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Making Blackness Meaningful,
or When William Melvin Kelley’s Characters Become Self-Conscious.

Introduction: Wake up and mover over

“Boy! Chig! Wake up and mover over. Please.”¹

These are the first words that are written in *Dunfords Travels Everywheres*, the fifth and last book published by African American writer, William Melvin Kelley.

From the start, his protagonist is encouraged to open his eyes, to get ahead with the struggle Black people are experiencing in the United States back in the 1960s.

It is not an accident if Kelley insists on the character’s awakening – and afterward on his wakefulness – given that the purpose of the work is to convey the primordial information to the *Blafringo-Arumerican*; that is the Black person, or the *Africamerican* as he has called them lately.

More than anything else, it is to the latter that Kelley directs his five books as well as the rest of his writings; *A Different Drummer*, *Dancers on the Shore*, *A Drop of Patience*, *dam*, and *Dunfords Travels Everywheres*, all of which were written and published during or just after the Civil Rights Movement.

Dispossessions, struggles, downfalls, or even hopes are to be found in Kelley’s writings. However, the author prefers concentrating on matters related to the inner selves of the characters he creates; characters he develops from one book to the other; thus conceiving intricate personae as well as complex stories and representations. This is the common point that links Chig Dunford, Tucker Caliban and Ludlow Washington.

Besides the three of them being Black and besides, at some point or another of their stories, realizing that they have to change it all or even start anew, there is nothing that relates them, and they will never meet.

Yet, they change; all three in the same way; from being subjected to a world that devoids them of humanity to mastering it and subjecting it.

From one master to another, then from inexistence to existence, the evolution in Kelley’s characters is noticeable as we turn the pages of his works: the consequences of a world; the aftermath, undecided and unpredictable, due of course to the color of a skin, but – and above all – to the need for recognition of a culture, of a humanity, of a right to live.

Throughout their own stories, the three characters reconsider their relationships with the Whites. They go from conflict with their own selves to acceptance and finally to self-assessment. Considering these reveals the depth of Kelley’s characters as they succeed in making their blackness meaningful again.

¹ It is all the more significant as those words are uttered by one of Chig’s white friends; one who, among others is supposed to “sympathize” with the Black Cause and who will be shocked by Chig’s reaction later in the novel.

What matters here is to reflect on the way these characters go from an extreme to the other; and I dare say, from one life to another, given that they often change thoroughly.

A change for oneself, and also – consciously or not – a change for the others. That is the core of Kelley's writing, and what he depicts in his characters, even if he says the contrary². Being inscribed in the Black Arts Movement, his novels required being an example which the Blacks could rely on, as they could with such works as *Dutchman and the Slave* or *The System of Dante's Hell* by Amiri Baraka.

This Movement that Larry Neal presents as both an esthetical and ethnical movement which aimed at addressing the African American population about their will and “desire for self-determination and nationhood” may explain the changes that are perceptible in Kelley's works; nevertheless it does not explain them all. Moreover, these transformations do not only impact the people who undergo them but also those who face, accompany, or just meet by chance the protagonists.

Let's now concentrate on these vicissitudes before focusing on the effects they have on characters in the books, and also on the readers, back in the 1960s-70s and even now.

A Matter of Changes

The use of the word “evolutions” for the three characters on which I am going to insist now is not a mere matter of rhetoric.

They are either linear or cyclic as we can see characters that go from the main body of the American society – and more particularly the main body of the Afro Americans – to self-assessment or the other way around, cyclically and endlessly.

However, to talk about changes when we speak about a writer of the Black Arts movement is almost superfluous as it was the main objective which they strove for. And it is normal that the three characters leave from the same point: people coalesced into the mass, going with the flow.

That is what Kelley wants his characters to go out of. That flow that represents the domination of Blacks by white people; which stands for what the Negro has to be from a racist point of view.

This is by introducing real characters – that is to say characters based on personalities that could exist in real life – that Kelley endeavors and succeeds in passing his ideas onto us. Thus, these characters stand for genuine ideas, and can be judged through the scope of literature of course, but also that of sociology and psychology; what shows and results from Kelley's adhesion to the Black Arts Movement.

Hence the awakening, for this is what happens to Chig when he wakes up in the parallel world of dreams in which the author immerses him: a wakening to the African American's truth and their realities. Furthermore, this immersion goes together with a new name for the character, what is reminiscent of the new names taken by Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka or other members of the Black Power Movement.

As regards Tucker – the protagonist in *A Different Drummer*, his awakening is a hard one as it occurs at the death of his grandfather. He realizes what has been happening to him when he loses the person who counted the most for him; the person whom he considered as his father.

² In his preface to *Dancers on the Shore*

The conditions in which John Caliban dies certainly explain the ‘act of renunciation’ (ADD: 153) performed by Tucker as he recovers the body under – I quote – “a white sign inscribed with thick black letters, which, had his eyes been open, had he been alive and just resting, would have been the only thing he could see.” (ADD: 121)

That sign stands for the lives of African Americans in the South; a synecdochical way of depicting a blinkered region where iniquities still persist in 1959, when Kelley publishes his novel; an obnoxious stranglehold which is worth fighting against.

From injustices to revolution, the spark that will set the tensions ablaze is contained only in one word: “Sacrifice” (ADD: 123). A “sacrifice” that Tucker wants no more. “Not another time. This is the end of it” (ADD: 124) he says. That is how and when he starts his revolution.

From his natural discretion to his calm yet noticeable revolution, Tucker takes only one step; one that first leads him out of the church during the funeral service, then to buying his land and finally to razing it and migrating away.

Among the white people in Sutton, some will say that it is due to the blood running in his veins (8); yet, this act, decided because he had had enough – enough of being helped, enough of being obliged to, enough of serving as well – is a personal decision, coming from his reflection on the “Negro Problem.”

But these people must not be wronged as the creation of Tucker’s mythical African ancestor is a proof that the author certainly wanted the weight of African American History to weigh down on his protagonist.

The creation of this embedded story of an African Giant, trying, by every means possible, to protect his offspring and trying to go back to where he comes from can be paralleled with Tucker’s departure, to the North we suppose; an eternal cycle of migration, a diasporic motion that prevents the black person from definitely settling somewhere. Maybe this is another way of interpreting Tucker sowing salt in his field, destroying his possessions, purifying them by fire and leaving to an unknown destination.

Tucker is supposedly going north, and Chig comes back to his country after an exile that makes him realize the true meaning of the Black struggle in the USA as well as the impossibility of going away from it and the problems resulting from a false representation of the relations between Blacks and Whites.

We remember Kelley’s own expatriation to France as Chig self-expatriates for his studies, and a connection may exist between both the author and his character.

To explain this link and the various adventures that Chig lives, Stanley Schatt writes: “While Kelley obviously does not expect his readers to accept this fact (*that West African slaves are still being carried from the Old to the New world*) at face value, he is suggesting that black intellectuals (like Chig) need to be reminded forcibly of just who they are and just what their historical ties to West Africa are. (...) Kelley believes that one reason why American’s attitude toward blacks has not changed is that they fail to give black individual identity, but see them only as stereotypes;”³ – thence, the hero finding his true identity again, away from those common place ideas.

This is depicted in Chig over and over rediscovering his culture, namely his black culture. When he is with his white hypocritical friends, he notices that they try their best not to show their need for domination, however, they have habits they cannot abandon since they are fixed in their behavior. From that doxa comes the attitude of a Marian who implies sex toward a

³ SCHATT, Stanley. “You Must Go Home Again: Today’s Afro-American Expatriate Writers” in *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol.7, No.3, Autumn 1973, pp.80-82.

Negro man, or that of a Lane who is quasi-authoritarian toward the colored boy. These friends who want to show their open-mindedness by trying to understand racism from the point of view of the oppressed are nevertheless shocked when Chig uses a “Negro swearword” (Motherfucker). Shocked, not because of the quality of his language, but because he dared consider himself superior, even equal to them. “Wherever you go, whatever you do, you’ll find a Tom, peeping on you” his father would say. Not a Tom, but sex-crazed and afraid whites.

The question of color is raised further when Kelley’s magnificent jazz virtuoso Ludlow Washington considers Blackness.

Indeed, how can you perceive blackness when you don’t know what color is? The query comes back and again throughout the novel *A Drop of Patience*; first when Ludlow considers blackness with his black blind fellows at the Home and when one of them, Four-Eyes who can see a little, describes white people⁴.

This query is also identified in a conversation between Ludlow and Missus Scott, his mother-in-law-to-be, which ends with Ludlow touching her face and asking about her and himself being ugly from a white person’s point of view. The conclusion that they are both unattractive creates a noteworthy silence in which Ludlow, not knowing what to do or say starts eating. This conclusion is also prefigured in Missus Scott’s speech when she stresses the fact that for black people, the white opinion has become Gospel Speech, something – I quote – “they been told (...) often enough to believe it” (ADP: 31); a *truth* that was already inculcated in Ludlow when he was a child.

In the novel, Ludlow’s last act is to go back to the South, to a little store-front church where he could play his music; a music that becomes essential and has a true meaning for black people; a considerable alteration in the character who goes from discovery to famousness, then from nervous breakdown to recovery and finally to a need for secrecy and almost seclusion. These personal evolutions lead him to a more implicit one, *i.e.* to making his culture, his perceptions, and his experience – his *Erlebnis* – momentous.

As the character matures, he discovers the true gist of blackness thanks to the use of his other senses. That is what can be understood when he imagines feeling New York (ADP: 120-121). The other senses become essential for the character, but also for the readers as they come to understand that blackness is more than a derisive and theoretical idea based on the only considerations of skin colors. It is a practical, sensitive and sensible fact, a positive cultural ideology.

From an almost naïve Negro who is dominated by a master at the Home (18), and through successive masters, Ludlow grasps his own destiny in his hands and becomes self-emancipated when he decides, without any kind of promise, to go back south; thus epitomizing a common ideal in the Afro American existences, but also a symbol of what a Black should be when he faces racial hardships as well as a life based on such premises.

Ludlow going back to the South can also be seen as the end of a circle in Kelley’s writing; one initiated by Tucker’s departure to the North and completed by Ludlow’s coming back: a representation of a certain diasporic motion of the African Americans within the USA.

⁴ “[...] all the blind white boys was in another place because the law wouldn’t let them be together with us because they was better. (...) Well, I did notice that Mister Gimpy and the Warden spoke different from us. So we asked Four-Eyes if it was being white made them talk different. And he’d say, Yes, kinda. Then he’d say white folks most always had straight hair and their noses wasn’t as big.” (ADP: 30)

Impacts!... and conclusions

Reading the stories of Tucker Caliban, Chig Dunford, and Ludlow Washington cannot be done without being influenced in a way or another by them; what incidentally coincides with the *a posteriori* aim of Kelley's literature. I say *a posteriori* because of the author's indication in his preface to his collection of short-stories *Dancers on the Shore*. I quote: "An American writer who happens to have brown skin faces this unique problem: Solutions and answers to The Negro Problem are very often read into his work." Nonetheless his vision of his role as a Black author changes as time goes by, just like a Chig or a Ludlow's visions changed, realizing what he could do for the Blacks in the USA.

On the other hand, in the same preface, Kelley claims that a writer should always be interrogative, he or she should ask questions; not give answers as a politician or a sociologist. And yet, he will give these answers all the same as we can read in his fourth novel for instance.

The epigraphs in his books have a significant importance as they help us understand the content of the works. Among these epigraphs, the one in *dəm*, the fourth novel is the most meaningful. Kelley phonemically writes: "now, lemme tell you how dem folks live" revealing a black person's speech and his goals in this book.

However, the work depicts black people lives as much as whites'. Narrated from a white man's point of view, the story insists on the beauty and simplicity of the lives of the Negroes, away from prejudiced ideas (a rediscovery of this beauty for a black reader), and yet, it is also to be understood through the underlying message regarding the depravity of the way whites live.

It is not only in this book that Kelley shows this, since in *Dunfords Travels Everywheres* he also shows us how the blacks are when they act "white;" displaying a negative image of these individuals.

Kelley's writing is all the more so convincing as it emphasizes experience over simple narration. Thanks to various narrative techniques, among which *showing* is both the most effective and efficient. The mission of the writer of the Black Arts Movement is accomplished as the message that is conveyed is directed to the Black and corresponds to an ideology of self-determination.

He thus takes elements, even simulacra of events of the existing world and transposes them into his writing, creating a perpetual motion of exchange between his readers and his characters. In fact, how not to be attracted to the reactions of a Tucker who cannot take segregation anymore and moves to a place that would be more promising, and how not to sympathize with a Ludlow Washington who does not understand why his white girlfriend leaves him after she becomes pregnant? How not to sympathize when you are Black and that you live the same things?

Kelley's writing is phenomenological in that way – even existential – as he represents in symbols and characters, ideologies that correspond to those of Lewis R. Gordon's Black Existentialism.

His literature can also be connected to Toni Morrison's reflection in *Playing in the Dark* when she writes: "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the

writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this.”⁵

Indeed, the evolutions that Kelley’s characters undergo are the fruits of the writer’s thinking about the conditions of the Blacks in the USA in the 1960s. They require to be situated in that context to be fully understood or else they would lose their meaning; a meaning that was to make blackness meaningful again in a country that was and that some philosophers such as Gordon still think is loathsome toward the black person.

From that point of view, Kelley’s writing is still perspicacious in the United States nowadays as many blacks consider themselves despoiled of their black identity.

⁵ MORRISON, Tony. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Paris: Christian Bourgeois éditeur, 1993, p.37.