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Memoir, Memory and Conceptualized Identities in William Melvin Kelley's

Narratives

Presentation for the "Mobilising Memory: Creating African Atlantic Identities" 2015 CAAR

Conference

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Memoir, Memory and Conceptualized Identities in William Melvin Kelley's Narratives

Introduction

William Melvin Kelley's an African American writer who published five novels and some short stories and essays. In the 1960s, he was a member of the Black Arts Movement created by the late Amiri Baraka. His narratives portray African Americans who're struggling to redefine their identities in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. To recreate these identities, Kelley has used elements from his own life and ancestry as well as his perception of the world.

In addition to this, because they were included in the Black Arts Movement, his works were committed to the betterment of the African American situation at that time so that they could construct a finer future for themselves. Kelley's especially focused on creating credible characters and for this, he's used the collective and individual memories as well as common events to shape their personalities. He's drawn on his own lived experience and identity to give unity to the fictional world he's been creating since. For him, African Americans should of course have the same cultural ideology, yet they must have differences which are constitutive of their very identities. In order to highlight these differences, when he writes, the author tries to find the perfect balance between community and individuality. In these narratives African Americans are people who're both within and without the community.

The mythification and intertextuality that one finds in Kelley's stories can be comprehended as the structural interlacing of a network of memories. These memories are the recollections of past events – whether it is a recent or older past. Because they are transcribed in the written form in Kelley's narratives, they become part of a kind of memoir and the works consequently have an autobiographical frame.

By relying on the past, William Melvin Kelley attempts to write a future that strays away from the destructive filiations bequeathed by the Euro-American hegemony. He creates new

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stories and a new history that allow the African Americans to see themselves as people and not as some sort of cliché.

Questioning the norms

We understand that Kelley's aim's the questioning of norms, those things imposed on Blacks from a certain past and from points of views that were against them.

Since the arrival of Black people in the USA, continuing throughout Segregation and until now, many Whites have considered that Blacks don't have a real individuality and they've only corresponded to selected criteria that objectified them. The one conscious discrepancy was binary: it was just a matter of distinguishing between the "Good-" and the "Bad nigger." This differentiation was nevertheless merely a way for those racist Whites to feel more confident as for the quality of object that was blindly attributed to people of African descent in the American society. Blacks have only been seen through the color of their skins and because of that, they've been perceived as deeply bad.

2

This point of view can be found in the narratives by William Melvin Kelley when he insists on the perception of his white racist characters. In his last novel entitled *Dunfords Travels Everywhere*, one of the Black protagonists who is friend with a group of expatriate white Americans is solely seen through their degrading perspective of Blackness: that is as the negative of their white selves. He's seen as vulgar and sex-crazed. He's then a beast that only obeys primary functions without any kind of humanity within him. In his writing, Kelley wants to destroy these approximations about black identity and replace them, both in the society itself and in American literature. This is a task that many African American scholars have been doing – like W.E.B. Du Bois, or Marcus Garvey – and that continues so far, hence our being here today. In her essay *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison's analyzed the presence of African Americans in the country through literature and has related it to the construction of the American identity in the whole. She writes:

I want to suggest that these concerns—autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power—not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity.

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Autonomy is freedom and translates into the much championed and revered "individualism"; newness translates into "innocence"; distinctiveness becomes difference and the erection of strategies for maintaining it; authority and absolute power become a romantic, conquering "heroism," virility, and the problematics of wielding absolute power over the lives of others.¹

This is the commonplace argument that Kelley distances himself from when he creates the character of the African – with a capital A – in his first novel, *A Different Drummer*. The African represents the hyper-masculinity and heroism that were taken from Blacks in the USA. Kelley reappropriates what'd been perceived as African rawness and savagery for himself, and transforms the giant African into a newly and distinctly autonomous individual. The writer doesn't only take the so-called white and positive images and ideals to give them to black characters; he also recreates black identity.

Historically speaking, the term "American" has been associated with Whiteness. It has thus excluded Blacks from the nation and been "a self-reflexive contemplation of fabricated, mythological Africanism" as Morrison calls it (47).

3 The question of the norm goes further when Kelley takes this "mythological Africanism" and reinvents the myths to transform himself and every other African American. The fabrication of the canonical American literary myth is the one that shows the Black as the negative of the White, namely as the one that one shouldn't be. The African in *A Different Drummer*, as he's modeled on mythical attributes, becomes a superhuman, but is also admired like a Samson when he kills the lion barehanded. Mr. Harper, one of the narrators in the story says it himself: the story of the African was amplified and extended, but it's because of this that it's remarkable and must be remembered. Because the African, who is a synecdoche of the origin of the African Americans and of their real culture and character – so because the African's larger than life, he's, in addition to Tucker Caliban (the real protagonist in the novel), the ferocious and at the same time discreet character that the reader will remember. He's different from the ordinary, common, normed and flat stereotypes. Still in relation to a synecdoche approach, Black people go from the category of sub-humans to that of mythic heroes, if not mythological.

I'm talking about mythology because that's what Kelley creates in his last published novel and to a lesser extent in some of his other narratives. The influence of the African on Tucker

¹ MORRISON, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993 (©1992), pp. 44-45.

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Caliban (who's the African's descendant) can be found on other characters' behaviors, as well. This myth-like narrative system is further amplified thanks to the intertextual system that's used in Kelley's works. Because we can find the same characters (in a Faulknerian fashion) from one work to another, there's a systemic understanding of real-life events explained in a fictional oeuvre. In that way when Chig Dunford – one of the protagonists of Kelley's last novel – explains what it's like to be Black in the US in the 1960s, that's a fictive character who's in a tale to explain real elements that can't be understood by some real people. The use of Chig in this narrative is thus that of a hero (despite his lacking divine characteristics) – a hero who is there to explain.

4

The codes are diverted and used in favor of the African American identity. The characters go from a world that belittles and dehumanizes them to being in a society in which they actively participate in enacting the rules. It's no longer the African Americans who are raw and savage, but the Euro-Americans who enslaved them and made them undergo Segregation. Where Morrison analyzed "(...) the common linguistic strategies employed in fiction to engage the serious consequences of blacks,"² Kelley, to describe the Whites and the consequences of their presence on African American culture and identity, uses the same strategies. He utilizes the same economy of stereotype and metonymic displacement. In his works, there's the metaphysical condensation since the White's the one who becomes an animal and therefore something it'd be incongruous to talk to. The author also reverses the white traditional idea of fetishization as it's a white woman who becomes the sexual predator on black males. And finally, like white writers, Kelley uses a dehistoricizing allegory and the patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language but this time to signify white people.

Several of these processes are difficult to perceive directly in Kelley's oeuvre, and it's possible to question them as those of an excessively committed writer. In spite of the political force and the symbols of revolt they contain, the last novels he published are indeed responses to real-life events, whether they were personal or not. For instance, one can notice Kelley's anger and lack of understanding to JFK's assassination in a passage of *Dunford's Travels Everywhere*. If Chig's emotion isn't instantly detected, the episode itself is built around a situation that jeopardized the hopes of African Americans. At that moment in the story, he's not interested in

² MORRISON. *Ibid.* p. 67.

the subject insofar as he keeps himself physically and morally far from the action. Yet his relationship with his white friends deteriorates from the moment he learns of the death of the President to when he utters the insult: "No, motherfucker!" This angry cry's the result of the accumulation of derogatory remarks as well as the affliction regarding the annihilation of the various hopes that were set in that President. Chig's thus to be regarded as a fictional double of the author.

At the crossroad between experience and imagination

5 Finding the figure of the author within the representation of fictitious characters wasn't a new thing when Kelley used this technique. But here, the writer's narratives are testifying for a tumultuous time in the lived experience of the whole African American community. As a member of this group, Kelley's been able to use his own life as an example to emphasize the true worth of the African American identity. He was after all part and parcel of the Black Arts Movement. Yet this lived experience as a Black in the USA is related to a particular *Weltanschauung* (that is a particular view of the world, life and condition of Man in the world). This vision correlates with an individuality which is absent from the Euro-American norms that Morrison's commented upon. Kelley sets himself as an example, because he's Black, he's an observer and as an American. On account of this selfhood or rather ipseity, we can see the dichotomy there's between being in the group and the notion of individuality. This separation's important in the construction of identity that the author tries to put forward. This way and for most of Kelley's protagonists, the person's detached from the group without getting away from it or denying it. The aim of this maneuver is to bring out a radiant culture as opposed to one that's dying.

This principle which is at the basis of the Black Arts Movement³ lets the author use the past to encourage a brighter future. It's not simply a question of studying the mistakes of the past; it's the reappropriation of an existence that was taken from black people. The different steps to this purpose are defined by a seemingly universal reasoning: namely to substitute a concept for another. For the members of this artistic movement, the matter's going from the double-

³ Cf. NEAL, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement". in *The Drama Review: TDR*. Summer 1968, Vol.12, No.4, Black Theater, pp. 29-39.

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consciousness that Du Bois explained to the partial, if not complete destruction of the white culture. Kelley however, contrary to say, Amiri Baraka, doesn't wish for the complete eradication of Whites. He just wants Black culture to be cleaned up of white annihilating items.

Because he's mobilizing the historical prejudices against Black people and because of the way he transmits his ideas through fictional narratives, the author theorizes and conceptualizes the African Americans based on the disparaging images that have existed of them.

Of course we can see here the dangers of this process. The risk is to produce new clichés, what can be seen in the novel entitled *A Drop of Patience* for instance. Ludlow Washington, the black protagonist, is unable to live his life but for himself, without sharing. This lasts even to the epilogue of the novel. Taken from a certain angle, he's the irresponsible father who abandons his family; a man without any interest for others. Because he's the protagonist in a novel by a committed black author, he can be seen as the representation of a whole community. Yet, the same Ludlow is a complete individual who strives against racial stereotypes to concentrate, at the end, on his art and black culture.

6

Despite the fact Kelley's characters strive to obtain the common recognition of their identities, Tucker Caliban is not the same as Ludlow Washington and so on and so forth in the list of characters. They however have common purposes as far as their rights are concerned, but are sometimes poles apart as to their personalities. These are the observations of Kelley as an author on the world in which he moves and lives and the heritage of the African American past. As a writer, he develops a technique of analogies regarding the lived experience that allows the reader to identify with the characters or dissociate from them.

Conclusion

Kelley's *Erlebnis* isn't set as a unique example. Hence the multiplicity of identities despite the fact the readers know from the very first pages where the writer's opinion lies. However, in addition to the lived experience that's found in the works, one must not forget the share imagination has, and that of historical and cultural heritage. Imagination has a predictive function inasmuch as it induces a fantasized vision of the world. This fantasy comes from the need of a better future compared to a present situation or to the everlasting memory of a troubled

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past. The prediction can be negative with the memory of that past which cannot be withdrawn and that continues for ever as it sometimes seems to be the cases in *Dunfords Travels Everywhere*. On the other hand, this prediction can become a utopia when it puts forward the construction of various black identities, in spite of the refusal of their existence by the Euro-American society. One can notice the plurality of final concepts related to imagination, lived experience, and memory. It's important to contextualize the events in order to understand the reasons of the changes in Kelley's way of thinking. From naivety to fatherhood, Kelley's abandoned the innocence and the blinders that blinded his life to the blatant radicalism in his penultimate novel. He's used his narratives as memoirs to note down and comment on the past and present. But contrarily to Calvin "Cooley" Johnson (one of his prominent characters), he didn't stop to that past as enslaved people in the USA. He has – because he continues – wanted to be a part of the American society.

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