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**“I WANT TO BE NOTHING”.  
CHALLENGING NOTIONS OF CULTURE, RACE AND IDENTITY**

This article tackles the issue of “hyphenated identities” in Heidi W. Durrow’s novel *The girl who fell from the sky* (2010), whose main topic is growing up as a girl of mixed race in a dominant black culture. This article examines how Rachel Morse, the main character in the novel, challenges racism and the essentialist notion of identity. Firstly, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy’s approaches to that issue are introduced and discussed. Then in relation to their theories an interpretation of Durrow’s fictional character is delivered. As the third part of the article, elements of Danish culture appearing in Durrow’s are presented and analyzed as well as the novel’s explicit intertextual references to Nella Larsen’s authorship, another mulatto woman writer of half-Danish origin. In accordance with Gilroy’s theory, the article’s aim is to show that Rachel’s identity is born in the process of self-reflection where Danishness becomes her ‘crossroads’ and thus to confirm that such phenomena as culture, ethnicity and identity are constantly constructed and altered.

Key words: American literature, in-between, identity, constructivism, anti-essentialism

In my article I want to examine the way Heidi W. Durrow, a half-Danish woman author “of mixed race” tackled the issue of “in-between” races in her novel *The girl who fell from the sky* (2010). My aim is to show how Rachel, the main character in the novel, challenges racism and the essentialist notion of identity. In order to support that thesis, I will firstly introduce my view on Rachel’s attitude towards the question of mixed identities in the light of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy’s approaches to that issue. Secondly, I will examine how the elements of Danish culture are presented in the book as well as the novel’s explicit intertextual references related to novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) written by Nella Larsen (1891–1964), another mulatto woman writer of half-Danish origin. Finally, I would like to sum up my conclusions in order to deliver my interpretation of Durrow’s fictional character.

Although the novel, whose main topic is growing up as a girl of mixed race in a dominant *black* culture, is obviously to be read in the light of Bell Hooks’ black feminist theory<sup>1</sup>, I would like to focus on different approaches to the identity question, in particular Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy’s anthropological theories that focus on mixed identities. My choice is dictated by the fact that much of my research interest lies in the post-colonial field, in particular theories questioning the essentialist notions of identity, race and ethnicity.

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<sup>1</sup> Because of, for instance, Durrow’s novel’s numerous striking similarities to bell hooks’ *Bone black* (1996).

However, the inter-disciplinary character of my approach, applying anthropological as well as literary theories in my reading, transgresses the narrow area of the purely literary field of research, which I hope will contribute to a more complex understanding of the novel in a broader context of meanings.

## 1. THE GIRL WHO FELL DOWN FROM THE SKY

Rachel, the daughter of Danish Nella Morse and a black American army soldier, is the only one who survives from a tragic 'fall' from the roof in a building where the family has lived for a couple of months. Rachel's grandmother from her father's side, black and from Texas, takes care of the girl, who then grows up in a distinctly black community. Before the tragedy, Rachel's white mother never told the children about race differences (since she did not see them) therefore Rachel never regarded herself as black. Now she is told by her grandmother that she is and has to act as a black woman. She constantly analyzes the new reality and people around her, constantly asking and answering questions concerning her own identity and negotiating between the different positions she finds herself in. This process is endless, and, through exploration of the new and old "selves", through experience gained in relation with both blacks and whites, through disappointments as well as the affirmation of life, it gradually leads Rachel to the conclusion that it is not race that makes people special and different from each other, but their unique stories.

## 2. IDENTITY AS A CONSTRUCT

Rachel challenges the essentialist notion of identity, which happens according to what cultural theorists of today say about culture, ethnicity and identity as phenomena being constantly constructed, maintained, challenged and denied<sup>2</sup>. Stuart Hall (born 1932) is undoubtedly one of those whose research in ethnicity, representation and hybrid culture has had a great influence on the modern understanding of the notions of identity and culture. Hall claims that:

Everywhere, cultural identities are emerging which are not fixed, but poised, in transition, between different positions; which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time; and which are the product of those complicated cross-overs and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalized world (...) (Hall 1992: 310).

On the same page Hall explains further his concept of those cultural in-betweens:

They bear upon them the traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages and histories by which they were shaped. The difference is that they are not and will never be unified in the old

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<sup>2</sup> Just to mention the most well-known ones such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Long Litt Woons, Jeffrey Weeks, and Homi Bhabha.

sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several ‘homes’ (and to no one particular ‘home’). (...) They must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them (Hall 1992: 310).

The “identity formations” Hall describes, composed of people like Rachel Morse, cut across natural frontiers, rejecting all absolutisms and essentialisms (Hall 1992: 310). Hall points to the fact that culture and identity are relational constructions, thus movable and processual. Cultural roots can be moveable too, which is the core of the theory of Paul Gilroy (born 1956), a cultural theorist and former doctoral student of Stuart Hall.

In many of his writings Gilroy focuses on the theorizing of the African diaspora. He claims that there are obvious differences between and within black cultures and “(...) we might consider experimenting, at least, with giving up the idea that our culture needs to be centered anywhere except where we are when we launch our inquiries into it” (Gilroy 1993: 194). Therefore, Gilroy’s view of culture “(...) accentuates its plastic, syncretic qualities and (...) does not see culture flowing into neat ethnic parcels, but as a radically unfinished social press of self-definition and transformation” (Gilroy 1993: 61).

In order to understand culture’s movements through space Gilroy has been inspired by another cultural scholar, Iain Chambers (born 1949), who says that different cultural roots are being transformed into a range of cultural routes (please notice word play between roots and routes)<sup>3</sup>. As I understand Gilroy’s thought, cultural roots are not all fixed and congealed, but, on the contrary, flowing and crossing values. If thinking about culture and identity the same way Gilroy does, all possible cultural routes are open for all people. Going back to Heidi W. Durrow’s novel, Rachel Morse preserves her individual roots as a multiethnic Danish American (she is very dissatisfied with the essentialist expressions “Negro and African-American and questions them constantly”, Durrow 2010: 148) holding on to her own special personal story. In doing so, she makes use of some of the cultural routes, to whose development her predecessors contributed significantly, but just like Gilroy expresses it, she also marks out some brand new ones that nobody has taken before.

Many of Gilroy’s writings, too, tackle the question of urban youth and their new, syncretic, hybrid forms and how “(...) much of their power resides in their capacity to circulate a new sense of what it means to be *American*” (Gilroy 1993: 202). These cultural forms “(...) point to the opening up a self-consciously post-colonial space in which the affirmation of difference points forward to a more pluralistic conception of nationality and perhaps beyond that to its transcendence” (Gilroy 1993: 62) Since it is not built upon any binary oppositions, the conception is inclusive, not exclusive in its character, and it makes up a sharp contrast to what Gilroy calls “the nationalism of black Americans”, where “the family is the approved, natural site where ethnicity and racial culture are reproduced” (Gilroy 1993: 197)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> In order to rethink “the dialectical tension between cultural roots and cultural routes, between the space constituted through and between places and the space marked out by flows” (Gilroy 1993: 193) Gilroy introduces the notion of *crossroads* “(...) as a special location where unforeseen magical things can happen” (Gilroy 1993: 193).

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Gilroy points to the fact that such a way of looking at the world bears a striking resemblance to the understanding of ethnicity and cultural differences by (white) Americans (Gilroy 1993: 197).

A classic example of the latter in Durrow's novel is undoubtedly Rachel's Grandma whose definition of authenticity is "defined by ideas about sexuality and distinctive patterns of interaction between men and women, which are taken to be expressive of essential difference" (Gilroy 1993: 197). A good (black) girl should want "a good secretarial job, a husband, two children and a house nearby" (Durrow 2010: 28), and she should not be too smart, because "the men don't go for that". She should not get too fat, either, because "How she gonna catch a lizard with her backside loading her down?" (Durrow 2010: 8). When Rachel as a woman begins feeling the need to be touched by someone, her Grandma has only one answer: "A pretty girl is gonna go somewhere (...) long as she keeps that pretty to herself and then her husband" (Durrow 2010: 148). In other words, Grandma tries to put Rachel under gender oppression with its clearly defined gender roles and patterns of behavior. She tries as well to impose her own dreams on her, dreams of a black girl from Texas, "bigger than her life is" (Durrow 2010: 149). But for Rachel "there's a low sky" in those dreams and she is aware of the fact that she will never become what Grandma wants her to act as.

### 3. RACHEL MORSE

From the very beginning of the novel Rachel calls herself 'the new girl': "The bus ride is seven stops and three lights. Then we are home. Grandma's home, the new girl's home in a new dress" (Durrow 2010: 4). But it seems clear that this term is used self-ironically and describes the way Grandma's wishes are projected onto Rachel. Rachel constantly transgresses the frontiers of the essentially fixed 'new black girl', by a. o. asking Grandma thought-provoking questions when she least expects it, at the same time knowing that "good black girls do not ask questions like that". But, in fact, the construction is damaged already in the beginning when Rachel mentions 'the middle' in herself that 'no one will touch' (Durrow 2010: 5). Then she reveals: "She doesn't say anything about my mother, because we both know that the new girl has no mother. The new girl can't be new and still remember. I am not the new girl. But I will pretend" (Durrow 2010: 6).

It is obvious that Rachel is not a 'new girl'. But the fact that she keeps saying that underlines the gap between Grandma's image of her and her own self-reflection. But what exactly is the latter? The answer seems elusive, nevertheless crucial for the main aim of this article.

It is undoubtedly clear that Rachel feels she wants more and she is more than the black community around her wants her to be. Reading *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon Rachel becomes aware of the fact that all essentialist definitions are too narrow and cannot embrace all that she feels she is. "There is a chapter called *The Man of Color and the White Woman*. Just that title makes me mad. I can't explain why" (Durrow 2010: 148). Living in a world, where "myths of origins are so appealing" (Gilroy 1993: 202), Rachel identifies neither with Africa, its peoples and attributes, nor with the word 'Negro' or with 'whites':

"The book uses the word *Negro* like they did in the old days. Jesse Jackson wants us to be African-American now. I don't know if this is a good idea. I don't know any black people who have even

been to Africa. It’s like calling me Danish-American even though I’ve never been to Denmark. But at least I speak Danish. I don’t know a single black person who speaks Swahili or any of those other African things they speak. Then there’s page 173: “Wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro”. That makes me think of how the other black girls in school think I want to be white. They call me an Oreo. I don’t want to be white” (Durrow 2010: 173).

There is actually one important word Rachel uses in order to describe the way she wants to feel about herself: “Sometimes I want to *go back to being what I was*. I want to be *nothing*” (Durrow 2010: 148). “Nothing”? And when was it exactly she was “nothing”? Since the word is in my opinion the key to understanding Rachel’s attitude towards her own identity, we must go back as far as to the times she still lived with her Danish mother Nella, her brother Robbie, and her sister Ariel.

#### 4. NOT THE COLOR, BUT THE STORY

Rachel’s mother, Nella Fløe is one of the novel’s five explicit narrators. Already on page 104 Laronne, Nella’s former employer, finds in the family’s apartment two journals filled with Nella’s handwriting. The loose notes make up separate chapters in Durrow’s novel and it is through them the reader learns about Nella’s reflections and about events that preceded the tragedy. The chapters are short, and they all start with the word “Day” plus a number (e.g. “Day 744”, “Day 755”) indicating the number of days since Heidi left her husband<sup>5</sup>.

It is not until the end of the novel we find out why Nella decides to take her children up to the roof and make the suicidal jump from the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. After Doug, her white boyfriend, for whom she dropped her children’s father Roger, has called them “Niggers” in an outbreak of rage, she realizes that she does not want her children to be “just a word” (Durrow 2010: 244). In her diary found posthumously by Laronne, Rachel reads: “Never have I been thinking of my children as black. (...) I want them to be anything. They are not just a color people can see” (Durrow 2010: 154). Because she can’t protect them, she wants to take them with her. Rachel interprets Nella’s deed as an act of her unconditional love towards the children.

Also, at end of the novel Rachel realizes that “I am Nella Fløe’s daughter. That’s what makes me special – me” (Durrow 2010: 237). Out of the many possible life patterns Rachel chooses one, she can fully identify and live with: the legacy of her tragically dead mother, an in-born quality of not seeing colors and races, but people and their stories. In the passage cited on the previous page, Nella says that she wants her children to be ‘anything’. Rachel almost mirrors her mother’s words by saying “I want to be nothing”. When we look closer at those two words, an evident difference is striking. While the word ‘anything’ is positive, inclusive and full of possibilities, ‘nothing’ seems totally exclusive, an absolute negation of everything. But ‘nothing’ is also the very beginning and end of everything, a lack of

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly, after going out of the hospital, Rachel tries in her diary to number her days spent at Grandma’s house as if her story mirrored that of her mother’s.

binary oppositions and differences. Instead of being ‘either-or’, choosing between separate possibilities, Rachel wants to annihilate what Paul Gilroy calls “neat ethnic parcels” (Gilroy 1993: 61). If we all are mixed, then there are no oppositions any longer and all notions of race, culture and identity are useless. ‘Being nothing’ becomes in this way a new possibility to stop seeing things and people as eternally contrasting with each other. But is this vision not a bit too naive and utopian? And if there are no differences, then what about people’s individuality and originality? The answer is found on the last page of the novel, where we read:

Brick puts his arm around me. When he looks at me, it feels like no one has really seen me since the accident. In his eyes, I’m not the new girl. I’m not the color of my skin. I’m a story. One with a past and with a future unwritten (Durrow 2010: 264).

Such a view of identity where people are seen as stories is a dynamic one, emphasizing the factor Gilroy calls ‘an ongoing process of self-making’ (Gilroy 1993: 202). We are our individual stories, made up of the sum of our personal experience, thoughts, hopes, dreams and unfulfilled wishes, determined by the interaction with others as well as by our separation from them. In this way Rachel is a story about a girl “who fell from the sky”. She is a story about a girl who is neither black nor white, and who does not want to become any of them. She is a story about the people she comes in contact with. She is also a story about her mother, and she makes Nella an important part of it.

## 5. NELLA FLØE VERSUS NELLA LARSEN

*The girl who fell from the sky* is much more than a plain story about a girl with a hybrid identity. It is also a great tribute to another woman writer of half-Danish origin whose name is Nella Larsen. Still little known in Danish literary scholars’ circles, Nella Larsen is widely acknowledged in the USA as one of the leading writers of the black literary and art movement called the Harlem Renaissance. She was born in 1891 of Danish Mary Hanson and Peter Walker, a “man of color”, who probably came from the Danish West Indies and disappeared after her birth. Opposite to the majority of “colored” woman writers, Nella Larsen questioned the ethic of race based on a racial dichotomy, challenging the binary system of race. In her most popular novels, *Passing* and *Quicksand*, the main characters are mulatto heroines who cross different boundaries and “are trying to find their identities, resisting the hegemonic signifying forces, which try to determine and overdetermine their identities” (Nakachi 2001: 57).

Durrow’s novel is larded with intertextual references to both Larsen’s authorship and to Larsen herself. Already on the front page of the book there is a quotation from Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*: “If a man calls me a nigger it’s his fault the first time, but mine if he has the opportunity to do it again”. That anti-racist motto as well as Rachel’s mother’s name, Nella, are the most striking intertextual references to the writer herself as well as to her authorship with its racially ambiguous characters who questioned the view that race was determined by skin-color or specific racial features.

While *Passing* is a story of racial transgression and universal gender oppression, the main character of *Quicksand*, whose name is Helga Crane, is a mulatto woman born of a white Danish mother and a black father. Just like in Rachel's case, Helga's hybridity refuses easy assimilation to the ethnic groups society attributes to her and she is split between two racial identities. Durrow's descriptions of Denmark and the attitude of the Danes towards blacks and mulattos also bear resemblance to those of Nella Larsen in *Quicksand*: in comparison to the United States Denmark seems like a racist-free oasis; however, after a closer look one can notice that “they were perceived as different, sensual, exotic” (Larsen 2001: 103). In other words they were exoticized, and – to some extent – eroticized. Durrow writes: “The white people thought you had moves. They thought you knew music better and deeper than anybody else” (Durrow 2010: 92). Although it was legal for coloreds and whites to marry in Denmark, mulattos and blacks were not free of being perceived as having some fixed essentialist features and being put in “neat ethnic parcels”, to recall Gilroy once again.

‘Falling from the sky’ is another strong intertextual reference to Nella Larsen's authorship, this time to her novel *Passing*, whose main character for many years – Clare Kendry – passes as white and in the end falls out of a window from the seventeenth floor in a skyscraper in New York. In both cases we have to do with figures who challenge the essentialist notion of race: Clare Kendry does it in order to gain advantages attributed to being white, and for Nella Fløe it is a natural thing since she does not see different skin colors. For both of them the fall means the end of a life where one has to belong to a defined ethnic identity group, a salvation from having to live under racial and male oppression. When it comes to Durrow's novel, Rachel's ‘downfall from the sky’ can be a symbolic boundary between the old and the new life, where she actually enters a reality reminding of the one known from Nella Larsen's novels. In some sense it can be said that she is transferred back to that period where, according to American identity politics, racial mixtures were considered abominable both by whites and blacks<sup>6</sup>. What is more, when we look at the plot of *The girl who fell from the sky*, it looks like the plot of *Passing* in reverse. While Clare Kendry's fall from a window is the ultimate end of her passing as white, for Rachel it is the very beginning of her passing as black. Both characters use mimicry as a strategy to question the boundaries of ethnicity and race from within and, as a consequence, challenge the binary system of race where no room is left for hybrid identities.

## 6. THE ROLE OF DANISHNESS

Apart from direct intertextual references to Nella Larsen and her authorship in Durrow's novel there appear frequent references to Danish culture such as Danish bread, Danish Christmas customs, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy-tales, and, most important of all, the Danish language. As it turns out, these elements are not just some sort of exotic

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<sup>6</sup> In her PhD dissertation on Nella Larsen Sachi Nakachi gives plenty of examples documenting such a state of affairs, citing among others Walter Taylor's *Faulkner's Search for the South* (1983) (Nakachi 2001: 27).

decoration, but an important factor that – together with the memory of Nella Fløe – reveals much about Rachel’s attitude towards the identity question I have been so persistently trying to track down in this article.

Rachel has never been to Denmark and, as she says:

Denmark, the one I know, has never been so much a real place as a story setting for things that Mor<sup>7</sup> did or told. (...) In the pictures of my Denmark there wouldn’t be people – except for Mor, except for the times I put myself there too (Durrow 2010: 188).

Denmark is for Rachel “a feeling inside her, like a cloudless sky”. This feeling is something extremely important for her, as she says “I don’t want being Danish to be something that I can put in and off. I don’t want the Danish in me to be something time makes me leave behind” (Durrow 2010: 205) Then again, Denmark is a story told to Rachel by her dead mother, thus linking her to Nella Fløe’s anti-essentialist and anti-racist legacy. Rachel *chooses* her own identity, transgressing the essentialist notion of race since, just like Nella Larsen’s heroines, she is in-between two different views of culture and identity and does not identify with either of them. Being ‘Danish’ for Rachel does not necessitate belonging to any particular, defined race, but, on the contrary, it is equal to being “nothing”, that is, belonging to an imagined community, where race is not an issue.

## 7. CONCLUSION

By reflecting on her own identity and putting it into discourse, a disruption in what is taken for granted appears, and as a consequence Rachel escapes the dominating binary categories and any essentialist notions of identity. Instead of being ‘either-or’ she chooses to be “none” of them, without having to fulfill any norms or define herself with the help of oppositions. To use Gilroy’s terminology, Danishness becomes Rachel’s crossroads; it emerges from tensions between her cultural roots and routes and means for her: not categorizing people, but paying attention to the uniqueness of their stories where their identities are born through the process of reflection.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Mor’ means ‘mother’ in Danish.

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„NIE CHCĘ BYĆ NICZYM”. RZUCAJĄC WYZWANIE KONCEPCJOM KULTURY, RASY I TOŻSAMOŚCI.

Artykuł porusza kwestię „tożsamości z myślnikiem” w powieści Heidi W. Durrow *The girl who fell from the sky* (2010), której głównym tematem jest dorastanie dziewczynki mieszanej rasy w dominującej czarnej kulturze. Artykuł bada, w jaki sposób Rachel Morse, główna bohaterka powieści, rzuca wyzwanie rasizmowi i kwestionuje esencjalistyczną koncepcję tożsamości. Na początku zaprezentowane zostają i poddane dyskusji podejścia Stuarta Halla i Paula Gilroy’a do wyżej wymienionej kwestii. Następnie w odniesieniu do tych teorii dokonana zostaje interpretacja fikcyjnej bohaterki Heidi W. Durrow. Trzecią część artykułu stanowi omówienie i analiza elementów duńskiej kultury oraz wyraźnych odniesień intertekstualnych w powieści do twórczości Nelli Larsen, innej pisarki Mulatki o częściowo duńskim pochodzeniu. Odnosząc się do teorii Gilroy’a, celem artykułu jest ukazanie, że tożsamość Rachel rodzi się w procesie autorefleksji, gdzie duńskość staje się jej ‘skrzyżowaniem’ (ang. *crossroads*) i poprzez to potwierdzenie, że zjawiska takie jak kultura, etniczność i tożsamość podlegają ciągłej konstrukcji i przeobrażeniom.

Słowa kluczowe: literatura amerykańska, mieszane rasy, tożsamość, konstrukcjonizm, antyesencjalizm