

## FROM BLACK ICE TO BLACK I(s): LORENE CARY'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF

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With her first book, *Black Ice* (1991), African American author Lorene Cary has entered the literary arena through the passage –a true rite of passage indeed– of autobiography. Far from experiencing the death of the subject and of the author postmodernism proclaims, the African American self, formerly stifled by the oppressive strictures and structures of a hostile white world, encounters a door to self-definition and regeneration in the revisiting of the past. Like her female predecessors, Zora Neale Hurston or Maya Angelou, Cary poses questions of identity and the problematics of its definition for a black woman; through the self-analysis and self-evaluation the autobiographical genre allows her, she sets out to look for answers to such questions as what effects does growing up black and female in the United States have on a person? How does that person deal with the ambiguities of integration, especially at a young age? How does that person negotiate the way to a sense of belonging?

*Black Ice* is the story of Cary's two-year stay (1972-74) at the white and wealthy boarding school of St. Paul in Concord, New Hampshire, which only one year before had become coeducational. With the financial aid of a scholarship from the school, Cary jumps onto the train of integration. But in a predominantly white and male environment, fifteen-year-old Cary is soon overwhelmed by mixed feelings of fear, remorse, confusion, isolation and alienation, despite her initial eagerness to leave home and her illusion to take part in «that mammoth enterprise –the integration, the moral transformation, no less, of America» (Cary 32-33).<sup>1</sup> In the narration of her own individual story, the author necessarily brings along her historical circumstances and the historical background of the African American community into a «collective

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1. For Cary, home represents «the closing in of worlds» (Davies 21), hence her eagerness to leave home and fly away to explore a new world and to grow out of a new experience.

experience,» as it usually occurs in African American autobiography (Fox-Genovese 184). The sequels of slavery, the oppression and the segregation suffered by whole generations of African Americans leads inevitably to a feeling of mistrust that will mark the relationship with white people as well as the negotiation of the ethnic self: «Were we black kids a social experiment? . . . Were we imported to help round out the white kids' education?» (Cary 5). Whether that was the case or not, she is determined to demonstrate her brilliance and undermine white stereotypes of superiority over blacks. She feels indebted to the long fight carried out by her people against oppression and discrimination and that encourages her to assert her own voice and her black and female Is even over the white authority embodied by the school's Rector:

My own voices were talking back to him, and so long as he spoke, I could not control the dialogue. Part of the tradition, my eye. I was there in spite, despite, *to spite* it. I was there because of sit-ins and marches and riots. I was there –and this I felt with extraordinary and bitter certainty– as a sort of liberal-minded experiment. And, hey, I did not intend to fail. (Cary 53)

Throughout the book, the double bind of race and gender is tilted towards the painful awareness of blackness, as the protagonist admits: «I was more aware of being black at St. Paul's than I was of being a girl» (Cary 200). The devaluation of blackness impinges on young Cary's image of herself, leading to the painful realization that «In the aftermath of *Black Is Beautiful*, I began to feel black and blue, big and black, black and ugly. Had they done that to me? Had somebody else? Had I let them? Could I stop the feelings? Or hide them?» (Cary 5). As Maya Angelou had written in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, being aware of this displacement when growing up black and female in the United States, «is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult» (3). Cary's self-image and inner confusion regarding her identity is but a reflection of what W. E. B. Du Bois had referred to as the «double consciousness» typical of African Americans, which responds to the dual gaze of the white society on the one hand, and of the African American person on the other, who is torn between the way others see him/her and the way he/she sees himself/herself:

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 peculiar 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 twoness, –an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body . . . (Du Bois 3)

This duality is explained by Du Bois as a «strife» and as a yearning to merge this double self «into a better and truer self,» taking the best from both its black and American sides. Du Bois' s idea of double consciousness is in keeping with Sheila Rowbotham's theory of the established social order seen as a hall of mirrors into which a woman looks to see herself, to see her identity reflected on them; the mirrors, however, project a socially constructed image of WOMAN as the frame which defines women (Rowbotham 27). Aware of this double gaze, from society and from themselves, women are doomed to an internal struggle triggered by that duality. In the case of African American women, like Cary, this dual consciousness is further extended into a triple consciousness determined by how the white society sees her as a black girl, how she is seen by the rest of the African American community who might not have the opportunity to go to a school like St. Paul's and, thirdly, the image she has of herself.

From the very beginning of her autobiography, the reader can sense the deep feeling of guilt and remorse that invades young Cary for sojourning in the white world of St. Paul's. Such a feeling can be easily inferred from the author's statement that «I began writing about St. Paul's School when I stopped thinking of my prep-school experience as an aberration from the common run of black life in America» (Cary 6). Furthermore, she explicitly portrays her vision of herself as a traitor for having trespassed into the white upper-class world, for having gone beyond the dividing racial line. The treachery adds up to the feeling of self-hatred which, as Regina Blackburn points out, is one of the recurrent themes in black female autobiography. According to Blackburn, the black female autobiographer, in the process of defining and understanding her black self, tends to assign some value to it, be it pride or shame and self-hatred; in most cases it is a feeling of self-hatred, shame or self-depreciation that marks the black self (136). Shame, self-hatred and «utter aloneness» (Cary 47) shape Cary's journey through elitist St. Paul's. On the one hand, she feels estranged from whites because of race and its historical and social implications, while on the other hand she also feels alienated from the rest of blacks who have not had access to this white microcosm of perfection. Thus, adolescent Cary harks back to James Baldwin's thoughts on the risks encountered when holding on to the white gaze of black people: «"I was as isolated from Negroes as I was from whites", James Baldwin wrote (in a book lent to me by Mr. Lederer, a Jewish teacher at St. Paul's), "which is what happens when a Negro begins, at bottom, to believe what white people say about him"» (Cary 78). And Cary soon realizes how difficult it is not to believe and internalize the image whites hold of blacks, in this case, the blacks chosen to be «America's leaders», which they were told they would one day become.

Despite her young age, Cary feels that the price she is supposed to pay for being special is the assimilation into white culture, which would certainly increase her alienation from her people. As a matter of fact, the recently integrated St. Paul's oozes a somewhat covert prejudiced atmosphere, shown especially in the attitude of some faculty members who «came here, frankly, because, for whatever reason, they preferred teaching in a boys' school» (Cary 143) and in a general tendency of St. Paul's school to suppress any deviation from white standard English, for which reason «teachers judged typically black "errors" more harshly than others, and ... once

obsessed by idiom they lost sight of black students' ideas» (Cary 194). Because of her knowledge of the historical circumstances her people had to live through and survive, Cary is wary of this white milieu, no matter how many benefits it may provide her, her major fear being the possibility that she might change in some way that would betray her people. The fear of assimilation determines Cary's view of her experience at St. Paul's as an aberration and an act of treason towards her race. This obsessive feeling is actually made extensive to blacks who dare to make a foray into white land, like John Walker, the first black teacher at St. Paul's and its first black trustee, of whom Cary comments: «I remember watching him walk with other board members and trying to deduce from his gait and the way he inclined his head whether the small man with the tiny eyes was traitor or advocate» (Cary 6).

Gender and race conditions determine Cary's attitude towards life as well as the demands she makes on herself as a member of the African American community, as it can be seen so far. She sets upon herself a great responsibility in the historical process of integration and coeducation she has to live in; she is determined not to be victimized by such circumstances but to fight and compete with all her might, to «turn it out» as she puts it. However, her repeatedly failing calculus and her mediocre grades certainly do not come up to her expectations and, once again, race issues and a renewed feeling of mistrust come to the foreground in her mind in a conflation of historical collectivity and individuality: «I wondered if anyone here had ever expected me to do better than this . . . I felt betrayed, first by them, then by my own naiveté. Hps [High Passes] were probably what they'd meant by fine –for black scholarship kids» (Cary 87). Far from being abated by this twofold betrayal, the protagonist of this story manages to find strategies of survival that turn her momentary disillusion into the renewed energy and strength typical of female predecessors like Sojourner Truth herself, whose very words appear interpolated in Cary's troubled thoughts:

They might know the rules better, whatever the unspoken rules were for leaping to the top of this world and staying there. But I could work . . . I could outwork them all. (Ain't I a woman?) Will, it seemed to me, was the only quality I had in greater abundance than my fellow, and I would will myself to work . . . I felt the rush of pure competition. (Cary 93)

Not only does Cary have to face the problems of integration but she also has to deal with the emotional turmoil caused by an undesirable first sexual experience, another one of the «many battlegrounds» life holds, as bell hooks rightly points out in her own autobiography (51). Cary loses her virginity with Ricky, a boyfriend who has a sexual relationship with her against her will, an act that will increase the deep feeling of shame and self-hatred that had already taken hold of her self due to her blackness. And the web of silence and guilt typical in victims of rape invades her immediately after. Once again, the memories of that unfortunate experience flood Cary's mind and are expressed through heartrending words (Cary 114).

What should have been a positive loving experience turns into a stifling physical, psychological and spiritual pain, something like «a bowel movement in the

wrong place» (Cary 107). Rape leads on to a fierce silence of the victim over the matter and the interiorization of too big and lasting a burden, namely the burden of self-hatred and self-blaming. A true «caged bird,» like Maya Angelou's and like Toni Morrison's «winged but grounded bird» (Morrison 162), Lorene Cary's desire to fly is repeatedly aborted on the grounds of either race or gender.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the bitter taste of rape leaves on the victim indelible traces which, as she puts it, «lived like a haunt in my soul, reminding me, whenever I was inclined to forget, to trust no man» (Cary 185).

One of the ways Lorene Cary tries to comfort herself amidst so much internal confusion, fear and alienation is to resort to family stories she recalls listening to from her great-grandfather. Two stories in particular come to her mind which are very much in keeping with her personal situation. In the first one, a woman steps out of her skin at night to leave the house and fly around while her husband sleeps. When the husband finds out about it, he looks for help from an old woman in the village, who advises him to rub salt on the inside part of her skin. Thus, when the woman returns from her flight, she feels a lot of pain while trying to slip into her skin and with a scream asks, «Skin, skin, ya na know me?» (Cary 130).<sup>3</sup> The second story is about a father who encourages his daughter to jump from the top of the stairs where she is standing, promising that he will catch her so that she does not fall down. Trusting her father's words, Izzy jumps just to land on the hard ground. Upon asking her father why he had not caught her as he had promised, he teaches her the lesson she is supposed to remember for the rest of her life: «Learn this one and never forget: Trust no man» (Cary 132). Like Izzy, Lorene Cary takes heed of her Pap's stories and, remembering them in the darkness of a lonely night decides that that is precisely the best way to handle her situation at St. Paul's, to keep a pose, to be well-mannered, big-hearted and defiant, «because a pose cannot resist great intimacy, at the center of my posing, I would remain alone. I would trust no man» (Cary 132). The mistrust is therefore extended from the group of whites onto that of males.

The story of the woman who steps out of her skin is, likewise, applicable to Cary's own «divided loyalties» (Gates, «Divided Loyalties» 2) in that the metaphor of the skin stands for the ethnic and cultural identity of the self. If the woman leaves her skin, that is her ethnic community and cultural baggage, to fly into another different world she won't be able to put on her old skin without suffering a lot of pain. Therefore, according to this story, and reading between the lines, a woman should stay in her place, the house, stick to her black community and its culture, without daring to cross the dividing line. Although Cary remembers this story in her Pap's voice, she also remembers that the women in his family had grown out of his stories and that

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2. Curiously enough, Angelou and Pecola, who appear associated with the metaphor of birds and thwarted flight, are also victims of rape, by her mother's boyfriend and by her father respectively.

3. In African American folklore, the ability to shed one's skin and fly around in the night is ascribed to witches. They can also «ride» a person while he or she is sleeping. To get rid of the witch one could throw «salt at it (in which case it could not return to its human skin and, consequently, would die)» (Hughes Wright 25).

they would have been happy to be the flying woman who can wander around at will, without constraints of race and gender:

Their womanhood seemed to be a taking off from the world of men below: as surely as they worked and worried to get a man and then build a home and a bed in it with him, so too did they seem eager to fly away. I have no doubt that if they could have, my mother and her sisters and my grandmother would have left their skins draped like pantyhose over their unsatisfactory furniture and floated up above us all: the men who never failed to oppress them; the children who'd ruined their beautiful bodies; and the boxy little houses fit to bursting with the leftover smells of their cooking and the smoke from their cigarettes, curling up and hanging just above our heads like ambition. (Cary 131)

If the story of the father and daughter instils a deep feeling of mistrust in Lorene, the story of the flying woman warns her of the dangers of crossing boundaries and flirting with the lures of assimilation.

Fifteen years later (June 1989), Cary will remember these stories, she will revisit them and reshape them, giving them new meaning. Cary's disappointment at not graduating with honors, as she had expected, is somewhat dispelled when she finds out that she is the recipient of the Rector's Award and that somehow her efforts and her work have been recognized and valued. But her previous resentment and the rooted uneasiness about the true intentions of white people provoke a momentary bout of suspicion on the concession of this award: «I told myself to be grateful for my award, even though I suspected that it was a booby prize, maybe even the badge of a Tom, a palliative to the selfless-devotion types who fell short of the mark» (Cary 219). However, from that time when her sojourn at white St. Paul's School is just about to come to an end, Cary starts experiencing pangs of remorse for not having trusted some white people who had really tried to help her as best they could, getting to the bitter conclusion that «For the first time that year, I was not ready to leave St. Paul's. I had had all my time, all my chances. I could never do it again, never make it right. I had not loved enough» (Cary 219). *Black Ice* is precisely an attempt to make it right, it is the chance Cary gives herself to make amends with that fearful resentful adolescent she had been years before, creating «an alternate self in the autobiographical act» (Stanford Friedman 76). This autobiography represents a reunification of the author with the former self she was at St. Paul's School, a reunion which certainly proves to be a rewarding leap into Cary's strengthened sense of identity. Instead of forgetting and burying those bittersweet years fraught with confusion, isolation and fear, what she does is remember that girl and her circumstances, listen to that girl calling her back, demanding «compassion, forgiveness, reunification» (Cary 228) because «You cannot go through life not trusting anybody without enormous psychic harm. You cannot do that pose. The pose is not a life» (Trescott 3). As we can see from the last pages of this autobiography, the author advocates the integration of both sides of the ethnic self, in this case the Black side and the American side into a whole being who is a composite of multiple selves, «refusing the boundaries which assign her exclusively

to one place or the other» (Anderson 107). Since, as Karen Piper rightly argues, «there is a dangerous fine line in the US between “hybridity” and “assimilation”» (22), it is necessary to emphasize at this point that with this book Cary is not choosing assimilation into the white culture and society but rather a “healthy” integration in it as well as the inclusion –rather than exclusion– of the different but not opposing selves of the African American person. In this sense, bell hooks’ claim for integration, quoting from Paulo Freire, comes to mind for its coincidence with Cary’s message:

Integration with one’s context, as distinguished from adaptation, is a distinctly human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and transform that reality . . .

The integrated person is person as Subject. In contrast, the adaptive person is person as object, adaptation representing at most a weak form of self defense . . . Adaptation is behavior characteristic of the animal sphere; exhibited by man, it is symptomatic of his dehumanization. (Qtd. in hooks, *Talking Back*: 67)

In 1982 Lorene Cary goes back to St. Paul’s School to teach for a year and later on she becomes one of the school trustees. Now, as an adult she is sure of the potential such a school encloses for black youth and, seeing in their eyes the same fear she herself had experienced, she tries to encourage them to make the most of it, not to be taken aback by the colour of their skin, since «just as St. Paul’s was theirs, because they had attended the school and contributed to it, so, too, was American life and culture theirs, because they were black people in America» (Cary 5). Like the brilliant spectrum of browns rendered by the prism effect of black ice on the surface of frozen lakes, the ethnic self must allow for enriching differences within. St. Paul’s School, and by extension the United States, too, is a multicolored prism where it is not so easy to determine who is «traitor» or «advocate». Therefore, although Cary understands her students’ familiar mistrust and fears, she very well knows that they will most probably be the root of a thwarted flight: «when I met with the black students . . . I could see fear in their eyes . . . Who was this person who walked about in the white . . . world? And at what price? What did it mean to be black in America if it did not mean handicap, shame, or denial?» (Cary 229). Apart from «a story of coming-to-terms» (Gates, «Divided Loyalties» 2), *Black Ice* is precisely the author’s attempt to put her experience at the service of those who might not have realized that being black in America does not necessarily mean handicap, shame or denial but that it might well be a source of pride and wealth, the wealth that stems from cultural diversity. As Betty Bergland points out, «we must develop a concept of the self that is pluralist, multidimensional, multifaceted» (133). Ethnic autobiographies, Bergland argues, represent an apt site for «the multiplicity of subject-positions that constitute a single agent» (157) and, what is more, «a theory of the subject in autobiography must posit the existence of multiple and contradictory subjectivities as the effect of multiple discourses at a particular historical moment» (161). Indeed, the historical moment of

racial integration and coeducation calls for the development of a wide-angled perspective ready to allow for multiple and sometimes contradictory subjectivities.

That *Black Ice* is a paean to hybridity, and the always problematic in-betweenness of the ethnic self in the United States, is clear in the book's final pages, where Lorene Cary celebrates her «self-empowered free self» into which the «would-be-victim of race and sex» (104), as Nellie McKay puts it, is transformed. Going back to St. Paul's School years later to work first as a teacher and then as a trustee has a deep meaning for Cary:

It is like admitting who I am. I came here, and I went away changed. I've been fighting that for a long time, to no purpose. I am a crossover artist, you know, like those jazz musicians who do pop albums, too . . . I used to hate those musicians for that . . . because they were no longer pure. Well, I didn't leave here pure. This is who I am . . . I wondered whether "crossover" was the word I wanted. Did it convey enough tension? Or did it sound like dying a cultural death . . . (233)

Far from dying a cultural death, Cary is ready to «apprehend mutable forms that can redefine the idea of culture through a reconciliation with movement and complex, dynamic variation» (Gilroy 130). Cary's celebrated dialogic stand acquires a social and educational dimension as not only does she strive for the integration of blacks into white society but she also ensures that that integration has a two-sided effect, to start with, on an academic level. It is noteworthy her determination to include in a traditionally white male syllabus African American works and authors, like Frederick Douglass's slave narrative (Cary 225). She clearly advocates the idea of wholeness and inclusion instead of the insurmountable dividing line of separation:

I wanted an image of wholeness, inclusion: moving circles that come together, overlap, drift apart. Why else were we, like married women, so concerned to find the right compounds and hyphenates? Black American . . . Afro-American, Afric-American, people of color, Afro-Caribbean, Anglo-African, people of the diaspora, African-American . . .

I make the choices every day –to live where my kid grows up with black people like the black people I grew up with, and to hope that she doesn't get burned up by the shame. (Cary 233)

Cary finally laments the shame with which some blacks still live their ethnicity, those probably verging on assimilation, like some people on her street who «still say a baby looks like a monkey if she's too dark» while «little girls cry out to God in the dark for good hair» (Cary 233-34). This is the cage she wants to open for her daughter and future generations to fly out, having the chance to not only be made by but also to make their own historical, political, and social condition in the United States of America (Cudjoe 277).



Lorene Cary's journey into social ethnic integration is parallel to her journey into the integration of her selves towards personal wholeness. And to that personal wholeness undoubtedly contributes the African American tradition of storytelling passed down from her forebears, from what Gary Kenyon terms a «therapoetic perspective» (2). We have seen how in the loneliness of her St. Paul's experience she recalls stories told by her great grandfather from which she draws helpful meaning. Although those stories will survive in her memory for ever, their meaning, however, changes according to Cary's perspective throughout the years. From hindsight, she admits how important the tradition of storytelling is for her; but she is also aware of the necessity to evolve within that tradition by revising loaded stories whose intended meaning might not be the best for the determination of the black woman's identity. Hence the reinterpretation of Papa's stories:

I recalled my great-grandfather's stories that I had used for comfort that night when I'd sat out on the ice . . . Those were as easy to write as to tell, but not the rest of it, not the betrayal. The hard part is to find the words to say it outright; that Pap was wrong. His stories taught me fear and shame and secrecy. "Trust no man." But I cannot throw them out. I cannot escape into some other history of my own choosing . . . I've been given my stories, and in them, people who try to fly are burned out of their own skins . . . (Cary 236)

Once again, through the recurrent flying motif the idea of freedom –of both race and gender– permeates this autobiography. And part of that freedom resides in the possibility to modify old stories: «I did not ask for the stories, but I was given them to tell, to retell and change and pass along . . . to give me the strength to take off my skin and stand naked and unafraid in the night, to touch other souls in the night» (Cary 237). Bittersweet memories from St. Paul's flood onto Cary's mind fifteen years after her stay there. The stories she was told during childhood can certainly fill in the gaps left by an absent or manipulated African American history created by whites. St. Paul's School also allowed her to realize that there is heterogeneity within the white community as well as within the self, and that skin color should not be an imprisoning cage:

Without the stories and the songs, I am mute. A white American education will never give them to me; but it can . . . it can help me to see the stories, growing like a vine out of the cane fields, up out of unmarked graves, around my soul. It can help me search out the very history it did not teach me . . . St. Paul's gave me new words into which I must translate the old. But St. Paul's would keep me inside my black skin, that fine, fine membrane that was meant to hold in my blood, not bind up my soul. The stories show me the way out. I must tell my daughter that. (Cary 237)

In Lorene Cary's final celebration of the black female self, the flying woman will not have to fear her skin as it will welcome her back; and Izzy will not fall and hurt herself on account of her father's betraying encouragement, but she will jump of her own will and she will not get hurt by the shock; she will learn how to jump over life's hurdles: «up, Izzy, up. Paint, dance, read, sing, skate, write, climb, fly. Remember it all, and come tell us about it» (Cary 238). *Black Ice*, therefore, closes with a message of optimism for future generations, enclosed as well in the title metaphor. As Albert Stone states, «each remembered life has its own special pattern, at once real and symbolic, which forms a picture of the past and a blueprint of a future» (185). Different critics have attempted to ascertain the meaning of this metaphor which gives the book its title. Jeanne Braham puts forward her interpretation of black ice as the trap and danger St. Paul's represents for young Cary (Braham 92). For Jacqueline Trescott, it is a metaphor for the protagonist's adopted personality (Trescott 3), since black ice covers the surface of lakes while «below, in the depths, frozen flora pose» (Cary 128). Finally, Phillip Lopate opts for a third explanation arguing that it must refer «to the icy self-control demanded by the situation of being a token or model minority student, and the anger it generated underneath» (Lopate 2). While we can agree with all these three interpretations, we would like to add another one which none of the mentioned critics have suggested. If we take into account the definition of black ice as «a thin, nearly invisible coating of ice» (American Heritage College Dictionary 145) we can read this image as a metaphor for the invisibility African Americans have suffered throughout history as well as that of Cary's own conception of herself in a white and wealthy environment.

With *Black Ice*, Lorene Cary has attempted to find the «true self-consciousness» Du Bois referred to; the «two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings» must and can be reconciled into a multiple complex but harmonious self, so that the history of the African Americans is not a history of a strife any longer. As Joanne Braxton aptly argues when dealing with Maya Angelou's first autobiography, «the autobiographer prays that the bird be released from the cage of its oppression to fly free from the definitions and limitations imposed by a hostile world» (185). *Black Ice*, which Arnold Rampersad describes as «probably the most beautifully written and the most moving African-American autobiographical narrative since Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,» (*Black Ice* front cover), has surely granted Lorene Cary a place of honor in the tradition of African American autobiography.

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