



Queer and Black Martyrdom in Alan Hollinghurst and Paul Mendez

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ABSTRACT

Both Alan Hollinghurst and Paul Mendez address the vulnerability of dissident, non-normative masculinities. With this purpose, I will first revise the narratives of martyrdom as an iconography (and trope) which relies on but exceeds its religious origins to understand gay and black identity representation in these writers. There are, however, some differences in their treatment of martyrdom. Hollinghurst's career spans more than three decades and, hence, his novels feature different faces of martyrdom although all the characters/narrators do it from a white perspective. By contrast, Mendez's *Rainbow Milk* revisits martyrdom as a contested narrative from the decolonized and black/queer viewpoint of the protagonist.

KEYWORDS

Mendez; Hollinghurst; Martyrdom; Blackness; Queerness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Paul Mendez is a brand-new voice in British literature. His debut novel, *Rainbow Milk*, is to be added to an increasing corpus by British writers, born in Africa and the Caribbean or of African or Caribbean descent, in the last decades. Thus, although still lacking the African American tradition and cultural impact in the USA, the novels of Zadie Smith, Bernardine Evaristo, Derek Owusu and very young writers like Paul Mendez and Okechukwu Nzelu are

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fleshing out racial discourses in Britain. Besides being engaged in postcolonial blackness, *Rainbow Milk* also relies on queerness to articulate and update (post)identity. In this latter case, the influence of Alan Hollinghurst is particularly noticeable and relevant, especially when it comes to interracial desire, and secondarily regarding the tension between race and sex for black queers (or queer blacks). In contrast to (but in relation to) the insidious character of racism, the outburst of AIDS was a turning-point in gay and queer narratives, overhauling the poetics of trauma and vulnerability from the late nineteen eighties. From this framework, the article explores how Mendez recasts the discourse(s) of martyrdom in Hollinghurst's novels. With this purpose, I will first refer to the concept of martyrdom as a religious and cultural concept with special emphasis on how it applies to marginal identities, especially queer blacks. In this sense, the article next explores the uses of martyrdom in Hollinghurst's fiction and how Mendez's *Rainbow Milk* re-articulates it by probing the confluence between queer and black discourses.

From the Greek *Martur* or witness, the martyr is the one who bears witness to his own suffering despite the torture he undergoes. There is, in this sense, a dissociation in the martyr, who is both an actor and spectator of his own vulnerability, a hybrid figure, an (un)willing agent of his own sacrifice for the sake of others. Hence, a key point is whether the martyr can utter his suffering and work it out or the exposed pain is a symptom of trauma's unutterability that the sufferer can only act out. Martyrdom is often identified with, and has usually been restricted to, religion and the religious experience. Drawing on its Greek original, for the Roman Catholic Church, martyrdom entails "bearing witness unto death", and the martyr [is the] one who 'bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine'" (Middleton, 2014: 119). Be it as it may, martyrdom and martyrology can transcend spirituality and embrace ethical, political and narrative undertones when understood in wider cultural terms. In fact, as Middleton argues, the focus should not be placed on the martyr's agency but on "who makes martyrdom and for what purpose?" (118). As a rule, therefore, the political intentionality behind making martyrs and defining what it takes to become one is related to the way martyrdom reinforces identity (118). Deciding who is or not a martyr, whose practices, discourses and witnessing deserve to be inscribed in martyrology is ultimately an act of power that "includes and excludes the 'right' people" (Slane, 2004). With all this in mind, it is paradoxically not the main character or martyr who takes centre stage, but the narrator of the death/martyrdom story (Middleton, 2011: 30). Hence, from a cultural viewpoint, the martyr is a person who ventriloquizes and corporealizes a political and religious discourse "to define, explain, or galvanize a course of action" (Schudson, 1989: 156). This tension between agency and passivity, representationality and appropriation (i.e., who decides who is named a martyr) is especially relevant in queer and black martyrology.

Drawing on the etymology and religious origin of martyrdom and Middleton's conclusions above, the martyr may bear witness to suffering or death, but must be chosen as a

legitimate voice. The martyr is often a passive unwilling agent who meets the requirements of certain socio-political circumstances but, in gay martyrology, he is always eroticized. Religious iconography has often been a source of martyrs for gay sensibility and liberation movements. Saint Sebastian is a case in point; an unwilling martyr appropriated to meet the gay erotic iconography of sacrifice. Likewise, Mathew Shepard, a twenty-year-old gay student from Wyoming, brutally murdered in 1998, became an unwilling popular martyr for the gay cause. Thus, he was not for “dying for Christ”, but “for the American people” (Hoffman, 2011: 123). In other words, Shepard turned a (gay) icon because his story appropriated and reformulated mainstream religious discourses of sacrifice. To reach his martyr status, he was de-eroticized as a pure child (143) and “an acolyte in St. Mark’s Episcopal Church” (133). By contrast, Oscar Wilde stands for the “pervert” gay martyr, the icon of Gregory Woods’ “the tragic sense of life” (1999), because he was sentenced for “gross indecency”. Yet, the gay liberation movements eventually updated his figure in sacrificial terms as a scapegoat of late-nineteenth-century mainstream culture. Despite their differences, these three examples (i.e., St. Sebastian, Shepard and Wilde) comply with the unwilling agency and erotic signification of gay sacrifice. But, above all, the three are white and narrated from a white perspective, and therefore, form part of the cultural imagery Hollinghurst inherits.

If gay and queer martyrs are either too passive and self-constrained (Shepard) or too active and flamboyant (Wilde), black ones are fundamentally charismatic male leaders (Maraj, Prasad & Roundtree, 2019), victims of state violence (often the police) or erotic objects for (gay) white consumers. In all cases, there is a schizophrenic logic that frames queer and black identity as excessive, either too visible and active or too invisible and passive. Moreover, when blacks and queers (let alone queer blacks) are objectified or maltreated, a sacrificial and redemptive iconography can conceal hate crimes and discriminatory discourses (Griffin, 2020). The upsurge of #BlackLivesMatter and black queer movements has turned the screw and opened new allegiances to combat these crimes and discourses both in America and elsewhere. Queer and feminist black movements exceed the Civil Rights, ones “that typically depend, as Black studies scholar Erica Edwards (2012) has argued at length, upon masculinist African American charismatic ideals [and] ... posit male orators as history’s heroic agents and self-sacrificing women as unselfish martyrs, heroic in their voluntary suffering” (in Maraj, Prasad & Roundtree, 2019: n.p.). Likewise, *Rainbow Milk* breaks with “such ideals of masculine charisma [that,] Edwards argues, is the reinscription of gender and sexual normativities” (n.p.). Thus, the moment when Jesse, the protagonist of Mendez’s novel, encounters the self-portrait of his dead father spreads onto the whole text and updates normative discourses of queer blackness beyond martyrdom, agency and eroticism. In fact, in assuming some frames as the right ones to construct martyrdom in

mainstream terms, some less-normative examples of queerness and blackness are doubly marginalized.

Whereas Hollinghurst's texts seem stuck in (and play with) melancholia—which could be read as a feature of neo-Freudian trauma narratives (Caruth, 1996; Hartman, 1996; Shoshana & Laub, 1992)—when depicting martyrdom in various ways, the underlying black queer activism in Mendez's novel updates the politics and poetics of martyrdom and agency conflating queer and black discourses. First, *Rainbow Milk* breaks with the aporia of neo-Freudian trauma theory and addresses the empathy and sympathy of readers and viewers. On the other hand, the novel revises and reconfigures mainstream (Western) religious and cultural iconography such as the classic individuation process, giving a twist to Hollinghurst's own revision of mainstream discourses.

2. THE DIFFERENT FACES OF MARTYRDOM IN HOLLINGHURST

Hollinghurst's novels feature vulnerable martyrs, uncanny figures in most of the cases, to fetishize exotic male bodies or to enact the anxieties of white queer masculinity. In *The Swimming-pool Library*, Will Beckwith, a well-to-do gay Londoner, attends an “exhibition ... called martyrs” (1998: 229), by Ronald Staines, a friend of Charles Nantwich, who happens to be Will's nemesis. Although Will himself fetishizes non-white boys, he feels uneasy about others, like Nantwich and Staines, doing the same. Hence, he stays aloof from the exhibition and the exotic performers:

The controversial conversation piece in which Aldo [as the Baptist] appeared with the yet unmartyred St Sebastian hung alongside. ... They had been cleverly posed against a projected backdrop taken from some Tuscan master, but for all the quattrocento piquancy of their gestures they remembered me of ... those queenly fashion spreads in Tatler and Uomo Vogue. ... The photographs were balletic and metaphorical, with a good deal of emphasis on the slim gilt soul aspect of a number of images, in Staines's most typical style, crossed and half-obscured by the shadows of prison bars. (Hollinghurst, 1998: 230-1)

The scene recalls the argument of Jean-Alan, a character of *Rainbow Milk*, when talking about interracial same-sex desire. In his view, gay whites' aestheticism commodifies black bodies to edify their sexual pleasure and power discourse (Mendez, 2020: 290-1). The black performers of Staines's exhibition are a case in point, impersonating martyrs whose very vulnerability/sexuality is aestheticized. Drawing on black male stereotypes, especially when metonymically identified with “bestial libido and [their] enormous cock” (Steward, 1999: 511), these performers are interpellated as the Other (Butler, 1993: 5). In other words, *The Swimming-pool Library* recalls stereotypes so that, using Steward's words, “gay black subjectivity [is] recognizable” (1999: 511) as a source of bodily pain and pleasure.

However, mainstream stereotypes of (male) blacks as too active and feral are not recalled literally because, as Woelz remarks, “in its repetition with a difference gay literature provides its readers ‘with new ways to see and hear the world’” (in Steward, 1999: 511-12). Black males’ agency is often repeated with a difference in gay texts because they are objectified as passive agents in erotic and sacrificial poses as in Mapplethorpe’s photographs (Yebara, 2021). This conception of repetition with difference is playfully ironic, though not to the degree of Gilles Deleuze’s, “as dynamic reinscriptions that parley with one another rather than inert copies of a stable original” (Maltz, 2013: 32). The scene in *The Swimming-pool Library* is ironic because the displacement of vulnerability from early Renaissance saints and martyrs to a group of gay hustlers is culturally relevant; more so when the ensemble is commodified. Thus, the original vulnerability of a martyr, his body contours being exposed to the Other, loses significance not because he is sexualized (i.e., repeated/reproduced with a difference), but because he is devoid of his aura. That is the essential irony: the martyr is deprived of his original metaphysical vulnerability to be granted a new one in the form of black sexuality. Hence, the performers are not spectators of their vulnerability, as martyrs are alleged to be, but objects of consumption and desire. The prison bars imagery is homoerotic but not liberating because, despite its allegorical and ironic undertones, the scene puts forward the interracial power relations between the white narrator, Nantwich, and the non-white performers.

Nantwich’s imprisonment and subsequent social martyrdom after the “crusade to eradicate male vice” (Hollinghurst, 1998: 260) run by Will Beckwith’s grandfather draws on Lord Montagu’s case in the mid nineteen fifties. In its turn, Montagu’s imprisonment recalled Wilde’s for the same reason at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, there is a thread of (white) gays who, after being accused of pervert acts, have become galvanizers of change and hence narrated as martyrs and vice versa. Their sacrificial bodies “continue to resonate as symbols of social memory, partly due to the strategic work and pressures linked to broader institutional and reputational patterns present within cultural systems” (De Soucey et al., 2008: 114). The historical cases of Wilde and Montagu and their textual sequel in *The Swimming-pool Library* put forward white gays’ anxieties (or rather social anxieties about them) in comparison with black queers’ (such as the martyrs in Nantwich’s performance) unacknowledged anxieties and viewpoint.

Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child* delves deeper into martyrdom, recasting the homoerotic undertones of elegy and drawing on neo-Freudian trauma theory. The martyr is not an outcast, as the performers above, but an upper-class WWI hero by the name Cecil Valance, whom his surviving beloved, George Sawles, recalls throughout. Back in Two Acres, the Valances’ manor where Cecil and George first met, George pays a visit to the

family chapel and “Cecil’s effigy” (2011: 151). Once there, he cannot help admiring the piece:

Cecil’s *white* figure ... seem[ed] to float above the floor. ... Cecil was laid out in dress uniform The effigy lay on a plain white chest. ... It was a thoroughly dignified piece of work, in fact magnificently proper. ... It seemed to place Cecil in some floating cortège of knights and nobles reaching back through the centuries to the crusades. (152-4, emphasis added)

An idealized hero, he is de-corporealized after a resplendent lifeless iconography, which recalls Mathew Shepard’s. Cecil’s effigy lacks humanity because it is not him, as a martyr, who bears witness to his vulnerability. On the contrary, the excessive whiteness of the statue conveys how Western rationality conceives the hero as martyr. In this sense, the marbled icon is intended to represent transcendence over the bodily, as opposed to what happens with stereotypes of blackness. However, as George concedes, the effigy is a narrative failure (154), lacking the protagonist’s actual physicality. He cannot help recalling the untold story of Cecil’s nakedness, which summons and eludes memory alike. This imagery, “less seen than felt”, converges in “the heat of Cecil, the hair-raising beauty of his skin, of his warm waist under his shirt ... And then of course the celebrated ... the celebrated *membrum virile*, unguessed for ever beneath the marble tunic” (155). Thus, George unveils how (Cecil’s) sexuality is identified with vulnerability as exposure to the Other. Being conscious of one’s vulnerability favors relationality over rationality, which encourages bearing witness to (and working out) one’s humanness rather than acting out traumata. In other words, the ambivalence of the effigy puts forward the melancholic aporia of neo-Freudian theory, namely “its focus on anti-narrative, fragmented, modernist forms by pointing to similarities with the psychic experience of trauma as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma” (Craps, 2014: 50). The impossibility of ultimate knowing characteristic of trauma and the subsequent inaction, as conceived by Caruth (1996), is the aporia *The Stranger’s Child* performs: George’s trauma does not result from Cecil’s death, which is merely a symptom, but from the unutterability of the actual nature of their bond. In this sense, the elegiac undertones of George’s memory and of the marble itself respond to and explain the traumatic overlapping of saying and not saying, the utterable and the unutterable. George’s rapport with the effigy only recalls Cecil’s absence, the former’s haunting and the recurrent loss of their original encounter.

When a generation passes and Two Acres becomes a boarding-school for upper-class boys, the chapel and Cecil’s effigy lose meaning and its traumatic undertones pave the way for ironic re-interpretations. In the nineteen sixties, the protagonist is no longer a martyr-hero for the country to work out the traumata of war or act out homoerotic melancholia, as was in

the nineteen twenties: “It was evident that the tomb, which the school was more or less proud of, was ... a bit of a nuisance. The boys fixed pretend cigarettes between the poet’s marble lips, and one particularly stupid child long ago had carved his initials on the side of the chest” (348-9). The statue, originally erected to overcome vulnerability, eventually exposes and demystifies Cecil’s memory, the melancholia of his loss and the trauma of war. In other words, drawing on neo-Freudian trauma theory, the text plays with the fantasy of the extinction of the white male body from a hegemonic perspective.

The specular encounter between a transfixed Jesse Alonso and his father Robert’s self-portrait in *Rainbow Milk* summons up a similarly complex scene in Hollinghurst’s *The Sparsholt Affair*. David Sparsholt, an arriviste youth in the pre-WWII years, catches the attention of Peter Coyle, who captures the former’s beauty in a portrait while in Oxford. As happens with Cecil’s effigy, the portrait evolves throughout, exposing the sitter to different viewers as time passes. At first, David is the paradigm of male good looks: “Oh, yes, him!” a character of the novel says when “the source of the shadow moved slowly into view, a figure in a gleaming singlet, steadily lifting and lowering a pair of hand-weights” (2017: 5). That is, Sparsholt is quite a (homoerotic) optical delusion, “as if shaped from light himself” (5). As a working-class muscular boy, he is idealized and commodified by fellow Oxonians like Peter Coyle and his friend Evert. Indeed, drawing on the heroic iconography of early-century beefcake portraits, Peter overstates David’s corporeality on the canvas: “What he had created was a portrait of a demigod from neck to knee, the sex suggested by a little slur, conventional as a fig leaf, while the neck opened up into nothing, like the calyx of a flower” (35). Like Robert Alonso’s self-portrait in *Rainbow Milk*, Sparsholt’s is ambiguous, metaphysical and excessively corporeal at the same time, focusing on his torso and concealed genitalia leaving his face aside. However, the martyr-like poseur and object of desire of Hollinghurst’s novel is a white (allegedly) straight man.

Sparsholt’s portrait traverses generations, not without irony. When Johnny, David’s son, sees it, “a red chalk drawing of a naked man, with a body-builder’s chest and ridged stomach, artily cut off at the knee and the neck, and with a high-minded blur where the cock and balls should be,” he concludes “it could certainly never have hung in his father’s house” (170). In the meanwhile, the affair of the novel’s title is revealed as elusively as the portrait itself. Papparazzi took photos of David and some unnamed politician involved in a gay scandal in the nineteen sixties. Thus, the glorious gladiator, as Peter puts it when drawing Sparsholt, proves to be as vulnerable as Cecil Valance. He is not martyred as a war hero, but as an arriviste and scapegoat of socio-political hearsay to redeem more powerful men, like the politician he is involved with in the scandal. The poetics of redemption are not as powerful as in Wilde’s (and black Robert Alonso’s) case though, because Sparsholt (like Nantwich) is a survivor. However, his imagery and that of the portrait also change according to social morals

and aesthetics: from a desirable man to almost a blank, a symptom of the protagonist in sacrificial terms, socially ostracized and witness to his own downfall. When having a look at Coyle's portrait of Sparsholt, Cyril, the art dealer for whom Johnny works, argues: "What was more vulnerable than a painted surface, screened only by varnish which itself darkened and distorted and sometimes even damaged what it was meant to protect?" (199). The palimpsestuous relation between the painted surface and the varnish is as problematic as David's representation. I am using the palimpsest in metaphoric terms, as Sarah Dillon does when addressing the layers which compose it and "are ever ready for revival and resurrection" (2007: 28). As mentioned above, the model Coyle admires is elusive; a mix of what light projects and the painter's own desire, and hence the painting itself is a delusive reproduction vaguely reliant on his actual perception. This duality between the actual model and the prospect of re-presentation is evident in the painting and exceeds it as well. David's idealized body is as powerful as vulnerable, the varnish of desire which protects and sustains it in the first place (Coyle's intentionality and desire) paves the way for a nakedness which is more than physical, as patent in the transgenerational reception of the painting.

When Johnny, already a well-known portraitist, comes across his father's picture again in a gallery, he is much older and in company of his daughter Lucy. Johnny even fails to remember the artist of the "red drawing of a naked man" (2017: 368), while Ivan, a youth at the gallery concludes that –after mulling over the piece–: "It must have been some body-builder, a bit grotesque" (268). Coyle being forgotten and Sparsholt but a shadow haunted by an old scandal, the portrait works as their remaining trace, which underscores (their) vulnerability when exposed to new/other viewers. The revelation comes, however, at the very end of the novel, when Johnny visits Bella, a television star, to make a portrait of her and her family. At Bella's, he bumps into his father's portrait hung on the wall. Unlike Ivan years before at the gallery, the television anchor re-values the drawing: "There was a little teeter on the boundary between them, what could be said about so much muscular male flesh" (449). The contours of David's body on the drawing and those between the portrait and Bella and Johnny as spectators reflect each other, putting forward anew the vulnerability of the exposed body, worshipped and wounded over time. Unlike most martyr-like poseurs in Western literature, Sparsholt's erotically-charged imagery is not exotic, thus commodifying male whiteness. The ultimate exposure of his vanishing body takes place when Johnny confesses his relation with the sitter of the drawing. It is not so much of a classic revelation, because readers know the whole story. However, Johnny's confession is not, for this reason, less meaningful: "'I'd been looking at this picture for years at Evert's house without guessing what it was.' ... 'It's my father'" (449). The confession is a gesture of recognition and acknowledgement of (his distance from) his father. In summoning him as simultaneously bodily and elusive, there is an excess of presence and absence in Johnny's utterance. There are similarities between this Oedipal encounter and that between Jesse and Robert in

Rainbow Milk, but also, as will be shown, some notable differences. The wounds of David's portrait and scandal have healed (like those of Sir William Beckwith in *The Swimming-pool Library*) into an almost metaphysical trace characteristic of white martyrs. In fact, David's imagery evolves from sportive to almost martyr-like evanescence for the sake of the Establishment while non-white male bodies in Hollinghurst's fiction are never de-corporealized, but diseased and commodified as mentioned in the next paragraph.

The impact of AIDS is much more obvious in Hollinghurst's first novels than in the last ones, but different, in any case, from its treatment in *Rainbow Milk*. Drawing on Brett Krutzsch (2019), gays often have to die and become martyrs "to be normal" and redeem themselves, the case of AIDS being paradigmatic. However, when it comes to the representation of the disease in Hollinghurst's novels, race is a crucial factor. Whites, such as Will Beckwith, the best friend and occasional lover of Edward Manners—the protagonist of *The Folding Star*—and Nick Guest in *The Line of Beauty*, are supposed to be affected by or (in the second case) die of AIDS, but the disease is never addressed directly. However, Guest's lovers, Leo, a black guy, and Lebanese millionaire Wani, are overtly affected by the disease. In order to sublimate the bodily effects of AIDS, these novels exploit numerous metaphors which, drawing on Susan Sontag (2009), work as symptoms of the disease—especially bodily marks, mirrors, fluid scenarios, threatening documents and videos, and perfumes—and its traumatic aporia for the protagonists to work it out. Most of these characters are wounded and vulnerable as their bodies and traumata are exposed to others. Indeed, there is usually a threatening underside to pleasure in Hollinghurst's texts, as Will Beckwith announces at the beginning of *The Swimming-pool Library* (3). The fact that the AIDS crisis is not uttered in *The Stranger's Child* and *The Sparsholt Affair* does not mean it is absent. Both novels feature gay or bisexual characters, particularly (though by no means exclusively) Cecil Valance and David Sparsholt, as signs of a trauma larger than themselves in allegorical terms. They re-appropriate the hero-martyr iconography without its redemptive promise because their imagery fails to survive time. Thus, their artistic representations act out their sexual inarticulacy, hiding in both cases their homosexual drives from the public eye. Cecil's poem to George's sister and his effigy, and David's eroticized chalk drawing are the traces where their unutterable sexuality and the discursive effects of AIDS are acted out. In other words, in transmitting their crypt to their descendants, they draw on neo-Freudian transgenerational trauma and address old and new crises vicariously, AIDS being just one of them. Thus, Paul Bryant, Cecil's second-rate biographer in the nineties, tries to re-model the poet's biography according to queer politics, though permanently acting out the pre-war elegiac poem. As for Johnny Sparsholt and his friends, they continue acting out the inarticulacy of David's portrait, especially when encountered by his son. The wounds are open and the new generation, albeit sexually liberated, remains stuck, unable to find

redemption. They go on looking at the original traumatic event (here represented in a poem and a portrait respectively) which haunts the new generation in neo-Freudian terms.

3. MARTYRDOM IN *RAINBOW MILK*

3.1. Martyrdom and Empathy

Rainbow Milk tells the semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story of Jesse Alonso, a youth of Jamaican descent, who is kicked out by his white stepfather and black mother from his Jehovah Witnesses' community in the Black Country.¹ In the next entry (the novel is arranged in the form of a third-person diary), he is out of the closet and works as a sex worker in London. Thus, the Windrush third generation feels compelled, like their ancestors, but now from the periphery (i.e., the Black Country) to find a place, but also discrimination, in the Metropolis.² The first section of the novel, set in the late nineteen fifties, is narrated by Norman Alonso, when he arrives in England with his family from Jamaica to have a better life and in response to Britain's need of workforce in the nineteen fifties. Both stories coalesce at the end, when Jesse finds out his biological father Robert, Norman's son, was a queer black artist who died of AIDS. Jesse's coming to terms with his Christian upbringing, non-normative sexuality and blackness constitutes a traumatic process that allegedly ends up when he meets his boyfriend Owen, a white professor, and re-encounters his father's family. The protagonist's dissociation from his household is articulated in different scenes along the novel. Yet, it is his epiphanic discovery of his father's self-portrait that is especially noteworthy because, as will be shown in this article, it updates the poetics of trauma and martyrdom in Hollinghurst's novels.

The first time Jesse catches a glimpse of his father is when he comes across the photo:

of a young man in a white shirt, ... looking up at the light coming from the window. Jesse studied the picture very closely, squinting his eyes as if they were out of focus He studied the shape of the man's eyes Jesse also had thick eyebrows, similar-shaped eyes, and high cheekbones. He didn't look like his mother. If he could get to a mirror. (2020: 133)

His mother's reaction is violent because she obviously intends to keep her past secret in the chest of drawers. However, the process of Jesse's self-recognition in his father starts. Both are displaced children: Norman, because his parents died at a very young age and was interned in a boarding school/foster care, and Jesse, because his white stepfather and black mother neglected him. Hence, father and son share a sense of rootlessness and non-belonging common in the Windrush generation and especially acute in their case, as members of dysfunctional families and as black queers. The spark of mutual recognition is ignited and Jesse's quest is unstoppable even though his first reaction dissolves into nothingness,

pretending “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” (133). Jesse’s death drive is closely related to self-hatred, his mother having “withdrawn” her blackness when marrying a white man, becoming a Jehovah witness and relinquishing her son. In any case, she keeps the photo as a crypt haunting her from the past she wants but cannot overcome. Only when the photo is decrypted can she rip it in two. By then, nevertheless, he has scrunched his eyes “to always retain it in his mind” (133). Robert’s fetishized black body is thus a present absence for the rest of the novel, which materializes and eludes itself especially in his self-portrait.

The first time Jesse sees his father’s portrait is at Thurston’s, one of his first clients in London. There are some portraits of male bodies on the walls, but one catches the youth’s attention:

A black male nude, his dick lazing across the thigh, clutching a large blood-red flower in his hand, the red paint dripping down his forearm as if he’d stigmatized himself on a thorn. It stung Jesse immediately, as if he had driven a pin right into the centre of his own palm. (54)

The scene recalls similar encounters in Hollinghurst’s novels. However, Mendez’s protagonist does not commodify the other. Instead, he feels identified with his martyred father impersonating Christ to the point of sharing the stigma. His rapport with the painting is ambiguous, hinting at transgenerational or insidious cultural traumata, but, very especially, at uncanny empathy. The novel does not feature a martyr acting out and witnessing his vulnerability, but the specular encounter between Jesse and his father’s self-portrait. This puts forward the ambivalence of both men as martyrs, being witnesses and performers of each other’s pain.

Lewis Ward highlights the fact that, unlike the identifying drive of sympathy, empathy refers to one’s capacity to understand and share the feelings of others. Thus, the logic of empathy relies on “a dual structure, a movement both towards and away, which forms a simultaneous gesture of proximity (identification, subjectivity) and distance (objectivity, critical understanding)” (2012: 3). This duality supports and explains LaCapra’s “empathic unsettlement” against the witness’s over-identification and appropriation of the other’s trauma. In other words, LaCapra argues for relationality in trauma narratives, which should recognize “the implication of the observer in the observed” (2001: 36). Yet, it is debatable whether it is Jesse or Robert who observes in *Rainbow Milk*. Unlike the unidirectional standpoint of Hollinghurst’s white narrators and characters, Mendez’s novel argues for a bidirectional encounter and gaze. In feeling the stigmata of his father in the portrait, Jesse feels sympathy and empathy because there is a mutual recognition of (and identification with) the other’s vulnerability as black and queer in a mostly white country.

The conflicts between empathy and sympathy, acting-out and working-through, and eventually the unutterability/unspeakability of the martyr's vulnerability are addressed in Hollinghurst's and Mendez's novels. However, their implication, articulation and effects in reference to traumatic events "involving victimization" (LaCapra, 2001: 78) such as sexuality and racism are divergent. Hollinghurst's narrators focus on white gays' anxieties based on sexual orientation, generally overlooking the vulnerability (or at least the viewpoint) of non-whites. In this sense, his narrators do not necessarily identify with the other's pain and hence do not "confuse one's voice or position with the victim nor seek facile uplift, harmonization, or closure but allow the unsettlement that they address to affect the narrative's own movement" (78). The distance with the other is too obvious to speak of empathy, let alone over-empathy, and therefore argue for empathic unsettlement. White narrators and/or characters act out their traumata in the first person and commodify non-Western Others, thus discarding their voices and specific traumata. The case of Mendez's novel is of a different nature because it revises the articulation of witnessing and appropriation at work in the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation to meet new political ends. This intersectionality must be placed in context, namely the redefinition of black masculinities.

3.2. Martyrdom in Black/Queer Terms

Jesse's symbolic reunion with his father through his self-portrait addresses homoeroticism, queer genealogy and AIDS from a post-traumatic and post-colonial perspective. Indeed, the painting compels the protagonist to work through his black queer identity and redeem his family and community history. In other words, the neo-Freudian transgenerational trauma that traps Hollinghurst's characters is recast in more effective and promising terms in *Rainbow Milk*. In *The Swimming-pool Library*, Will Beckwith concludes, in reference to the biography he is commissioned to write about a homosexual his grandfather imprisoned decades before: "All I could write now ... would be a book about why I couldn't write the book" (1998: 281); his words address Cathy Caruth's aporic trauma, namely Will's impossibility to know and hence represent the traumatic event. The discursive character of aporia does not operate in Mendez's novel where Jesse works through his father's loss. The corporeality of Robert's portrait, as mentioned above, appeals to Jesse, physically and metaphysically and is, in its turn, informed by the youth's hybridity. In admiring the portrait for the first time, the protagonist feels his father's Christ-like pain, his "ribs showing, blood draining down [his] stretched-up arms, thick pins driven through [his] palms into stakes" (2020: 55). There is empathy and sympathy (i.e., understanding and identification) in this encounter because he bears witness to his father's pain, which he reclaims as his pain in genealogical and cultural terms as a queer black. Christ's martyrdom is paradigmatic of Western metaphysical culture, but a problematic referent for Jesse. Indeed, his status is too

complex, “being a black boy trying to be a white boy trying to be a black boy” (93); hence, Christ’s martyrdom is both his own and not his own, a repetition with a difference. Be it as it may, as a black man, he is always reminded of his awkward status in his (Jehovah Witnesses) community. It is in this sense that he appropriates what he is denied as a “native” (albeit black) Christian, namely the radical relationality and alterity of Christ’s body and discourse. He is thus arguing for the representation of Christ’s otherness, as it is denied in traditional Christian iconography. In consequence, Jesse’s *Bildungsroman* breaks with the conventional one, which chronologically delimits the hero’s individuation process. In his case, there is no actual resolution since his identity is more problematic and open at the end than at the beginning, for he begins to come to terms with his hybridity. His father cannot bear witness to his own martyrdom, but act it out on the canvas, until Jesse bumps into the portrait and recognizes the Other’s blackness and his own in a British post-imperial context.

Conroy, a member of the “cool” black community in London (252), tells Jesse about his father; he was an outsider who “hung around the [artistic] scene” after a difficult life “in and out of foster care as a teenager” (263). This is how the protagonist begins to fill the void of his father and of his community. Although the Civil Rights movement for blacks was particularly relevant in the USA, there were some analogous manifestations in Britain. Thus, when Jesse asks Conroy whether he was part of the “Blk Art Group” (263), the understatement is the cultural impact of this group in the British black community. It can be argued that Conroy’s (and probably Robert Alonso’s) adscription to Blk Art is related to what in the USA was called the soul era, i.e., the cultural expression of the Civil Rights movement. In the American context, Richard Schur points out:

Civil Rights era artists, such as Charles White, created images that demonstrated the humanity of African Americans to break down the barriers of segregation. White relied on tragic modes to narrate and visualize African American experiences, to lift up the race, and to challenge white supremacy. ... Defiant and angry, the Civil Rights era work, especially at the height of the Black Power movement, implicitly assumed that visual imagery could alter social relations and the world. It emphasized the struggles of romantic heroes against a racist society, knowing what needs to be done and demanding immediate change. (2007: 641)

It is not stated whether blacks like Conroy and Alonso believed in a specific black culture –as understood in the soul-era– to transform the status quo. However, Jesse’s father’s only traces are his portraits, which feature himself as a black Christ, a struggling romantic hero, and Othello. The romantic hero or martyr is by definition wounded, exposed to the Other, and therefore an artistic and political instrument of revolution. In appropriating the imagery of Christ and the romantic hero to address AIDS and blackness, Alonso’s self-portraits problematize the ethos of the Civil Rights era. Indeed, his self-sexualization and Christ-like

impersonation –“a thorn pricking the palm, blood dripping down the forearm” (263)– is nuanced by the effects of AIDS. As Conroy points out: “He said he was painting again, to document the process of his illness. ... ‘He had AIDS’” (263). In mixing AIDS with Christ’s martyred iconography, Robert’s painting challenges the widespread association of (queer) black males with the disease in the nineteen eighties and nineties (Icard, Schilling, El-Bassel & Young, 1992; Whitehead, 1997; Braithwaite, Griffin, Sumpter-Gaddist & Murdaugh, 1998; Lynn, 2000; Harper, Terry & Wiggs, 2009). Thus, *Rainbow Milk* breaks with simplistic and stereotypical accounts of black masculinity.

Robert’s portrait is paradoxically entitled *Othello*. In Shakespeare’s tragedy, the moor of the title (apparently at least) complies with Western stereotypes of non-white masculinity, especially “brutishness and irrationality”. Indeed, Othello’s baseless jealousy of his white wife ends up in murder: “O perjured woman [Desdemona], thou dost stone my heart, And mak’st me call what I intend to do a murder, which I thought a sacrifice” (V.ii.). Othello is not the erotized “martyr,” as Robert is in his eponymous portrait, but the active agent who commits a crime. In this same line of deconstructing Shakespeare’s character and current stereotypes of black male violence and death, Jesse attends a new version of *Othello*. In it, black and mixed raced characters perform the major roles so that gender and race stereotypes are allegedly disabled (281). The protagonist argues he likes “the commentary on colourism and social class” but he dislikes “the way the white man [Iago] was seen to get away with it at the end” (281). In other words, Jesse is not easily satisfied with a revision of a classic from a politically correct standpoint that still assumes white supremacy.

The representation of blackness in *Rainbow Milk* exceeds exclusively black cultural referents, welcoming hybridization and the fragmentation of blackness into many different blacknesses: Blackness cannot be reduced to a simple unified model any longer when black diversity (economic, political, cultural etc.) is too complex. Although Jesse is raised unaware of his roots, his rootlessness becomes his driving force to come to himself. His dialogue with his father’s portrait returns them to their original British-Jamaican community and helps the protagonist to interrogate their black and queer identity. As mentioned above, Maraj, Prasad and Roundtree revise the straight-jacketed conception of black masculinity in the Civil Rights era since “the conceptual violence of such ideals of masculine charisma, Edwards argues, is ‘the reinscription of gender and sexual normativities’” (2019: n.p.). Drawing on queer black feminist criticism, they stress the need to open the scope of blackness to accommodate its multiplicity. In this line, according to Alicia Garza, #BlackLivesMatter “affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum” (2014). Although #BlackLivesMatter is a neatly American movement, it addresses the diversity of blackness beyond male active charismatic leaders or passive objects of desire and female martyrs in a worldwide context that *Rainbow Milk* portrays.

The study of Moji Anderson et al. on Caribbean males having sex with other males in London is particularly relevant because it places Jesse's experience in context. In their view, "due to anti-homosexual hostility their identities remain unresolved and they are thus placed in a liminal, unstable position" (2009: 315). Drawing on previous studies on African-American males, Anderson et al. explore whether gay Caribbeans confront more difficulties to come to terms with their sexuality than their white counterparts because of "(1) religious beliefs and (2) conflict with racial identity - that is, the belief within this group that Black identity should exclude homosexuality (Alston, 1974; Icard, 1986; Ernst et al., 1991; Lewis, 2003)" (316). The cases of Jesse and his father are paradigmatic of this liminal status which compels them to adjust their identities. As for religion, Jesse rejects it—rather than rejecting homosexuality or compartmentalize his life (using Rodriguez and Ouellette's taxonomy, 2000)—because he is rejected by his religious community. As for racial identity, Jesse does what Moji Anderson et al. call "re-incorporation"; that is, re-integrate one's identity with the community one comes from (2020: 317). In this sense, Jesse comes back to his father's family once he has integrated his sexuality and cultural origins with Owen and a new generation of youths of Jamaican descent (322-6). In returning to his father's family without rejecting his sexuality, Jesse also vindicates his father's identity. The process of "re-incorporation" starts in (but exceeds) Jesse's encounter with his father's self-portrait who, being gay and seriously diseased of AIDS, ends up being a social outcast. Although heterosexism, especially that of Jesse's mother and stepfather, almost suppresses Robert's memory, Jesse eventually unearths him and a whole genealogy of sexual dissidents among the Jamaican and Jamaican-descended community. Thus, the youth gains agency, though of a different nature to that conventionally associated with black males, and re-signifies black commodification looking at the body (black or white) from a black perspective. Marcia Sutherland explains how "the special challenges faced by African Caribbean men have implications for their interpersonal relationships with African Caribbean women and children" (2006: 46). Robert Alonso faces up these challenges and that of being a gay, which also determines Jesse's role in a society that still pigeonholes and discriminates the Windrush generation and its descendants.

4. CONCLUSION

Hollingshurst's conception of martyrdom draws on the elegiac and heroic (albeit not without irony) when it comes to narrators and protagonists, all of them Western whites. Their tone is melancholic because they long for the "august, masculine atmosphere of a better age" (2000: 133), as Evelyn Waugh (a tutelary spirit along Hollingshurst's career) puts it in *Brideshead Revisited*. However, the vulnerability of non-white characters is fetishized and commodified in interracial bonds always rendered from the perspective of Western narrators, especially in

The Swimming-pool Library, *The Folding Star*, *The Spell* and *The Line of Beauty*. In other words, in Hollinghurst's novels, white (mostly) gay characters control the trauma narratives of martyrdom of non-whites and bear witness to their own suffering as the Other within. They are performers and victims of traumatic events such as AIDS, homophobic prosecution and social ostracism. As pointed out above, this dual role is in line with the melancholia of neo-Freudian trauma theory. Hollinghurst's main characters, starting with Will Beckwith, are stuck between the need and the impossibility of uttering the traumata they are haunted by. As for the protagonists' non-white lovers, they are denied this aporia. They may be victims of traumas alike, but their traumas are rendered and appropriated by their white counterparts.

In contrast with Hollinghurst's narrators and protagonists, Mendez's narrator challenges the black stereotypes and monolithic identity which informed the coming of African Caribbeans after WWII and still informs the Britain of the Windrush scandal and Brexit. *Rainbow Milk* addresses the multiplicity of blackness(es) in post-colonial UK, especially when interlocked with queerness. The protagonist of the novel cannot fully bear witness to his vulnerability until he understands the implications of interracial desire and the articulation of queerness in Jamaicans and their descendants in Britain. His father's self-portrait, Othello, is named after the rose he holds, but is also related to Shakespeare's play. As a matter of fact, Jesse dislikes the politically correct performance of Othello, which includes black and mixed-race actors, because he feels it is just a performance with no effect on real life (266). It is in this sense that Mendez's novel performs ironically to expose not only black/queer vulnerability but the performative practices responsible for power representation and actual discrimination. Despite the use of irony, realism is reinvigorated to address an ethical and political emergency, as Mendez text claims for empathy and sympathy of the Other to further active engagement. Jesse takes control, directing the Western gaze towards the (black/queer) Other as martyr and addressing the accountability of mainstream (i.e., Western) discourses. Hence, it is significant how *Rainbow Milk* converses with and exceeds the artistic representation of the male body and vulnerability in Hollinghurst's AIDS and post-AIDS gayness. The final effect is a redemptive and resurrectional individuation process not in metaphysical, but in relational, terms.

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NOTES

¹ The Black Country refers to an area of the East Midlands in the UK. The name comes from the nineteenth century, when the area was popular for its mining industry. In making the Black Country the place where Jesse's grandparents arrive as part of the so-called Windrush generation (i.e., Caribbean immigrants arriving in the UK after WWII), *Rainbow Milk* points to the racist undertones of the immigration process and the indelible binary Metropolis-peripheries.

² The effect of the Windrush Scandal (whereby “hundreds of Commonwealth citizens [...] were] wrongly detained, deported and denied legal rights” JCWI: n.p.) in 2018 must be taken into account to understand Jesse's family story.

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