is superior to other forms of knowledge about the same subject" (2013, 151).

Like Gilroy, then, Douglass posits music as the most suitable vehicle for communicating the true "knowledge of slavery." Importantly, though, JanMohamed suggests that it is actually Douglass's fluency in multiple modes that gives voice to these truths, that the power of Douglass's narrative comes from how the act of writing reveals and responds to the "wild songs" he heard as a child. Likewise haunted by childhood memories, Anderson's Octavian Nothing works from a similar model, integrating his mother's instruction that all speech is song with his own mastery of written language. Ultimately, Octavian demonstrates that the child self may not be recovered as objective truth, as Sully and others in the early child studies movement suggested, but that figurations of the child can be employed as vital tools



for self-fashioning. Projecting the past through the present, Anderson uses Octavian's interrogation of his child self to construct a powerful model of subaltern identity, one that works through a complex interaction of performing and composing the self to achieve a diasporic vision archiving the voices of the past, while opening channels for those of the future.

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