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Posing Dead to Make a Claim on Life in Paul Mendez and Kehinde Wiley

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This paper intends to explore the convergence of queerness and blackness in Paul Mendez's *Rainbow Milk* and black portraiture art, especially Kehinde Wiley's portraits, with particular attention to his Christ-related works. With this purpose, I will review the narratives of post-blackness and black camp (Pochmara and Wierzchowska 2017) characteristic of Bertram D. Ashe's post-Soul aesthetics. Unlike the monolithic discourses of the Civil Rights generation, these artists cross over conceptions of race, sexuality and privilege in intersectional terms. They break with racial authenticity and play with appropriation, irony and camp to renegotiate and articulate othernesses and render them grievable.

Keywords: Mendez; Wiley; camp; martyrdom; blackness; queerness

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Posar muerto para reivindicar la vida en Paul Mendez y Kehinde Wiley

Este artículo se plantea explorar la convergencia entre lo *queer* y la negritud en *Rainbow Milk*, de Paul Mendez, y el arte del retrato negro, especialmente los retratos de Kehinde Wiley, con particular atención a las obras sobre Cristo. Con este propósito, revisaré las narrativas de post-negritud y camp negro (Pochmara y Wierzchowska 2017) características de la estética *post-soul* de Bertram D. Ashe. Frente a los discursos de la generación de los Derechos Civiles, estos artistas engarzan conceptos como raza, sexualidad y privilegio en términos de inteseccionalidad. Rompen con la autenticidad racial y juegan con la apropiación, la ironía y lo camp para renegociar y articular las otredades y representarlas como merecedoras de duelo.

Palabras clave: Mendez; Wiley; lo camp; martirio; negritud; lo *queer*

1. Introduction

Paul Mendez is a young British writer whose debut novel, *Rainbow Milk* (2020), has been widely acclaimed by critics. He forms part of a growing group of writers in the U.K. who were either born in British ex-colonies or are of African or Caribbean descent and who have enriched the British literary panorama in recent decades. Mendez's novel addresses the stigma of black (queer) masculinity in twenty-first-century England, especially in the scene when Jesse, the protagonist, comes across his father's self-portrait depicting him as a Christ-like poseur. Thus, *Rainbow Milk* recasts the discourses of suffering, death and redemption in campy terms. As for Kehinde Wiley, he is an Afro-American artist who became widely known for his portrait of President Obama in 2017 (Cunningham 2018). Yet, he is most widely recognized as a portraitist of blacks posing after examples of eminent personalities in classic European masterpieces. Wiley's renegotiation of high culture in ironic terms draws on and updates Susan Sontag's camp aesthetics. In fact, his portraits of black men are not only flamboyant artifacts but political statements on black masculinity. This is especially problematic when it comes to his Christ-related pictures, which appropriate the poetics of Christian iconography to address race issues.

The intersectional discourses of Mendez's novel and Wiley's paintings respond to a global sense of post-identity in the twenty-first century, mostly derived from queer theory and, more specifically, from queer/black criticism. The specific contexts and traditions behind the two artists' work differ, as does their approach to race, sexuality and masculinity. However, both reformulate stereotypical representations of black males, and especially black queers, using irony and a challenging and imaginative camp aesthetic. Their protagonists, especially Robert Alonso in *Rainbow Milk* and Wiley's religion-inspired poseurs, perform death scenes that deconstruct posing itself as well as the cultural frames that pinpoint male blackness as violent. In this sense, these artists recast conventional black masculinity imagery such as the charisma of Civil Rights leaders and post-Civil-rights "Cool Pose;" i.e., young black males' "deliberate and conspicuous styles of demeanor, speech, gesture, walk, stance, and other physical gestures" (Hall 2009, 532). All these traits "convey fearlessness to others" (Unnever and Chouhy 2020, 2). Thus, stereotypes of black masculinity are recast to articulate new post-identity options that entwine race and sexual orientation. With all this in mind, this article explores how the poetics and politics of camp convey black masculinity beyond the classic binary disempowerment/violence and renders (male) blacks' grievability. In this sense, bell hooks's vindication of a queer black masculinity that is aligned with black feminism and critical of (white) supremacist phallocentrism (1992) is also taken into account. Likewise, this article responds to the caveat of other critics against the "dangerous turn away from intersectionality [where] the important

crossings of blackness and queerness are overlooked" (Kiesling 2017, 4), which demeans the former and privileges the latter for the sake of (white) safety (Eng 2010; Hanhardt 2013).

2. Black camp

As an aesthetic sensibility, camp has undergone an array of reactions and interpretations since it was first coined by Susan Sontag in *Notes on Camp* (1964). For Sontag, camp was "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (517), much in line with the opinion of gay activists of the nineteen sixties and seventies, who, in Horn's words, "rejected camp and its effeminate gestures, allusions to Hollywood divas and over-the-top performances of gendered identities, as a sign of internalized self-hatred, reactionary, and ultimately hurtful to the new political demands of the US gay rights movement" (2017, 18). However, the advent of queer theory changed this as camp aesthetics fitted in with a de-essentializing conception of identity. Within this context, camp was re-politicized, especially as a result of AIDS, and became connected not only with gays but with "many other individuals and groups who saw themselves outside of and in contrast to heteronormativity" (2017, 20). In short, the artificiality, theatricality, irony and incongruity characteristic of camp were revalued as politically efficient tools to convey deconstruction in general and queerness in particular (Meyer, 1994; Jagose 1997; Cleto, 1999). However, as Anna Pochmara and Justyna Wierzchowska point out, there is still "an almost complete lack of scrutiny devoted to race in the aesthetics of camp" (2017, 696) for a number of reasons; the most important one being the identification of camp with white gays' effeminacy and privilege, therefore rendering it unfit to represent (male) blacks' commitment to authenticity, charisma and the fight against institutional racism, especially in the U.S.

The "Cool Pose"—discussed in depth by Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson (1993)—is a way to be authentic that is much in line with classic "masculinist African American charismatic ideals" (Maraj, Prasad and Roundtree 2019, n.p.). Black males have often responded to white supremacism by taking up stereotypes, especially "the reinscription of gender and sexual normativities" along with a "gendered economy of political authority in which the attributes of the ideal leader are the traits American society usually conceives as rightly belonging to men or to normative masculinity" (Edwards 2012, 21). For bell hooks, the adscription of many black males to patriarchal phallocentrism has been harmful to them and "the people they care about" (1992, 111). In other words, African American males have been stereotyped as violent and they have "posed" (hence the Cool Pose) as raging against institutional racism, trying to be faithful to an essential blackness and black culture. I am not using posing here in the sense of fake performing, but rather in the Butlerian sense of performativity. When black males "pose cool," they paradoxically assume there is an essential blackness which they are standing for. It is for this reason that black studies have often rejected camp as a useful

aesthetic and methodological tool. However, this article contends, camp (like other black male "authentic" discourses) is not only a protective pose or performance against cultural, sexual, gender and racial supremacism. It is also a sensibility that has always been a fundamental and identifiable feature of black popular culture (Meyer 2010, 114); one that upholds the shift from blackness to post-blackness(es) in Mendez's novel and Wiley's paintings. In this sense, post-black is not a rebuttal of blackness and activism against discriminatory practices as much as a refusal of blackness as heteropatriarchal and monolithic. For these reasons, it is surprising but understandable, as Pochmara and Wierzchowska argue, that "the unwillingness to use black camp or post-blackness as critical tools in contemporary academic discourse stands in contrast to the plethora of camp performances in black culture" (2017, 698). The TV series *Pose* (2018-21) is a case in point in that it recalls the drag ball culture of the African American LGBT community in New York during the AIDS crisis.[1]

Both Mendez and Wiley play with canonical Western narratives, the classic *Bildungsroman* in Mendez's case and Renaissance and Baroque portraits in Wiley's. They revise mainstream cultural and religious representation in campy terms, thereby challenging power discourses. In this way, as mentioned above, they surpass the monolithic understanding of blackness of the Civil Rights/Soul era and argue instead for multiple blacknesses (queer blackness and, more specifically, Jesse's hybridity being two examples) in line with post-Soul aesthetics (Schur 2007). While post-Civil Rights movements usually have political agendas, the label post-Soul is normally associated with the evolution of African American art from essentialist positions to a much more complex, pluralistic and non-normative understanding of black identity and its representation. In this sense, roughly speaking, post-Soul—as theorized by Ashe (2007)[2]—can be used as an umbrella term that includes (though is not restricted to) the post-black and campy queerness in both Mendez and Wiley.

Although camp has been rebutted from mainstream black culture because of "the regime of authenticity that has limited many studies of black culture and constrained the black canon" (Pochmara and Wierzchowska 2017, 696), black camp can update one-sided interpretations of authenticity against institutional racism. Some of Mendez's characters and Wiley's poseurs pose as suffering or dead, an act which is ironic, challenging and political. In other words, Pochmara and Wierzchowska continue, camp

[1] Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) addressed black camp, which confirms yet again its cultural relevance in Afro-American culture. However, as bell hooks points out, it is problematic that many of these black camp manifestations are conveyed from a white perspective (1992, 145-56).

[2] Before Ashe's seminal study on post-Soul aesthetics, other critics had also dealt with it. Trey Ellis (1989) and Greg Tate (1992) were the first to make reference to a new Black Aesthetic, which Nelson George systematized in *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (1992). Many artists see themselves as part of this cultural break; Terry McMillan is a case in point in that he considers himself as belonging to "a new breed, free to write as we please, in part because of our predecessors, and because of the way life has changed" (quoted in Ashe 2007, 610). In other words, these new artists found a voice thanks to the Soul and Civil-Rights generation, but also because they departed from it.

exceeds pleasure—one of the reasons for the scarcity of black academic and political representations of camp (697)—and is, therefore, a valid tool with which to represent the anxiety of (queer) blacks as well as the (un)grievability which informs post-colonial discourses in *Rainbow Milk* and movements like Black Lives Matter in Wiley. Judith Butler argues that "an ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all" (2009, 38). This (un)grievability applies to African Americans and ethnic minorities insidiously. When such individuals are brutalized by institutional racism, their life cannot be "officially" grieved because it is a life that "does not count" as worth-living. More recently, Butler has refined her conception of grievability: "There is a difference between someone's being grieved and that same person's bearing, in their living being, a characteristic of grievability. The second involves the conditional tense: those who are grievable *would* be mourned if their lives *were* lost; the ungrievable are those whose loss would leave no trace, or perhaps barely a trace" (Butler 2020, 74-75; italics in the original). (Un)grievability is a potentiality that Mendez's and Wiley's black camp deals with. The discourses of both artists diverge in some senses, but it can be argued that there is a dialectical relation between them in their use of camp narratives to explore post-black masculinity.[3] They highlight as fictional the concept of gender and race that renders black males as violent or victims of violence, as front-runners of their harassed communities, in contrast with whites.

2.1. Queer/Black Camp in *Rainbow Milk*

Jesse's grandfather Norman Alonso, whose voice narrates the first part of *Rainbow Milk*, recalls the racial discrimination and stereotyping of blacks back in the nineteen fifties. Norman and his family arrived in England from Jamaica as part of the Windrush generation recruited to solve the workforce shortages after WWII (Mendez 2020, 29). Although Norman claims all his family would eventually be proud of his son and Jesse's father Robert (27) when the latter is still a child, he also depicts how blacks, particularly males, are not only sexualized but criminalized and rendered brutish and, hence, unfit to live in England. When Norman rather than a white colleague gets a new job, the latter assumes that their queer supervisor has "suck[ed] [Norman's] big black cock off in his office" (28). Norman also recognizes racist discourses according to which blacks are supposed to kill whites when, in real life, it is "the white man [that]

[3] They are by no means the first artists to question black masculinity stereotypes. As Marlon Rachquel Moore points out, Langston Hughes's "sissy successfully transforms his gender transgression into a critique of heterosexism and hegemonic blackness" (2008, 501). Hughes was a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, a movement which vindicated African American culture in the U.S. and paved the way for the Civil Rights campaign. Similarly, in his analysis of Rita Dove's "Thomas and Beulah," Kevin Quashie remarks on the male protagonist's revolutionary discourse and identity, noting that his "representation is not only an inversion of the gendered expectations of maleness; it is also a queer rendering of his black male subjectivity" (2016, 377). The present article adds a camp dimension to the intersectionality between blackness, queerness and masculinity.

want[s to] kill *you*" (34; italics in the original). Violence and sex go together in this simplistic stereotyping of black males (Kiesling 2017, 5). Within mainstream culture, whites "fear we [blacks] might rape them dry like they did rape we for century, except we king cocky bigger than for their struggle cocky" (Mendez 2020, 38). Norman's pidgin is very effective in conveying the hatred and unfair criminalization he and his peers suffer, to the point that they feel like they are crooks (46), just because "the establishment afraid we might take their perfect English landscape and strip it down to bush and savannah" (38).

Robert Alonso, Norman's son and Jesse's father, also challenges white stereotypes of black males, but for different reasons. As a queer black man in the nineteen eighties, Robert is denied not only access to his son but also control of his own body as a marginalized victim of AIDS. It is only by chance that Jesse comes across a photograph, and later a portrait, of a black male who happens to be his father. Never does Jesse meet him in the flesh. Moreover, Robert does not fit into any of the stereotypes a black man is supposed to fulfill. Robert's absence is particularly conspicuous when Jesse starts his own individuation process once he is kicked out of home by his black mother and white stepfather. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons why camp has been disassociated from black history and, especially, liberation movements, is because it has been identified with uncommitted pleasure. However, Robert conflates black masculinity and campy pleasure and, therefore, becomes a rarity, a blank in the story until Jesse resurrects him. When Jesse comes across an old photograph of a black man at home, "barefoot, and handsome, with high cheekbones and thick eyebrows" (148), he feels immediately attached to and reflected in him. Robert's blithe pose and the feel of the photo exudes an unproblematic pleasure that is almost offensive for a black male to exhibit according to white mainstream discourses. Besides pleasure, the photo conveys a grander-than-life appearance that plays with religious iconography, which also breaks with standards. Robert's simple attire—he is wearing just a white shirt—and bearing—"sitting on the floor against a wall" (148)—both clash with and confirm his transcendent, almost Messianic pose "looking up at the light coming from the window" (148). He seems to be anointed in the image despite being a destitute black queer man.

Besides the photograph of Robert, it is with his self-portrait that Jesse feels especially connected, although he still ignores the fact that they are both depicting his father. At the home of Thurston, one of his first clients as a male prostitute, Jesse comes across the painting of "a black male nude, his dick lazing across his thigh, clutching a large blood-red flower in his hand, the red paint dripping down his forearm as if he'd stigmatised himself on a thorn. It stung Jesse immediately, as if he had driven a pin right into the centre of his own palm" (57). The photograph recalls Barkley Hendricks's camp paintings of the nineteen seventies,[4] especially his self-portrait (1977) and that

[4] Barkley Hendricks (1945-2017) was a famous African American portraitist. In his edited collection *Birth of Cool*, Trevor Schoonmaker underscores Hendricks's outstanding influence on recent black art. More specifically, Schoonmaker points out, he "is best known for his life-sized portraits of people of color from the urban northeast.

of George Jules Taylor (1972). However, Robert's self-portrait engages even more directly with the tradition of "mostly male artists working on black portrait painting" (Hyacinthe 2017, 604). The campiness of Robert's piece is complex: it connects with Sontag's aesthetic conception of sensibility, but it also draws on dissidence-related aspects such as the affective and hagiographic qualities of camp that serve to update black masculinity. Camp, then, re-writes Robert's blackness, queerness, foreignness and masculinity because he, like Jesse later, does not live a (quoting Audre Lorde) "single-issue life" (2007, 138).

Susan Sontag speaks of artifice and stylization, rather than beauty, as the foundation of camp; a sensibility that therefore emphasizes "texture, sensuous surface and style at the expense of content" (1964, 518). This bent for the unnatural, the exaggerated and the theatrical is evident, she says, in campy "flamboyant mannerisms" (518). As a matter of fact, the etymological origin of camp is the French term *camper*, meaning "to put oneself in a pose," which is often associated with (although it goes beyond) gay effeminacy. Robert's imagery is sensuous, his glossy black body exposed, and his attitude theatrical, clutching a rose and looking at the beholder. When Jesse reencounters the painting—aptly called *Nude With Othello*—at a friend's house, its campiness only increases:

> The nude's dick lay thick across his groin, almost purple; his body in soft focus, a black male Ophelia. Blood coursed down his forearm from the centre of his palm. His other hand was tensed, clutching at air, yet his face was relaxed, as if in ecstasy, his lips thick and open, his eyebrows thick and naturally arched, his eyes blissfully closed. [...] Was he dead or alive? (Mendez, 312).

Posing as a nude Othello and a male Ophelia challenges gender stereotypes in liminal terms. Moreover, impersonating Shakespeare's tragic characters highlights the theatricality and excess of the scene. The incongruity of the painting, however, goes further still in that the poseur is both tense and relaxed, suffering and in ecstasy at the same time. Likewise, Robert's beauty and sensuality are unconventional because his excessive physicality and posing blur the limits between life and death, especially when his body suffers the effects of AIDS. This penchant for aesthetics is related to what Zora Neale Hurston called "the 'will to adorn' [...] characteristic of black expression" (Pochmara and Wierzchowska 2017, 698), which has, however, been suppressed from both within (African American) and outside (mainstream) cultures for political and representational reasons. This "desire for beauty" and "decorating a decoration" in which black people radically engage (698) explains Robert's aestheticism and the bond between father and son, artist and beholder when Jesse re-visits the painting.

His bold portrayal of his subject's attitude and style elevates the common person to celebrity status. Cool, empowering, and sometimes confrontational, Hendricks' artistic privileging of a culturally complex black body has paved the way for today's younger generation of artists" (2008, 1).

However, it is not only artificiality, posing and aesthetics—traditionally identified with femininity and gay effeminacy—that characterize Robert's post-black masculinity. Also present is the affective and hagiographic campiness that Hyacinthe notes in Hendricks's portraits. Drawing on Sontag, Hyacinthe explains how campy style creates "an affective reception over one of reason and historicity" (2017, 614). In other words, privileging aesthetics and emotion over rationality explains the affective and relational character of camp, which, paradoxically, re-politicizes Sontag's concept. The excess and splendor of his father's painting encourage Jesse's affective relation with it/him beyond the limits of classic black masculinity. Antwaun Sargent's words on Hendricks's painting of George Jules Taylor are particularly relevant here because they can also be applied to Jesse's encounter with Robert's canvas: "It's a slick, sublime portrait of intersectional individualism that blurs the lines of realism to show exactly who Taylor is by capturing him in a moment of transcendence. The first time I saw it, I [...] wanted to *be* that picture" (2017, n.p., italics in the original). Both Kirsten Olds and Genevieve Hyacinthe regard Sargent's encounter with Hendricks's Taylor as an example of affective camp. Yet, for Olds, it is a "gay expression" (2013, 21) while Hyacinthe argues that it addresses "black freedom" in more extensive terms (2017, 614). Be that as it may, Jesse's beholding of first the photograph and then the self-portrait, twice, is a similar ethical event to the one experienced by Sargent. However, rather than identifying with his father (i.e., wanting to *be* that picture), Jesse wants to feel attached to and understand his father as being a representation of himself.

Hyacinthe also examines camp hagiography in Hendricks's portraits, specifically that of music star Fela Anikulapo Kuti entitled *Fela: Amen, Amen, Amen* (2017, 620). The portrait of the artist shows him, as Trevor Schoonmaker points out, with "a crown of thorns around a flaming heart in the shape of the African continent [...] and halo over his head" (quoted in Hyacinthe, 620). The extremeness of Fela's sexualized masculinity—he is grabbing his crotch—contrasts with his Christ-like iconography of suffering and empathy. In this way, the hagiographic links with the affective because he is a compassionate Christ. Moreover, the portrait overturns classic conceptions of male blackness as the heart outline in the shape of Africa is turned over on Fela's chest. In *Rainbow Milk* Robert Alonso's self-portrait also plays with Christian imagery in campy terms. The portrait, aptly called *Nude With Othello*, updates the threatening masculinity of Shakespeare's character as an object of desire. Thus, in impersonating Othello, Robert is sexualized after the moor in the play, his dick lazing on his thigh. Yet, he is also worshipped by his son, especially when Jesse identifies with his father's "stigma" caused by a thorn on the rose he holds, as "a pin right into the centre of his own palm" (Mendez 2020, 57). Robert is thus granted through his portrait the grievability he was denied by his wife and community when he came out as gay and contracted AIDS. Moreover, the incongruence of his excessive corporeality in contrast to his transcendence characterize his campy hagiographic bearing in *Rainbow Milk*. The father, portrayed as a marginalized queer and an idol, and the son, as his devotee, update Christian imagery to revise black masculinity.

Jesse forms part of a new generation of blacks in Britain that argue for their hybrid and specific culture. In doing so, he resurrects his father: "*I have a dad and he was a painter I have a dad and he was gay or bi I have a dad who was still alive in the early Nineties I have a dad and his name was Robert and he had eyes just like mine I have a dad*" (333; italics in the original). In repeating these sentences, like the Lord's Prayer or a religious litany, in which he dialogues with and invokes his father, Jesse's discourse not only grants his father grievability but also a hagiographic dimension. After this stream-of-consciousness narrative of self-affirmation, the protagonist "buries himself" in books on black culture and art and imagines his father as part of that iconography and tradition (333). It is worth noting that he mentions Rotimi Fani-Kayode (333), a queer black British photographer who conjured up an aesthetic universe within which to redefine black masculinity back in the nineteen-eighties. Fani-Kayode's (Mapplethorpe-like) imagery features black males posing naked, often drawing on their corporeality and the artist's twofold Christian and Yoruban religious legacy. In this same line of ironic and hagiographic camp, *Rainbow Milk* connects with a long tradition of black portraiture in general, and with Kehinde Wiley's post-Soul portraits in particular.

3. Black camp hagiography. *Rainbow Milk* in conversation with Wiley's portraits

Schur points to "how recent work has typically offered ironic renderings of black and post-black bodies rather than celebratory or sympathetic portraits" (2007, 646). Yet, in his opinion, there are signs of exhaustion with the use of irony, which, in my view, though still very obvious in Kehinde Wiley's works, are more nuanced in *Rainbow Milk*. For the past two decades, Wiley has developed a personal hyper-realist and opulent style:

> By appropriating the technical aspects of traditional portraiture and inserting black bodies into spaces previously reserved for white noblemen and royalty, Wiley strikes at the heart of issues surrounding the representation of blackness. These large-scale works play with obvious anachronisms, yet in their contemporary dress the sitters often reflect the same visual opulence as the originals, with designer clothes and expensive jewellery replacing riding breeches and encrusted sables (Blythe, 2020).

This act of appropriation is problematic for various reasons. It is debatable whether Wiley's works commodify black male bodies or, on the contrary, challenge the ways in which art and other cultural manifestations have exploited them, as Byrd McDaniel suggests (2013, 35). In reworking Western masterpieces, it could be argued that Wiley questions their status as unmarked cultural referents. However, the analogy between his black sitters and the wealthy sitters posing for European masters is arguably an ironic event whereby "he does not deconstruct images of African Americans, but those of Europeans" (Schur 2007, 651). Be

that as it may, Wiley's portraits certainly disjoint power discourses from their prescriptive renderings, which opens up a debate on the representation of power/vulnerability. This debate is a complex one, especially because the pairing of "postmodernist appropriation and postcolonial refashioning" (Maltz-Leca 2013, 32) is not only ironic, but also summons the specters of the originals. This is part of the complex nature of the post-black era that Wiley's paintings and Mendez's novel point to.

Although Wiley is best known for his neo-baroque campy portraits, I will here refer to his appropriation of the iconography of Christ to re-enact blackness (Jones, 2016) in connection with Robert's self-portrait, its poetics of (un)grievability and campiness. Jones refers to other similar reenactments by Wiley: *The Dead Christ in the Tomb*,[5] which recasts Hans Holbein's 1522 oil of the same title; his version of *The Veiled Christ*,[6] which updates Giuseppe Sanmartino's 1793 marble; his revision of Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1480) in his eponymous oil on canvas;[7] and finally, Anthony Van Dick's *Ecce Homo* (1626), which Wiley responds to in his rendering of the iconic image.[8] In contrast to mirroring European aristocrats and monarchs, the representation of power in Christ is problematic. The flamboyance and campy posing of blacks impersonating seventeenth-century people of note cannot immediately be applied to Wiley's Christs. That said, even in these latter portraits, Wiley uses a very aestheticized imagery, especially West African textile design, hip hop and mannerism, as a backdrop to his theatrical Christs. In other words, these paintings forefront the incongruity of religious iconography, excessive corporeality and the spiritual. Indeed, as the ultimate martyr, Christ is powerful because he suffers (out of empathy) for the sake of those who are "unable to suffer to redeem others." This excess of power and vulnerability, as both divine and human, transcends the terms of authority of leaders in Baroque portraits. Hence, Wiley's appropriation of Christ's renderings responds to Schur's contention on post-Soul narratives, namely the redefinition of irony and its rearticulation of realism. This turn to realism with respect to the previous generation of black artists such as Basquiat "predates the Black Lives Matter movement, but speaks powerfully into that context" (Jones 2016, n.p.). Both Mendez and Wiley commodify Christ's iconography, as Christian art itself has done before, with the purpose of re-defining black masculinity.

Jesse's father portrays himself as a martyr in erotic terms (Mendez, 263): Christ's body transubstantiates into that of a naked black man holding a rose and is intended for a gay public. However, Robert's self-sexualization and Christ-like impersonation is awkward, his body having been ravaged by AIDS (263). Like Robert, Wiley's black *Ecce Homo* is suffering and, like Van Dyck's Christ, he has his hands bound, his body is hanging limply and the outline of his head is iridescent hinting at a power that is

[5] See Kehinde Wiley's painting *The Dead Christ in the Tomb* (2007). https://bit.ly/3S1y5i9

[6] See Kehinde Wiley's painting *The Veiled Christ* (2008). https://bit.ly/3By5j1p

[7] See Kehinde Wiley's painting *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (2008). https://bit.ly/3LxjWqf

[8] See Kehinde Wiley's painting *Ecce Homo* (2012). https://kehindewiley.com/works/selected-work-2012/

otherwise not clear to see. That said, in both Mendez's novel and Wiley's portrait, the model's campy demeanor is political: in the former it functions to redress the commodification of black queers, their identification with AIDS and feral sexuality in post-colonial Britain. In the latter, the young man's hands bound and hanging loosely in front of him recall blacks handcuffed by the police in the U.S. and elsewhere, thus denouncing the criminalization of black males.

Wiley is by no means the first to appropriate Christ's martyrdom with recourse to his arms hanging limply, Jean Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793) setting a significant precedent. David's masterpiece features Marat, a French revolutionary, just after he has been stabbed in the bathtub by Girondin Charlotte Corday. David, a revolutionary himself, updates Christ's martyrdom and majesty in order to legitimate the French Revolution. Wiley's Christ-themed portraits share the symbolic realism and political engagement of David's painting, but from an ironic viewpoint. His *Dead Christ in the Tomb* presents a challenging attractive black youth in underpants instead of "the blue face, puncture wounds, and emaciation of [Hans Holbein's] prototype" (Jones 2016, n.p.). According to Jones, some critics "have recognized in this and many more of Wiley's paintings a homoeroticism" which, it seems to me, is recalled in Robert Alonso's self-portrait. The impersonators of Christ in Mendez's novel and Wiley's *Dead Christ in the Tomb* mix up flamboyant corporeality and a bent for transcendence; this simultaneity serving in both cases to question mainstream black masculinity and how it has been constrained by white discourses of power, religion included. In the case of Wiley's painting, as Jones points out, this revision of black stereotypes is related to Black Lives Matter: "In the direct gaze and parted lips of Wiley's dead Christ I hear not 'Come hither' but 'Look, white America, at what you have done, at what you are doing'" (2016, n.p.). In other words, moving far from Sontag's apolitical camp, the gaze of these secular Christs draws on (un)grievability and current racial politics and, more specifically, on police violence against blacks (in Wiley) and on silence (in Mendez).

In re-enacting Christ's suffering, Wiley's *Lamentation* and *The Veiled Christ* beg for "more empathy in us [than] when we see news photos of black people whose lives have been taken from them" (Jones 2016, n.p.). In other words, the paintings point to structural racism whereby unmarked (i.e., white) audiences are supposed to empathize and identify with the mourner only as long as he is white. As a Western cultural product, Christ's white imagery is supposed to appeal to a global audience, unlike black youths attacked and murdered by police officers in the U.S. or Brazil. In placing black men as Christ-like dead martyrs bearing witness to their traumata, Mendez's and Wiley's characters do not only ask for empathy but also for redemption. White viewers are compelled to empathize with the victims of insidious racism and brutal policing; and more shamefully yet, whites must take notice of how these victims suffer, "for them" because, as mentioned above, Christians (i.e., "whites by definition") are rendered "unable to suffer" having been absolved by Christ's martyrdom, as appropriated by western culture. Thus, in Wiley's *Lamentation*, "we're invited to poke our heads into the

void left by the excision of Mary and John and to wail and moan" (Jones 2016, n.p.). That is, the allegedly white gaze of the Virgin and John the Baptist is replaced by that of a post-race audience paradoxically concerned with race. Wiley's *The Veiled Christ* (as well as Giuseppe Sanmartino's marble of the same name) portrays the covered face of the protagonist and, as such, it enhances his vulnerability and extra-ordinariness. The veil protects, but it also invisibilizes and wounds the face it hides. The faces of Robert Alonso and Wiley's veiled Christ are "covered" by a political purpose. In Alonso's self-portrait, AIDS functions as a metaphorical veil that conceals his actual face. Indeed, the narrator himself points out that behind the altered and gaunt faces of all AIDS victims, one could still spot "that unrelenting life spirit. That beauty, which did not change" (Mendez 2020, 298). The disease, then, masks and "protects" the unalterable face of the martyr, vulnerable but redemptive. Wiley's veiled youth is also tortured, the thorns and nails having fallen next to his feet. Yet, the beauty and disempowerment of the setting and of his body beg for action rather than redemption. In sum, Mendez's and Wiley's works are paradigmatic of the post-blackness on both sides of the Atlantic, and no longer regard blackness as a monolith. However, their political and ethical implication, rather than being reduced, is enhanced, since race is queered and updated, drawing on the "multiple intersections of both blackness and queerness" (Kiesling 2017, 6).

Jesse is disfellowshipped by his mother and his religious community in the Black Country and emasculated by white men in London. Yet, in meeting his father's self-portrait, he recalls not only his family, but a tradition of black portraiture and a black camp aesthetics that informs a whole culture that is often overlooked. *Rainbow Milk* breaks with stereotypes such as "rappers usually peddle [...] the idea that black men lack emotion" (74). Jesse's and his father's camp, like Hendricks's, Fani-Kayode's and Wiley's, proves to be deeply affective and post-black; not because it rejects black culture(s) but rather embraces, that is a restricted conception of male blackness often devised, bell hooks argues, by whites (1992, 98; 100-101; 105). Jesse is supposed to be one of those "unreachable black teenage boys" (Mendez, 98) that society considers intractable and, ultimately, ungrievable. However, he finds refuge in (black) camp culture that questions gender and race limits: Soul divas (129), gay magazines featuring John Galliano, Kate Moss, Alexander McQueen, Aaliyah and Beyoncé (195), Robert Mapplethorpe (280), neo-Soul divas and black female writers, as well as his friend Gini, a theatre director (287).

The novel and its protagonist do not take a naïve approach to either affective or hagiographic camp, nor to blacks' ungrievability. Drawing on Wiley's (and post-Soul) irony, though in more realistic terms, post-blackness in *Rainbow Milk* is promising, but not without its thorny sticking points. Like Wiley's sitters, Jesse and Robert "pose" and challenge black masculinity. Drawing on Black Lives Matter, the novel denounces blacks' ungrievability and identification with violence. The music Jesse listens to pumps "like the heart of a black boy being chased into a dark tunnel by white thugs" (199). Robert "poses" as if dead, drawing on Wiley's Christ-like portraits, but emphasizing Butler's conception of grievability, referring in Butler's words to the question: "Whose life, if

extinguished, would be publicly grievable and whose life would leave either no public trace to grieve, or only a partial, mangled, and enigmatic trace?" (2009, 75). *Rainbow Milk* and the black portraits addressed here put forward a proposal about when and whose life is worth living. Butler makes reference to the future anterior to explain the logic of livability and grievability: "This will be a life that will have been lived is the presupposition of a grievable life, which means that this will be a life that can be regarded as a life, and be sustained by that regard" (2009, 15). Wiley's portraits are a case in point. However, it is particularly pertinent to the case with Jesse when he plays with the idea of unbornness, posing like a foetus (Mendez 2020, 148-49), thus denouncing blacks' institutional ungrievability. The scene is very powerful and graphically nods to Butler's "future anterior." He "got under the covers and pretended he was dead, as if his mother had miscarried him, as if he was a tiny dead baby and nobody had ever heard of him" (141). Eventually, his posing paves the way for his voice, which is more political when it denounces oppression in plain terms, such as when he is recalling Trayvon Martin and Stephen Lawrence (330). Both boys were killed in racist attacks, in the U.S. and Britain respectively, the first while visiting relatives and the second while waiting for a bus.

Camp is a protective and empowering sensibility in both *Rainbow Milk* and in Wiley's portraits. However, it can also be a trap if understood in restrictive terms. In drawing on European masterpieces, Wiley's paintings can be read as subservient to Western white culture. Originally, Sontag identified camp as a (white) gay aesthetics or sensibility, which it still is for some, as is patent in *Rainbow Milk*. Indeed, when Jesse starts a relationship with Owen, a white university professor, he also finds out that gay sensibility is mostly identified with whiteness. Jean-Alain, the black boyfriend of Nick St John, an upper-class white friend of Owen, shows Jesse the couple's campy bedroom. It is "floored with black leather. The walls rendered in polished light grey concrete with a hint of pink, so the room looks like a luxury version of a Genet prison cell, [...] in one corner, a giant chandelier of crystals" (325). The excess and theatricality of the scenario can be, at the same time, liberating and a prison, the latter not in aesthetic terms à la Genet, but in actual terms. In fact, Jean-Alain warns Jesse about gay whites' aesthetic supremacism (332), concluding with resignation: "We will always be something other, something inferior" (329). Camp has many faces, and *Rainbow Milk*, like much black portraiture in recent decades, explores many of them and resurfaces the allegiance of this sensibility with black culture in order to delve into post-blackness and grievability.

4. Conclusion

This article has shown how camp is not only politicized, as Cleto and other critics have claimed in response to Sontag, but is also a potent aesthetics of change when applied to queer (post)blackness and masculinity. In this sense, the texts in Mendez's debut novel and Wiley's portraits put forward a double interconnection: Camp de-essentializes black masculinity, and the political undertones of blackness update camp. Posing

constitutes a key concept in this double crossover. Black Civil Rights movements and Soul aesthetics encouraged a rather monolithic conception of race, especially male blackness, in which performative posing was inadmissible because it was considered politically ineffective. However, the artificiality of posing in terms of suffering or being dead like Christ, while at the same time being erotically appealing and confronting discrimination is both affective and effective. Performativity does not diminish the political impact that the Civil-Rights movement attributed to black males in the form of charisma and "aggressive" discourse. In fact, black charismatic leaders from decades past also performed a stereotype that met their purposes, namely denouncing and combating institutional racism. Posing in anger, as Civil Rights leaders and Cool Posers do, does not reduce the political efficacy of their discourse, but redefines (black) authenticity. In other words, posing according to the cultural frames that mainstream culture has set up is as artificial as any other cultural manifestation.

The confluence of queerness and blackness results in post-blackness or a de-essentialized conception of race. This is much in line with Schur's post-Soul aesthetics, which "have liberated artists to question the social construction of race" (2007, 642). Mendez's protagonists and Wiley's sitters are a case in point in this process, on both sides of the Atlantic. They break with authenticity in the classic sense of the term because they deconstruct blackness in queer terms and vice versa. In other words, they do not privilege blackness or queerness, but find a liminal space within which to negotiate this double otherness. Campiness as a crucial sensibility of black popular culture forms part of this liminal space.

Rainbow Milk and Wiley's portraiture address blacks' suffering and death in artistic terms, recasting mainstream Christian iconography. As such, they point to the ways in which blacks have been represented, often in violent terms, and re-orient this violence to argue for blacks' grievability. In other words, if Christ is granted grievability when he suffers for himself and especially for the (white) other, black suffering in *Rainbow Milk* and Wiley's portraits is also performative because the black protagonists suffer for the sake of other blacks who have been denied proper suffering, and this becomes a sign of grievability. Hagiographic camp thus meets affective camp and both serve a political purpose of affirmation of post-blackness.[9]

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