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Scandalous Roots: Black and White Ancestry in Recent African American Fiction

Fritz Gysin

In the beginning was the African. And the African was a slave, who had newly arrived on the American shore. But he was a special kind of slave. He was the giant of King Barlo's sermon in Toomer's "Esther," whose "head was caught up in th clouds" while his feet were chained by "some little white-ant biddies. They led him t th coast, they led t th sea, they led him across th ocean and they didnt set him free. The old coast didnt miss him, an th new coast wasnt free, he left the old-coast brothers, to give birth t you an me" (*Cane* 38-39). But he was also "The African," the legendary great-great-grandfather of Tucker Caliban in William Melvyn Kelley's novel *A Different Drummer*, who broke his chains upon arrival, cut off the auctioneer's head, and, carrying his little baby under his arm, fled to the swamp and from there began to haunt coastal plantations, freeing other slaves. Or, to give two more recent examples, he was one of the mythical Ibo slaves in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* or Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, who took one good look at the new country, did not like what he saw, turned around and walked or flew back to Africa.

In the beginning was the African. The genealogical interest came later. Even *Roots* came later. The emphasis on bloodline came after the modernist concern with the fate of the individual and after the realist protest against racism had given way to a new attention to family and community, the black family and the black community, i.e. in the 1970s. Since then, quite a few African American novels have been tracing the development of three and more generations of a black family. Alex Haley, Leon Forrest, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, and many others have attempted family sagas or have combined stories and novels into a family saga, in which the focus is usually on survival in the face of adverse circumstances. Survival is shown to be possible due to the preservation of, or the return to, or even the

transformation of, values and strategies that in most cases have roots in Africa or at least in slavery, values and strategies exemplified, personified, by "the African."

The issue is not so clear-cut, however, if we look at the actual messages which are handed down to, or which are discovered by, the protagonists representing the last generation in these novels and if we look at these protagonists' reactions to their discoveries. Many of the more complex – or more artistically compelling – recent novels insinuate an alternate version of origins, one that is at the same time more frightening and more ironic. In the beginning, these texts tell us, was the scandal. Consider Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, a quest novel, whose protagonist Macon Dead discovers that his ancestor was one of the famous flying Africans. But the great-great-grandfather's legendary flight back to Africa turns out to be fraught with paradoxes: the revealing song that is addressed to Sugarman/Solomon contains in its centre his wife's wail not to leave her and her twenty-one children back in the new country. Moreover, there is a report of the mother's having gone mad as a result of her husband's desertion, so that the children had to be brought up by neighbours. The meaning of Milkman's imitation of his ancestor's mythical flight remains equally indeterminate: it may be suicide, it may be transfiguration. "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (337). The final statement covers an aporia and a missing entity, which is Africa. The end of the plot thus may be said to deconstruct the beginning of the story, or, according to one's angle of perception, the scandal at the top of the pedigree is answered by a distorting echo of the last branch of the family.

Contrary to certain Afrocentric doctrines,¹ the mental and psychic survival of last generation protagonists in recent African American novels frequently depends on a sceptical reaction to, if not a downright rejection of, ancestral models of behaviour. The persuasive power of David Bradley's *The Chaineys-ville Incident* depends upon the protagonist's ability to break a succession of suicides in the male line of his family. Despite his admiration for the un-compromising bravery of his slave-smuggling great-grandfather and his acceptance of the appropriateness of a mass-suicide of trapped fugitives instigated by this ancestor, John Washington must decide to overcome the anxiety of influence and opt for life. The same thing holds true for the female protagonist in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, whose decision at the end of the novel not to top fellatio with castration and thus not to repeat her grandmother's revenge is a desperate attempt to break out of the cycle of

¹ Cf. Molefi Kete Asante. *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

love and violence that has dominated her remembrance of ancestry. Arguably, Ursa Corregidora's self-liberating decision is more difficult to make than that of Bradley's protagonist because in her case the ancestral scandal involves a horrifying combination of incest and abuse practised by a Portuguese slave owner who fathered (and "grandfathered") his own slaves and turned them into prostitutes. It is also more relevant in the context of this paper, because the black matrilineal line is virtually "overdetermined" by a *white* male, a fact that is so obvious that it almost disappears behind the protagonist's (and the author's) obsession with sexual brutality.

Thus we should specify: in the beginning was the "racial" scandal. And the "racial" scandal involved a black woman and a white man. John Edgar Wideman's famous *Homewood Trilogy* starts with an old African slave, Orion, who frightens a white "lady" by facing her in the nude and thus causes his own lynching in order to be able to pass on his secret knowledge to a young boy. But the actual founder of the black community of Homewood, the ancestral mother referred to again and again, is Sybela Owens, a slave of the same plantation, whose white lover steals her from his own father when he learns that she will be sold. The white man supports and protects his wife; when the white folks of Homewood refuse to accept the mixed family, the couple put a curse on their property and withdraw to Bruston Hill, and from this "holy mountain" they begin to populate the town with blacks.² Raymond Andrews's semi-autobiographical second novel, *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee*, is about the author's grandmother, "a black-Indian maverick who met and mated with a white maverick,"³ but in the fiction the image of the comparatively successful and lasting marriage is subverted by the matriarch's late confession that the only man she has ever loved is a guitar player who had been castrated because he wanted to marry her, that since then she has been messing around with white men to pay them back for what they had done to him (236-240). Wideman's approach is less direct as far as the relationship between the almost mythical ancestral pair is concerned. In the semi-autobiographical last chapter (or story) of *Damballah*, entitled "The Beginning of Homewood," there is only one sentence in his imaginative recreation of the flight from slavery which directly hints at possible complications: "In the quiet moments of that first morning of freedom she misses the moaning horn and hates the white man, her lover, her liberator, her children's father sleeping beside her" (158).

² John Edgar Wideman. *Damballah* (New York: Avon, 1981).

³ p. xiv. Cf. also Andrews's autobiography, *The Last Radio Baby. A Memoir* (Atlanta: Peachtree, 1990).

However, the narrative screens Wideman uses to maintain the founder's story at a mythical distance reveal his uneasiness about the scandal at the roots.

First, there is the problem of names, an important issue in a genealogy. Sybela Owens bears the surname of her white owner, but the slaves call her Belle, following a secret naming practice that helps them protect their dignity. This secret name is a repetition; Sybela is named Belle because to the older slaves she seems to be the incarnation of another slave woman, long dead by then, an *African* who for twenty years had lived with a cage on her shoulders with a bell attached to it, a punishment for her refusal to function as a breeder, and who had become a martyr and a saint. Interestingly enough, the white man who steals Sybela and thus gives her her freedom is called Charlie Bell (157-158). His name cannot possibly be an adaptation to the matrilineal pattern, because the pedigree at the beginning of the book names the founding couple as Sybela Owens and Charlie Bell (8). The white man's name is an instance of what John Johnston, in another context, has called "uncanny repetition [...] with a difference" (49-50), a hidden allusion to the *difference* concerning the origins of the tribe.⁴

Secondly, the frame of the story represents an attempt to establish a parallel between Sybela Owens's "crime" of fleeing from slavery and that of the author's brother, who has received a life sentence for armed robbery. Wideman has a hard time doing this, because his insistence on racial inequality does not seem to him to be enough justification for personal guilt. And hidden somewhere in his argument, I suspect, is the problem of Sybela's involvement with the white man. Maybe that is the reason why Wideman could not stop at the end of *Damballah*, why he had to follow up with two more novels, in which he could elaborate on this issue.⁵

Thirdly, in *Sent For You Yesterday*, the scandal at the top of the pedigree finds a remote distorted echo in an odd inversion of the act of miscegenation, when a Black nationalist woman conceives the child of an albino. Against all odds the child is an albino as well; he is killed by his black brothers and sisters, whereupon the mother goes insane and the father

⁴ Cf. "Toward the Schizo-Text: Paranoia as Semiotic Regime in *The Crying of Lot 49*." *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49*. Ed. Patrick O'Donnell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁵ This theme has preoccupied Wideman in many of his novels, but especially in his non-fiction book *Brothers and Keepers* (1984).

commits suicide. As we know from critic Ashraf Rushdy,⁶ Wideman's trilogy, and above all its third part, is about passing on, from generation to generation, the secret African counter-knowledge, as well as about the dissemination of tales whereby the family is extended to include the entire community of Homewood. In this context, the birth and death of the albino child represent moments of severe crisis, and it is very likely that this crisis is related to the scandal involving the founding couple. If Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* can be said to have added miscegenation to the list of ambivalent ancestral outrages derived from classical tragedy, Wideman can be said to have inverted the issue and to have made it fit the black discourse, giving it a further twist by presenting the albino's lack of pigmentation as the last stage of black exploitation and abuse.⁷

The dilemma of white ancestry is also subliminally present in Wideman's latest book, entitled *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society*, a non-fiction book, in which the author, among other things, complements his matrilinear, light-skinned family story with an account of his search for his apparently darker forefather. One, slightly self-ironical quotation must suffice:

In America people of color walk under a cloud of unsettled paternity. Assertions that the devil or orangutans engendered us are not heard often today, yet the cloud still accompanies us wherever we go, like an invisible balloon on an invisible string. Even when no one mentions the cloud or pretends it's not there or declares they don't notice or care, everybody's aware of the cloud. Its presence is attested to by our obsession with color. We're color-struck. Stricken by color. More terms for our color than Eskimo languages have invented for snow. *Shit-skin* is one particularly evocative appellation I came across recently in the novel *Clockers* by Richard Price. (82-83)

Scepticism regarding one's ancestry, irritation by the colour spectrum at the top of the pedigree, and anxiety about the repetitive obsession by mythical scandals: the black family saga of postmodern times is full of dilemmas and predicaments. A radically different version of questioning one's ancestry has been offered by Charles Johnson in his award-winning novel *Middle*

⁶ Cf. "Fraternal Blues: John Edgar Wideman's *Homewood Trilogy*," *Contemporary Literature* 32.3 (1991): 312-345.

⁷ Cf. Fritz Gysin, "Predicaments of Skin: Boundaries in Recent African American Fiction." *The Black Columbiad. Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*. Eds. Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 286-297.

Passage. It is no family history; rather, it describes a postmodern return to the roots, but its development reveals an equally scandalous repetition of the foundation story as those we discovered in the other novels. A newly freed “Negro” evades marriage by sneaking on board a slaver run by a genial but perverse white dwarf and finds out not only that their captives are members of the oldest tribe of Africa, the Allmuseri, but that the captain also intends to carry back to America the captured Allmuseri god. As this journey and the slave mutiny that interrupts it are about the closest the picaresque hero ever gets to an understanding of his African roots, the details about the tribe and its divine creator require special attention.

The description of the Allmuseri and their behaviour shows a number of significant inconsistencies.⁸ They possess two brains but are singularly incapable of abstraction. They appear to be a synthesis of numerous other tribes, but their history and language is presented as an indication that they are at a beginning stage of civilization. In their mythology the Europeans had once been members of their tribe, yet they are afraid that their white captors are going to eat them. And the stories of their peaceful and noble life style clashes with the rather rude and fanatic behaviour of some of them during and after the mutiny. Therefore, if Rutherford suggests that “they might have been the Ur-tribe of humanity itself” (61), he also makes them represent his own paradoxical ancestry and at the same time hints at the confusion at the beginning of the line, a confusion that is increased by the postmodernist collapse of time levels.

Similar contradictions can be found in the description of the Allmuseri god: he is considered all-powerful and is said to be “unphysical” most of the time (101), and yet he lets himself be captured and put into a cage in the hold of the ship. He is the creator of the universe, and yet, according to Captain Falcon, he can’t know himself; his omnipresence, as Falcon explains, “forfeits our kind of knowledge” (102). Like his people, the god represents a blending of innumerable cultures (“living parasitically on its body” [168]), but his protean quality allows him to face Rutherford in the shape of the latter’s father. No wonder the narrator complains that “nothing more phantasmal [. . .] forever confused my lineage as a marginalized American colored man” (169).

⁸ Cf. Ashraf Rushdy, “The Phenomenology of the Allmuseri: Charles Johnson and the Subject of the Narrative of Slavery.” *African American Review* 26.3 (Fall 1992): 373-394; S.X. Goudie. “‘Leavin’ a Mark on the Wor(l)d’: Marksmen and Marked Men in *Middle Passage*.” *African American Review* 29.1 (Spring 1995): 109-122.

Even more astounding are Rutherford Calhoun's remarks about the Allmuseri's and their god's relationship to the grotesque skipper of the *Republic*. The "secrets too scandalous for me" (142) that Rutherford discovers in the captain's cabin do not only include information about Falcon's intimacy with the god, whom he calls "a witty conversationalist" (101), but also provide insights into the white dwarf's complementary god-like function in the re-shaping of the Allmuseri's fate, or history, which is described in sexual terms reminiscent of the scandal at the beginning of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* clan:

whether we liked it or not, he had changed a people simultaneously for the better and worse, made himself the silent prayer in all their projects to come. A cruel kind of connectedness, this. In a sense we *all* were ringed to the skipper in cruel wedlock. Centuries would pass whilst the Allmuseri lived through the consequences of what he had set in motion; he would be with them, I suspected, for eons, like an ex-lover, a despised husband, a rapist who, though destroyed by a mob, still comes to you nightly in your dreams: a creature hated yet nevertheless at the heart of all they thought or did. (144)

Yet the perverse generative process suggested by this trope turns out to be abortive: the "white god" who consorts with the black god turns out to be controlled by an African American crook, who masterminds the narrator's rescue after the black god in one of his whims has run the ship aground. Moreover, the narrator himself is implicated in this operation by becoming the site of the abortive attempt. After unknowingly eating the meat of a white mate, he violently vomits something he likens to "an afterbirth or a living thing aborted from the body — something foul and shaped like the African god, as if its homunculus had been growing inside me" (178). Needless to say, the parodic repetition of foundation as miscarriage throws a bizarre light on the prospects of the reunited couple at the end of the novel.

Thus, in the beginning was the urge to repeat the scandal, with its concomitant threat of abortion or miscarriage. And we might offer this tentative conclusion: that the postmodern African American novel reads the foundation story against the grain, replacing the myth of the liberating African with a parody of the fall — whether fortunate or not is for the reader to decide.

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