

From Root to Route: Identity, Mobility and Renaming in James McBride's *The Color of Water*

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Abstract—The idea of mobility implies an escape from intolerant normality and a chance to make oneself over. Moving around signifies willpower in quest for a true self. Postmodern men need to run away from set patterns of institutionalization system-roots. By constant moves, individuals develop roots of different categories and link them to form new routes to foster constructive selves. Hence, the practicability of running away expands the depth of the idea of mobility. In addition, mobility often interplay with re/naming. Naming is an exercise of power because those who name also control. From the perspective of identity construction, renaming is deemed as self-designation; it indicates freedom and the birth of a new self. This paper analyzes correlations between mobility, renaming, and identity construction in James McBride's *The Color of Water*.

Index Terms—Identity, mobility, renaming, *The Color of Water*

I. LITERATURE REVIEW: MOBILITY, NAMING, AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

For decades, the mobility of people has constantly been cast in a positive light as a general fact of American cultural identity. F. J. Turner [1] and D. J. Boorstin [2] argued that American spirit and success was directly tied to the country's westward expansion and it was mobility that made American people practical folks and transformed traditional European scheme and transcended to bring the country prosperity. J. D. Porteous [3] and G. Olsson [4] contended that home does not always possess a positive connotation and an individual may be trapped in his native place, unable to escape into the perceived freedom of the *awayness* context. Only through an act of moving or journeying, can one achieve a form of integrity and self-actualization. M. Crang (1998) [5] proposed that Americans should be mobile because escaping through mobility was actually "an escape from the claustrophobic petit-bourgeois city life" and "an escape from the confining oppression." Furthermore, T. Cresswell (2006) [6] asserted that geographical mobility in its American sense signifies freedom from constraint and is a foundation for anti-essentialism and anti-representationalism. A. Taylor (2008), [7] echoing Turner and Boorstin, indicated that the pioneers' mobility produced a new type of citizen: one with the power to tame the wild and one upon whom the wild had conferred strength and individuality. Other scholars like W. Zelinsky (1973), [8] J. C. Lowe and S. Moryadas (1975), [9] and J. M. Jasper (2000) [10] proposed similar ideas.

All these points of view demonstrate that in American sense, a man's mobility refers to running away from domestic ties. A person's ability to move around symbolizes his being able to "escape" from claustrophobic life in his/her native place. Hence, "to escape" or "to run away" turns to be a crucial means to demonstrate one's mobility. Bearing such a notion of movement, the American sense of mobility encompasses an "escape from an intolerant 'normality' and the chance to start afresh, to make oneself over." [11] In contemporary America, the sense of running away through mobility further indicates an escape from the confining oppression [12].

The contemporary idea of running away to build subjectivity of an individual stems from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's study on nomadism and rhizome. [13] Deleuze and Guattari expatiate that "the rhizome can be connected to anything and...is very different from the tree or the root, which plots a point, fixes an order." [14] It is literally a stem of plants that grow horizontally along or under the ground, can be applied to anything that generates life, heterogeneous connections and mutant lines when used as a metaphor. Unlike the tree that is filiation, the rhizome is alliance. "The tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the rhizome has for its tissue, the conjunction 'and...and...and'". [15] The point is that "the soul is neither above nor inside; it is 'with,' it is on the road, exposed to contacts, encounters..." [16] In a "rhizomatic" operation, an infinite variety of heterogeneous lines intersect, co-penetrate, and mutate through co-operations that carry and proliferate a multitude of particles from an innumerable array of semiotic systems, to co-create infinite, de-territorialized, a-centered, a systematized "worlds." In such map-making, nomadic movement, there are no pre-established paths based on pre-existent notions. That leaves a lot more space for an individual to develop him/herself, free from dictatorial powers and the "Major" world order that submit the unconscious to arborescent structures, the hierarchical graphs [17]. As a result, these encourage and allow for innovative creations on the individual.

Elaborating their ideas, A. Asada proposes that an individual needs to adopt a run-away strategy in order to resist the authoritative, oppressive, established constraints. That is, to run away from the set patterns of family system, school system, social system, and/or any form of institutionalization system in his or her residential society, i.e., roots. By constant moves and changes, the individual can develop roots/routes of different categories and link these roots/routes to form new routes, and simultaneously, foster a more constructive self. Accordingly, one should not be static and stay fixed, but rather hybridize and merge every

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possibility into his/her being. To do so, one needs to be away, to move around, to develop mobility, as what Deleuze & Guattari suggest in the rhizome and nomadism conception [18].

Naming is “a heavily ritualized rite (or is that right?) of passage.” [19] Naming conveys a power over things. It is an exercise of power because those who name also control. That is, the “namer” has the power, while the named remains powerless. Moreover, names are, more often than not, bound within the male power structure, the dominating patriarchal structure, and in American society, the mainstream whites [20]. Since the powerless, being named carries with it the threat of limitation, reduction, and destruction, naming has a double importance in the tradition of minorities, immigrants, and women. In order to break away from this sense of powerlessness, Americans have historically resorted to renaming, especially African Americans, to gain subjectivity and construct identity. In consequence, from the idea of naming evolves the idea of renaming oneself in order to take authority over oneself. Renaming can be a means of self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past, just like former African-American slaves discarded their masters’ names and created new names for them. From the perspective of identity construction, renaming, hence, is deemed as self-designation. It indicates “social and economic freedom, the birth of a truly new self.” [21]

Taking possession of one’s own name and concomitantly claiming sovereignty over one’s self is an act of power. Nevertheless, fixed in one’s native place, the named, like an objectified “Other,” stays as an object, lack of subjectivity, and is powerless to proceed to re/name him/herself. Be it the familial relations or social networks, the named are defined and restrained within the affective bonds. Should they intend for developing and constructing an identity different from the prescribed social role they are ascribed to, they need to be away, running away from domestic ties, so to start a new life and to make themselves over.

The text to be discussed in this paper is the New York Times bestseller autobiography *The Color of Water* by James McBride, an inter-racial American born of a white Jewish mother and a black African father [22]. James McBride, his mother Ruth McBride Jordon, and his maternal grandfather Old Shilsky are marginalized due to their ethnic backgrounds or the special combination of races in their family. All have experienced a “double dispossession” in their native places and have tried moving away and renaming themselves to construct new identities through an ability of mobility to new places. This paper discusses and analyzes the correlations between mobility, renaming, and identity construction in the text.

II. MOBILITY AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN *THE COLOR OF WATER*

In James McBride’s recollections in *The Color of Water*, a lot of images concerning his mother Ruth McBride Jordon are her constant moving, changing from one place to another, and her rapid body movements, running from one space to another. Such an impression of running and moving around is significant in interpreting Ruth’s persistence on her striving

for her own identity construction first and later for her biracial family. Ruth in her memoir also expresses, “Even as a girl, I was a runner. I’d like to go out of the house and go” (17). Metaphorically, Ruth’s running demonstrates an ability of mobility and a will to break away from the ties that restrain her. Therefore, upon encountering frustrations and helpless depressions in life, Ruth moves incessantly to stay active; she would not stand still and enervate herself even when she is too weak to move. When her first husband dies:

Ruth staggered about in an emotional stupor for nearly a year. But while she weebled and wobbled and leaned, she did not fall. She responded with speed and *motion*. She would not stop *moving*. She rode her bicycle. She walked. She took long bus rides to faraway department stores and supermarkets where she’d window-shop for hours and spend fifty cents. She could not grasp exactly what to do next, but she kept *moving* as if her life depended on it, which in some ways it did. She ran, as she had done most of her life, but this time she was *running for her own sanity*. (163-164) (emphases added)

Ruth’s body movement and her motion can be viewed as a metonymy of her moving of mind. Hemingway said in *The Old Man and the Sea*, sometimes, moving is a game of will. And moving encompasses the meaning of mobility, which can bring about a chance to start again in a new way and to make oneself over [23]. The significance of Ruth’s moving on and on resides in her refusing to stay fixed and get bounded by things outside of her own physical being. To keep moving and changing positions becomes her faith. Ruth is convinced that by doing so she will not be easily constrained by rules or norms of the society or be defeated by hardship in life. As she repeatedly mentions in her recollections:

Anything that could close behind me, or trap me, I never liked... I can’t stand feeling stuck or trapped in a place. I like to move... Running... was my hobby... Just run anyplace... I was always a running-type person... I had something to run from.... (42)

What is this “something” to run from for Ruth? Obviously, at the very beginning, it is the life that is suffocating/Suffolkating her in Suffolk, Virginia, her hometown. Therefore, when Ruth leaves Suffolk for New York, and then moves to Delaware, then New Jersey and back to New York again, her moving around should be seen more than just a physical moving; it is more of a psychological quest for her true identity. In fact, she is searching for a dwelling for her heart. Ruth’s mobility indicates not only her will not to be defeated or confined by her destiny but also her ability to change, no matter good or bad, advantageous or disadvantageous. Therefore, when she goes to New York to face alone her pregnancy and abortion, she still holds confidence in herself and sees things in positive ways:

New York was an eyepopper for me. Plus everyone seemed so busy to care about what race or religion you were... I had never seen so many people rushing about... But I wanted to rush like them... Sometimes I’d just go out and walk with them so I could rush with the crowd. I had nowhere to go. Just going crazy, rushing with the rest... I’d hang my head out the side and let the wind blow in my face, whoooooo! Anything that moved I liked. Speed. Trains,

trolleys, skates. (130-133)

What is reflected in Ruth's idea of running and moving, as Joseph Conrad exclaims in his *Heart of Darkness*, is to wipe away, to get away with the mire in the heart of darkness. Hence, running away from something unbearable is the concept of mobility in American sense, and "to run away" refers to the shifting of places, the changing of space, leaving an old place for a new one. While the original/native place (precisely, the social conditions) is sedentary, rooted, stabilized, yet rigid, moving is an action of mobility. It imports the idea of progressive force, a form of freedom, a break from earlier, more confined, spaces and times. Running, an action of moving, embodies the notion of mobility and, as a result, carries the positive meaning of flow, velocity, becoming, and, above all, change (de Certeau 1984; Deleuze and Guattari 1987) [24]. Ruth's "running" away from Suffolk, Virginia to New York, "running" away from her New York relatives' place to Harlem, and "running" away from the black-unfriendly community in Delaware back to the Big Apple, all suggest her ability to resist and to be on her own. Her keeping moving not only demonstrates her strong will to resist the constraints and authoritative oppression from her surroundings, but also manifests her ability to construct a desired identity, and to be the master of her own fate. Moving is, thus, both a life pattern of hers and a strategy of hers to maintain her subjectivity:

Ruth kept moving as if her life depended on it... (164)

A bird who flies is special. You would never trap a bird who flies... Birdie, birdie, fly away. (218)

...looking for another place to move... literally became a lifestyle... (268)

Superficially, Ruth's "moving" seems like negatively "running away;" however, it is not the way it appears. Deep inside the running activity, it shows that her "moving" makes her see and get in touch with new things and new people, from which she gets to know herself better and realizes what fits her most. It is more like her trying to break the ties, the root of her origin, and to develop new routes of her life. Moreover, her running away from her original place breaks the set patterns of her past thinking and action and develops a new set of attitudes towards the established value system for change and for improvement. Fulfilling Asada's idea about running away, Ruth's running away actually helps her build subjectivity of her own and helps her resist the authoritative, oppressive, and established constraints in society. Her "moving" has helped her transform herself from a "subject to thinking of other's" to a "subject of thinking" and then a step further to a "subject in thinking" and ultimately a "subject for thinking." She stands in the position of a speaker in control of the hermeneutical situation. She represents herself, rather than being represented. She is fully fledged in thoughts. And that is why she stays comfortable in a black community with a white body. Besides, as a white female, double (gender and race) unacceptable to the blacks, she even runs a church for the blacks and earns respect from her acquaintances in the black community. Had Ruth had the sense of ghettoization and exclusiveness as others did in her society, she would not have been able to do so, especially when she, being a white, identifies more with the black than with the white. Above all, Ruth resists authority successfully with her actions, as she

claims: "I don't want to be around anyone who is domineering or pushing me around because it makes me nervous" (43).

As for James, similar strategies are adopted upon confronting plights in his life. Imitating Ruth, James also resorts to "running" and "moving" to cope with difficulties:

I failed everything. I left home in the mornings and simply didn't go to school. Just like Mommy did years before me, I began my own process of *running*, emotionally *disconnecting* myself from her [Ruth].... (138) (emphasis added).

Disconnection from one's ties is the central idea of "running," and "moving" manifests a will to overcome. Why does James have to disconnect from Ruth? It is because what has troubled him is his split identity, a result of his biracial family background and his White mother. Ruth's "physical body," Jewish in a non-Jewish community and a White in a black neighborhood, makes James and his siblings trapped in an awkward predicament:

My sister Dotty would say, "I sure wish you wouldn't ride that bike, Ma," and I silently agreed, because I didn't want my friends seeing my white mother out there riding a bicycle. She was already white, that was bad enough, but to go out and ride an old bike that went out of style a hundred years ago? And a grown-up no less? I couldn't handle it. (8)

James feels uncomfortable seeing their white mother ramble around on a bike on the streets in the black neighborhood. What makes the scene unbearable is Ruth's identity, her white skin color; she does not fit into the space, a Black exclusive community. The identity problem keeps bothering James. As he recalls in the chapter of his school life, identity is a shadow following him wherever he goes and whenever he feels the existence of his being. Identity is like the gravity. It is there, whether we like it or not. It is irresistible. It is a silent power; it guides us, and yet it also dominates us. Because of his white mother and his daily traveling from his black community to the white neighborhood for school, James accumulates his panic anxiety every weekday and continuously through his juvenile and adolescent years:

Mommy was the wrong color for black pride and black power, which nearly rent my house in two. (96)

...I felt frustrated to live in a world that considers the color of your face an immediate political statement whether you like it or not. (262)

These two often competing selves, black and white, that James is experiencing are what W. E. B. DuBois terms the "double consciousness" or the "twoness" of the black people, the source of their suffering and alienation in American society [25]. This double self alludes to James' "unreconciled striving" over the "two warring ideals in one dark body." This sense of double-consciousness causes him to look at himself through the eyes of others, to measure his soul by the tape of the white American society "that looks on in amused contempt and pity" during those years of his coming of age (16-17). His sense of double-consciousness is worse than his siblings and most of his black fellowmen, because other blacks have to face simply either to reject or to accept the white-dominant mainstream values. Nevertheless, James is

simultaneously unable and unwilling to deny the whites because he has a white mother. To negate the Whites means to negate his mother, his own origin, especially since he is a posthumous child and has no birth father to identify with. His anxiety and stress of this dilemma makes him fall into the plight of knowing nowhere to go or to evade:

...I myself had no idea who I was. I loved my mother yet looked nothing like her. Neither did I look like the role models in my life – my stepfather, my godparents, other relatives – all of whom were black. And *they* looked nothing like the other heroes I saw...who, incidentally, was always white. (91) (emphasis original)

That is why even after he has attained maturity, he still feels afflicted with the inflicting consciousness:

It took years before I began to accept the fact that the nebulous “white man’s world” wasn’t as free as it looked; that class, luck, religion all factored in as well...the color boundary in my mind was and still is the greatest hurdle. In order to clear it, my solution was to *stay away from it and fly solo*. (262) (emphasis added)

As a result, James “runs away” when he is able to, just like his mother Ruth. Why have they both tried running away? Simply because when an individual is trapped in his/her native place, to run away is to escape into the perceived freedom of the mobility context. He needs a new route to replace the root of his ancestors, be it his black father’s or his white mother’s. The rhizome, not the root, is what he needs when encountering such a plight in reality.

Like canonical American protagonists, such as Huck in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* or Milkman in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, [26] James and Ruth, feeling alienated from their native places, achieve some form of integrity or self-realization through the act of running away, through moving to a new place, to create a different identity. And like Milkman, James does what Morrison suggests to her black countrymen: “If black people are going to succeed in this culture, they must always leave...to cut [themselves] off.” James’ leaving New York can thus be deemed as the emerging selfhood in himself that is trapped at home where he has a split identity due to his mixed family background. James demonstrates his masculinity through his experience of seeking freedom on his way to maturity. Apparently, Ruth and James are like postmodern nomads, in Deleuze and Guattari’s idea, who try hard to free themselves from all roots, bonds and identities and resist the mainstream dominant, normalizing powers and develop new routes to extend their life. With the new routes, both Mother and Son are able to create a new life elsewhere rather than remaining rooted pathetically in their homeland neighborhood. Most important of all, Ruth and James luckily live in a society (i.e., American society) where everyone is entitled with a right to actualize him-/herself. Although James ever complains that “finding oneself” is a necessity for the whites but for most blacks or minorities it is a luxury (265), it is undeniable that both Ruth and James have enjoyed the luxury through mobility. They have accomplished their quest for a true self and developed an identity of a decent American through the act of moving wherever they like to.

III. RENAMING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN *THE COLOR OF WATER*

At the very beginning of the first chapter, Ruth mentions changing names. It is noteworthy that her names are changed in accordance with her residential places, a result of her running away. In her remembrance, her father changes her name from the Jewish Ruchel Dwajra Zylska to American English Rachel Deborah Shilsky when they immigrate to America from Poland (1-2). And when she goes to the white school where the white kids hate Jews, she self-assertively names herself Ruth in order “to fit in more”:

My real name was Rachel, which in Yiddish is Ruckla, which is what my parents called me – but I used the name Ruth around white folk, because it didn’t sound so Jewish, though it never stopped the other kids from teasing me. (80)

Later, she completely rids of this still-Jewish-sound name Rachel Deborah Shilsky at the age of nineteen when she leaves Suffolk, Virginia for New York in 1941. She renames herself Ruth officially. A new name brings about a new identity for Ruth as she decides to start a new life in the Big Apple. She resolves: “Rachel Deborah Shilsky is dead as far as I’m concerned. She had to die in order for me, the rest of me, to live.” (2) This announces the death of an old, undesirable identity for Ruth and the birth of a new one. Ruth seems to create a new route for her life by cutting off her root. It seems only by a new name can Ruth start afresh and make herself over. She makes it! She becomes Ruth McBride (and later Ruth McBride Jordon), raising twelve successful children, running a church in a black community, even earning respects from black folks.

What Ruth does is quintessentially a strategy of impression management, a term applied by S. Lyman and W. Douglass [27] in their analysis on the assimilation and acculturation of the minorities in American society. Like members of any ethnic group would want to avoid conflicts and troubles, Ruth is also aware that, in a pluralistic society, stereotypes are frequently distorted for pernicious purposes yet oftentimes based upon certain realities, be it perceptions or misperceptions, understandings or misunderstandings [28]. She, like other ethnic minorities, has to defuse potentially dangerous aspects of the stereotypic saliencies and tries to demonstrate her ability to contribute to America and withholds from presenting any element that challenged or subverted cherished values in the large society [28]. Hence, it is wise to merge into American society by means of changing her Jewish name at the time when the Jews are not welcomed, if not hated in American society. Renaming helps hide her original identity and switch her Jewish identity into American identity. In a way, like many second-generation immigrants, she tries to replace her ancestral root (Jewish in her case) with an American route. What is worth noting is that such identity switching is done after Ruth runs away from her native place; it is mobility that helps her renaming herself and the act of renaming indicates that she intends to shun her ancestral root in order to redefine and reinterpret herself, and ultimately to develop her subjectivity, to reconstruct a desired identity.

The renaming of both Old Shilsky (Ruth’s father) and Ruth

presents the process of identification of one's self. It also demonstrates that self-ascription and external constraints exercise simultaneously in the shaping of one's identity in his/her life experience. Both renaming occurs in accordance with their moving to the New Continent from the Old Continent, from hometown to new home. The outside situations change, their names change accordingly: from Poland to America, from the Old European Continent to the New American Continent, from home (private territory) to school (public territory), from Suffolk to Brooklyn, from Virginia to New York, from South to North. Their mobility manifests an ability to make over; it not only represents a contrast from old to new, from death to life/rebirth; it also refers to the symbolic epitome of differences between the "namer" and the named, the powerful and the powerless, and the one in control and the one under control.

Furthermore, what Old Shilsky does on changing names is to modify the Jewish spelling to the American spelling. Although he does not intend to rid his family of the Jewishness, he has to rename his family to "fit in more," in Ruth's words. Nevertheless, Ruth, unlike her father, comes to America as a baby and grows up in America, so she chooses to acculturate thoroughly to Americanness. And first and foremost, she chooses an American name, without a trace of her origins. Ruth, like all her relatives, is trying hard to be American (135) and is afraid that others, especially the Whites, will discern her ethnic origin and categorize her according to essentialist stereotypes. As she assimilates into American society, or more precisely New York society, by renaming herself, her identity changes as well.

Another interesting point is found about the interrelationships among renaming, identity, and mobility. In their remembrances about name changing, all the major characters unanimously rename themselves as they change residences: Old Shilsky, a Jew, marries a handicapped wife in order to run away from the oppression in his birthplace to come to America. He renames himself from Zylska to Shilsky in an attempt to get rid of the impression that he has been a dependant to Mrs. Shilsky, Ruth's mother. By changing his name, Old Shilsky brings himself a new identity, an independent individual. Re-naming himself not only earns him his own identity but also establishes his place as the master in his family. It is like an echo to Ruth's declaration: the old "Rachel" has to die so the new "Ruth" can be born; the old "Zylska" has to be forsaken before the coming of the new Shilsky; the Zylska of the old Europe has to be cast away so that Shilsky can have a rebirth in the new Continent. Since the homeland possesses not only geographical and ethical implications but also social, political and cultural ones, homeland is a metaphor of ties. Homeland is a person's root. A person can voice out with a new identity only at a new place [30]. Hence, no matter it is his own renaming, or his renaming Ruth, or Ruth's renaming herself, all mean the abdication of his/her old identity and the reconstruction of new identity in the new homeland. It illustrates the potential identity-shaping purpose such renaming strategy provides. In all, Shilsky and Ruth's renaming themselves symbolizes not only a breakup with the past; more importantly, it is a reclaiming of authority, because the power to name leads to the right to claim. Their renaming embodies regaining their

subjectivity, being their own master, and having their fate under their own control.

A similar re/naming episode is also seen with James himself. His nicknames change in accordance with his residences, too. He is called "Nigger" in the North, namely New York, whereas he is nicknamed "New York" (147) during his stay with his sister Jack and her husband in the South, i.e., Louisville, Kentucky. Name with its reference becomes a conveyer of significance and connotes the overtone of identity. In James, it demonstrates a social self that indicates which group his affection and social belonging reside in. He is called "New York" in the South because the townspeople in Louisville name him according to the place he is from. And he is called "Nigger" in the North because the whites see him in terms of his ancestral residence.

Naming, a kind of meaning producing practice through signifying processes, is oversimplified and reduced into a signifier that contained peculiar social and cultural connotations [31]. The concepts formed in our mind function as a system of mental representation, classifying and organizing our world into meaningful categories. Old Shilsky, Ruth, and James, naming, being-named, or renaming, or the implication of the Black Panther anecdote, all proves what Karl Marx says: It is not man's consciousness that decides his being; on the contrary, it is the society that decides his consciousness [32]. Active or passive, positive or negative, the renaming and the identity switching are tightly connected to the actors' moving from one place to another. From the South to the North, from the Old Continent to the New Continent, from the black neighborhood to the white community, the subjects are restrained obviously by the social hierarchies in American society. There are the super-ordination and the subordination and hierarchicalization is an indispensable and unavoidable phenomenon. Society is composed in terms of such hierarchical system, so is the space territory whereupon men dwell. With this complicatedness, Ruth and James both unwittingly recall their pasts, particularly the parts concerning name-changing or renaming.

IV. CONCLUSION

"God is the color of water," so says Ruth, and "Water doesn't have a color." The main point here is not that water doesn't have a color, but rather that water doesn't have only one fixed color. The color of water is decided by its surroundings. The color of a lake is oftentimes green because the trees, the grass, and bushes around are all green. The lake honestly reflects the phenomenon beside it. The golden pond shines brightly because of the golden sunbeam. The sea is blue because of its reflection of the bright azure sky above it. When the sky is covered with black clouds, the sea becomes dark gray accordingly. Hence, entitling his autobiography *The Color of Water*, James McBride intends to impart the idea that man's identity is *the color of water*: it changes according to the situations wherein the agent is situated. The positioning of identity reflects and is decided by the situationality of which the subject is conscious. An individual shifts his/her identity according to the historical contexts,

developments, accumulations, and precipitate sediments.

As Stuart Hall comments, identities are not singular but “multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions.” [33] Identity is a construction, a process that never completes and is always in “process.” It is conditional, lodged in contingency. “Like all signifying practices, it is subject to the ‘play,’ of difference, [and] obeys the logic of more-than-one.” [34] Drawing an analogy between the color of water and identity, McBride, echoing Hall, proved that identities are constantly in the process of change and transformation in the historically specific developments and practices. McBride explicitly tells us that to earn desired identities one needs to go for them by running away from the present undesirable ones.

Naming, especially to the minorities, is far more important than simply giving a name. The significance of a name exceeds its superficial meaning. It bestows one an identity. It confers one a right, an authority to him-/her [35]. Naming is a repeatedly empathic theme in American literature, modern or postmodern, especially in black narratives. For blacks, names are an essential part of the legacy and naming, misnaming, and renaming is actually about birth and death [36]. The importance of naming is as a ritual in people’s lives. Not having a proper name is not having a proper belonging. Not having a proper belonging is not having an identity. Having a proper name is having the sense of security and guarantees the ownership of one self. One becomes the owner instead of the owned. That is also why McBride ends his book with a long list of all his mothers’ and siblings’ names and titles because that represents the witness of belongingness, their identity in American society.

In all, identity shaping is not returning to roots but a coming-to-terms-with “routes.” Identities are made up out of partial fragments and such fragmentations are historically constituted. Identities are at all times contradictory and situational. Changing names according to residential places merely reflects the correlations between mobility, renaming, and identity construction.

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