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[Introduction to] Platitudes: & the New Black Aesthetic

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Trey Ellis

PLATITUDES

& "The New Black Aesthetic"

with a new foreword by Bertram D. Ashe

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FOREWORD

Your stand on negritude, sir, continues to befuddle me.

Isshee Ayam, in a letter to Dewayne Wellington dated December 26, 1984[1]

This telling sentence in Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* is easy enough to miss, given that the novel contains a blizzard of satirical narratives, counternarratives, and metanarratives, including excerpts from the PSAT (a standardized high school test), diner menus, lists of "favorite things" (19–20), sexuality surveys, photographs, and even a chapter from the Cub Detective Series (159). Specifically, this sentence is buried in a post-postscript among the flurry of letters and dueling chapters that make up *Platitudes*. These missives are exchanged by a young experimental writer named Dewayne Wellington and Isshee Ayam, a feminist novelist who serves as his foil. This sentence, which appears more than halfway through the novel, reflects a significant tension in the text. By this point in the narrative, having read the first thirty chapters of Dewayne's novel-in-progress, Isshee obviously feels that

she should be able to grasp Dewayne's "stand on negritude" (110). Her sense of being "befuddl[ed]" is, obviously, *not* something with which she's comfortable. As the novel plays out, it becomes clear why.

There are four main sections to *Platitudes* (the title both of Ellis's novel and of the manuscript-in-progress composed by Ellis's protagonist, Wellington). The first consists of thirty chapters in which Wellington introduces the reader to Earle Tyner, an apolitical black teenager from Manhattan's Upper West Side who loves all forms of American "junk" culture (20) and who lusts after a white classmate named Janie Rosenbloom. Wellington also introduces us to Earle's widowed mother, a public relations spokeswoman for apartheid-era South African Airlines who is dating a Jewish man. Then Wellington creates Dorothy Lamont, a teenaged Harlem resident who attends an exclusive downtown private school and is friendly with a multiracial crowd of wealthy, drug-using, sexually active girls. But early in this introductory section Dewayne grows dissatisfied with the progress of his draft. He invites someone, anyone, to assist him: "both story lines—Earle's and Dorothy's—have their problems," he observes in chapter 7. "Obviously enough, folks, I need help. Anybody out there who's inspired, please write in and tell me which story you like better. . . . Just write to: 'Which Ones Do I Kill?' c/o Dewayne Wellington" (14). Two paragraphs later, Ayam, the radical feminist author, responds with an angry letter to Dewayne and two of her own chapters in which she's transported Earle, Dorothy, and their mothers to a rural setting in 1920s Georgia. *Platitudes*' dueling-novelists'-viewpoints plot is under way.

In the second section—chapters 31 to 49—Dewayne's involvement with Isshee deepens. In an act seemingly born of his infatuation with her, Dewayne-the-narrator "blackens" Earle and Dorothy's world considerably: Earle becomes romantically interested in Dorothy, and he joins an African American political or-

ganization in order to help elect a black mayor. Earle's mother leaves South African Airlines to become the spokeswoman for New York City's Health and Human Services Commission, and she begins to date a black captain in the NYPD. For her part, Dorothy spends more narrative time in Harlem, with Earle. But in the third section—chapters 50 to 55—the slowly developing relationship between Isshee and Dewayne falls apart. After Isshee stands him up at a planned rendezvous, Dewayne angrily responds by draining all of the "blackness" from his text: Dorothy has sex with a white boy; Earle responds by sleeping with Janie Rosenbloom; Earle's mother goes *back* to South African Airlines, and she leaves the black captain to resume dating the Jewish man. The final section of the novel—chapters 56 through 58—contain, perhaps a bit too neatly, the reconciliation of Isshee and Dewayne, of Earle and Dorothy, and, by extension, of black feminist fiction writers and their black male postmodern novelist counterparts.

Along the way, however, black identity itself becomes just another fistful of silly putty, able to be shaped one way by Dewayne, another way by Isshee, and still another again by Dewayne—seemingly on a whim—when he wants to annoy Isshee. Over the course of the novel, Earle's and Dorothy's blackness evolves and mutates as Dewayne and Isshee present their competing versions of a black reality. It is as if Earle's and Dorothy's black identities exist, to use Ellis's words in his novel *Right Here, Right Now,* in "a perpetual theater whose only script is one [they] either inherit or invent."[2] Perhaps more than any other moment in the novel, then, the nagging sentence in which Isshee complains that she can't read Dewayne's "stand on negritude" clearly marks a fundamental break between *Platitudes*, which appeared in 1988, and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, writers and intellectuals such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Ron Karenga argued that all black

art, in Karenga's words, "must reflect and support the Black Revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid."[3] In his 1968 essay "The Black Arts Movement," Neal writes, "Black art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America."[4] Certainly a number of other African American artists and writers quarreled with these black cultural nationalists and their attempts to define a "black aesthetic," but the Black Arts Movement captured the imagination of many younger black artists of the 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, some black aestheticians contended that knowledge of a black author's "stand on negritude" (to quote Isshee) was critical to evaluating the given writer's work.

In something of an overstatement, Leon Wynter writes that "the rise of black consciousness during the civil rights movement and its subsequent 'black power' phase" meant that "African-American cultural politics embraced a concept of blackness that was as absolute and unaccepting of divided racial identity as the Ku Klux Klan's understanding of whiteness. But," continues Wynter, "somewhere during the late 1980s, like new land pushing up from the mouth of a submerged volcano, an island began growing in the mainstream."[5] The late 1980s saw the rise of an era that Nelson George has dubbed the "Post-Soul."[6]

The first generation of black youth to come of age in a post-integration reality, the artists of the Post-Soul are the children of Martin Luther King's "dream." And Trey Ellis was one of the first to recognize and explore the difference between the Post-Soul and everything that came before it. Born in Washington, D.C., in 1962, Ellis grew up in the suburbs of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and New Haven, Connecticut, as his parents attended graduate school at the University of Michigan and Yale. He went to Phillips Academy, Andover, then Stanford University, and he is

currently a Hollywood screenwriter as well as a novelist. Along the way he has lived in New York City and Florence, Italy (he returned to the United States with the first draft of *Platitudes*), and he has produced freelance articles and translations. Ellis's experiences growing up as a "bourgie black boy"[7] flow like electric current through each of his three novels. Ellis uses the circumstances of his own life as an imaginative springboard for some of the most inventive and engaging experimental fiction being published today.

In 1988, however, he was merely one of a swarm of young black artists who were dedicated to expanding a sense of what black art could embody. Three years after the publication of *Platitudes*, Ellis put it this way: "You can be anything. I'm just saying it's an open-ended aesthetic as opposed to a rigid canon, which is what Karenga and some Black nationalists were trying to argue for. In the sixties they were trying to codify Black art. And now, more than any other time, it's uncategorizable."[8] Artists and writers such as the guitarist Vernon Reid and the black rock band Living Colour, the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, the theater impresario George C. Wolfe, the photographer Lorna Simpson (whose photographs appear in *Platitudes*), the filmmaker Spike Lee, and the essayist and playwright Lisa Jones, to name only a few, were, as Greg Tate suggests, "artists for whom black consciousness and artistic freedom are not mutually exclusive but complementary, for whom 'black culture' signifies a multicultural tradition of expressive practices; they feel secure enough about black culture to claim art produced by nonblacks as part of their inheritance."[9] Essays and books began to announce this telling expansion—and, often, combination—of black art and black popular culture, including Tate's *Flyboy in the Buttermilk* (1992); Paul Beatty's "What set you from, fool?" in *Next* (1992); Jones's "She Came with the Rodeo" in *Bulletproof Diva* (1994);

and Nelson George's *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (1994).

Trey Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic" (appended to this reprint edition of *Platitudes*) remains one of the earliest and perhaps the most noteworthy of these statements. Published in the influential black literary journal *Callaloo* in the winter of 1989, Ellis's article began as a midterm paper in an African American Studies course at Stanford and ended as a seminal communiqué on young, post-integration artists and writers. Ellis's essay, however, made a curious, if unfulfilled, stop along the way. "I was approached by the *New York Times Magazine*," said Ellis in an early interview with the Post-Soul novelist Danzy Senna, "'cause they said, 'We want to be hip and young and cutting edge, and we want you to write something.' So I'd always had this [New Black Aesthetic] idea, and they gave me a bunch of money and let me fly across country and I interviewed Fishbone in L.A. and all these people, [John] Wideman, and August Wilson, and Kid Creole, and I wrote this article and they hated it and they didn't print it" (Senna and Wasow 21).

The *New York Times* felt that the artists in the essay were too obscure. In the end, however, Ellis's piece turned out to be amazingly prophetic: Spike Lee, Living Colour, Fab 5 Freddie, Chris Rock, and the Hudlin Brothers were only a few of the then-unknowns who went on to various degrees of celebrity. "The New Black Aesthetic" examines these artists—along with the rest of the New York–based, Post-Soul black art world—and makes four critical observations: one, that the artists of this New Black Aesthetic are decidedly transcultural, that they have "changed, crossed, and flouted existing genres according to their own eclectic inspirations" (NBA 234); two, that "a telltale sign of the work of the NBA [New Black Aesthetic] is [the] parodying of the black nationalist movement" (ibid. 236); and three, that "the new, unflinching way NBA artists are looking at black culture is largely

responsible for their popularity" (ibid. 237). The fourth observation concerns what Ellis calls the "cultural mulatto":

> Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing crop of cultural mulattoes that fuels the NBA. We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. The culturally mulatto *Cosby* girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother. Neither side of the tracks should forget that. (ibid. 235)

Response to Ellis's "much-maligned" essay was swift (Senna and Wasow 21). Writing the first of two responses that *Callaloo* published along with the essay, Eric Lott applauds Ellis: "Just thinking about all this disparate work together is a forward (and postmodern) leap. . . . What Ellis is talking about," Lott argues, "is one of the only postmodernisms with a conscience."[10] Lott's chief criticism is that although "Ellis is politically conscientious—balancing black mass and middle class, the joys of cultural mulattoism and the death of Edmund Perry[11]—there is a certain evasion of politics going on in his piece, a refusal to spell out the bup/mass relationship. . . . it might be nice to have some clarity on the matter of class, particularly its relation to the cultural sphere" (Lott 245–46).

In his book *Black Intellectuals*, William M. Banks was bothered that "the artists whom Ellis identified as purveyors of the New Black Aesthetic . . . displayed no common theme or set of artistic values."[12] *Callaloo*'s second respondent, Tera Hunter, brings home that process-oriented critique: "I am hard-pressed to dis-

cern, for example, what aesthetic values and commitments Eddie Murphy and Wynton Marsalis share in common. Or why do Murphy's 'Beverly Hills Cops' movies rank higher on the litmus test than Lionel Ritchie's 'Dancing on the Ceiling' or Whitney Houston's 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody'?"[13] Her main issue with the essay, however, is that "Ellis provides a laundry list of mostly male stars," that the "concept is defined in strictly male terms" (Hunter 247). Despite this pointed observation, Hunter ends her response by concluding that Ellis's "essay, nonetheless, opens up a discourse with far-ranging implications" (ibid. 249).

In *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, Mark Anthony Neal complains about Ellis's "failure to mention the ways that hip-hop artists, for instance, also borrow across race and class, despite some of them not being second-generation new black middle class." He adds, "Ellis's championing of the NBA allows himself and presumably others like him the space to be simultaneously 'seddity' like the New Negroes and as 'ghetto-fab' as the 'niggas,' all the while traveling through white universities, publishing houses, corporate boardrooms, and art galleries as postmodern 'Race Men.'"[14] And yet even Neal concedes that "the mass commodification of the New Black Aesthetic did provide a context for rich and provocative constructions of blackness within mass culture" (Neal 113). In other words, like any other exploratory formulation, "The New Black Aesthetic" was bound to have its critics, some of whom raise insightful and legitimate points. But these same critics almost invariably acknowledge, sometimes grudgingly, that Ellis was holding a novel and engaging lens through which to view late-twentieth-century black cultural production. At bottom, suggests Nelson George, "In the years since the civil rights movement forced official integration, cultural assimilation and nationalism have confused all discussions of [men], women, sex, and race" (George 144).

In some ways, of course, this "confusion" is nothing new. Afri-

can American writers as early as Phillis Wheatley, James Weldon Johnson, and Jean Toomer and as recent as, say, James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry were all naturalized cultural mulattos; and their writing reflects, in form and content, an extremely wide range of contemporaneous cultural influences. What sets Post-Soul novelists such as Trey Ellis apart from the majority of earlier black writers is their reaction to the "confusion" to which George refers. Post-Soul fiction suggests that such confusion is not to be feared, masked, closed off, or protested against—reactions that, understandably, marked much black writing before and during the Black Power Movement.

Ellis's work grows out of his lived experiences in this brave new world that some characterize as post–civil rights. To date, he has published two additional novels, *Home Repairs* (1993) and *Right Here, Right Now* (1999). In each, Ellis places his characters in largely cosmopolitan, late-twentieth-century settings, and he surrounds them with co-workers, family, love interests, and friends who reflect the full-bodied variety of the black experience. The socioeconomic levels of African Americans in the novels vary widely, as do their educational backgrounds and political perspectives. And yet they feel solidly and effortlessly "black," many of them practicing what Nelson George has called "integration without anxiety" (George 6). Ellis's multidimensional exploration of a fluid black culture, combined with his experimental approach to narrative form, first coalesced in *Platitudes*.

The idea of exploring the varieties of black experience was one that came early in his conception of the novel. "In *Platitudes* what I tried to do was talk about the way I grew up in a really honest way. Not like I was special or something," says Ellis in the *enigma* interview (Senna and Wasow 22). "The idea of *Platitudes* just came to me. I first thought of a young boy lying facedown in a field thinking about life. I started writing with this character and really liked him, but the tone became boring to me after a while.

Then I heard this other voice, Isshee, the feminist author, and she came into my mind critiquing the first, sexist author. It just felt right to have them alternately narrating the story."[15] It is not at all surprising that, writing in the 1980s, Ellis would hear "this other voice . . . the feminist author." While the Black Arts Movement had faded by that time, the era of black feminism certainly had not.

As early as 1970, a year in which Toni Cade Bambara edited *The Black Woman*, Maya Angelou published *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Toni Morrison and Alice Walker released their first novels, African American women initiated a public discussion of black liberation from what Walker called a "womanist" perspective. By the late seventies, Zora Neale Hurston had been rediscovered, and Michelle Wallace and Ntozake Shange hurled Molotov cocktails into the black artistic and intellectual communities with, respectively, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) and *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1977). Both Wallace's book and Shange's play prompted heated, ultimately healthy debates about sexism in the black community. Just two years before *Platitudes* was published, the Hollywood film version of *The Color Purple* stoked those fires once again, in another controversy about black male portrayal. No, there's little surprise that Ellis would hear a feminist voice critiquing Dewayne Wellington's narration. What's interesting is the way he brings that voice to bear on the issue of blackness itself in the novel.

The ideological tension between Ayam and Wellington is right there on the surface of *Platitudes*. On the one hand, she's something of a traditionalist, a black feminist who worships at "the temple of black literature" (39). Wellington, on the other hand, believes in the more expansive sense of blackness expressed in Ellis's "New Black Aesthetic" essay. So when Wellington creates a narrative in which Earle and Dorothy are savvy, cosmopolitan

cultural mulattos, a horrified Ayam responds by crafting an alternative fictional reality that drags them back to familiar terrain: using a flowery, "Afro-Baroque" (75) voice, she constructs scenes set in the rural past featuring heroic black female characters who fear urbanity and struggle against both racist whites and unreliable black men (Wellington sarcastically calls such novels "Afro-American glory-stories" [19]).

But it would be a mistake to read *Platitudes* as an anti-feminist novel. After all, Ellis created both Wellington *and* Ayam as fictional authors who have legitimate points of view. And Dorothy, the female protagonist, has a strong, feminist personality as well. "Dorothy was based loosely on my cousin and her group of girlfriends," says Ellis in *Swing Low: Black Men Writing*. "My cousin went to a private high school in New York, and she would tell me all of these incredible stories about the experiences she had with her girlfriends. They created this great language that was sort of a cross between Valley Girl talk and street talk. So I wanted to include that language and the girls who created it in the book" (Carroll 73). Ellis's portrayal of Dorothy, in particular, demonstrates the way cultural mulattos reside at all socioeconomic levels of the black community. The plot ironically moves Earle *up* from the Upper West Side to spend time in Harlem, and Dorothy *down* from Harlem to frolic in lower Manhattan. Indeed, one of the novel's most revealing moments comes via Dorothy's thoughts as she takes a late-night subway to Harlem (quite possibly the "A" train) after nightclubbing with her wealthy friends from private school:

> *Yeah, this class shit is crazy, but after college and biz school I won't have to worry about that 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. Yeah, I'll have me a dee-luxe*

apartment in de skyaaaay. I'll out-booj even Sheena only hip not just snooty, rich and black. . . . Still it's kinda cool after these wealthy preps start talking about their dad the TeeVee producer or world-famous microsurgeon, for them to say, What does your father do—or mother, don't think I'm sexist, and they laugh and you say, My mother runs a diner in Harlem and my father's in Texas somewhere. And just once I want some Graham or Brett or Ethan to say, You're joking, but they never do 'cause they think I'll rip their dick out. (106, italics in text)

Imaginative readers can feel the subway train clattering up to Harlem in real time, transporting Dorothy's body uptown at the same moment she dreams of her downtown future. But more than just aspirations are expressed here. As she describes her encounters with the Grahams or Bretts or Ethans of the downtown world—and her simultaneous refusal to deny her uptown reality—cultural mulatto Dorothy is an example of what Patricia Hill Collins calls the "outsider-within."[16]

On the one hand, Ellis is exploring the black migration narrative[17] here, as he displays the complexities of Dorothy's character. On the other hand, as Collins writes, "Although metaphors of travel, migration, and social mobility increasingly characterize local, national, and global population movement, this same movement seemingly replicates long-standing hierarchical power relations of race, economic class, and gender" (Collins 13). Indeed, Dorothy's comparison of herself to "a slave" on the floor of her white friend's downtown apartment supports Collins's commentary. Still, continues Collins, "this connection between change and fixity, traveling and standing still, migration and containment generates a new outsider-within location for African-American women" (ibid.). In other words, while Dorothy may have to carry some *old* baggage, she is, at least, in a *new* location.

On some level, however, Dorothy's internal monologue is also merely an urban, late-twentieth-century manifestation of the same strong stance that Isshee's version of Dorothy might take—minus the white boys, the investment banking gig, and the reference to the theme song to *The Jeffersons*, of course. Even though we hear the thoughts of Post-Soul Dorothy and her 1980s corporate ambition, the rhetoric of uplift and displacement, the metaphorical allusion to the migratory impulse is still present. The difference is that this time, unlike traditional black migration patterns, the trajectory isn't *up*, but *down*. (The idea that Harlem—or uptown—was for so many years the Promised Land to so many black southerners only compounds the irony that Dorothy's aspirations lead her downtown.)[18]

In contrast, from his home downtown, Earle is fascinated with lies *up* in Harlem.[19] And in much the same way Ellis reveals Dorothy's thoughts as she rides the subway to Harlem in chapter 29, he gives us (in chapter 10) Earle's complex meditation on the challenging cultural demands that he finds himself struggling to negotiate uptown. As he enters Chez Darcelle, the Harlem restaurant owned by Dorothy's mother, Earle thinks,

> *God, what a weird place. Mom'll kill me if she finds out I ate up here but hey bud you only live once, you know what I mean [laughs]. Geez, you laugh like a fucking goon, that's why that guy's staring at you he's thinking, Why is that sweaty fat kid laughing, I bet he's crazy, he's thinking. . . . Where's my food? I don't want to be killed up here . . . Shit Earle, lighten up will you? You're not a fuckin maniac, you're just, well, emotionally disturbed, heh heh, yeah, just think about it, three, maybe four steps to being committed, just stand up—nobody's looking—hop on the table—now they're looking—whip out your little wienerschnitzel then drop a load right on the chicken livers if they ever get here, I could do it I know it ready one two three. Stop fooling around and just look mean so they won't*

know you're not from uptown. Yeah, iss cool whussup yeah. Shit Earle they spotted you a half hour ago. Yeah there he is the black Howdy Doody face, I bet he's got lots of bread on hisself—bread? Do they still say that? Now wait, here comes the waitress so act normal, ready here she comes T minus five four three two
Uh no, thank you. I don't drink coffee, thank you. (22–24, italics in text)

This passage humorously demonstrates the gap between Earle's downtown persona and his expectations of the behavior of uptown residents. He clearly has had precious little lived experience among Harlemites, as is shown by the overwhelming sense of difference he feels and internally expresses. Inordinately concerned about getting killed, he feels as if he is in danger in this Lenox Avenue eatery, even though it is likely that the other patrons barely notice him at all. Accordingly, he reflexively adopts a defensive physical stance ("*look mean so they won't know you're not from uptown*") and mouths a Black English dialect as he attempts to imitate the locals ("*Yeah, iss cool whussup yeah*"). However, even as he considers ways to "relate," to be "down" with the "'hood," so to speak, he is acutely aware that it is hopeless ("*they spotted you a half hour ago*")—that his visual and oral markers ("*the black Howdy Doody face,*" the Standard English speech patterns) cannot help differentiating him from his fellow patrons. It is no wonder he finds the diner "*weird.*"

Still, Earle is black after all. If readers of this foreword inserted themselves into the fictional world of *Platitudes* and stuck their heads into Chez Darcelle on the day Earle dined there, it is likely that only black, and possibly brown, faces would be bent over food or engaged in conversation. And it is highly unlikely that Earle would immediately stand out, if at all. In other words, this multilayered chapter allows readers to hear the thoughts of a black teenager—who doesn't quite see himself as traditionally

black—settling into a traditionally black setting. In the process, the scene becomes a specific example of an issue that the novel at large addresses: cultural differences within the black community. What separates *Platitudes* and other, earlier novels of intrablack difference—passing novels, for instance—is that in the post-sixties era, American racism doesn't immediately provide a profound context for the protagonist's discomfort. Earle is, after all, a cultural mulatto: he's black but has lived all his short life in an environment that is not governed by (even if it is informed by) the black cultural tradition, narrowly defined. And yet Earle *is* attracted to blackness, or else he would never have ventured uptown. Weeks later, Earle suggests to his two best friends, one of whom is biracial and the other white, that they visit Chez Darcelle together:

> Earle says he knows this great place up on One Twenty-fifth Street and Lenox Avenue where the lady there won't probably charge, she likes him so much. He fixed her toaster—there was just a screw loose—but Andy says no way, he'd get knifed even before he got off the train, and Donald says the same thing, only *he* could probably pass [for black!] and get away with it, his mother being black and all, but only if he didn't act like such a frigging goombah. So finally Earle says it's an adventure, so he is going anyway, with or without those wussies. (76)

This urge on Earle's part, this attraction to what he imagines to be authentic blackness, constitutes a key factor in Ellis's fictional dramatization of his concept, the New Black Aesthetic. That is, Ellis creates two black worlds, uptown and downtown, even if only the former would be recognized, in the eyes of mainstream America, as traditionally black. And he depicts two thoughtful and curious black youngsters who find themselves maneuvering,

figuratively and literally, in the liminal area between those two worlds.

Appropriately, Dorothy comes to use the term "commuters" (141) to describe herself and Earle. She is referring to the way both of them float up and down Manhattan, moving into and out of differing racial and socioeconomic spheres. At one point in the novel, Dorothy initiates a conversation with Earle about their status as cultural mulattos. "Do you ever feel weird in your clique?" she asks. "I know we're not supposed to say this after civil rights and all, but do you ever feel different just because you're black? . . . You know, like there's the people you hang with over there and then there's you over here." Earle replies, "Yeah, I know exactly what you're saying. It's lonely sometimes" (147). This conversation suggests some vague, general discomfort among Ellis's post-sixties teenage characters. Up until this point in *Platitudes*, Ellis only hints at difficulties in the "commuter" lives of Earle and Dorothy. But in this scene, Earle's "It's lonely sometimes" response is explicit and unambiguous.

Ellis does not expand upon this short conversation between Earle and Dorothy. Indeed, any loneliness Earle actually expresses in the novel is extrapolated into belated grief over his father's suicide or sadness at Dorothy's infidelity. The complexity of these portrayals of cultural mulattos could have attained even more depth with an exploration of these characters' sense of difference, their briefly-referred-to loneliness. "I was twenty-one when I started" *Platitudes*, observes Ellis, "so when I reread it I think that it could be a lot deeper in all aspects. It's just what I knew about life and the conditions of it at the time. I was a senior in college when I wrote the first chapters and those are pretty much unchanged."[20]

Platitudes did quite well; it stayed in print for more than ten years. "For a first novel it's a very, very good run," says Ellis. "I have no complaints about the reach of it. They get it or don't get

it, but it's certainly pressed some buttons, and that's what I wanted it to do."[21] What it also did was signal the surfacing of a genre: the post-sixties postmodern black novel. "Postmodern fiction like this," writes Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, "exploits and yet simultaneously calls into question [the] notions of closure, totalization, and universality that are part of those challenged grand narratives. Rather than seeing this paradoxical use and abuse as a sign of decadence or as a cause for despair," she concludes, "it might be possible to postulate a less negative interpretation that would allow for at least the *potential* for radical critical possibilities."[22] If one reads black cultural nationalism and a certain strain of black feminism as such "grand narratives," then we can appreciate the powerful postmodern impulse that drives Ellis's fiction and that informs his construction of the New Black Aesthetic.

Granted, Ishmael Reed leveled blistering attacks against the aforementioned black "grand narratives" in such novels as *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and *The Terrible Twos* (1982); and Fran Ross turned racial categories upside-down in her unconventional comic novel *Oreo* in 1974. Furthermore, Post-Soul novels such as Percival Everett's *Suder* (1983) and Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips* (1984) predated *Platitudes* as well. However, one can argue that it is only after the 1988 publication of Ellis's satirical, self-consciously postmodern first effort that a critical mass of African American novels appeared that fully realized the "radical critical possibilities" that Hutcheon describes: Reginald McKnight's *I Get on the Bus* (1990), Darius James's *Negrophobia* (1992), Darryl Pinckney's *High Cotton* (1992), Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), Jake Lamar's *The Last Integrationist* (1997), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), Everett's *Erasure* (2001), Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001), and Toure's *The Portable Promised Land* (2002) have all emerged since the appearance of *Platitudes*. Although not all

of these novels could be called postmodern, it is true that these Post-Soul novels do indeed hammer home the overarching agenda that "The New Black Aesthetic" asserts: to identify and explore African America's vast, complex, multihued field of blackness. As Lisa Jones puts it in another context, Ellis's characters "are not members of a race-ambivalent middle class growing up alienated outside of the hood. They belong to an expanding body of young Americans, race identified but grappling with new definitions of community."[23]

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NOTES

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1. Trey Ellis, *Platitudes* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1988), 110. All subsequent quotations cited in text.

2. Trey Ellis, *Right Here, Right Now* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 53.

3. Maulana Karenga, "Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie McKay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 1973.

4. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 1960.

5. Leon Wynter, *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business and the End of White America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002), 167.

6. Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), xi. All subsequent quotations cited in text.

7. Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 12.1 (Winter 1989), 235. All subsequent quotations cited as NBA in text.

8. Danzy Senna and Omar Wasow, "A Conversation with Trey

Ellis," *enigma* (Stanford, Calif.: a new school production, 1992), 21. All subsequent quotations cited in text.

9. Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 207.

10. Eric Lott, "Response to Trey Ellis's 'The New Black Aesthetic,'" *Callaloo* 12.1 (Winter 1989), 244–45. All subsequent quotations cited in text.

11. Edmund Perry was a seventeen-year-old Harlem teenager who was shot in the summer of 1985 by a white undercover policeman only a short time after he had graduated with honors from Phillips Exeter Academy. The killing of the Stanford-bound young black man aroused considerable controversy at the time.

12. William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 219.

13. 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* 12.1 (Winter 1989), 247. All subsequent quotations cited in text.

14. Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 112. All subsequent quotations cited in text.

15. Rebecca Carroll, *Swing Low: Black Men Writing* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 73. All subsequent quotations cited in text.

16. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 13. All subsequent quotations cited in text.

17. Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century and lasting until mid-century, millions of African Americans migrated from the south to the north, west, and midwest. There are four pivotal moments in the migration narrative, outlined in Farah Jasmine Griffin's *Who Set You Flowin': The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): "(1) an event that propels the action northward, (2) a detailed representation of the initial confrontation with the urban landscape, (3) an illustration of the migrant's attempt to negotiate that landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization, and (4) a vision of the

possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South" (3). Each of these moments corresponds with actions Earle and Dorothy take—solely on the island of Manhattan.

18. This ironic commentary on the migration narrative is not entirely new. Like Dorothy, John Grimes in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) feels the tug of downtown Manhattan, even (perhaps especially) as his southern family attempts to adjust to northern life in Harlem. See as well Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981), with its ironic depiction of the protagonist Jadine (herself something of a cultural mulatto).

19. In *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative,* 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), Robert Stepto argues that "ascension narratives" and "immersion narratives" (167) are two ways that African Americans "move" through America's physical terrain as well as through African American culture. Using Stepto's analysis, another layer of irony can be discerned in Earle's and Dorothy's crisscrossed, inverted trajectories. As he spends more time in Harlem, Earle is moving *up* for his "cultural immersion ritual" (Stepto 66). In contrast, Dorothy's movement *down* is couched in the emancipatory language of the slave narrative, which always contained a northward "ascent" to freedom.

20. Bertram D. Ashe, "'And there is room for me to breathe': Ten Years of Trey Ellis's New Black Aesthetic" (unpublished interview, conducted November 22, 1999).

21. Ibid.

22. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 70.

23. Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 46.