

Conclusion: The Challenge of Love and Forgiveness

If the word integration means anything, this is what it means:
that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are,
to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.
---James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all.
---Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Since the late 1960s, there have been a significant number of African American literary and historical works which take slavery as their direct subject matter. These contemporary narratives of slavery revisit, recall, and reinvent the slave experience while simultaneously reflecting on its continual and disturbing aftermath from the Reconstruction-era to the present. The recovery of marginalized history from dominant western historiography has had a tremendous impact on how we perceive history and human relationships. Prejudices in historiography as well as rational humanism are inextricably linked to social inequalities and power relationships, against which demands for self-determination have been strategic and effective. In literary studies, scholars and critics have urged a revision of the American literary canon by recovering lost works and experiences from the past, and by consolidating original research. The act of writing about slavery creates both a rejection of western historiography and, to an extent, a self-expression of what it means to be black through recreating the experience of slavery. The inexorable lack of a living memory of slavery was no longer a thorn in the flesh: the insufficiency turned out to be a major source of literary imagination for African American authors, especially for those who recreated a narrative of subterranean spheres of enlightenment and progress. However, this resolution brought out an ambiguous attitude in writers and critics toward the concept of universality, which was

thought to repeat the mistakes of the West.

This shift in the critical landscape of African American literature enriched our vocabulary for empowerment and self-affirmation. The four writers investigated in this study – Walter Mosley, Octavia E. Butler, Gayl Jones, and Charles Johnson – were writing and publishing under these circumstances explained above. Despite the various degrees of representation of slavery in their works, they engaged themselves in a resignification of the past within their contemporary situations. The works of the four writers concern the continuation of the essentialist notion of race, which causes the legacy of slavery to be grounds for inducing separation, and the ramifications of social as well as literary categories. Without careful attention, critical terms to elicit empowerment and self-affirmation for a racial minority may stabilize a notion of race whose centrifugal force does not admit anything but being different from others. In other words, the legacy of slavery can function as a justification of divisions between whites and blacks, as well as between men and women. Moreover, it may culminate in a cynical indifference to others in the name of relativism, or tolerance, as Žižek warns us against: This study regards this situation as the limits of identity politics.

Kenneth Warren provides a good example of this critical attempt to solidify African American literature. In his book, *What Was African American Literature?*, Warren suggests that the underlying notion here is a belief that racism continued in the aftermath of the Jim Crow laws. Warren's argument is clear-cut at first: African American literature comprised a group of creative and critical works written by black Americans within and against Jim Crow America (and not before or after Jim Crow). Warren delineates the process of creating a genre called African American literature and its "racial mission." According to Warren, African American literature had operated as instrumental in response to the Jim Crow laws, while

African American criticism recognizes its indexical value in contributing to the improvement of the race as a whole. This “racial mission” was viable only if it was carried out under the Jim Crow laws, which legalized segregation. Warren explains how this racial mission continued even after the Jim Crow laws were repealed, by discovering pre-Jim Crow era texts and including them together with post-Jim Crow era texts to form the genre called “African American literature.” Warren proposes that we overcome the past in African American literature by putting an end to “African American literature” itself. What we need to understand is that African American literature is inevitably entangled within historical contexts and critical nomenclature, which extends and limits our understanding. He explains this transitory nature of critical discourse:

[T]hese contextual forces shape a shared set of assumptions about what ought to be represented and that as these contexts themselves undergo change, those representational and rhetorical strategies that at their peak served to enable authors and critics to disclose various “truth” about their society can begin to atrophy and become conventionalized so that they no longer enable literary texts to come to terms with social change but operate instead as practices of evasion. (8)

Warren warns against this shift into a “practice of evasion” within African American literary criticism as well as certain groups of literature. African American literature is not a “transhistorical entity.” If recovery, remembrance, and revision of the past remain viable as representational and rhetorical strategies, what then can the contemporary narratives of slavery, as well as African American literature as a whole, claim?

In a double movement – a consolidating process of canonization with the racial mission

and a dividing process of self-determination – the narrative of love suffers from critical vigilance. In *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*, Candice Jenkins notes that “intimacy in general has political significance for black people, and it related to who African Americans are as civic objects, to the very shape of the ‘black politic’” (4). She expounds the situation that, in an effort to avoid the accusations of sexual deviance, African American writers represented the intimate relationships in a normative way, and therefore inadvertently invited criticism and insinuations of diverse sexuality in the literature. African American subjects, Jenkins argues, have a particularly complex relationship with the “exposure of intimacy.” The black politic, the normative force Jenkins proposes, hinders African American writers as well as critics from writing and reading about intimate relationships. In other words, intimacy and sexuality are unwelcome subjects among African Americans. Reading about love in African American literature entails a great effort to disentangle this critical background and to disfigure the representations of human relationships in the texts.

To a greater or lesser extent, the underlying question for the four writers in this study is what to do with the double movement and its concomitant concepts that relate racial identity to sexuality. This study therefore attributes the difficulty of discussing love to the specific historical development of contemporary African American literary criticism. It also brings into the foreground the (im)possibility of human bonding through narratives of love in the texts. Because love, which is the most private experience of humans, is revealed by the act of reading these texts, it inevitably demands a reading paradigm in which it can be contextualized. As seen in the previous chapters, because of the reading paradigm that is racially defined, violence and sex are often times interchangeable in African American literature. This interchangeability of violence and sex disavows love as a fragile concept; love

does not fit into the idea of self-determination and the autonomous subject, and therefore it must necessarily be avoided. Love in African American literature becomes idealistic, romantic, and too optimistic. Implied is that within the critical paradigm, which prerequisites the racial ramification of the human being, human bonding is always and already impossible.

Yet the four writers discussed in this study, indeed, delineate human bonding by confronting the very impossibility of love in African American literature. Miscegenation and/or passing as dealt with in Mosley, Butler, and Johnson reveals how these two notions are challenging; because, on the one hand, miscegenation and passing signifies their past, slavery and their continued oppression; on the other, these are the very concepts in which the erotic, tolerance, and forgiveness are challenged because of the representation of interracial intimacy after the emancipation in their works. Jones' treatment of black matrilineal tradition further explores the concepts that dominate the contemporary African American literary landscape, along with Johnson's critique of identity politics. In addition to the concepts and notions that define racial identity, these authors delve into the narrative forms that shape their experience as racial beings: slave and blues narratives.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the narrative of love proposed in this study is a critical framework that tries to reexamine the residue of the texts outside of previous interpretations. The experience of love is something already outside of language, and therefore it is an exception, an unattainable experience. Tolerance and forgiveness, the two concepts I proposed at the beginning of this study, operate as exceptional experiences in each of the novels. Forgiveness "is not, it should not be normal, normative, normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, by proof of the impossible," Derrida says. Tolerance is also negated as essentially impossible by Žižek. This impossibility is rooted in the human inability to experience something outside of oneself: Derrida says that forgiveness is "crazy,

it must be plunged, but lucidly, into the night of the intelligible. Call it the unconscious or the non-conscious, if you want" ("The Century and the Pardon"). In other words, to forgive and to tolerate is to allow oneself to have an experience outside one's conscious self. Because the racial ramifications of past wrongs operate as unforgivable and intolerable borderlines between blacks and whites and men and women in each work, the ultimate obstacle for the works dealt with in this study is to forgive and tolerate others; and indeed, forgiveness itself is an attempt to love. In Mosely, Easy fears for love; in Butler, tolerance is left as a challenge for the characters; in Jones, the erotic as power leads Ursa to finally love her husband; and in Johnson, the issue is not only the forgiveness of others but also of oneself.

Because this attempt to love – the attempt to forgive and tolerate others – is deeply connect to the historical background of African American literature explained above, this attempt involves facing the past. I deliberately chose to start my discussion with *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), followed by "Bloodchild" (1984), *Kindred* (1979), *Corregidora* (1975), and *Middle Passage* (1990), and then to end with *Oxherding Tale* (1982). I chose to do this because the challenge of forgiving the past and tolerating others is not something to be undertaken incrementally. Andrew in *Oxherding Tale* underscores the problem with the African American identity in contemporary life, which Easy in *Devil in a Blue Dress* also identifies with. Love is not an easy task, when it entails forgiving past wrongs. The attempt to realize love, often times, meets obstacles that are not easily overcome: the line between the possibility and impossibility of love is a fine one. Yet examining this very attempt in each novel shows how human bonding is situated at the very intersection of this (im)possibility of love.