

Representing the Self in Yusef Komunyakaa's Poems

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ABSTRACT

Yusef Komunyakaa is an African-American poet who received many prizes for his contribution in poetry. In eleven collections of poetry he introduces a very unique and interesting jazz poetry which combines aesthetic ideals with moral ones. His poetry is addressed to themes of war, love, and racism. The subject matters of his poems range from portraying the experiences and suffering of black southern men in Bogalusa, and his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam War. Komunyakaa tries to move outside these experiences in an attempt to be alienated from the limitation of self and identity. Essentially, His voice is not signifying himself but a universal voice that is addressed to all human beings.

Keywords: Yusef Komunyakaa, African, Americans, Jazz poetry, Vietnam war.

Introduction

The American poet Yusef Komunyakaa (1947) was born in Bogalusa, Louisiana where he got his early education. He served in the United States Army and served during the Vietnam War. Later, he studied in University of Colorado where he got the position of an editor of *Riverrun*, a literary publication of the university. There, he got his master degree in creative writing and worked as a poetry teacher in New Orleans Public School in 1978. Komunyakaa also worked in at Indiana University in 1997 as an English professor at Princeton University. Yusef Komunyakaa's career in the university enables him to start his first phase's poetry and publish his first collection *Dedications & Other Darkhorses* (1977), then his second collection *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory* (1979). In 1984, he published *Copacetic* (1984) which received positive acceptance by the public as a jazz poetry. In the second phase of his literary career, he published many collections as *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986) which won San Francisco Poetry Center Award; and *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), which won The Dark Room Poetry Prize. His *Magic City* (1994) and *Neon Vernacular: New & Selected Poems 1977-1989 and Thieves of Paradise* in 1998 for which he received the Pulitzer Prize. The third phase of his literary career witnesses the publication of *Talking Dirty to Gods* (2000) and *The Emperor of Water Clocks* (2015). The themes in his poems are objective subjects depending on singular images. His poems are full of childhood images, and some are derived from his experiences in military and Vietnam war. (Derricotte, 1993, 217). All these collections did not receive their adequate study and analysis. These works were a documentary of the history of the war between the Americans and Vietnam, as well as representative of the voice of the African-American man in a time of dominant racism in the United States of America. Also, these works presents the reality of the poet's personal life through his use of several narrators of different ages, and the goal is not to be disguised, but to give his model more universality.

On the contrary of many artists, Komunyakaa will not escape the omnipresence of his color, but he has the ability to introduce himself from across a yawning racial chasm. He does not escape from the construction of his race. Rather, he is the spokesman of the African-American man as well as the spokesman of all humans regardless of their race or gender. His poetry "is informed, not determined by that race" (Salas, 2003, 36). He does not particularize his art to particular people since as Robert Hayden once suggests that "any Negro author in a kind of literary ghetto where the standards applied to other writers are not likely to be applied to him" (1967, xix-xx). This fact enables Komunyakaa to map his self and his heritage in eleven volumes that address

“war, race, guilt, redemption, and world mythologies” (Salas, 2003,34). These volumes touch all human aesthetics and ideals in a very universalized way. His black race is just a medium to introduce his subject matters. The subject matters are introduced through his race without being signified. In most of his interviews, he asserts the fact that he can never get out of his black race:

I think the idea of ghettoization is imposed upon certain people, and that it is a pigeonhole the artist attempts to traverse by all means. But we can not crawl out of our skin, even when we try to He to ourselves or say that race doesn't matter, that art and artists are color-blind, which is no more than an empty, delinquent illusion. (Asali, 2000, 76)

Art must not addressed to specific race, gender, age, or class. It must have a universal aspect. It must be addressed to all humanities.

Thus, Kamunyakka's poetry is a documentary of war, it addresses the experiences that all men soldiers share in Vietnam War as in *Capacetic* (1984), *Dien Cai Dau* (1988) and *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986) . The subject matter of these collections is originated from his service in the war. *Magic City* (1992) addresses the poet's childhood and all African American men in Bogalusa, Louisiana. It depicts the conflict between the white and black. *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* (1993) combines the poet's artistry and authentic aspects. *Pleasure Dome: New & Collected Poems, 1975-1999* (2001) The collection includes 18 new poems that cover his creativity during 24 years. In *Talking Dirty to Gods* (2000) “he creates a new form of mythopoesis, a multicultural synergy of the proliferating gods flooding the contemporary era, from the more traditional myth-making machinery of religion to the new mythologies of science, film/television, and consumer capitalism”. (Tuner, 2009, 336) Such volumes assert the facts that that Komunakka's poetry is not only derived from his personal life, but from the lives and experiences of other persons, either a male or a female, a child or an adult, black or white,..etc. Race will never build creativity or imagination, but it may form the perceptions of life. This paper will shed light on the voice that Yusef Komunakka applies to map the self and to function his art in some of his collections as *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986), *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), *Magic City* (1992), *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* (1993), *Pleasure Dome: New & Collected Poems, 1975-1999* (2001), and *Talking Dirty to Gods* (2000). Such volumes are directed to race, gender, war, and childhood memories, the personas who are portrayed are varied and the speakers are different according to the drawn experiences.

Discussion:

In an era in which African American identity is under threat of dissolution, as is the military threat to which nations are exposed. As a military leader, the poet tries to change the strategy used for defense, just like changing the military strategy against the enemy. So the poet in his poetry collections changed the language used for the language of defending the ego. The poem becomes a tool for defense and revenge, and a blurring of the ego and the African-American identity against disintegration. This kind of defense is clear in his collection *Capacetic* (1984), the language which he uses is threatening and defending. He defends the African man, The African man does not lie and the African man is physically strong and ready to work in any field. The tone of the poem is playful and full of street language. The poet's current poems differed from his previous poems. While the previous poems focus on the narrator's personality and on the emotionally focused and captured images, the current poems focus on the effect of memory in the narration. To become the memory that leads the poetic text as in his poem "False Leads". "Believe this, brother, / we're dice in a hard time hustle. / No more than handfuls of meat" (42). It seems that the poet is disguising himself to another being, to the person whom he wishes to be: "I am this space / my body believes in" (3). The struggle between forgetting and remembering, and the struggle between what is and what is supposed to be is a recurrent motif in such poems.

In some of his current poems, the poet tries to expand the discussion on some of the topics he mentioned in previous poems as in "Unnatural State of the Unicorn," a poem from *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*, the same war images that are mentioned in his early poems which talks about his experience in Vietnam war. The African American man who participated in the war and became a broken tooth and skull is now a king, he opens "Unnatural State of the Unicorn." From *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems* by: "I am a man. Cut me & I bleed./Before embossed /limited editions,before fat artichoke hearts marinated" (4-6). In this poem, Komunyakaa tries to frame his raceless manner by the phrase "I am a man.". Komunyakaa is well aware of his race and will diminish the fact of being black, but he tries to universalize the feelings. However, he ends the poem: "[I]nside my skin, / loving you, I am this space / my body believes in". (24-6). He tries to defend himself as a king: "I lean over the enlarger, / in the light table's chromatic glare / where I'm king, doctoring photographs, / airbrushing away the corpses" (6). "universal State of the Unicorn" is set beyond the limitation of the self. The poet asserts the privilege of objectivity to widen his anti-racism.

In his poem "Recreating the Scene", the poet universalizes his feelings, he shows sympathy to the others regardless of their nationality or race, or gender. for Komunyakaa, the poet must have a capacity to feel others. He says that "the world is so large, and we are so small. How dare an artist not imagine the world from the perspective of someone other than himself? It's all part of the on-going dialogue we must have between ourselves and the world" (Salas 1999, interview). The poet describes the situation of a Vietnamese woman who is endangered by the American Soldiers. She is also a victim of her country, the rules of the country that do not secure her. The poet, as the speaker himself, is a journalist who just reports the news as well as recreates the scene. What he can do is only to be sympathetic with her. The universal human rights cannot be neglected by the poet. The audience witness this terrifying death being overwhelmed by the detailed description. The poet in this poem plays the role of the audience who records the events as they are.

Reality cannot be denied and one cannot take off the gown of his father, so escaping from reality seems difficult sometimes. Sometimes it is considered a kind of proof of existence. In "Landscape for the Disappeared," the poet lives the conflict between the memory and the forgetting, he could not forget the dead, his uncles or his grandfathers : "The dead / stumble home like swamp fog, / our lost uncles & grand- daddies / come back to us almost healed" (50). At the end of the poem, the poet assures that he can not escape his black heritage. The difficulty of escaping from memory is the source of beauty in his current poems, and this conflict between past memories and forgetting is reflected in one of his poems, where he cannot forget the smile of that girl he saw in Vietnam : "Her smile, / a place where minnows swim. / All the full presence / shiny" (51). There seems to be an emotional shift from feelings of remembering the dead, which are painful, to feelings of remembering the Vietnamese girl he saw in the war. Gwinn says that his *Dien Cai Dau* is "the most poignant elegy that has been written about the Vietnam War" (Gwinn 1994,744). Memories of the poet in the Vietnamese war played a major poetic artistic role in his literature. Where the poet was able to move from several directions, one of them is his role as a soldier in the war and the other is his role as a poet. Therefore, we find him merging experience with experience in most of his poems.

One of these memories and experiences that will never be neglected are in "Camouflaging the Chimera," from *Dien Cai Dau* , where the warriors are fully prepared to go to battle against their white counterpart. And before they fight the battle, we find them disguised by filling their bodies with the mud of the river "We tied branches to our helmets. / We painted our faces & rifles / with mud from a

riverbank" (1-3). The goal is to hide and appear in a different way from their real pictures. The poem is full of beautiful uses of blackness, as "dark-hearted songbirds"(14) and "gold to black" (20), and "black silk"(24), but there are many ironies in it. The same river whose mud they used to disguise is the one who throws its bodies and remains after being defeated by the white enemy still "The river ran through [their] bones" (4). The poem depicts the struggle that the African American man goes through for survival. The disguise of warriors using mud is an attempt to appear as other white people, but the attempt fails. on the contrary, this war just damaged their psyches.

In "Starlight Scope Myopia," it seems that the is weapon used to enable them to see the enemy in the dark is nothing but a weapon with which they see the horrors of the war they are waging, and that's kind of ironic here. The soldiers are given a scope for their guns that makes them able to see at night. The military device which is a gun, is labeled as "Starlight Scope,"(4) to smoothen the horror of the "killing range"(5). The expression "Myopia" suggests that the weapon will enable them to see what they can never see before. They can see the horror of the war and the upcoming years that will end soon : "Viet Cong / move under our eyelids / . . . years after this scene ends" (12-3). The poet stresses once again that this weapon will enable them to discover well and enter the stage of discrimination and evaluation of what is in their favor and what is against their interest: "You / peer down the sights of your M-16, / seeing the full moon / loaded on an oxcart" (27-9). The conflict between what the citizens believe about the war and what the warriors participating in the war perceive is the main idea that the poet tried to convey through the words of the soldiers themselves. That war, which is a kind of glory and victory for the Americans, is nothing but a place of terror and horror for the warriors. The same war that the poet fought in his previous poems is still going on in his current poems, but from a different perspective, which is the perspective of realizing the truth that war is terrifying. That war they fought in the past was a devastating war for themselves, and the same weapon they used in the past for defense and victory became a weapon for defeat.

In a poem from *Dien Cai Dau* "You and I Are Disappearing," in which the poet describes deeply the murder of a Vietnamese woman by an American soldiers. The detailed description lets the readers to be overwhelmed by the incidents. Gotera describes it as "a bravura performance high lighting Komunyakaa's technique of juxtaposed images" (Gotera 1990, 291), In this poem, the poet describes the situation of a Vietnamese woman who was burned by the American Soldiers. "She glows like the fat tip / of a banker's cigar" and "She burns like a burning bush / driven by a

godawful wind" (17). In this poem, this weapon is used so that the fighter and the reader alike can see what he had not seen before. The poet highlights the cost to everyone of war. The beauty of the poem lies in the generality of the idea, as both victory and defeat turn into personal suffering. Most of the images used, such as symbols and similes -although few-, were used to highlight the post-war era. The weapon which is used in this poem is a weapon to change the states of the soldiers. Since 1986, the poet has been trying to get rid of the privacy of thought, moving away from being a male to being a human being. Kevin Stein, says that Komunyakaa creates "a soldier's history of Vietnam from an African American perspective" (1996, 90) He does not care about sex or gender, but rather about humanity. From the first lines of the poem, it seems that the poet introduces himself as a man, he does not even gesture to his identity or confessing his black color.

The poet cannot escape from the reality of his black skin. In some poems he sheds light on this black heritage, but in a way that makes this reality the suffering experienced by all blacks. In "Boat People" from the same collection, Komunyakaa describes the lives of the black "Tonight's/ a black string, the moon's pull- / this boat's headed somewhere" (5-7). So hard lives the practice as "Seasick, they daydream Jade Mountain/ a whole world away, half-drunk/ on what they hunger to become" (28-30). The readers' imagination shift from the shouting of the grandmother "Son, you ain't gonna live long" to the young boy with the Vietnamese refugees who "cling to each other, / faces like yellow sea grapes, / wounded by doubt & salt." (45-7). In "Facing It", a similar picture is portrayed for the black and there is a direct confession of his race as Black: "My black face fades,/hiding inside the black granite." (1-2). This poem from his collection *from Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems* recalls the bad memories of the war and their impact on the soldiers. The speaker visits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington and recalls the war in which he was a part: "I turn/ this way—the stone lets me go. / I turn that way—" (8-10). The painful memories that assault him and cause his trauma, has no affect on the people who did not live the same experience "While the speaker appears unable to put his war-related trauma behind himself, the rest of the world moves on without a problem. "Names shimmer on a woman's blouse / but when she walks away / the names stay on the wall," (18-20). It seems that the poet addresses the lives of all the blacks in a very universal objective way.

The bad memories of the wars that are expressed in his collection *Dien Cai Dau* are changed to his childhood memories of his town as expressed in his collection *Magic City*. The narrators in this collection are ranged between five to fifteen year-old. An

age that they cannot distinguish between evil and good. They only report reality as it. In his poem “The Whistle” which carries many meanings of belonging to the black community in which the poet lived. Although this society is considered isolated from the white American society, and although this society lacks many of the material and emotional needs that any person needs, his poems carry a lot of feelings of love and loyalty to this society. This poem starts with the image of the boy at: “[t]he seven o'clock whistle/Made the morning air fulvous/With a metallic syncopation,” (1-3). The front seats are booked for the white people, while the back seats are for black people: “Hum drawing workers from flowers,/Back to the colonized heart./A titanous puff of steam rose” (8-10). In some of those poems that talk about childhood, the poet speaks using the language of children. “Don't mess with me / 'Cause I have my Lone Ranger / Six-shooter. I can hurt / You with questions” (“Venus's-flytraps” 2). In those poems that talk about the stage of adultery, the poet also uses the appropriate language for that period “Soon we'd be / Responsible for the chambered / Rapture honeycombed in flesh” (“Boys in Dresses”, 33). The creativity of the poet in this collection stems from his ability to adapt the language used in the language of the speakers themselves without being so ornamented. The poet depicts the innocence of this African American community in many of its practices. Innocence controls all the behavior of the members of this society even when they try to do evil. Innocent evil also remains. In “Immolatus.” “Next day / I tracked blood in a circle / Across dead grass, while fat / Boiled down to lye soap” (19). The poet neither not talks about a personal experiences, nor address a specific person. Rather he talks to all blacks about their passion and their miseries. The town where he sets *Magic City* is Klan. It is the birthplace of Africa Americans who fight against racism.

In “Glory,” The poet depicts the extent of the toil that the people of this society suffer in living, as they are married at an early age and work for hours throughout the week in order to provide what supports their lives : “[m]ost were married teenagers / [w]orking knockout shifts daybreak / To sunset six days a week” (1-2). They are “already old men playing ball” (4). He even remembers their names: “They were all Jackie Robinson / & Willie Mays, a touch of Josh Gibson & Satchell Paige / In each stance & swing, a promise” (7-9). The portrait of the baseball players is the portrait of identified masculine that is lost in the previous poems. Those players are married and they worked hardly to survive: “As children & wives cheered/ The men were like cats/ Running backwards to snag” (16-8). Their manhood is represented in the image of the players. Thus. if one day they lose their ability to play, they will lose their manhood and may spend their time with other things such as drugs and others. Then they will lose their wives and children. The situation after losing their wives is

enlarged in his poem "My Father's Love letters". The poet explains the life of a man who wastes his family's life because of drugs. He tries to offer a lot of offers to fix the error. The poem depicts a picture of an African-American man who asks his son to write what he dictates as a letter to his mother who has left the house: "After coming home from the mill,/. & ask me to write a letter to my mother" (2-3). Despite the man's ignorance of writing and reading, he is full of feelings, tenderness and love, as well as able to assume responsibility. In his poem. Some of the words he used express his deep remorse as well as his intense love "Love,. Baby, Honey, /Please." (17-18) "would beg / Promising never to beat her / Again." (5-6). The speaker in this poem is proud that his father, who was a savage at one time, is now a regret. The speaker does not forget the cruelty and brutality of that father to his wife and children, which made the wife leave the house. But the speaker also does not deny the role of the manly father in providing everything the family needs. He worked sincerely and toiled to provide for all the needs: "His carpenter's apron always bulged/ With old nails, a claw hammer/Looped at his side & extension cords" (12-4). The poem combines the cruelty and brutality as well as the responsibility and tenderness of the African American man. That responsibility gave him the authority to abuse his wife and children. We can consider his poem as representative of Komunyakaa's childhood with a brutal father, which was a source of creativity in the poem. () The accuracy of the description cannot come from a man who did not live the experience himself, as in the case of most of his poems.

Poetry tries to find an identity to the African- American man. To let his readers knows a lot about him. This works seems to be as chorological developments of his life since he revisits the town and its memories. In both collections, the poet attempts to portray the identity of the African- American man. Whether that man was a warrior in Vietnam or this man who lived his childhood and adult life in Louisiana. In his two poems "Buried Light" and "Shrines", the poet depicts the perspectives of the Vietnamese peasants after the end of the military clash between Vietnam and the United States of America. The poet refers to the devastating Western influence on Vietnamese culture. Regardless of the destruction of towns and villages and burning of farms, the culture of Vietnamese society needs to be rehabilitated. Fitzgerald ones assures that "the village dinh or shrine still stood in many of the villages of the south as testimony to the endurance of the traditional political design of the nation" (1972,429-30). "Shrines" denounces the lack of integration between the alien Western culture and the inherited Western culture. There is no harmony between them. Who will preserve the heritage if the previous generations were lost and the current generations are unable to preserve the heritage.

One of the poet's most welcomed collection is *Taking Dirty to Gods* , April Bernard refers to this volume as "a series of meditations on Gods and the Things They Do" (2000,36), while Durriel E. Harris notes that "From maggot to dirt dauber to various manifestations of devil, demigod, beast and divinity, Komunyakaa explores the majesty of the worlds human beings inhabit, worrying the lines between modern and ancient Greek and Hindu mythologies in a celebration of imagination" (2001, 36). In this poem one may read Komunyakaa's poetry as raceless since he managed to get rid of the issues of race and color and turned to religious concepts and issues of slavery. The poems are full of classical rituals and obscure illusions. Most important is the objectivity of the poems as "Venus Willndorf" and "Remus & Romulus". Worthy mentioned about these poems is that the race and color are irreverent. As Radiclan Clytus asserts in his introduction to Komunyakka's collection "much of what Komunyakaa writes reflects his inextricable link to a sentiment seldom acknowledged in African American poetics, the idea that a black experience should not particularize the presentation of art" (2000, vii). In this particular collection of poetry, the poet was actually able to break out of the chains of tradition and take off his black gown to speak as an American man only, mainly, as a white man. The poem is full of evangelical references and religious connotations

Conclusion

Although Komunyakka cannot diminish the fact that he is a black man, he seeks to assert himself beyond his race or his gender. It appears from the poet's poems that he tried to separate his thorny personal life from his poetry. And by using the mediators, such as the use of several narrators in his poems to represent the largest group of society, such as the woman, the child, the husband, the son, and the man in general. Thus, the poetry of Komunyakka can not be directed to particular people or limited to specific gender or color. Rather, it is the type of poetry that lenders the experiences of human beings. This does not mean neglecting oneself, but portraying the situation in a neutral and objective manner is one of the reasons for the poet's success in conveying his ideas and views in an objective image. Thus, the poet tried to move in his poetry from several directions and positions. Benefited from his experiences in his participation in the American war against Vietnam. And he benefited from his experience as a journalistic and a reporter in the accuracy and objectivity in transferring the events, as well as benefiting from the capacity of imagination as a poet to bring out those experiences and expertise in a beautiful artistic way. undoubtedly, he could mirror his experiences in Vietnam War and childhood and

oppressed-race memories as being devices to create his poetics. His poetry stands both to expand our perception and universalize our acknowledge of humanity.

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