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EBONY AND IVORY: INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE PIANO IN BRANDON TAYLOR'S *THE LATE AMERICANS*

Set in a college town in the Midwest, the principal protagonists of American author Brandon Taylor's second novel, *The Late Americans* (2023) are on the cusp of completing their graduate degrees. A somewhat motley crew of friends, acquaintances, and lovers, they differ in their gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation. As the characters navigate the uncertainty of their daily lives and their futures, the complicated and at times oppressive intersections between these aspects come to the fore. Some of the characters are musically talented, and the piano – arguably that most bourgeois of instruments – represents a contentious leitmotif in the novel. Alongside other forms of creative expression such as writing and ballet, it recurs in the different but interwoven narratives, accompanying key observations and discussions relating to interpersonal relationships, class differences, and racial identity. Conscious of the notion that classical music could be considered both universal yet elite, this study utilises close reading to examine not only how the piano is depicted in the novel, but also how it highlights intersectional aspects within the interconnected perspectives that make up this complex and intriguing work.

Keywords: contemporary American fiction, Brandon Taylor, campus novel, classical music, intersectionality, piano, race, social class, *The Late Americans*, 21st century literature

1. Introduction

With our modern world seemingly in a constant state of upheaval, the confluence of factors such as changing political ideologies, technological advances and artificial intelligence, neoliberal economic models, and the general geopolitical uncertainty have combined to create a global sense of instability and precarity. In addition, within many Western nations, questions relating to issues such as race, gender, sexual identity and orientation, wealth, class, and privilege have come to the fore, assuming paramount importance in discussions on the shaping of contemporary culture and society. Indeed, noting the existence of multiple narratives in conversations on these key topics, the concept of intersectionality (as will be discussed further) has become increasingly adopted not only by the academic community but also by wider audiences.

Unsurprisingly, as a highly relevant and topical issue, there have been many literary and cultural responses to this phenomenon. Conscious of its key social and cultural relevance at the present time, this study aims to examine intersectionality as portrayed in a recent novel by the American author Brandon Taylor, *The Late Americans*. As will be

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outlined subsequently, the book is very rich in its possibilities for analysis. With classical music being one of the novel's recurring elements, this analysis utilises a close reading of the text in order to explore how the image of the piano can be used to draw attention to intersectionality in the work as a whole.

2. Intersectionality: A short overview

As a concept, intersectionality was originally coined in the late 1980s by the American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. In her pioneering article (CRENSHAW 1989), she utilised the term to originally describe the double marginalisation experienced by Black women – i.e., via a combination of both racism and sexism – within the United States legal system. In drawing attention to her novel conceptualisation of being multiply marginalised, Crenshaw states how intersectionality goes beyond “how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis” (CRENSHAW 1989: 140). Accordingly, scholars Ann Phoenix and Pamela Pattynama articulate that intersectionality “foregrounds a richer and more complex ontology than approaches that attempt to reduce people to one category at a time”, drawing attention to the fact that the term can be seen as “thus useful as a handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it” (PHOENIX, PATTYNAMA 2006: 187).

Given the prominence of these issues in contemporary society, responses to intersectional aspects have also come from authors of fiction, including luminaries such as Zadie Smith (see e.g., BAĞLAMA 2020). In addition to providing a source of creative inspiration, attention has been drawn to ongoing discussions on how national and other literatures can become more representative of the realities of living in multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural societies. Additionally, intersectionality also remains present in ongoing conversations regarding how school and university curricula can be made more diverse (see DAY et al. 2022); in other words, how the traditional canon can be expanded to incorporate authors (and by extension, protagonists) from a wider range of backgrounds, including from communities, languages, and ethnicities that – for various reasons – may have historically or socio-culturally been viewed as minority, minoritised, or marginalised.

3. Brandon Taylor's *The Late Americans*

The source text for the present study is the recent novel *The Late Americans*, published in 2023 and authored by the prize-winning American novelist, short story writer, and essayist Brandon Taylor, who grew up in rural Alabama and currently lives in New York (O'LEARY 2023). It is Taylor's second novel; his debut work, *Real Life*, was critically acclaimed and was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize, and was followed by a well-received collection of short stories, *Filthy Animals*. Both *The Late Americans* and *Real Life* draw on Taylor's own experiences in graduate school: a trained scientist, he studied biochemistry in Wisconsin and subsequently completed the well-known creative writing programme at the University of Iowa. Though both novels could arguably be considered part of the broader American tradition of campus novels (see ANTÉNE 2015), there is a specific difference to Taylor's oeuvre. In a 2020 interview published in *The Guardian*,

Taylor stated – with reference to his first novel – that “so many of my queer, black friends were like, ‘We’re here on college campuses and yet none of these stories represent us in any sort of substantive way.’ So I told myself, I’m going to imagine myself at the center of this space” (CUMMINS 2021). Elsewhere, and again with reference to his debut work, Taylor also noted that though he “love[s] campus novels, they never seem to provide space for queer black people. And it felt exciting to write a story in which someone like me got to have their say” (THE BOOKER PRIZES 2022). Accordingly, in foregrounding aspects of race and sexual orientation that had previously not been widely considered in the context of campus-based fiction, Taylor’s work can be said to be groundbreaking in this regard.

The Late Americans takes place in a university city in the Midwest, inspired by Iowa City where Taylor studied (O’LEARY 2023). As in the earlier *Real Life*, this setting is by no means accidental: Taylor has mentioned that he is “always interested in college towns because they are these incredible spaces that seem almost designed for people to come to them in great numbers and then for them to leave, also in great numbers” (O’LEARY 2023), observing additionally that he is “so interested in how that informs and shapes a community” (O’LEARY 2023). Accordingly, the principal protagonists in *The Late Americans* are graduate students on the cusp of completing their degrees. They represent a varied group: a motley crew of friends, acquaintances, and lovers of different genders, races, social classes, and sexual orientations, with several characters being gay and black. In a nod to the expansive 19th-century novels that Taylor has mentioned as some of the sources of inspiration for the work (see NEEDHAM 2023), the events in *The Late Americans* are told from the perspectives of a range of different characters, with each chapter zoning on a specific character or characters. Though done in the third-person, this interwoven narrative strategy provides unparalleled insights into the inner worlds of the different characters as they navigate the inherent uncertainty of their daily lives and their futures and consequently, complicated and at times oppressive intersections are highlighted in multiple ways.

A notable feature of the novel is the presence of classical music, which permeates the work as a whole. As will be highlighted later in this study, several characters are musically talented, and their instrument of choice is the piano. As a perhaps unexpected object in the novel, the piano recurs in the different interlinked narratives in manifold ways. Alongside other forms of creative expression (such as creative writing and ballet), classical music (in the form of the piano) represents a somewhat contentious leitmotif which accompanies key observations and discussions in the novel. These relate not only to interpersonal relationships and class differences, but also to aspects of racial identity.

4. The piano in literature and culture

Perhaps one of the most popular and recognisable musical instruments in the world, the piano is used extensively in western classical music as well as in jazz and occasionally other genres and forms. Invented in the mid-18th century in Italy (see GIORDANO 2016), the piano gained ground in the 19th century with its eighty-eight white and black keys traditionally made of elephant ivory and the hardwood ebony (see MURRAY 2009). Combined with shifts in the public perception of musicians and composers (for example, from a trade to an art form) (BLANNING 2008: 45-57), the piano’s popularity swept the world. Hence, the early to mid-19th century also saw the rise of many com-

poser-pianists who travelled widely on extensive solo tours. A notable example of these new international musical celebrities was the Hungarian pianist and composer Franz Liszt, who enjoyed such a high level of adulation from his fans that the resultant frenzy was dubbed 'Lisztomania' (see e.g. BLANNING 2008: 51-57). As such, the piano became widespread around the globe, reaching even the farthest corners of remote Siberia (see ROBERTS 2020; HOYTE-WEST 2022).

Though the piano was prominent on concert stages, it could also be found in many aspirational 19th-century households where it was viewed as "the social anchor of a middle-class home" (ROTHSTEIN 1990: viii). Indeed, pianistic skills were deemed to be a sign of accomplishment among middle- and upper-class ladies; as "among the practical skills required to lead a spiritually healthy and successful life" and as a "calculated and strategic form of leisure" (BYRD 2020: 441). Accordingly, it could be argued that the piano was something of a bourgeois symbol, a label that – as will be illustrated in *The Late Americans* – could also be potentially applied to perceptions of much of western classical music.³

In common with many other musical instruments, the piano is much less popular nowadays owing to advances in recording technologies and societal changes. Yet, noting evolving tastes and approaches, the world of classical music itself has been a topic of discussion and analysis in recent times. This is mindful of the fact that it has been arguably thought of both as something universal or ubiquitous, yet somehow also exclusionary or – more controversially – as even potentially discriminatory (for more on the latter, see ROSS 2020). In turning to the focus of this study (i.e., in examining how the piano highlights intersectional aspects within the interconnected perspectives that make up *The Late Americans*), it is only comparatively recently in the Anglo-American context that greater public attention has been centred on the presence and contributions of black classical musicians (see HUIZENGA 2019; HARRISON 2020, etc.). The recent international success of instrumentalists (such as the highly-talented members of the Kanneh-Mason family, composers like Errollyn Wallen, and Chi-chi Nwanoku's Chineke! Orchestra) has been highlighted in the international media. In addition, this has also stimulated interest in hitherto less-well known classical composers with black ancestry, including the 20th-century American symphonist Florence Price, the British Edwardian composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and the accomplished French contemporary of Mozart, the Chevalier de Saint-Georges. Yet, in terms of its links to African-American musical traditions, it can be argued that for many, the piano is perhaps seemingly more commonly associated with ragtime and jazz, rather than with classical music.

5. Intersectionality and the piano in the novel

As mentioned above, the novel's events are recounted from the viewpoints of a variety of different characters. As a component, the piano makes its debut in the narrative of Fyodor, which revolves around his turbulent relationship with Timo. Fyodor (his name comes from his Russian father) is working-class and has a job in a meat processing facto-

3 Interestingly, following the immense social and political changes of the 20th century, it is noteworthy to mention classical music (and by extension, the piano) was also viewed as acceptable in many Communist countries. Indeed, the Soviet Union and other aligned nations were renowned for their systems of practical musical education (for more information, see LOWE, PRYOR 1959; ROBERT 1964; BARTLE 1986, etc.)

ry, whereas his boyfriend Timo is middle-class and is a graduate student in logic. Though from different social and ideological backgrounds, Timo is similar to his boyfriend in that he, like Fyodor, is “black, even though he was also mixed” (TAYLOR 2023: 58). On approaching his home, Fyodor hears the strains of piano music:

“Up his own steps and in front of the old Queen Anne, which had been busted up into apartments. Fyodor could hear something which sounded like classical music. He stood in the cool hall, pressing his head to the door, listening. It was piano. Timo never shared that part of himself anymore, not since those early weeks when they’d first gotten together. Now, he guarded that part of his life as if to share it would be some kind of betrayal of a promise he’d made to himself” (TAYLOR 2023: 55).

Hinting at the complicated relationship between the two men (which involves heated arguments and passionate reconciliations), this excerpt highlights the role of the piano as a gate-keeper. For Fyodor, it represents a glittering key to an inner world that Timo – ostensibly selfishly, but for reasons which later become apparent – chooses to not to share with his romantic partner. With Fyodor yearning to understand his lover, the piano music can be seen as a symbol of their differing social backgrounds and the class differences that exist between them: though both black and gay, it draws attention to latent intersectional tension between their blue-collar and white-collar backgrounds. As such, by expressing himself through music but opting to keep it private, Timo is depicted as someone who wants to isolate himself from his romantic partner, with Fyodor stating that his boyfriend was now “totally unreachable” (TAYLOR 2023: 59).

Yet it was not ever thus: in a flashback to the early days of their relationship, Fyodor recalls the first time he heard Timo play:

“[Timo] played piano and knew about music and art. In the summer, the city put pianos out on the sidewalk for people to play, and sometimes, when they were walking home, the air fragrant and fuzzy in the falling dusk, Timo would stop and play something astounding and beautiful. The first time, Fyodor had been so startled by the effortlessness with which Timo pulled something wonderful out of the rickety old pianos that he’d stopped and choked on his beer. They were walking home from the bar [...] But then Timo had done that thing with the piano, and the whole world had shifted” (TAYLOR 2023: 59).

Though they may be of similar ethnic origins, the excerpt underlines that, to Fyodor, Timo’s knowledge of arts and culture makes him somehow mysterious. Additionally, through doing ‘that thing’ with the piano and showcasing his skills, Timo also demonstrates that he is capable of wondrous marvels. As such, the piano here is shown as a highly seductive element. For Fyodor, it is a gateway into a different world: yet when Timo seems to freeze out his boyfriend and react to him with “bored hostility” (TAYLOR 2023: 59), the piano once again becomes a means to exclude. Accordingly, in addition to symbolising the social class differences between the couple, the piano also depicts social and romantic inaccessibility as demonstrated by Timo’s withdrawal from his partner.

Of the other characters in *The Late Americans*, another pianist is Goran, a graduate student in music. He is wealthy, but “he was adopted, a black kid in a white family” (TAYLOR 2023: 94). Goran is in an open relationship with Ivan, who is studying for a

graduate degree in business and is also black, but from a modest background. Similarly to the case of Fyodor and Timo, the relationship is characterised by certain inequalities: these are not only financial, but also artistic, as Ivan longs to be able to understand classical music. In attempting to do so, he listens to one of Goran's records (by the legendary pianist Arthur Rubinstein)⁴ but neglects to put it away properly and leaves it spinning on the player – when Goran discovers that his prized record could have been damaged, he becomes very angry indeed (TAYLOR 2023: 106-107). As with Timo's behaviour towards Fyodor, Goran's behaviour towards Ivan also highlights the notion of the piano as something arcane and inaccessible – i.e., in attempting to educate himself about music (and by extension, with its connection to his boyfriend's inner world), he is strongly dissuaded.

Goran is also friends with Timo, and the piano again recurs in an important episode. As mentioned previously, dance also features in the novel, and Goran is the repetiteur pianist who provides the music to accompany the ballet classes: "Goran hated Debussy, Timo knew. But he played for dance classes for the money and for the practice, and also for a certain sense of superiority" (TAYLOR 2023: 143). Indeed, the latter element is one that highlights the elitist and inaccessible nature symbolised by the piano. In noting that Timo used to play the piano, Goran "liked to say it was the first thing he'd noticed about Timo at a mixer for gay graduate students: You had a rod up your ass, like all the pianists I know" (TAYLOR 2023: 143). Indeed, this notion of being aloof is something that both Goran and Timo share in their relationships with their respective partners. Yet for Timo (and as hinted at by his reluctance to share his inner world with Fyodor), the piano is irrevocably linked with darker episodes in his life, despite the fact he "still had a pianist's hands, wrists, and posture" (TAYLOR 2023: 143). His parents were surgeons, who ran out of money after the financial crisis in 2008 and ultimately separated and divorced. For Timo, "the piano wasn't the reason his parents had split up, but he couldn't separate the two things in his mind. The better he got at piano, the more his parents fought and the faster their money ran out" (TAYLOR 2023: 143). In intersectional terms, the notion of Timo's parents' descent is highlighted in the precarity of the status of being "Black Upper Middle Class in [Washington] D.C.", which is contrasted with "the regular Upper Middle Class, meaning *white*" by virtue of having "less money and the money was less durable on the whole" (TAYLOR 2023: 143). Thus, in this regard, this commentary on the post-Lehman Bros financial crisis accentuates the racial element and the notion that white-collar black professionals were more affected than their white colleagues.

Accordingly, Timo accompanies Goran to his piano practice one afternoon; "a grand piano, glossy and stern" (TAYLOR 2023: 145) awaits them. Goran invites his friend to try but Timo refuses, having not played for over two years. Goran begins – first with scales, "as if in fealty to an old teacher" (TAYLOR 2023: 146), and Timo notices that "the physicality of the music was in him [Goran]" (TAYLOR 2023: 146). Then, Goran launches into a celebrated work – the virtuoso Ballade in G minor, by the Polish Romantic composer Frédéric Chopin. Timo observes that Goran:

"wasn't playing it for practice or beauty or enjoyment. He was playing the Chopin to let something out of himself, the way some people tuck hair behind their ear or chew on

4 The Polish-American virtuoso Arthur Rubinstein (1887–1982) was one of the most famous pianists of the 20th century (for more information, see STEINWAY 2024).

their fingernails. It was Goran's habit, as casual as anything else" (TAYLOR 2023: 148).

The vivid description continues:

"Goran was passing his feeling through the contained network of the music, its strictures [...] pouring himself and emerging undiluted. Goran's shoulders opened like a pair of wings as he played. His hands were quick and large as they swept and descended. His face a mask of annoyed thrill" (TAYLOR 2023: 148).

As the piece draws to an end:

"At the end of the ballade, the frenzy is supposed to turn tender, wistful. But Goran skipped that part now. He played even the soft parts with such vicious intensity that it was as if the madness just kept going, endlessly, until it vaulted into the waiting silence of the room, which vibrated, thunderstruck" (TAYLOR 2023: 148).

As outlined above, vivid, highly sensual imagery is used to convey Goran's performance of this atmospheric work, highlighting his rendition of the classic work as embodying a facet of his own self. He is fluid yet rigid, physical yet emotionally intense. As such, given the previous exclusionary role that the piano has had up to this point in the novel, it is therefore highly personal that Goran chooses to allow Timo to be present. As one of the core mainstays of the solo piano repertoire, the choice of Chopin's Ballade No. 1 for Goran's performance can be said to be no accident. It is a Romantic concert work *par excellence*, challenging, beautiful, tempestuous and one of the Polish composer's most popular and best-known compositions (MÜLLEMANN 2007: v).⁵ Indeed, Chopin was the first to use the designation 'ballade' – originally a type of poem – for a musical work (MÜLLEMANN 2007: iv), creating a new genre as well as "the idea of transforming a fictional, dramatic and mystical event into music" (G. HENLE VERLAG 2024). According to contemporary correspondence from the German composer Robert Schumann, this first ballade was also one of Chopin's own favourites among his own compositions (MÜLLEMANN 2007: v). In providing this 'dramatic' and 'mystical' rendition of his very own, Goran thereby allows Timo to enter the rarified world of the piano, a place that others like Fyodor and Ivan are denied. In intersectional terms, here the accent is firmly placed on class differences rather than race or sexuality, highlighting latent issues of inaccessibility even within close personal and romantic relationships.

6. Concluding observations

As this brief study has aimed to illustrate, the piano plays an important role in delineating several characters in Brandon Taylor's *The Late Americans*. Goran and Timo, the pianist-protagonists, are both black, gay, and from white-collar families; conversely, their boyfriends (Fyodor and Ivan) are from different social backgrounds. In terms of the multiple aspects of intersectionality treated in the novel, the piano is mostly used as a means of highlighting class differences. Consequently, the instrument underscores the degree of inaccessibility faced by the non-pianists – i.e., that Fyodor and Ivan are unable to enter its mysterious realm, which is jealously guarded by the pianist protagonists. It

5 For insights on an amateur pianist approaching Chopin's G minor Ballade, see former *The Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger's memoir *Play it Again: An Amateur Against The Impossible* (RUSBRIDGER 2013).

could also be argued that this is emblematic of traditional conceptualisations of classical music – for example, as something that is beautiful yet somehow elitist and aloof. A further consideration of the role of the piano includes the very appearance of the instrument itself, with the ebony and ivory keys symbolising not only the racial identities of the four men: as musicologist Sean Murray terms it, the “metonymic relationship between skin and piano keys makes racialization at the piano more apparent than most other musical instruments” - i.e., as a form of “racial shorthand” (MURRAY 2009: 4). Additionally, in linking back to Taylor’s comments on the visibility of black and queer identities in campus novels (see CUMMINS 2021; THE BOOKER PRIZES 2022, etc.), the contrast between ebony and ivory could also be means of how, in the novel, attention is focused on the black experience in predominantly white spaces (such as graduate school).

Accordingly, subsequent research on the novel could perhaps contrast the depiction of the piano and intersectional aspects with some of the other creative arts featured in the book, which include ballet, creative writing, and fine arts. In addition, comparative studies with Taylor’s other works⁶ could also prove interesting material for further analysis, thereby offering deeper insights into intersectional themes in his oeuvre.

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⁶ As detailed by Taylor in a 2023 interview with *The Guardian*, *The Late Americans* is part of a planned quartet of works which are all set in the American Midwest (NEEDHAM 2023).

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ЕБОНСКО И СЛОНОВАЧКО: ИНТЕРСЕКЦИОНАЛНОСТ И КЛАВИР У РОМАНУ *THE LATE AMERICANS* БРЕНДОНА ТЕЈЛОРА

Резиме

Радња другог романа америчког писца Брендона Тејлора, *The Late Americans* (2023), смештена је у универзитетски град на америчком Средњем западу. Главни јунаци налазе се на прагу завршетка постдипломских студија. То је помало шаролика група пријатеља, познаника и љубавника, који се разликују по полу, раси, друштвеној класи и сексуалној оријентацији. Док се ликови крећу кроз неизвесности свакодневице и сопствене будућности, на површину издијају сложене, понекад и потискујуће, везе између ових аспеката. Неки од њих су музички надарени, а клавир – можда најбуржоаскији инструмент – представља спорни лајтмотив у роману. Уз друге облике уметничког изражавања, попут писања и балета, клавир се понавља у различитим, али међусобно испреплетаним приповедним токовима, пратећи кључна запажања и разговоре о међуљудским односима, класним разликама и расном идентитету. Узимајући у обзир идеју да се класична музика може сматрати и универзалном и елитистичком, ова студија примењује блиско читање како би анализирала не само приказ клавира у роману, већ и начин на који он истиче интерсекционалне аспекте унутар повезаних перспектива које чине ово сложено и интригантно дело.

Кључне речи: савремена америчка проза, Брендон Тејлор, универзитетски роман, класична музика, интерсекционалност, клавир, раса, друштвена класа, *The Late Americans*, књижевност XXI века