

## Cup your ears and hear him: An attempt at a critical look at Mitchell S. Jackson's *Oversoul*, by Jenny Catlin

In the *Simpsons* episode where Homer becomes a food critic, his love of food inspires a rave review of every restaurant he critiques. I worry that I may be the Homer Simpson of literary criticism, writing one glowing review after another. However, like Homer, I am determined to find a way to expose the bad in *everything* I read. Fortunately or unfortunately, it won't begin with Mitchell Jackson's *Oversoul*. There are few, if any, unenthusiastic words to be said about this unusual collection.

Jackson's first full-length work is a blend of journalist essays and short urban fiction stories. I use the term urban fiction tentatively here; I tend to stray from sub-genres. I am not desperate to fit every page and every poem into a box; nonetheless, I can't help but theorize that Jackson has, perhaps, built his own box with *Oversoul*. Is there a category for literary urban fiction? If one exists, Jackson reigns supreme. Not one word in these stories feels unnecessary, nor could any of the yarns stand with a single syllable missing. The language, the dialogue, and the gritty, surreal characters that we meet in these stories are urban staples. Strippers, addicts, and the proverbial rode-hard uncle walk through these pages and allow readers to glimpse moments and monuments in their lives. The characters speak, dance and stride naturally—without effort. The tenses and timing are near pitch-perfect. Despite the heavily urban context of *Oversoul's* fiction, it reads as an academic work. Jackson has created a body of work that somehow fits snugly into the urban 'niche', while simultaneously defying it.

Jackson's fiction is musical. It is hip-hop, jazz, and blues reading. The strings of language seem desperate to be read aloud. Anyone who has ever taken or taught a creative writing course has been beaten into submission with *Show*,

*don't tell*. The scenes and citizens that Jackson draws are vivid and alive. They are dark paintings hidden in grandma's basement: "He points at his cracked lips, opened with a sliver of space between them, a pipe-smoker's lips, forever scorched." (Head Up, Palm Down 4) "as you watch a gray-suited Clinton lay hand to Old Testament, with Hillary and Chelsea near—the new First Lady sporting a flagrant blue bonnet, young Chelsea's curls hysteric in the D.C. breeze." (Presidents 27) It is rare to meet characters that emerge from the pages and take you on a tour of the streets and walls that have built them.

Jackson's essays are equally well envisioned. The four nonsequential, nonfiction, commentary pieces in *Oversoul* display the reach and ability that Jackson possesses: a letter, a traditional essay, a narrative memoir, and a somewhat clinical examination of serial killing, all perfectly executed, all beautifully written.

Hybrids like this so often fall flat, reading as if the writer has thrown together a few slapdash prose pieces that act as a footnote to the fiction. Jackson has avoided that trap. While the nonfiction portion of *Oversoul* lends credibility to his brash, lyrical short stories, each portion stands firmly on its own, as independent works.

What Jackson has created for us is a bit miraculous. He has achieved what so many have attempted—an authentic, articulate, and precise examination of 21<sup>st</sup> century urban existence. With some difficulty, I will refrain from making comparisons to writers who have preceded him; though, let me say the very short list of men and women I am reminded of are among those whose names appear on the reading lists of professors in academic classrooms, on the lips of community organizers, and the playlists of kids, who don't yet know the immense power that a few precisely placed words can possess.

Dark and heavy, *Oversoul* is, nonetheless, a joy to read. Among the weights of

despair there is tangible hope. Keep an eye on Mitchell Jackson. He has the gift so many of us reach for: the potential to become more than a storyteller but, rather, a truly important writer. Our generation needs more men like Jackson, artists who amid the haze of entertainment broadcast the often unlivable truths of our age. Du Bois hypothesized that all art is propaganda; if his statement is true, Jackson's propaganda calls for a listening ear and a watchful eye.

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