

ETHNICITY AND RE (MEMORY) IN MORRISON'S *BELOVED* AND
WIDEMAN'S *FATHERALONG*

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INTRODUCTION:

What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race to or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be universal or race-free? In other words, how is ... literary blackness" made and what is the consequence of that construction? (*Playing in the Dark*, xii)

American literature since the 1960s has been re-defined to include the ethnic voices who once dwelt on the fringes of American life where they were collectivised as an other by the mainstream Anglo-American culture. The resulting change in power structure, has made multiculturalism a fundamental issue in the United States. That has also extended the boundaries of contemporary American literature to include Latin, Asian and African Americans as worthy subjects of discourse. This is the legacy that the Ellis Island Museum in New York brings to the collective American consciousness in its display of historical records and relics of immigrants who entered the United States from the 19th century.

However, apart from the American or Native Indians who were the original inhabitants of America, the descendants of African slaves are among the oldest settlers in the United States. This is because the commodification of Africans for the development of Western capitalism had deposited them in plantations in the New World as slaves since the Seventeenth century. But despite the egalitarian posture of the Emancipation proclamation, the concept of race was inscribed in American conscience and skin pigmentation was used to categorise human worth into two antithetical groups - whiteness equals superiority while blackness equals inferiority.

This binary opposition institutionalised racism has justified three centuries of systematic enslavement and suppression of the African people in America. Ever since, Jamaica Kincaid intimates that colour has become "the national religion of America" because it determines who you are and what you should become (73). Therefore, the boundary between the American dream of possibility for all and the American nightmare of social fixation for the people of colour is "I am not black." Toni Morrison corroborates this position when she remarks that America is "a nation of people who *decided* that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression" (xiii). This is why the ethnic writers from the different racial groups seek to preserve their group identity through the creative process.

But since the doctrine of race has established blackness as a sign of moral and biological inferiority, the African American people when compared with other racial minorities in the United States have an outsider status as step-children of American democracy. Consequently, the African American writer has the agenda of reinventing his/her cultural heritage as a panacea for racial bigotry. Within American's pluralist culture, she constitutes an ethnic voice that attempts to define what America means to him/her both as a writer and a group representative. This work uses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong* to examine ethnicity and re(memory) as paradigms for dialogue between the African American people and the larger society in an attempt to determine the meaning of America to her black citizens.

ETHNICITY AND RE(MEMORY) IN *BELOVED* AND *FATHERALONG*

Ethnicity as Emenyi has explained in the essay "Ethnicity and the Literary Imagination ..." refers to the interaction between groups and the preservation of peculiar attributes of each for the purpose of group survival (213). This is because colonial racism compartmentalises people into groups, some superior others inferior. For most African Americans who languish in poverty despite American's material prosperity, the burden of history has placed a "complex fate" on them. It is this history that Morrison engages in *Beloved* where she recreates a 19th century slave narrative in which a black woman killed her two children rather than leave them in slavery.

Why does Morrison recycle Black history in the United States in *Beloved*? She is confronting the conscience of America over her inhumanity, which led to the demise of over 60 million Africans during the Middle Passage and in the plantations. Sethe's refusal to allow her baby, Beloved, to participate in the slave system by exterminating her epitomises the tragedy, which Black women encountered within the plantation economy. The sexual economy that characterised their relationship to the white masters permitted their violation and stigmatised them as "sexual beings who have no modesty, virtue or intelligence" (Alexander, 5). *Beloved*, therefore, reinvents the origin of the pains that has become a major aspect of the Black experience in the United States.

This pain represents a past that the Anglo-American culture has dismembered by pushing into the realm of the subconscious. Sethe's lament is that "those boys came in there and took my milk" (17). She is, haunted by this violation because the stolen milk constitute a link to other generations. Her mother was hanged yet she is expected neither to speak nor hear; to live in the present demands that she closes the door to her past. This helps to explain why there is no museum of African American history in the United States even though the holocaust has been acknowledged in the National Museum in Washington, D.C. Incidentally, the same United Nations which created the State of Israel refused to

ratify the 1947 Genocide Convention which would have improved the situation of blacks in America. But the return of Beloved returns as a ghost points to the fact that African American history is an unfinished or inconclusive business.

Beloved is narrated by various characters, including the ghost of Beloved. The art of storytelling as an oral genre in the United States is traceable to the Africanist presence in the last four centuries of her history. According to Maggie Sale, the processes of experiencing suppression and re-telling the story of slavery “de-authorize the original figures in power by methods that authorize the teller and thematically disenfranchised through the foregrounding of their perspectives” (45). But this is a means of reconstructing the past as a component for designing the present. As such, the use of ghost memory to recreate the past which Amy Levin calls “ghostwriting” serves as “a ritual of constructing the lives of suppressed others and then speaking for them, of unburying their African roots and exposing them to the light” (131).

Besides, African American women establish connections with their African foremothers and sisters through the art of storytelling. This as Gay Wilentz explains, is not only because Africa is a “historical ancestor, political ally... but as a part of a continuum in which black women, before the slave trade and since, have recorded cultural history and values through their stories” (xii). Apart from this, men writers of African American background have been exploring linkages with Africa as far back as the 1920s. This cultural connection is also shown in John Wideman’s *Fatheralong* where he uses father stories of African narratives in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and the heroic lie of the South African Statesman. Nelson Mandela to inscribe the male voice in the storytelling genre, which has been popularised by women in the African American community.

But Morrison’s engagement with the past is a confrontation with history both as the source of black people’s dilemmas and the means of transcendence, depending on what they choose to do with it. This brings to bear the concept of re(memory) because Morrison has re-membered Black history. The ghost in *Beloved* is a memory which helps to understand the past; it foresees the future and negotiates the present. Therefore, *Beloved* embodies the truth, about “the Negro problem” or what Gunnar Myradal describes as “the white man’s dilemma.” The remark “This is not a story to pass on” identifies Black history as a trauma. This is because America will hurt as she encounters this trauma; but the four-decade wound inflicted on American Blacks will undergo a process of healing. There may be a tendency to blame Morrison for such moral violence as Sethe’s action shows, but Sethe is made to “pay the price for the criminality of her love” as Terry O’Fen comments reveals: “whatever sympathy Morrison asks us to feel for Sethe, she never denies the truculence of her deed”(82).

The protagonist's dilemma in *Beloved* is occasioned by her desire to reconstruct the dysfunctional family pattern of the African American people in a situation where it had undergone a systematic process of dis-membering. But as soon as Sethe realises that moral violence affects both the perpetrators and the innocents, Paul D returns to her as a means of transcending the gulf in heterosexual relations in the African American community. This is shown in the comment "me and you we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (288). Paul D and Sethe need to unite if they must have a future which commands dignity.

The success of *Beloved* as Emenyi states in her essay, "Challenges and Paradoxes of Identity Politics" . . . , is not necessarily "the banality of the evil of slavery." Rather, it is the moral responsibility which the paradox of violent love brings to Sethe in a situation where slavery problematised the Black family in America" (10). Morrison does not just reify pain as Kristin Boudreau opines, but she transcends this through a redemptive process. This is the point Sethe has made in this statement: "She had to be safe and I put her where I knew she would be" (200). This suggests that evil is a product of true love—a fact which culminates in the union between Paul D and Sethe.

Since Black history is irrevocable as LeRoi Jones states in "The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro-American Literature," John Wideman's analysis of this history in *Fatheralong* shows how the African American people have been walking towards a Promised Land that is never there. Its absence as he states is a product of "our national confusion, our multiple personality disorder in regard to race" (xvi). Although African Americans occupy the lowest position on the social order, Wideman does not attribute this to generations of poverty as most scholars of Black history do. The real issue, for him, is racial prejudice which Sigelman and Welch see as judging blacks unfavorably because of their race" (47). This is what has isolated African Americans from mainstream culture. *Fatheralong* is therefore a treatise on the problem between black fathers and their sons whom they offer nothing.

Wideman explains why the African American people cannot climb the social ladder easily in this revealing remark:

From the middle of the 19th century American whites sat or were told they sat, by other whites, at the pinnacle of power and privilege in the most privileged and powerful nation on earth. . . . White people were standard issue, nearest to God, the measuring rod for comparing other kinds of people (xviii).

The American society is organised in such a way that the African Americans are fixated because they are “minor characters in somebody else’s self-elevating melodrama”(xxi).

The memory of the past in *Fatheralong* is a tortuous recollection which goes with hostilities. Again, the problems are traceable to the dysfunctional nature of the African American family. His parents are not just separated; but they maintain a high degree of invisibility towards each other. This family pattern emphasises the role of the black woman as the stabilizing factor in the African American male’s aspiration towards the American Dream. Wideman’s search for connection with his father reflects the tragic state of the African American family in a society that harbours racism.

The search to establish linkages with his father brought his family from the Promised Land in South Carolina to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; a process which the novelist uses to reveal the squalor and deprivation in African American life. On Thanksgiving Day, he rides in a Trolley with his mother from the parade because his father who keeps three jobs has gone on duty at the restaurant in Kaufmanns’s Department Stores. He belongs more to the female tradition of mothers, aunts and grandmother. Historically, the crippling impact of racism on the African American men has made women the pillars of black families. This is why the myth of the black family as matriarchal is popularised. (See Lerone Bennett’s “The 10 Biggest Myth About the Black Family”)

The African American family is not matriarchal, but it has female heads because the income of most black men cannot support their families. This according to Lynn Norment is because 46 percent of adult black male are jobless while they also constitute 43 percent of prison population in America (54). It is not surprising that black sons grow up to hate their fathers, but unknown to the them, America’s racial memory is the primary source of tension between fathers and sons. This has produced various survival strategies among which are self-expatriation, the adoption of surrogate white fathers, the killing of the white fathers, the bonding of sons in gang groups and social determinism. Black youths announce the search for fathers in Rap music and outlandish life styles. This same determinism makes young black women to adopt prostitution as a survival strategy. It denies them the ability to react naturally to suffering just like McKay’s “Harlem Shadows.” The nude women in Mardi Gras make the African American women “the only women for whom virtue was not an ornament and a necessity” (Alexander, 16).

It is the predicament, which surrounds the African American life in the city that makes the narrative voice in *Fatheralong* to describe himself as “An outsider, voiceless, unconnected ...”(60). This search for identity takes him to the South to trace the family history, but what he encounters there are the relics of slavery and its devastation. The search for a moment of affinity with his father ended in suffering because he sees him as “A familiar stranger. Unpredictable, vaguely threatening.” (84).

Wideman's experience indicts the United States as a melting pot with ethnic cleavages because her citizens are separated "into those who count and don't count." The tensions generated by the different voices on the racial divide transform America into a racialised society that imposes her reality on the creative process. Therefore, the "writerly imagination" of an African American writer cannot be race-free. This explains why Wideman concludes *Fatheralong* with an affirmation of Black history and a commitment to "speak these stories to one another"(197).

CONCLUSION

The insight which ethnicity and re(memory) brings to this work is a critical unpacking of America as a Land of Promise to whites but an arid landscape to her black citizens. But the interpretation of this reality assumes different things to the sexes, depending on what America means to each of them. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* recreates the historical violation of black women in slavery which has been repeated in the lives of successive generations of women because history holds the explanation for the fractured humanity of black women in the United States. She achieves this by exploiting the speech patterns of black folks to create the kind of magical realism which reflects the sophisticated simplicity of the rustic in African American Literature

But John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong* locates the injustice which white America vents on the African American people within a patrilineal framework. This follows the tradition of his literary fathers - James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Being the strongest male urban novelist in the contemporary African American community, he recaptures the tragedy of racial fragmentation in a language that is lucid and at the same time lyrical. In probing the circumstances around the legacy of nothingness, that most African American men bequeath to their sons, Wideman confronts indicts America's racial memory for its fixation and castration of Black manhood. African American history as Morrison's *Beloved* and Wideman's *Fatheralong* portray suggest that it is immoral for America to act as the world policeman for democracy when she is, indeed, a society with broken souls – broken by the interplay of race and racism.

NOTES

1. It is estimated that over twelve million immigrants entered the United States through the Ellis Island, a small Island within the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour between 1892 and 1954.
2. The creative imagination is genderised because the social conception of sex difference has made the genders to perceive reality differently. Emenyi's *Intersection of Gendered Voices* (2005) gives us detailed analysis of the gendered nature of artistic creations.

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