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### **Chig Dunford and the idea of life in cycle: from insouciance to consciousness, and conversely**

#### ***An Introduction to William Melvin Kelley and Dunford's Travels Everywheres***

William Melvin Kelley and his works are unknown to many of today's readers. This is mainly due to the fact that his most famous stories take place during and are contextualized in the Civil Rights Movement, under the influence of the Black Power Movement; thus making Kelley part of the Black Arts Movement, the literary *group* that advocated a literature committed to teaching a Black culture to African Americans. Here, I'm going to focus on the last novel he published, *Dunford's Travels Everywheres*.

It introduces two protagonists. On the one hand, there's Chig Dunford, a middle-class student who has lived in Harlem all his life but has only known private schools and a culture alienated from the Black experience. At the beginning of the novel Chig is in an imaginary European country, then aboard a liner that takes him home. He comes face to face with enslaved African people who're being transported to America. On the other hand, there's Carlyle Bedlow, a Harlem hustler who lives off his petty thefts. Carlyle's confronted with one of his friends having to sell his soul to a “White Devil” in order to save his mother from dying. The two characters represent a certain aspect of Blackness, but are both at a certain point in the story obliged to face that Blackness and the meaning it has in mainstream American society. Notwithstanding their differences, Kelley considers the two characters share a common background and that's why he melts their identities into a single one in their dreams where they become Mr. Chiglyle.

#### ***Introducing the notion of “cycle” in William Melvin Kelley's Writings***

The notion of cycle is among the main concepts the author uses in his work. However it's essential to note that the traditional definitions given to cycles don't fully correspond to Kelley's cycles. If the idea of central figures can be found with the intertextuality of several characters like Chig Dunford or Carlyle Bedlow, the cycles in those characters' lives don't

necessarily imply that they'll always come back to the point where the reader first encountered them.

In *Dunford's Travels Everywhere*, Kelley deconstructs his characters' psychological, moral and physical evolutions, in order to analyze their components, as one does in a scientific dissection. He then symbolically rebuilds them through the physical structure of the novel, as well as by the *Joycean* language he invents so that his protagonists can regain the Black identity they'd forgotten or realize they only live because it's imposed on them by the dominant society.

These deconstructions are to be seen as a means the author uses to instruct African American readers as to their common identity. He wants to make them aware of the path they should take to go from their insouciance to the realization and the understanding of the annihilation imposed on them by the dominant society. But Kelley insists this awareness is never complete and that it's everlasting, going round in a kind of spiral-like cycle. This cycle's more like a double helix as the construction of Chig's character represents an internal cycle and the physical design of the novel's the external circle of Kelley's thoughts.

### *Internal Cycles*

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The example of Chig Dunford's meaningful here insofar as Kelley tries to achieve a real sociological, psychological and moral analysis of this character. When he first appears in the story "A Visit to Grandmother," Chig's not aware of the realities that forged his father's character, and that'll forge his too. Chig only progressively understands his father's awkwardness when he's in the family house. Actually, Charles Dunford, Sr. has come to settle his problems with his mother and brother. He goes to visit his mother because he thinks she's loved him less than she's loved his brother. His argument's based on the color of his skin because he thinks his mother makes a distinction between them because of their complexions:

"That's not true, Mama. You know it. GL was light-skinned and had good hair and looked almost white and you loved him for that."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> « A Visit to Grandmother » in *Dancers on the Shore*. p.62-63.

The first “racial” confrontation that Kelley gives to Chig is in the inner family circle – one which is circumscribed, but that echoes the American pre-established social order. The message’s simple but precise: the mother who’s a symbol of affection as well as an authoritative figure in Charles Dunford, Sr.’s single-parent family; this mother forgives her older son more easily, because he’s a lighter complexion. The transposition’s easy, and the reader effortlessly recognizes the organized-hierarchy due to epidermis that’s current in post-slavery and post-colonial societies such as the American society.

Chig’s reflection on race relations in the US continues while he’s in Europe. The geographical distance allows him to be plainly aware of his situation as Black in his homeland. Similarly the links he has with his friends and fellow American expatriates just like him, show him that the doxical relations are stronger than he believed, when he thought they considered him as equal. The end of this quote when Chig and his friends are on the beach helps us reflect on this:

[...] Hi, Chig. And our having Chig in the car showed them we weren’t the kind of people they were against.”

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Chig must also answer when these friends ask him questions about his being black in the United States:

(...)

Most times, Chig tried to answer their questions, to help them understand the experience of Africans in the United States, the pain of slavery, the shame of segregation, the frustrations of integration, and all the rest of it. But this Sunday he wanted only to play softball and store up sun.

There’s a differentiation between Chig and the other members of his group of friends. The latter somehow set Chig apart because of the questions they ask him and they wonder about him, not as a complete person, but as only an African American. Furthermore, he doesn’t try to differentiate himself from his friends. *They* see a difference and show it. He only wants to make the most of his Sunday with his friends, at the end of summer. It seems like these friends try to convince themselves that they’re in favor of integrating black people into mainstream American society, and they consequently try to perceive Chig as an American

human being, just like them; but they can't and their pretenses are visible in the commentaries they make to Chig.

It's when he's set in contrast to those different from him that Chig realizes he has a role to play in the United States, and this is one of the reasons why he goes back to his homeland. During this return voyage he ends up in the ship hold, and witnesses the deportation of Black Africans toward the US. Yet he doesn't succeed in saving these Africans from their fate. This powerlessness is a lack of maturity in the character who hasn't saved himself yet, and hasn't made himself meaningful again yet. This is the realization Kelley wants his character to come to, so that he can have his own existence, not one that would be dictated by a dominant society. This is an additional stage in the elaboration of the cycle in Chig's life.

His understanding is completed by Carlyle Bedlow's experience. The combination of the two characters into one – Mr. Chiglye – permits Kelley to deliver a universal message to his African American readers, whatever their social categories. The author insists on the sameness of every African American concerning their shared history. He discloses the difference between the Blacks and the Whites, to show that the latter are demonic; prone to fratricidal relations with each other; but also that they're set to cause the downfall of the black man. This is what can be understood from the explanations the Professor gives:

Some Usricans say it's because the Uralpean ist d'DeVille. They razen He'll tempt you, tissyue, tuss you, tighten your truest with gleeven, his Job, as illmost any quistian will taile you. (...)

E.M. Fardpull, in his landark steady of the study hobits of the eurlly tribs of the eorly Yacucic Pyreod, *THE MESS AGE OF THE LACKMAN*, states clearly his bilefe in the thory of mismagination and expelcion, the eeveel reck of the hubristic Jack L. Yacoo, M.D.

The writing in this extract's to be examined on diverse scales since the writer implies several levels. The title given by the Professor, "THE MESS AGE OF THE LACKMAN," has a double meaning. It's of course a reference to Elijah Muhammad's *Message to the Blackman in America*. Yet, the underlying significance in the way Kelley spells this title mentions the Age of Mess; that is of chaos that the Black man has known, as a man *who lacks of something*. The reference to Muhammad's book's still more accurate when Kelley talks about the "Yacucic" Period. The Professor's speech refers to the six thousand year cycle whose end will supposedly mean the return of Blacks to power, after the expulsion; a power that was taken by the Whites who were created by Yakub, as can be read in quote No.5.

The demon is the White man, created by Yakub who wanted a purer race. The image of expulsion is used to denounce Yakub's excess of pride, with the term "hubristic." This is certainly an exhortation to African Americans not to let themselves become self-important like the White man has; but to remain proud of their equality, if not their superiority in relation to the White man.

### *External Cycles*

Larry Neal, one of the champions of the Black Arts Movement, used to say that the fratricide wars would terminate the Euro-American society. Kelley's aim is to show the detectable divisions in White American society and the results they'll have. He aims to convince the African Americans to gather together and brace for the dangers of the aforementioned divisions. By assembling together the Blacks would come to dominate the American society as the White is dominated because of his weakening culture.

The transformations of the moral attitudes due to the various episodes in this novel make it possible for Chig and Carlyle to join in their dreams and form a single agent, the one that Kelley and the other members of the Black Arts Movement think should motivate the African American community.

In the final part of the novel, Mr. Chiglyle meets with two atypical characters – Rab who stands for Br'er Rabbit in the Southern US and Cherokee's tales and Turt for Brother Turtle in the same tales). Both are depicted in Kelley's novel as Texas Rangers. When Chig reacts negatively to one of his white friends' — Lane's — remarks by saying "No, motherfucker!," he fulfills a request made by the Rangers, who told him not to say "No" to a Black person, but to the Whites.

The cycle is completed and it's after this *hubris* directed toward Lane, that the professor's lecture starts and the reconstruction of blackness begins in the novel. The inner circles join with the external ones in the transmission of values dear to each character toward a sharing with the community. Chig Dunford's ego becomes the one in which every African American partakes.

For Kelley, this novel starts on chapter 29, the penultimate one, and chapter one is just a continuation of chapter 30, creating a never-ending circular motion. When the Texas Rangers send Mr. Chiglyle back to the "real world" in chapter 30, they proclaim the following truth:

“In Side, out! Good-bye, man: Good-buy, man. Go odd-buy Man. Go Wood, buy Man. Gold buy Man. MAN!BE!GOLD!BE!,” and the first thing that Chig hears when he wakes up in chapter one is “BOY, Chig, Wake up!” In fact it’s a single sentence that shows the monetary worth of the African Americans as seen by the whites who, at the same time, belittle them. The shortcut is simple but reminiscent of the practices during slavery in the USA:

The Negro can be purchased with gold → he is worth gold → Therefore he is gold, but with a non-human worth: he is a child.

The Black man seen as gold shows that the White man considers him as a good.

The perpetual reference of notions from one page to the other unveils the African Americans’ constant, seemingly everlasting struggle. Unlike Carlyle, Chig seems unable to act in favor of the African Americans, hence his return to the beginning at the end of the cycle. He doesn’t understand that it’s important to act and really take part in the effort led by the other Blacks in the USA. Kelley insists that the African American is sacrificed for the White man’s benefit, just like Abraham’s scapegoat was sacrificed to the white man’s god, that was created by the Norse mythology so that Spring could heat up the man from the North. Thus he writes: “Wehel, Tote, it save rycompl, icated process-pool. Ingand Co., latingre Cent killrat. I.O.S. with our D.E., sire, to sacrifice T.O.O.D. inso thats Pringwill com,e?”<sup>2</sup>

Spring must be perceived as the going toward summer, toward the heat coming from the African sun. After the white man’s wintry period and his Norse tales that lasted for six thousand years, Yakub’s invention gets warmer and thence favors the black man’s return to power. The voluntary sacrifices echo Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1966 speech “We Shall Overcome,” in which he said that “Before the victory is won, even some will have to face physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent psychological death, then nothing shall be more redemptive.” This psychological death is the one that Chig must cope with. The Professor warns that this death is explicitly related to his renouncing his African American identity.

Symbolically, because of the union of both Chig and Carlyle, the body of the African Americans starts to act at the same time as their actions become mutual and meaningful. The uninterrupted action and the will to show it’s important constitute the foundations of the cycle in Chig’s life. For Kelley, it does not suffice to act just once, like Chig does on the ship. The

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<sup>2</sup> (Well, Turt, it’s a very complicated process, pulling & Collating recent ill-ratios with our desire to sacrifice to Odin so that spring will come).

character, and in that way all of the African Americans, must strive to go away from the pretense of integration toward a real, true integration.

Kelley's cycle is to make his reader realize the condition that's imposed on him by the mainstream of this society. African Americans must act so as to take the path toward a true existence, beyond the Du Boisian double consciousness and to a unique one, the one of the black community. By striving to make this schizophrenia disappear and become individuals who would act only for themselves, Chig and Carlyle come back to the Africanist values that Kelley wants to set forth. They must reclaim their cultural heritage and a land for their own. The collusion of both Old Norse and African myths is of course the confrontation of two separable, different cosmologies. It's similarly a superposition of these cosmologies opposite the four hundred years that Black people have spent in more or less intimate relationships with the Whites. Because of the transmission of the latter's beliefs, African Americans have come to know them better and find the flaws that could help them go back to the domination promised by Elijah Muhammad Yakub's legend.

### *Conclusion*

Chig lives in a never-ending cycle that he alone can control. To do so, he must understand that his destiny is not to be with White people, but with Blacks. He must understand that he cannot disown his African origins. His insouciance and then realization will follow each other on and on, as long as he doesn't learn to know himself and renounce what he considers to be privileges and what Carlyle considers to be drawbacks because they come from the Whites. That's a message to the Black Man who sees examples of what his behavior can lead to. This is a dichotomous vision of the American society according to the order established in the writing of the novel, and this is a vision that introduces Kelley's own vision at that time; that of a man who had been disillusioned by the situation he had to struggle against in a society that he did not choose but that remains his nevertheless; a fight because of the color of his skin and of prejudices that do not come from him.