

# “Decolorized for Popular Appeal”

## ‘True’ Stories of African American Homelessness

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### INTRODUCTION

If George Dawes Green had published his mystery novel *The Caveman’s Valentine* within the past decade and not in 1995, one might be tempted to accuse him of rather crude plagiarism. Its main character is a homeless African American man in his fifties who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. He turns out to be an incredibly talented pianist who used to study at a world-renowned conservatory, Juilliard’s music division, and we learn that prior to the beginning of the story his illness first made it impossible for him to graduate and ultimately rendered him unfit for what is usually considered a regular life altogether. For the entire diegetic time, he lives in a cave in New York City’s Inwood Park and refuses all attempts to ‘reintegrate’ him into society.

More than ten years after the publication of Green’s novel, *LA Times* columnist Steve Lopez met a homeless African American man in downtown Los Angeles. Nathaniel Ayers is 54 years old at the time, plays the violin and turns out to be a highly-gifted Juilliard dropout who has been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Ayers’s illness has prevented him from graduating, and when Lopez first meets him, he insists on sleeping outside and playing music in a noisy tunnel. Lopez repeatedly wrote about Ayers in his column and also contacted his family, who assured him of their efforts to convince Nathaniel to return to sleeping indoors and recommence his medication. Lopez published a much-noticed book, *The Soloist*, about

his friendship with Ayers in 2008. A movie adaptation came out the following year, starring Jamie Foxx and Robert Downey Jr.

Musical geniuses, it seems safe to assume even without solid data on the topic, make up only a fraction of the American inner-city homeless population. Black Juilliard alumni (or dropouts) are also not exactly abundant; African American students currently make up between 3 percent and 4.2 percent of the school's student body, which makes Blacks the second-smallest ethnic group among Juilliard students after Native Alaskan and/or Native Hawaiian.<sup>1</sup> And while mental illness has been a significant factor for many Americans in becoming homeless and not finding their way back into regular housing,<sup>2</sup> psychotic disorders and their borderline symptoms are in many cases compounded not just by lack of access to medical treatment, but also by increased substance abuse, self-medication, and addiction.<sup>3</sup>

The conspicuous parallels between Green's fictional and Lopez's factual character suggest that the two books draw on some sort of 'type' or cultural staple, namely the mad-genius stereotype. In what follows, I will discuss the use of the mad-genius trope in allegedly "true" stories about black homelessness from different media in the context of Pierre Bourdieu's critique of the notion of the "uncreated creator" on which the myth of genius is built (cf. *Cultural Production* 139). The "substantialist mode of thought," as Bourdieu writes with reference to Ernst Cassirer, dominates the field of cultural and artistic production more blatantly than most other areas of social and cultural reality (*Sociology* 29). Its tendency "to foreground the

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- 1 According to colleges.niche.com and collegefactual.com, respectively. These numbers refer to the entire student body of all Juilliard divisions, including the music school.
  - 2 In *The Insanity Offense: How America's Failure to Treat the Seriously Mentally Ill Endangers Its Citizens*, E. Fuller Torrey refers to a number of studies reporting that one-third of homeless men and two-thirds of homeless women suffer from severe psychiatric disorders. He also quotes a study of chronic, long-term homelessness conducted in Miami which found that "every one of them was mentally ill" (123-24).
  - 3 According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, roughly half of all mentally ill urban homeless in the U.S. suffer from substance abuse and addiction, many of them self-medicating with street drugs. African Americans are even more over-represented in this group than other minorities ("Mental Illness").

individual [...] at the expense of the structural relations [...] between social positions” is reflected in this field’s *doxic* belief in “unique creators” that are “irreducible to any condition or conditioning” (29). This insistence on unconditioned, “uncreated” creativity informs the mad-genius stereotype in particular because it presupposes a relation of mutual dependence between giftedness and inherent (and thus naturalized) illness. It therefore dismisses out of hand any attempt at situating both artist and artwork within the context of the conditions that rendered them possible and of the structures of which they are the product.

While the texts analyzed here are in one way or another self-proclaimed “true stories” of African American homeless persons,<sup>4</sup> I use Green’s work of fiction as a point of departure not just for the above described parallels. In addition to these similarities between Green’s and Lopez’s books, the novel includes one scene that anticipates my essential argument here and boils it down to one ideologically charged motto: Romulus Ledbetter, the mystery novel’s protagonist and homeless would-be detective has a television set in his cave. The device does not work in the technical sense, of course, since the cave has no electricity. Romulus’s schizophrenic mind, however, fabricates hallucinatory television programs that sometimes reveal parts of the character’s pre-diegetic past. On one of these TV nights, Romulus believes to be watching a film starring Steve McQueen and Ali MacGraw, a reference to *The Getaway*, Sam Peckinpah’s 1972 road-movie gangster drama.<sup>5</sup> The film’s plot, however, rendered through the filter of Romulus’s perspective, bears no resemblance to *The Getaway* but tells the story of a young music student at Juilliard, who drops out of school because

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4 To be more precise: All homeless characters in these texts are male, as is the case for the vast majority of fictional representations of homelessness. To find accounts of the experiences of homeless women with psychotic disorders, one could turn to Tanya Marie Luhrmann’s ethnographic studies, e.g., “Down and Out in Chicago” (2010).

5 The chapter featuring this made-up film provides information about Romulus’s early years at Juilliard and about his marriage. McQueen’s and MacGraw’s disastrous real-life marriage, their characters’ turbulent and often dysfunctional marriage in *The Getaway*, and also their public personae as the epitomes of rebellious masculinity and tragic feminine beauty provide insight into Romulus’s self-image and his analysis of his own biography.

his girlfriend is pregnant. Despite its two white leading actors, it is suggested that the film's male hero is "in fact supposed to be a young black man," that "his great-grandfather had been a slave," and that the composer is "treated like family" in Harlem (*Caveman's Valentine* 43). His social and physical downfall from promising musical talent to homeless madman being unappealing enough, the poor black musician from the Bronx is represented in Romulus's imagined movie by one of Hollywood's most iconically masculine white stars. A caption flashing on the screen definitively drives home the reason for this choice of cast, informing the viewer – or, rather, the reader – that "this movie ha[s] been DECOLORIZED FOR POPULAR APPEAL" (43).

This slogan pointedly summarizes the effect of framing the narratives discussed here as "true stories" of individual pathologies. I will argue that what these depictions achieve by foregrounding the giftedness and mental illness of their characters serves the purpose of fading out the racist and classist challenges these characters face in their lived realities. The narrative frame of the mad genius provides a well-known type of tragic hero that allows these stories to superficially make black homelessness more visible while avoiding a discussion of systemic conditions.

In order to be palatable for a mass audience, African American homeless characters must be framed in a particular – and particularly narrow – way. It's not a story about *that* kind of homeless guy, these texts suggest. Instead, they offer an easier to swallow tidbit of truth in the form of alternately pitiable (for their mental illness or bad luck) and admirable (for their genius and/or their resilience) individuals. Yet, these stories nonetheless claim to offer a piece of truth since they all are being marketed as either 'inspired by a true story' or as the direct or adapted results of journalistic production. While apparently zooming in on an especially devastating aspect of America's rapidly growing issues of mass poverty and social, political, and cultural neglect of the poor – particularly if they are people of color (cf. APA; Gradín; Institute for Research on Poverty) – these texts provide their audiences with an alternative perspective of black homelessness in which criminalization, racial profiling, and the reach of the prison system are relegated to the margins. The audience's attention is instead drawn to the extraordinary yet conceptually familiar individual whose giftedness and social invalidity are mutually dependent and hence form a

perfectly circular system that seems to function without any outside (social, systemic) influences.

## HOMELESS, GIFTED, AND BLACK

Cultural articulations of homelessness since the late 19th century have, for the most part, represented unhoused characters as white and male. When public discussions about the socio-economic plight of the extremely poor began to identify the unstable housing situation of a growing number of Americans as an issue of national importance during the 1870s, African Americans were already “a significant presence” within the homeless population (Hopper and Milburn 124). Yet, as Kenneth Kusmer has shown, the public image of a typical homeless person remained that of a white male until the 1960s, rendering homeless Blacks even less visible than white street dwellers. Nowadays, however, no group is as overrepresented among the homeless in the U.S. as African Americans. It is estimated that forty percent of the entire homeless population in the U.S. and more than fifty-six percent of those who experience long-term and chronic homelessness are black (cf. NCH, “How Many People”; SAMHSA).

A number of historical, political, and legal factors play into this imbalance. In *Slavery by Another Name*, Douglas Blackmon unravels the extensive perpetuation of the structures that shaped slave-based economies in the South well into the 20th century and that contributed greatly to processes of ghettoization and the precarious housing situation of an disproportional number of African Americans, as well as to the systematic criminalization of poor Blacks moving freely in public spaces. Thus, the postbellum vagrancy laws in former slave states were designed specifically to target African Americans and sentence them to what essentially amounted to slave labor (cf. Blackmon). Today’s staggering incarceration rate among African Americans is in part a direct result of this deliberate criminalization. The U.S. prison system, including the laws and legal practices facilitating it, in turn fuels the increase of homelessness rates by releasing inmates into a life in which they are often legally barred from employment or housing.<sup>6</sup> “The

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6 Ava DuVernay’s documentary film *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016) takes on the interconnections between the U.S. criminal justice system and racial inequality. Featuring scholars

racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature,” as Michelle Alexander notes in her groundbreaking study of 2010, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (6). A similar claim could be made for homelessness.

While literature and film seldom feature homeless protagonists, un-housed African American characters are particularly rare given the demographic reality, which renders the similarities in those few representations all the more salient. Looking at cultural articulations of black homeless persons of the past two decades, both fictional and allegedly factual, one cannot but notice a tendency toward narratives that center on giftedness and special talents. One example of great popular success is Gabriele Muccino’s overachiever drama *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), which claims to be “inspired by a true story” about its protagonist, Chris Gardner (Will Smith).<sup>7</sup> The film follows the improbable career of a single father who goes from lining up outside San Francisco’s homeless shelters while taking care of his infant son to becoming a successful stock broker. The hyperbolic emphasis on an extraordinary individual’s personal success story certainly comes as no surprise in a high-profile Hollywood production, but Muccino’s film deserves to be mentioned in the context of how American popular culture represents black homelessness due to its strong reliance on its main character’s unusual capabilities.

*The Pursuit of Happyness* only brings up in passing the interrelations of mental health and destitution: as a foil against which the protagonist’s resilience can shine even brighter. A secondary character (played by Kevin West) personifies the stereotype of a mentally confused hippie roaming the streets of San Francisco. He mistakes Gardner’s bone-density scanner for a “time machine” with which he wishes to travel back to the 1960s. First introduced in a scene that shows Gardner waiting for and then riding a bus, the homeless man’s constant jabber about the “time machine” provides a

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like Michelle Alexander, Angela Davis, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the film was widely released on the online streaming platform Netflix, which makes it available to subscribers worldwide, perhaps an indicator that this topic is beginning to receive more popular attention.

7 With a box-office result of over \$26 million during its opening week, *The Pursuit of Happyness* compares to *The Departed* or *The Devil Wears Prada*, which also came to theaters in 2006.

basis for the protagonist's aversion against public transportation. The homeless hippie returns later in the film when he is in possession of the lost bone-density scanner that Gardner has to wrestle from him in another scene of public humiliation. The clownish role amounts to little more than a parody of Bay Area hippie culture. Like other homeless characters in the film – e.g., the man who picks a fight with Gardner while they wait in line at a homeless shelter – the character has little to no impact on the story itself but merely showcases what a nuisance homeless people are for Gardner and how admirably he shoulders the mental, emotional, and physical burden of his situation. Chris Gardner could have gone mad, this tells us, but he didn't. Instead, he puts his extraordinary intelligence to good use – demonstrations of which culminate in his solving the Rubik's Cube puzzle and thereby securing an interview for an internship – and becomes a stock broker, i.e., a representative of the profession widely blamed for laying the foundation for and then accelerating the most recent housing market crisis and financial meltdown<sup>8</sup> that led to over four million home foreclosures in the U.S. between 2008 and 2011 alone (cf. Bennett).

Certain forms of fusing individualization with pathologization, in the way that *The Caveman's Valentine* and *The Soloist* do, loom large in narratives of black homelessness. Most recently, Ted "Golden Voice" Williams leapt to fame in 2011, at age 53, after a video interview with the then homeless man was published by the *Columbus Dispatch* and later on *YouTube*. His unusual vocal skill has dominated Williams's self-presentation as well as the narratives that various media have based on his persona. The other two aspects of Williams's biography that define his public image are his drug and alcohol addiction and his homelessness. A voice-over artist by training, Williams struggled with addiction, lost his house, and was homeless for over 15 years. The media reported extensively on his return to middle-class living standards, his job opportunities, the emotional reunion with

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8 Economist Josh Bivens, among others, speaks out against the notion that the financial meltdown of 2008 was an unpredictable and inevitable event within a complex system: "The economy that [...] turned a housing bubble into an economic catastrophe was [...] designed, specifically, to guarantee that the powerful reaped a larger share of the rewards of overall economic growth" (9). See also Calomiris and Haber; Stiglitz.

his mother, his relapse and subsequent rehabilitation program, and his wedding in 2014.

While the character of Nathaniel Ayers in *The Soloist* suffers from a psychotic disease that fits snugly into the framework of madness and the mad-genius trope, Ted Williams's struggle with addiction does not lend itself so well to the ambiguous fascination with ingenious madness but leans more toward the abject end of the illness spectrum. A BBC report of 2011 – apparently unaware of the real-life basis for the film – goes as far as explicitly comparing the internet sensation Ted Williams to the movie adaptation of *The Soloist*, claiming that Williams's story was “a remarkable case of life imitating art” and asking if, based on the parallels between the “golden voice” media coverage and the movie, Williams's fame was “too good to be true.” This slightly hypocritical attempt at criticizing the media's tendency to overemphasize personal tragedy and success for the sake of a heartwarming story – the BBC is cashing in on the sensationalism, too, after all – addresses by proxy (through an internet commentator's video footage) how a discussion about the increase in poverty and homelessness is notably absent from most of the media coverage on Ted Williams, but then does not engage in or initiate such a discussion. Williams's mental health issues are subsumed under his “checkered past,” accompanied by Roger Miller's sentimental hobo song “King of the Road.” The reality for the thousands of mentally ill homeless in the U.S., however, bears little resemblance to the fiction of a freedom-loving hobo life celebrated in Miller's song.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness and mental illness are in many cases mutually dependent. Being homeless poses a severe mental health risk, and mental illness in turn increases the risk of becoming homeless. This correlation does not merely stem from the social, economic, physical, and psychological strains of living on the street or the many challenges that accompany mental illness and make it difficult to secure one's income and housing. Political and legal changes are decisive factors, particularly in the U.S. with its political developments of the last decades that relieved the federal and state governments of many responsibilities with regard to mental health care. The

systematic deinstitutionalization of psychiatric patients since the 1960s has contributed considerably to what E. Fuller Torrey calls “the rise of mass homelessness” (*The Insanity Offense* 124). Under the Community Mental Health Act of 1963, public psychiatric hospitals were closed and funding moved instead to community mental health centers. With the introduction of Medicaid and Medicare many states passed legislations modelled after California’s Lanterman-Petris-Short Act, which regulates involuntary civil commitment to mental health institutions and involuntary assistance or medication. These policies make it extremely difficult to institutionalize or medicate even severely psychotic persons against their will.<sup>9</sup>

Deinstitutionalization works in two stages: First, patients are discharged from public institutions, most of which are then closed down afterwards. As Torrey writes, “[t]he former affects people who are already mentally ill. The latter affects those who become ill after the policy has gone into effect and for the indefinite future because hospital beds have been permanently eliminated” (*Out of the Shadows* 8). By the 1980s, after the Reagan administration had repealed Carter’s Mental Health Systems Act (thus defunding many of the already underfinanced community mental health centers), the “overtly psychotic” homeless who could not or did not want to find adequate care were “politicized, provoking major debates regarding their numbers, their origin, and the relative responsibility of local, state, and federal governments for their care.” “By the turn of this century,” thus Torrey, “the homeless were no longer causes célèbres, having quietly blended into urban landscapes like abandoned cars or rundown buildings” (*The Insanity Offense* 124).<sup>10</sup>

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9 To illustrate the at times absurd consequences of these legislations, Torrey recounts the case of a mentally ill homeless man in Augusta, Maine, whose chosen abode resembles that of Green’s protagonist in *The Caveman’s Valentine*: “Randy Reed, a forty-three-year-old man, dug out a cave-like home for himself on the banks of the Kennebec River. Mental health outreach workers and police were aware of Reed and offered him help, but he refused [...] Reed continued enlarging his home to the point that it eventually undermined a city parking lot, causing it to sag. Reed was then deemed eligible for psychiatric commitment because of the danger posed to the parking lot, not to Reed himself.” (126-27)

10 The results officially intended by these policies failed to materialize in most regards, as Daniel Yohanna points out: “Three forces drove the movement of peo-

Homelessness and mental illness are interrelated; homelessness and prison also have a strong correlation; and to come full circle, mental illness ties in with incarceration as well. 45 percent of federal prison inmates and 64 percent of local jail inmates have been reported to suffer from mental health problems (cf. James and Glaze). “America’s jails and prisons have become our new mental hospitals,” a 2010 study states based on the fact that in some states there are “almost ten times more mentally ill persons in jails and prisons than in hospitals” (Torrey et al. 1). This conglomerate of factors – homelessness, incarceration, and mental health issues – affects people of color at a much higher rate than any other group in U.S. society. “People of color [...] are more likely to suffer disparities in mental health treatment in general,” as Lorna Collier reports, which also makes them “more likely to be ushered into the criminal justice system.” The texts discussed here, however, focus on just a fragment of one of those interrelations, namely homelessness and mental illness, and neglect the interconnections of racial bias, poverty, incarceration, and mental health altogether.

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ple with severe mental illness from hospitals into the community: the belief that mental hospitals were cruel and inhumane; the hope that new antipsychotic medications offered a cure; and the desire to save money” (886-87). None of these three points proved entirely true or attainable. While the institutionalized treatment of mentally ill patients has a long and in many cases well-deserved reputation for cruelty, discharging patients from hospitals without providing the legal requirements or infrastructure to ensure the care they need turned out to be just as inhumane in the long run. The development of the first widely effective antipsychotic drugs, above all chlorpromazine in the 1950s, fueled expectations that psychotic patients would be enabled to return to a ‘regular’ life. Since a strong belief that one is not sick, however, is a common symptom of many psychotic disorders, patients stopped taking their medication after being discharged. As for saving money, the decision to pull funding from public mental health care suffered from the same short-sightedness as most other policies defunding institutions that provide care and assistance to those citizens most in need of it. It looks good in a government’s annual budget, but the actual expenses for cities and counties – if and when somebody takes the time to estimate such costs – are staggering (cf. Mangano and Blasi; Culhane).

## THE MAD GENIUS

The narratives spun around Chris Gardner in *The Pursuit of Happiness* and the *YouTube* phenomenon Ted Williams derive much of their momentum from continuously dramatizing their protagonists’ outstanding talents, a strategy that Green’s novel *The Caveman’s Valentine* and Lopez’s book *The Soloist* carry to an extreme by making use of the mad-genius trope for the depiction of their main characters. Certain mental illnesses such as schizophrenia have long been believed to coincide with creativity, artistic talent, and unusual cognitive abilities. The mad genius, as Judith Schlesinger puts it, “has been a cherished cultural icon for centuries, a romantic and compelling concept” (62). Schlesinger’s analysis dismantles the misconception behind the mythconception of the mad genius stereotype, the unfounded belief that creativity and what is perceived as genius have any scientifically proven correlation to psychopathology and madness. She hints at the cases made about famous artists like Mozart, Beethoven, van Gogh, or Kafka, and canonical literary figures fitting into the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde theme. “Who needs science when we have such compelling poetry to make the case?” she asks (63).

The figure of the mad genius has not lost its allure for today’s storytellers. “Hollywood can’t get enough of it,” Arne Dietrich points out in a polemical article on medical research’s readiness to assume a connection between mental illness and creativity: “The narrative of the troubled genius just strikes all the right chords for coverage in the tweet-sized attention span of modern news reporting.” (1) Although it makes for a compelling narrative, the mad genius nonetheless belongs to the realm of long-established myths about superhuman intelligence and artistic talent, as Dietrich makes clear. “The simple truth of the matter is that the VAST majority of creative people are not mentally ill and, more importantly, the VAST majority of those suffering from psychopathology are not geniuses.” (2)

While medical researchers like Schlesinger and Dietrich refer to clinical psychology’s tendency to draw ill-informed and then widely popularized links between mental illness and creativity, the question with regard to cultural images of black homelessness is one of representational politics and the effects this well-established – if scientifically unsound – stereotype has on character development and the ways in which these “true stories” are

told. When relying on the mad-genius trope and its less flamboyant neighbor, the highly gifted individual who is faced with personal tragedy, media representations of homeless Blacks tap into a popular myth of extreme individualization whose very logic separates the individual from society. The same condition that makes the mad genius unfit for society – their mental illness – is believed to produce inexplicable yet socially and culturally valuable outcomes, namely artistic work. Social exclusion is not simply a regrettable side-effect of genius; in the logic of this stereotype, it is necessary for peak performances.

Representational strategies that personalize social and systemic issues have been widely criticized in Reality TV formats, a genre with a programmatic claim to telling ‘true stories’ (cf. Aho; Andrejevic and Colby; Escoffery). Employing the mad genius frame is in itself such a strategy of individualization. Merely by depicting characters as artists or creative talents locates them within the field of artistic production and, according to Bourdieu’s analysis of this field, detaches them from their social conditioning: “There are in fact very few other areas,” he observes in *The Field of Cultural Production*, “in which the glorification of ‘great individuals’ [...] is more common or more uncontroversial” (29). Due to their relative position within social reality, artistic production and creative work are singularly suited to promote a consecration of creative individuals that, even while acknowledging socio-cultural and socio-political environments, obliterates most of the interdependencies between the personal and the context of which it is the product. Naturalization of the assumed bodily source of genius – illness – is but one side of this process of de-socializing, de-politicizing glorification. The production of “a particular form of belief” on which the artistic field depends – and within it the myth of the mad genius as a specific kind of tragic artist – forms the other. “The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art,” writes Bourdieu (35). The same is true for the artist whose name consecrates the work qua the collective belief in that name. Producing this belief requires practices that “can only work by pretending not to be doing what they are doing,” which is building and participating in an economic structure that “can function [...] only by virtue of a constant, collective repression of narrowly ‘economic’ interest” (74).

In this ostensibly anti-economic, disinterested universe, the figure of the 'true artist' incorporates the assumed opposition in which the artistic field constructs itself in opposition to fields of power. The 'pure' artist defies economic interest, state institutions, bourgeois standards, and politics. What could be a purer artist, then, than one whose very body does not even allow for the option of participation in mainstream society? By representing black homeless characters through the mad-genius frame, texts like *The Soloist* pretend to be doing what they are not doing: They appear to depict the racial dimension of poverty and homelessness while actually eclipsing the systemic scope of their characters' racialized identities. For the remainder of this essay, I will engage in a closer reading of the specific techniques used in the book and the film *The Soloist*.

## THE DISCONNECTED SOLOIST

The first time Lopez and Ayers meet, the homeless musician is playing his violin at the foot of the Beethoven statue in Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles. Lopez describes the scene as an "odd picture of grubby refinement," expressing the discrepancy between contradicting elements unexpectedly forming a coherent image: a homeless man, visibly poor and "troubled," as Lopez puts it, skillfully playing an old violin with only two strings and seeming "oblivious to everyone around him" (*The Soloist* 13). Ayers's clownish attire and the decorated shopping-cart in which he holds his possessions add to the air of absurdity in this scene that constantly tip-toes the line between the merely odd and a parodic portrait of the protagonists' first encounter.

Within the artistic field, intentional parody "presupposes and confirms *emancipation*" in that this form of parody means to overcome "the dominant mode of thought and expression" (Bourdieu, *Cultural Production* 31). The borderline-parodic effect of a visibly psychotic homeless African American playing a damaged violin, however, does not constitute an act of emancipation in *The Soloist* – not so much because Ayers does not intend an emancipatory parody, but because the narrator Lopez, who creates and constructs the character Ayers for the reader, does not allow it. In what I read as an act of false modesty, Lopez claims not to know much about classical music while at the same time making what seems intended to sound

like a valid judgment of Ayers's skills. He discerns from hearing Ayers play on a two-stringed violin that he must have had "some serious training" (13); it sounds "brilliant" to him, who is "no musician" but has "a good ear for pitch" (23). Lopez remains wedded to a conventional (bourgeois) perspective on classical European music that focuses on the cultural and symbolic capital of canonical works, expressed also in his namedropping of composers, and aims at harnessing its profits for the benefit of the underprivileged homeless man – and also for Lopez's own creative work, namely his newspaper column.

The character Nathaniel Ayers is, of course, a product of the author/narrator Lopez's creative imagination. Lopez creates Ayers not just as an artist, but at the same time as a work of art, an object: He is introduced, first and foremost, as 'material' for a story; in fact, Ayers *is* the story. "I'm figuring this vagrant violinist is a column," Lopez realizes (8); and a few pages later, when it proves difficult to get a hold of Ayers, he states: "Now I'm worried that I've lost the column" (16). Journalistic writing occupies a rather low position within the field of cultural production. Therefore, the journalist jumps at the opportunity to increase his story's (in other words, Ayers's) value by way of the quasi-magical effect of name recognition. As soon as Ayers mentions his Juilliard education, and no sooner than that, Lopez begins to do the "legwork" necessary for a "good column" (20). The journalist is ready to drop the idea when a first enquiry at the renowned conservatory does not confirm Ayers as an alumnus. When the school calls back with the information that Ayers did in fact attend Juilliard but failed to graduate, it 'upgrades' Ayers to the status of a particularly unique object. Bourdieu describes this mysterious 'alchemy' using the example of "the magic of the designer's label" which, "stuck on any object, [...] can multiply its value in an extraordinary way" (*Sociology* 102). With the Juilliard label attached to his persona, Lopez's character Ayers takes on the extraordinary cultural capital that comes with the famous name and that is even increased by his destitute living conditions because of the improbability of the two labels – 'homeless' and 'Juilliard' – coinciding. "This is indeed a magical, alchemical act," as Bourdieu puts it, "since the social nature and value of the object are changed without any change in its physical or its chemical [...] nature" (102). After Lopez receives the phone call from Juilliard, Ayers is still the same person, nothing about him has changed, except for his now being a product of the Juilliard school. Not the crazy,

homeless black man is of value to Lopez's writing, and even the obviously talented homeless black musician has barely any scarcity value; it is the label of Juilliard – an institution that stands for elite education in high-brow, classical European music – that grants Ayers a position of uniqueness. In Bourdieu's words, "what makes the value of the work is not the rarity [...] of the product but the rarity of the producer [...], that is, the collective belief in the value of the producer and his product" (102).

*The Soloist* sidesteps the issue of the conditionality of Ayers's class affiliation and racialized identity by way of the mad-genius trope that shields the character from his surroundings and also keeps the audience from engaging in a discourse about the race- and class-related aspects of African American homelessness. It must be mentioned here that the film adaptation uses a more ambivalent strategy than the book. While it increases the individualization that disconnects Ayers from his environment and foregrounds Lopez's character, the movie also includes scenes that seem to criticize the effects of this individualization in a form of meta-critique of the media.

On the one hand, the film presents Ayers as a de-racialized, assumedly non-political character. What the book rather soberly mentions as a historical landmark coinciding with Ayers's biography turns into a character-defining scene on the screen: In a sequence that summarizes Nathaniel's socialization, he is shown in the basement of his Cleveland home, feverishly practicing the cello while Civil Rights protests take place on the street right outside his small window. Only the flickering lights of a burning car catch his attention. After briefly glancing through the window with an expressionless face, he returns to his cello practice. His schizophrenic mind provides an opportunity for the story to detach Ayers from socializing as well as politicizing influences.

On the other hand, the film includes a scene in voice-over narration in which Lopez is composing his first column about Ayers while we also see a woman reading the published column. The scene begins with a full-screen image of a television broadcasting news footage from New Orleans in the days after Hurricane Katrina, which hit the gulf coast just before Lopez published his first piece about Ayers. The newspaper reader is sitting in front of her television, but instead of watching the news where predominantly black people persevere on rooftops and in overcrowded buildings, holding up signs that ask for help, she is immersed in the column and so touched by Ayers's fate that she donates her old cello to him. The

personalized story about one singled-out individual elicits generosity while thousands of hurricane survivors, cooped up in stadiums and ignored by the federal and state governments, are not even granted a look. A discussion in the *LA Times* newsroom also addresses the lack of response to an investigative article revealing large-scale corruption, in contrast to Lopez's piece about his own accident which generated tens of emails from concerned readers.

By limiting to an ultimately personal level even those passages of the book that deal with social institutions, political agendas, and the responsibility of the media with regard to the way the public deals with issues of poverty and racism, Lopez's *The Soloist* divests itself of the opportunity to place such issues in their larger socio-political context. "Is he happy?" the narrator Lopez asks himself in reference to Ayers. "Clearly music makes him happy, and how many musicians in the world have as much time to play as he does, entirely free of expectation? For him, it isn't work" (163). Interpreting lack as freedom here, Lopez paints Ayers's life as endless free time where the absence of conventional expectations, rather than being the result of marginalization, provides constant opportunity to indulge in one's favorite pastime.

The passage suggests that Ayers does not conceive of music as "work" simply because he enjoys it so much, and not, as would be much more to the point in many respects, because he does not get paid for playing. The line between being free of constraints and being denied access to opportunity gets even blurrier as the passage continues: "Sure, he [Ayers] gets down on himself occasionally, frustrated by his limitations. But he doesn't have to worry about training for an audition, like he did when he was younger, and he doesn't need to make a living at it. For Nathaniel, music is freedom" (163). Again, and more pronouncedly at this point, Lopez interprets as a privilege what is in fact an expression of Ayers's exclusion from the opportunities of those who have access to the labor market (limited as these opportunities may be for a growing number of artists and many other workers in the United States). Ayers is *unable* to make a living and he could not prepare for an audition if he wanted to because he has no access to that professional part of a musician's life anymore. And yet *The Soloist* suggests that his being underprivileged is the source of Ayers's happiness.

This strategy works all the better because Lopez stages himself as a hard-working everyman and his work life as a burden. His complaints about

the nuisances of a regular life in mainstream society sometimes sneak in through the back door when he pretends to talk about Ayers: “Nathaniel is 100 percent off the books. No Social Security card, no driver’s license, no address, no living will, no job, no lawn to mow, no phone calls to return, no retirement to plan for and no rules except his own” (164). What begins as a mere list of items separating Ayers from regular citizens soon turns into a cliché of middle-class tedium and then culminates in what sounds like the tagline of a Wild West drama featuring a lone hero of last-man-standing caliber. But domestic chores, social etiquette, or retirement plans are not inevitable consequences of secure housing and mental health; plenty of people enjoy the roofs over their heads without ever mowing a lawn or responding to certain phone calls. What Lopez conceives of as Ayers’s “freedom” is the kind of liberation the *illusio* of the artistic field ascribes to the ‘true’ and ‘pure’ artist. “The position of ‘pure’ writer or artist,” writes Bourdieu, is assumed to be “an institution of freedom, constructed against the ‘bourgeoisie’ [...] and against institutions – in particular against the state bureaucracies, academies, salons, etc.” (*Cultural Production* 63). Ayers has no bourgeois reputation to protect, no federal or state institutions to deal with, and no academic aspirations to train for. Without his musical talent, he would merely be a social failure. As a Juilliard-certified and medically diagnosed mad genius, however, he meets the requirements for ‘pure artist.’

The particular focus not just on individual experience as detached from the systemic, historic, and habitual forces of which it is the product, but on an individual’s unusual mental capacities and shortcomings has a double effect. For one thing, it allows for the fading out of the physical experience of homelessness by ascribing its bodily aspects to pre-existing mental pathologies (and moral disciplining, or lack thereof), thus further marginalizing the socially exposed and culturally divested black body, along with the political-cultural history incorporated in these bodies. For another, these narratives neatly fall in line with the specifically U.S. American welfare ideology, which aims at charity rather than welfare, “not solidarity but *compassion*” in Loïc Wacquant’s words (42). Displaying and eliciting moral sympathy for an exceptional individual gives a forum to the cathartic proclamations and outbursts of compassion so ingrained in the liberal American habitus, while the texts edit out the relational entanglements of African American poverty.

In 1969, Nina Simone released the single “To be Young, Gifted and Black” (lyrics by Weldon Irvine), later to be included on her live album *Black Gold* (1970). The song honors playwright Lorraine Hansberry, author of the famous play of the same title, and became an important protest hymn in the Civil Rights movement. It celebrates the abilities of the new generation of black youths all over the world, demands they be acknowledged, and encourages Blacks to claim recognition and equal opportunities. “There are billion boys and girls / That are young, gifted and black, / And that’s a fact!” one stanza ends. The giftedness this song wants to convince its listeners of, however, is not the kind attributed to black homeless men in the early years of the 21st century. Simone’s song – arguably the most widely distributed cultural reference that links being black to being talented – promotes a change in how the public conceives of African Americans, and even more so in the collective self-image of people of color in the U.S. It targets the demeaning identity politics of the Jim Crow era and claims agency for a disempowered social group.<sup>11</sup> The homeless and gifted black characters of the early 2000s, by contrast, are divested of much of their individual agency as well as their African American identity precisely through a foregrounding of their special talents. The frame of the mad genius elicits sympathy for the individual while at the same time facilitating a tacit dismissal of race, class, and social conditionality.

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11 Wright’s film adaptation of *The Soloist* quotes a line from Simone’s song in one of the flashback scenes that recount Ayers’s childhood during the Civil Rights revolution. While tucking him in at night, Nathaniel’s mother tells him that “there’s a whole world waiting for you.” However, the teenaged Nathaniel has just been visually cut off from the political movement in the previous scene (see above) which renders the reference quite hollow.

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