



## Rereading William Melvin Kelley

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**Abstract:** As an African American writer who was part of the Black Arts Movement, William Melvin Kelley became an ardent defender of Black identity/-ies and the Black Aesthetics. This article aims to revisit his narratives through the scopes of African Existential Philosophy and a phenomenological approach in order to understand how he perceived and constructed Black identities in the context of segregation. At the crossroad between imagination and lived experience, his stories interrogate what constitutes the self as an existing Black body filled with individual and community essence.

**Keywords:** William Melvin Kelley, Africana existential philosophy, phenomenology

**Author:** Yannick M. Blec is a PhD candidate in African American literature at the Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée. His dissertation, entitled *Le Blafringo-Arumerican dans l'œuvre de William Melvin Kelley: l'afro-américanité entre concept et expérience vécue* (*The Blafringo-Arumerican in William Melvin Kelley's Works: African American Blackness between concept and lived experience*), focuses on William Melvin Kelley's depiction of Black identities during segregation and after throughout his works. He is also interested in the construction of identities, race relations, and transdisciplinary approach of literature among other things.

# Rereading William Melvin Kelley: Black Identity Construction in the Light of an Africana Existentialist Phenomenological Approach

*Yannick M. Blec*

It sometimes seems an understatement to say that the narratives written by William Melvin Kelley have fallen into oblivion. The general readership does not remember his works even though a few of them enjoyed some notoriety when they were first published in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> As an African American writer, he was expected to endorse a committed position in favor of the racial struggle that was shaking the USA at the time he released his books – which he did not want to do, as he writes in the preface to his collection of short stories in 1964. He eventually became an ardent advocate of civil rights within his narratives – and that is when the critics started to lose interest in his books. Nonetheless, he did not primordially enjoy the idea of using his art to transmit his political opinions. Hence, his fiction must be seen from a literary point of view that is nevertheless related to his blackness. In the context of Cultural Studies, the latter remains one of the central sources to analyze Kelley's works. Indeed, except in one of the stories he creates, all of his protagonists are Black and strive to regain their humanity at the time of race segregation in the US and after. Black identity is the foundation and leitmotiv of Kelley's characterization. He is a Black author subjected to various degrees of discrimination on account of the color of his skin and, as I will suggest, Kelley has transcribed his own *lived* experience within his works as well as the one common to every African American in the country. This contribution does not give me enough space to thoroughly show the presence of William Melvin Kelley in his narratives. But the reader can undeniably find autobiographical traces through the lines of his novels and short stories.<sup>2</sup> I am not implying that the works I am going to deal with are a mere form of autobiography; they are works of fiction. But they present an occasion to reconsider the

impact of their author's life and his political commitments. This presence of the writer's lived experience is reflective of an interrogation about what constitutes the self. The latter examination is linked to phenomenology insofar as it concerns the essence of being—this is Husserl's eidetic reduction. But this approach to essence is correlated with the existential approach to African Americans in the USA. Because they were annihilated by the predominantly White society, they had to show their existence, which Kelley does in his novels. They are constantly posing "the teleological question of black liberation and the question of black identity in the midst of an antiblack world." (Gordon, *Existence in Black* 4). There is thus a blending of phenomenological occurrences and of an Africanist existential approach in the American segregationist context in Kelley's works.

William—Duke or Bill—Melvin Kelley was born on November 1, 1937; the son of a paper editor and the grandson of a seamstress. He lived in Harlem, in an extended family set-up since his parents and he dwelled in the same place as Nana Jessie; his grandmother. The latter had a great significance in the author's career as, when his parents passed away, she was the one he asked for permission to become a writer. She also appeared under a pseudonym in the first two short stories published in the collection *Dancers on the Shore* in 1964. The latter book and the previous one, *A Different Drummer* (1962), are those which were Kelley's most acclaimed. In 1965, he published the story of a fictional, blind musician, Ludlow Washington in his novel, *A Drop of Patience*. Ludlow is Kelley's first attempt to show to his Black readership what a real Black person should be like, in the expressiveness of the Black Arts Movement to which he subscribed.<sup>3</sup> This character seems to correspond in parts to Amiri Baraka's Clay in *Dutchman* (1964), except that here, Ludlow does not die because he is associated with a White woman. His death is rather figurative, as he is reborn through Black culture and tradition, through his music directed to his fellow African American people.

*dəm*, Kelley's penultimate novel, is arguably the most political inasmuch as it depicts the immoral aspects that were commonly attached to White people by many members of the Black Power Movement.<sup>4</sup> In the epigraph, the author phonetically writes in a Black vernacular: "næʊ, ləmi təlʒə hæʊ dəm foks liv..." which can be translated: "Now, let me tell you how them folks live." Here, there is a departure from a complex literary form in favor of a simpler one. Kelley, instead of showing his readers the negative sides of White people, tells them how he perceives the situation. Using a Black vernacular is a means for him to develop further his idea of the Black Aesthetic and his political commitment. Instead of simply being a narrative device, it becomes a militant tool. This militancy is additionally visible in the dedication: "This book is dedicated to the Black people in (not of) America." By employing this Black vernacular—which he ex-

pands in his last published novel *Dunfords Travels Everywhere* (1970) to create a whole new language—William Melvin Kelley takes a stand. He wants his voice and the voices of every single African American to be heard with regard to the way that Whites have depicted them and imposed false representations of African Americans. He wants to share his experience of racism and that of most African Americans in relation to their existence as human beings in US society.

### Answering the Questions of Black Existential Philosophy

In *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*, Lewis R. Gordon writes: “Existential philosophy addresses problems of freedom, anguish, dread, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality and liberation; it addresses these problems through a focus on the human condition. [...] Problems of existence address the human confrontation with freedom and degradation” (7). Africana existential philosophy is thus an aspect of philosophy that deals with issues related to the African diaspora in postcolonial and postslavery countries and regions, such as the USA, the Caribbean, South America, Sub-Saharan Africa and so on. For Gordon, Africana existential philosophy answers the questions: “What is the meaning (if any) of black existence? What is suffering? What is to be done in a world of near universal sense of superiority to, if not universal hatred of, black folk?” (1). They are already raised in Kelley’s first book when Tucker Caliban explains the reasons of his exodus to Mister Leland:

He grabbed at Tucker’s coattail, using it as a rein to halt him.

“Go on back, Mister Leland. Do like I say.”

“Why you going?” He cleared his nose and tilted his head. “You ain’t really evil – is you, Tucker?”

Tucker stopped and put his hand on the boy’s head. The boy stiffened.

“That what they saying, Mister Leland?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does you think I is?”

Mister Leland stared into Tucker’s eyes. They were large and too bright.

“I... But why’d you do all them evil, crazy things?”

“You young, ain’t you, Mister Leland.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you ain’t lost nothing, has you.”

The boy did not understand and said nothing.

“Go on back.” (*A Different Drummer* 50)

As he is a very young White boy, Mister Leland does not grasp Tucker’s aim as a means to solve his existential problems. The protagonist has lost

his humanity that is not granted by the common White people both in the town of Sutton and The State—the imaginary territory invented by Kelley—where the story takes place, but in the general segregationist context as well. This is because his father has brought him up to be respectful of every person, no matter what their skin color is. By granting Tucker Caliban and other Black characters the respect due to their status as human beings, Mister Leland wipes away the existential questions that they face in their everyday lives. He and his father, as well as the old narrator Mr. Harper, are the only Whites who somehow try to distance themselves from the racist relationship between the two races. But in this context, it is, however, also possible to perceive a negative effect of this behavior.

Even though Blacks are regarded as sensible beings by the three aforementioned Whites, the past context is one that has despoiled them of any trace of humanity. It is still important that the liberation movement comes from the Blacks themselves, both to exist by themselves and to prove their very existence in that respect. The protagonist's intention is to go from this form of invisibility that divests African Americans of existential substance and to replace it by a point of view that tends toward that selfsame visibility that infuses him and the other African Americans with *non-stereotypical* human values. By exposing himself and refusing to follow the normative aspects imposed upon him by the dominant White society, Tucker Caliban gives a new significance to his life and subsequently the lives of each and every African American in The State. Every Black person in the latter immediately leaves after Tucker's destruction of the symbols of his ancestors' slavery, one of them stating: "'We all leaving, all the state we just a-rising up and going away. [...] I ain't sure, but it seems like all the Black folks up in Sutton got it into their heads they just won't stand for it no more'" (*A Different Drummer* 132). This existential approach is further enacted in an Africana existential manner insofar as Tucker has reflected on his position first as a man and then as an African American in the USA. This denotes the Du Boisian *double consciousness* process and the same thinker's questioning of "the problem of the Twentieth Century" (Du Bois 359). When his grandfather dies in a segregated bus under a sign that reads "COLORED," Tucker Caliban gets sick and tired of it all. His reaction during the eulogy is the exposure of his thoughts about a situation that he has not chosen and that he wishes to change by himself. At that moment in the story, a friend of the Caliban family speaks in these terms about the deceased man: "John Caliban was the kind of man would always sacrifice hisself to help others. He was a good man and a good worker in all kinds of ways, a gentle soul (sic)" (*A Different Drummer* 123). This speech is imbued with the preconceived ideas of what a Black man should be, of what Fanon has referred to as the "Black man's behavior—or a Negro's" (92).<sup>5</sup> It is very relevant to note that these words are uttered

by a Black man who seems to not realize that he is using the arguments against himself which Southern Whites have similarly used for so long. He is shaped by the negative assertions that make him less than a man. It is a very strong instance of what the existentialists call Bad Faith or *mauvaise foi*. Here, this man is contradictory. He is under the pressure of societal forces that have made him, as a Black, nothing. This inflicted false standards on him that became his options in order to remain in the world. They have disowned him of his humanity. But in so doing, he also disowns his own innate freedom, hence acting inauthentically, in a fundamentally existential way. Yet, he is also responsible for the choices he has made.<sup>6</sup> Tucker's answer to this is radical. He does not call this a life of sacrifices but of servitude: "'Sacrifice? Is THAT all? Is that really all? Sacrifice be damned!' It was not for an instant that I realized from what part of the church the figure rose, not until I marked the thin black-coated figure, the short-cropped hair on the large head, the steel-rimmed glasses, not until I saw *the arm raised and brought down in a motion of disgust, as if to wipe away the words*, that I realized it was Tucker" (*A Different Drummer* 123, my emphasis).

In addition to servitude, there is a will to fight against this institutional invisibility, as Gordon calls it (*Existence in Black* 70), and to tangibly eradicate it; hence the arm motion to "wipe away" the symbols of essentialist patterns. Just like Ellison explains in the Prologue to *Invisible Man* that the latter is invisible "simply because people refuse to see me" (7), Tucker decides to *put on a show* of his existence by going from institutional invisibility to extra-visibility. This is the reason why he acquires the land on which his ancestors labored first as slaves and then as employees. At the beginning, he destroys and at the same time purifies the soil with salt—a whitening substance that will vanish with time but that will also destroy everything.<sup>7</sup> Then he demolishes all his material possessions with an ax and fire; all of this in front of an assorted crowd, both Black and White. Even if he disappears in the dark at the end of the day, he is the instigator of a migration—that of all the African Americans in the invisible southern state.

The darkness which Tucker disappears in paradoxically represents an existential stance since it is made of several layers. It is of course the disappearing of the former Tucker Caliban who goes from a life inflicted on him by a supremacist society to an affirmation of himself; which can be read as a rebirth passage. Because it simultaneously represents the end of the narrative about this character but also the beginning of his journey, this obscurity entails a sort of transition. It is the same one that Kelley uses to develop his next major character in a novel, Ludlow Washington. If Tucker disappears from the sight of his fellow African Americans or his friends and foes, Ludlow Washington in *A Drop of Patience* (1965) has nev-

er been able to view people or the world at large. It is here that the question of color is most interestingly addressed in the ontological and existential enquiries that can be found in Kelley's narratives overall. The epistemological stance of Ludlow's blackness is enacted in his search of a sense of a real self. As he was abandoned by his parents and successively given or sold to new "masters" (*A Drop of Patience* 19), the character—who to some extent seems to become a catharsis of every African American in the country<sup>8</sup>—wonders about what is bad about being Black as this seems to be only a question of color:

"It bad to be colored, Missus Scott?" He did not feel bad and wondered if he was just stupid.

"White folks say it is and I reckon most colored folks believe it."

"Why?"

"I reckon they been told it often enough to believe it."

"No. I didn't mean that. I mean why does white folks say it?"

She hesitated before answering. "Boy, I can't tell you nothing at all about how white folks think, just what they does!" [...]

"Missus Scott, white folks think you ugly?" He kept his fingers near her mouth so he could feel the answer.

"Yes."

"Then I'm ugly too."

"Yes, you ugly too." She stopped, then chuckled, but her mouth was drawn tight. "Sometimes I think even the best-looking of us is ugly to white folks."  
(31–32)

Many African American readers at that time felt this bewildering way; it is incidentally one of the reasons that fueled the "Black is beautiful" motto. This is a compendious way to wonder about a sense of Black identity from an African American point of view, away from the American perspective. Missus Scott's chuckle, which can be read as an expression of resignation, is a perfect overview of what being Black had come to mean. Yet, Kelley's purpose is not to just expose facts of lived experiences but to think about an appropriate sense of blackness and offer a new definition. This is put forward in the form of art with Ludlow's music, but also Wallace Bedlow's in the short story "Cry for Me" (*Dancers on the Shore*, 1964). Art in this context involves a re-creation of identity, a way to repossess one's self as Black and give new meaning to the term. It is a dissenting stand, one which allows the African American to "step to the music which he hears," because "he hears a different drummer."<sup>9</sup> This dissidence is ontological and, I must add, existential as it is the result of a reflection about problems of Black existence and suffering. Because he suffered a nervous breakdown, because he loved a White woman who could not socially accept her relationship with a Black man, Ludlow Washington has



chosen to start his life and *exist* anew, in accordance with his own beliefs, and play his Black music for his fellow African Americans. In the same way, Cooley in *dām* (1967) was rejected by the White society. He has consequently chosen to take revenge on Mitchell Pierce, the novel's White anti-hero. Likewise, the reason Kelley chooses to depict various personalities when he makes African Americans his protagonists is because they have suffered from various clichéd images. By creating different Black characters in his narratives, the author's aim is to show the plurality of identities in the African American community in the USA, especially during racial segregation with its reductive categorizations (which are still continuing nowadays).

### **Phenomenological Approach: Countering Overdetermination and Manicheism**

This lived experience of a Black person in the USA and the reflection that he has had have allowed Kelley to create characters who are detached from the solipsism that is existent in the stereotypical images that ordinary Whites have had of the Black community. The author's work on identity has been the conceptual demonstration of the multiplicity of Blacks in US society. Despite his being a member of the Black Arts Movement that advocated a precise version of what an African American should be, Kelley has tried (in most of his novels) to avoid transferring his vision from a White stereotype of Blacks to a Black stereotype of Whites. This means that he did not want to impose a specific aspect of blackness as an indivisible model that embraces every member of the African American society on his readers. He tries not to permeate his work with a sadistic vision<sup>10</sup> that towers over any other conception of what it means to be Black. Thus there is no reproduction of a scheme that would crush the Other, for Kelley comprehends, unlike, say, Amiri Baraka or the early members of the Black Panther Party, that to *exist* is not just a matter of being a subject or to be objectified. It is to be a body that is three dimensional: "the dimension of seeing, the dimension of being seen, and the dimension of being conscious of being seen by others" (*Existence in Black* 71, as Gordon reemploys Sartre's arguments) or, to put it like Simone de Beauvoir, to be "ambiguous" (12). But I will show below that Kelley was not always successful in this process. Indeed, these aspects of the body are made more complex with its *Black* coloring in the Western world.

In the chapter entitled "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explains the "overdetermination" (93) of the Black, namely his or her fixed position in society that makes

him or her a new genus; “Well, a Negro!” The ossified—understand biased—conception of the Black is essentialist, which means that he is excluded from society because of the problem he represents from the solipsist White point of view. The Black is therefore objectified through this perspective. By playing God (being a sadist, then), the White imposes a (forced) masochism on Blacks that has led to the nihilistic presumptions that were shared by many African Americans in the 1960s–70s (when Kelley published his books); just like the man giving the eulogy in *A Different Drummer*. This overdetermination that comes from the outside is the starting point of Kelley’s reflection and writing. I do not debate the fact here that he has transcribed elements of his personal life within his works but I point to his experience as it affects the composition of his narratives.

If Gordon writes that “Black novelists emerge as more than symbols of blackness; they become blackness on our shelves, our curricula, our mythology” (*Existence in Black* 75), Kelley on the other hand started his career believing that his role was not to speak for Black people or to depict the “Black Problem” in his books, but simply to depict true-to-life personalities.<sup>11</sup> In spite of his stories becoming more and more committed, he also struggled to show that being Black is not something that is fixed and overdetermined. He represents blackness in the USA as a culture common to many (but not all) Black people but also as the complex association of several points of view and characters. Hence, his protagonists do not have the same vision of the world and the same expectations, depending on the experiences they have had in life. For instance, Chig Dunford in *Dunfords Travels Everywhere* (1970) does not act like Carlyle Bedlow in the same novel. This is due to the way they approach the world, which is fashioned by their personal histories. The former comes from a middle-class family and studies in Europe while the latter is a Harlem hustler who lives on his petty thefts. Even though they both want the Black community to be freed of segregation and obtain civil rights, they each have traits that depict their individuality. This individuality is the transformation of the Black as object into a subject by the author. But it is important that this object and subject merge and become threefold (as explained earlier). The characters in Kelley’s works see, are seen and are also conscious of being seen by other characters, again in a three dimensional perspective. There is also a sense of reflexivity in Kelley’s writing inasmuch as he addresses his later books to his Black readers in particular—in *dəm*’s epigraph for instance Or when the narrator addresses the reader, for example in *Dunfords Travels* when he assumes the role of a professor and says:

Goodd, a’god Moanng agen everybubbahs n babys among you, d’yonLadys in front who always come vear too, days ago, dhis-Morning we wddeal, in dhis Sagmint of Lecturian Angleash 161, w’all the daisiastrous effects, the

foxnoxious bland of stimuli, the infortunelessnesses of circumsdances which weak to worsen the phistorysystematical intrafricanical firmly structure of our distinct coresins: The Blafringo-Arumericans. (49)

The existential phenomenological approach chosen by Kelley is visible in this respect that the professor intends—and he directly says so—to tackle the presence of the African American in American society. By choosing to put forward this presence, he intends to *erase* this concept of invisibility and overdetermination and have his characters (and himself as well as every African American reader) determine their position in society with regard to the three dimensional body approach. The professor here insists that the Black body is merely considered an object in the system; an object that is obnoxious and that weakens the American society. It is this objectification that is scrutinized in the novel and that the author-narrator wants to turn not just into a subject but into an “ambiguous being” (*Existence in Black* 72). Yet, because of his anger and humanity, Kelley did not always succeed in doing so and in getting away from the stereotypes that came both from the doxa<sup>12</sup> he evolved in and the exaggerations of the committed groups he was part of. Consequently, in *dām* for example, Calvin “Cooley” Johnson cannot, because of his need for revenge, put himself away from the sadist position when he deals with the (White) character Mitchell Pierce. In a deception game, Cooley, who goes by the name of Calvin, tells Mitchell he has “old scores to settle”:

“Old scores from four hundred years ago, for his great-granddaddy and his granddaddy. That’s another thing about Cooley. He a long grudge-holding Black man. He don’t never forget a slight. [...] So, he says, it’s your turn.”

“My turn? But why me?” [...]

Calvin snorted, smiled. “That’s funny, because he said you’d ask that. And he told me that when you did, I was to ask you why his great-granddaddy?”

“Well, I didn’t do it.” Mitchell was bewildered. “What do I have to do with all that?” (159–60)

Despite Kelley’s early attempts of differentiation of characters, every African American seems to be associated with Cooley’s reaction and need for revenge, just like he associates every White with Mitchell. By doing so, he comes back to the feeling of overdetermination of “what the *black* man wants”<sup>13</sup>—understand, to gloss Gordon again, how they would ever be satisfied if not by taking the lead (*Existence in Black* 77). Because this novel was written at a time when Kelley felt disillusioned, it is possible to find a form of “sado-masochistic substantiation” (*Ibid.*), namely considering the

world from a unique binary point of view. Like many then, he turned toward self-defense; that is toward a sadistic vision of the world. It meant no inclusion of the Other in addition to playing god. It meant turning the White into an evil agent as the Black had been turned into that agent—like Baraka had previously explained to the White woman. And in a pervasive inclusion in the Black Arts Movement, it meant conveying his point of view to his readers asking them to become dominant. That is the significance of Cooley's reply to Mitchell Pierce. And so, Kelley had forgotten that the "Negro experience is ambiguous, for there is not *one* Negro, but *many* Negroes" (Fanon 110), which also means that there is not just one White but many, with their own thoughts, individualities and relations to the others. This is a contradiction in Kelley's writings. Although in his first stories he strived to represent African Americans as individuals, in *dām* he associated every individual under the symbols that Cooley and the other Black characters depicted in the work. This is where existential philosophy is useful to analyze his works. One must not forget in fact that philosophy of existence is "always a conjunctive or contextualized affair" (Gordon, *Existence in Black* 4). Moreover, one can argue that in Kelley's case, the ambiguity of the Black experience was settled again in the book after *dām*. This shows that the angry cry that is echoed throughout his fourth book is not the exclusive vision of Black Power but of a man who ultimately believes in the possibility of understanding between the two races.

The fact remains that this objectification of the White character in *dām* is interesting in the "existentially phenomenological *and* phenomenologically existential" (*Existentia Africana* 73, my emphasis) reading of Kelley. Indeed, rather than reproaching the works for lacking literary worth, I think they are on the contrary to be reread with reference to the context in which they were written. This allows for a personal understanding of segregation as Kelley puts his own point of view forward. This focalization is the key to the symbols and ideas that can be found in the books. Contrary to what Donald Weyl and other critics write, the "decline in artistry" (15) in Kelley's opuses is just a subjective point of view—a matter of perspective. It is to some extent a response to what a lot of critics were expecting of the stories by a Black writer. By depicting a cowardly, emasculate Mitchell Pierce and by saying from the beginning "Now let me show you how them folks live," Kelley is making a point. It is the statement of a Black writer who had enough and who wondered about the position of Black people in the USA in the 1960s from a phenomenological angle. He suspended—understand "bracketed"—his interest and observed his objects of thought as phenomena.<sup>14</sup> A phenomenological distance can therefore be an interesting hypothesis as I argue that the author had to distance himself from the phenomena he was going to deal with. Although the act

of writing started as an impulse, he had to theorize it so as to transform his observations into a narrative, hence conceptualizing African Americans, that is to say that he focused on their essence in addition to their existence.

The discrepancy that exists between his first published novel and the last is a matter of *Erlebnis*—of lived experience. From the young, 25-year-old writer to a father of two at 33, the experiences are not the same, whether they are personal, cultural, political or artistic. When *A Different Drummer* is the idealistic, “create everything” vision of an experimenting writer, *Dunfords Travels Everywhere* is a more mature work that is the synthesis of *lived* experience, literary audacity and commitment. The binary aspects of blackness/whiteness, although they are still relevant in the works of the writer, are not the only bases he has. The division is not two-fold as there are multiple partitions in the two groups and the relations are not solely dual. The components of the groups are therefore idiosyncratic. They are distant from the commonplace ideologies of the conception of Black or White identities, although he still presents some flat characterizations. The wealth in William Melvin Kelley’s novels is yet to be studied from different slants than that of traditional criticism. Because of the fact that they are untraditionally modernist, they have been depreciated—especially *Dunfords Travels Everywhere* which is complex both in the ideas that are developed and the language that is invented. But a transdisciplinary analysis facilitates an interest in works on Black identity construction as it is perceived and shown by this particular writer in the 1960s and the echo this vision can have in today’s still complicated race relations in the USA.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is a topic that Eric Gary Anderson has already started to address in the introduction to his article “The Real Live, Invisible Languages of *A Different Drummer*: A Response to Trudier Harris.”
- <sup>2</sup> It is the subject of a longer work in progress under the form of a thesis dissertation.
- <sup>3</sup> The Black Arts Movement as a protest movement was created for African Americans to (sometimes violently) dissociate themselves from the White traditions that had undermined the Black culture and life—subsequent to the Harlem Renaissance idea of the New Negro. It was a cultural movement to favor Black Arts and the Black Aesthetic and help improve the vision that African Americans had of their own culture and of themselves in a country

that favored assimilation rather than multiculturalism. By promoting a positive vision of Blackness—in a broad sense—it focused on who African Americans arguably really are.

- <sup>4</sup> I think again of Amiri Baraka and his oft-quoted conversation with a White woman who asked how the Whites could help with the Black cause and he replied: "You can help by dying. You are a cancer. You can help the world's people with your death." This radical approach is not singular to Baraka. It could be found in the speeches uttered by many Black Nationalists. And Kelley himself can be cited among them after Malcolm X's assassination in 1965.
- <sup>5</sup> All the quotations from Fanon are directly translated by me from the French edition of *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*).
- <sup>6</sup> Let me quote Lewis R. Gordon here on the subject as he deals with Sartrean existential phenomenology: "Yet, choosing and having options are not identical: choices may work in accordance with options, but one may choose what is not a live option. The choice, then, turns back on the chooser and lives in a world of negation. There the choice at best determines something about the chooser, though it fails to transform the material conditions imposed upon the chooser." (*Existentialia Africana* 76)
- <sup>7</sup> The symbol of salt is important here. Its color is not the primary element to take into account, but it has a double meaning. The salt which makes food savory whitens the soil and, by making it white, gives it a semblance of purity in a White person's point of view. But this purity is only ephemeral and is killing the land underneath, just like White culture (as the members of the Black Arts Movement will write it a decade later) is a poison for Black values and culture. Tucker is amorously sowing salt on his land, mimicking the parable of the sower whose grains produce plenty of food. In Kelley's version, the planting is a destructive one—it does not aim to starve the White population of The State but to deprive them of their dominance on Blacks.
- <sup>8</sup> This is another interesting pattern in the analysis of Kelley's works and one that is in fact found in the analysis of every fiction by African American authors. In fact, I am not implying here that the person of Ludlow Washington is a representative of *each and every* African American in the country. On the contrary, Kelley wants him to be a *unique individual* (tautology intended). When I use him as a catharsis, I mean that he is a representative figure, in the literary sense of the term, of a general questioning in a community that has lived the same reality of racism and segregation and has therefore acquired the same *lived* experience on the same subject matters.
- <sup>9</sup> Kelley quoted an extract from the conclusion of Thoreau's *Walden* to entitle his first novel. He also used passages of this essay in the epigraph of his novel. These quotes are from Thoreau and the epigraph. They were a means for Kelley to convey his transcendental ideals. Tucker Caliban indeed goes against the behavior expected from an African American. This vision can also be seen in some parts of the character of Ludlow Washington.
- <sup>10</sup> I am using the term in its existentialist sense, that is, to refer to someone who lives in the world thinking he or she takes the only existing point of view. The

sadist assumes that the world does not see him and that he alone can see the world, or as Gordon writes, "he regards himself on the level of 'subject' before whom all others are 'objects.'" It differs from the masochist who in this situation wants to be seen as the object and not the subject; the masochist wants the world to dissect him or her in order to *be*. (See Gordon, *Existentialia Africana* 76-78, and *Existence in Black* 71-72)

- <sup>11</sup> This is what Kelley writes in his Preface to *Dancers on the Shore* (1964): "A writer, I think, should ask questions. He should depict people, not symbols or ideas disguised as people" (vii). This is an idea that has evolved and changed through his career until now.
- <sup>12</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu: "[...] the primary experience of the world is the one of the doxa, the compliance to the orderly relations which [...] are accepted as self-evident" (549, my translation).
- <sup>13</sup> Fanon 6, my emphasis. Here Fanon makes a clear distinction between man and Black man.
- <sup>14</sup> In the phenomenological context, to suspend one's interests means to bracket objects of thoughts (that is desired things) and wonder about those things themselves and not the desire to have them or, as Gordon puts it, "instead of focusing on my interest in the thing to be purchased, I focus on the thing itself." For a more thorough explanation of Phenomenology, one can refer to Gordon's *Existentialia Africana* 73, or Edmund Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*.

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