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Telling the Trauma: Fiction of Black Lives & Death

Black trauma and death, particularly by racially motivated violence, represents a significant contemporary crisis in America. Even prior to the Black Lives Matter movement of recent years, several Black writers chronicled historical incidents of such deaths. *Philadelphia Fire* (2005), by John Edgar Wideman, is a novel inspired by the 1985 police bombing of the MOVE compound and the resultant deaths of eleven Black people and the destruction by fire of a Black neighborhood. *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999), by Toni Cade Bambara examines the serial killings during the early 1980's known as the Atlanta Child Murders. *Rendered Invisible: Stories of Blacks & Whites, Love & Death* (2010), by Frank Dobson, examines the 1980 serial killings of Blacks by Joseph Christopher, a white pathological killer in New York State. These works sound an alarm regarding the endangered nature of Black life in America, presenting sometimes overlooked instances of Black historical trauma. This paper will discuss how these works—functioning as both compelling literature and prophetic social commentary—shed light on Black trauma and death in the decades prior to the present-day Black Lives Matter movement.

Rendered Invisible is a work of historical fiction that focuses on issues of race, class, and gender. Much of the narrative, which is told through various voices, depicts people—both black and white—seeking safety, justice, and solace. The central piece, “Rendered Invisible” tells the true story of a little-known occurrence in American history, the 1980 killing spree of the .22-Caliber Killer, a pathological white racist turned serial killer who murdered thirteen (13) black men during his reign of terror, his crazed yet calculated attempt to start a race war. (The killing spree began in Buffalo, NY and spread to New York City, where the killer was termed the Mid-Town Slasher.) The story seeks to offer insight on not only the killing spree but also why it has received little media attention. Joseph Christopher was a white, pathological racist who tried to start a race war by killing black men. He almost succeeded. Christopher's homicidal rampage began on September 22, 1980 when he was twenty-five. Christopher started his crimes by shooting African American men while they went about their daily duties, striking in the middle of the day and into the night with sometimes more than five murders in one day. His first victim was a 14-year-old. However, Christopher changed his method of killing midway through his onslaught of terror by choosing a knife as his new weapon, stabbing his victims to death and cutting the heart out of two of his victims. There was a massive manhunt for Christopher. Christopher may have never been stopped if it had not been for his out-of-control anger toward African Americans, when he attacked a fellow soldier at their home station of Fort Benning, Georgia, resulting in his arrest. He later died in prison from a rare form of male breast cancer at the age of 37.

When one begins to look at the present condition of race relations in America, it becomes vitally important for works such as these to be given more critical and popular attention. Of course, each work examines an historical incidence of the violent loss of Black lives. But each also offers up further testimony of a sentiment shared in numerous Black works of fiction, whether historically based or not. It is a sentiment perhaps most strongly shared in the great writer James Baldwin's masterful short story, “Sonny's Blues.” In “Sonny's Blues,” there is a passage in which the narrator and protagonist recalls the view of his mother regarding safety for their Black family:

“Safe!’ my father grunted, whenever Mama suggested trying to move to a neighborhood which might be safer for children. ‘Safe, hell! Ain’t no place safe for kids, nor nobody.’” These works suggest that there is no place safe for Black Americans and that, moreover, the very vulnerability of Black life in America is the overarching “crime” within these novels that document crimes committed against Black lives. In each of these works, there is also sense of terror, particularly in *Rendered Invisible* and *Those Bones are Not My Child*. The nature of the terror is that of the unknown. The killer is unknown. The motive is unknown. What is known, however, in each of these works is that there is an assault on Black lives.

These works seem to say that the ultimate abnegation of responsibility in terms of these incidents of lives lost is that of the community. James Baldwin, in his work on the Atlanta Child Murders, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, observes the following, “. . . the meaning of the word community—which, as I have understood it, simply means our endless connection with, and responsibility for, each other” (122). Each of these works shows the abnegation of that responsibility. In each, the madness of America is what causes the loss of Black lives.

Each of these novels is also which posits a continuation of the civil-rights era, and in that sense, they suggest that America is in no way “post-racial.” The times during which they are set are the early 1980’s, a time which the writer Nelson George calls “Post-Soul.” In writing about the decade of the 1980’s, when all three of these incidents occurred, George says the following: “A redefinition of ‘blackness’ so sweeping the word itself went out of vogue. For those who now called themselves African American, the years between 1980 and 1989 were filled with extreme contrast, a lurching forward and backward that left a legacy that is curious and contradictory.

Hip hop and black women’s literature were clear winners; both expressions would continue to grow rapidly in the ‘90s. The impact of black mayors was inconsistent. Despite the stunning mistake of the MOVE bombing, Wilson Goode was reelected in Philadelphia.”

I would suggest that the nature of the contradiction is brought forward forcefully in these three novels. There is the notion of fear, born of the sense in each one that the Black community is under assault. However, it is not the sense that one has today. Rather, it is the sense that the killings are part of a larger plot, a genocidal one, designed to incite fear in Black communities. The second sense is that there are no leaders. In the decade of the 1980’s, during which Ronald Reagan was president, there was the sense that the Black community was perhaps, as George says, “lurching forward and backward,” in a manner that was created a sense of stasis. It is perhaps the stillness or immobility of the sense of danger without the momentum to launch a countermove or a defense. There is within each of these works a sense of the Black community’s defenselessness, although there are defensive moves made within each of the historical incidents. In his work, *Race Matters*, Cornell West writes the following: “Black people have always been in America’s wilderness in search of a promised land” (25).

These are works that ultimately chronicle, as much as anything, the yearning for a charismatic leader, the yearning for a way out of the wilderness, and a stronger sense of community. One of the key words of the of the Obama campaign was the word, “hope.” These novels seem to chronicle the

Black yearning for hope, the continuing Black dream of hope. Indeed, they seem to chronicle the Black hope for "hope," or perhaps they chronicle the struggle against hopelessness and despair. At one point in *Those Bones are Not My Child*, the protagonist, Zala, is frantically searching for her lost son, Sonny, hoping that he has not been slain, that he is not yet another victim of the Atlanta child serial killer. She and her estranged husband, Spence, have been searching for Sonny, and she is here thinking of the futility of her search for her son and the Black community's search for safety: "But there was no place to dream anymore. ... All over, the same talk. Street crime was down, liquor sales were up, ditto for locks, flashlights, and baseball bats. No place to dream and no way to live a rational life." (*Those Bones Are Not My Child*, 326).

In two of these works, there is a "manhunt," or a hunt for the killers of Black people. In the other work, PF, there is a standoff, in some ways, a skirmish, between a group of a Black people, men, women and children, and municipal authorities. In each, there is a sense of the irrational the insane occurring, recalling the words of Chester Himes in his work, *My Life of Absurdity*. In this work, the most famous passage is perhaps the opening; it is one in which Himes addresses the subject of racism. He Himes quotes the French philosopher, Albert Camus in the opening to this, the second volume of his autobiography: "Racism is absurd. Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition...If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim one comes to feel the absurdity of life."

Indeed, the nature of the irrational, is what each of these works explores. I would like to examine passages in each to show just how vividly these works show the absurdity of racism, while also telling the trauma of Black American life.

I would like to examine a passage or two within each work to make the point.

On May 13, 1985, in West Philadelphia, after bullets, water cannon and high explosives had failed to dislodge the occupants of 6221 Osage Avenue, a bomb was dropped from a state police helicopter and exploded atop the besieged row house. In the ensuing fire fifty-three houses were destroyed, 262 people left homeless. The occupants of the row house on Osage were said to be members of an organization called MOVE. Eleven of them, six adults and five children, were killed in the assault that commenced when they refused to obey a police order to leave their home. A grand jury subsequently determined that no criminal charges should be brought against the public officials who planned and perpetrated the assault (*Philadelphia Fire*, 97).

There is a Black mayor, Wilson Goode, in charge of the City of Philadelphia. He gives the okay for the bomb to be dropped on the residents of the house. What the work seems to say that is that the nature of the fire is perhaps not that this happened but that the action was not seen as criminal. Evidently, it was seen as merited.

During the prologue of *Those Bones are Not My Child*, we get a sense of the widespread speculation regarding the disappearances and murders of Black young people in Atlanta (17).

Similarly, in *Rendered Invisible*, there is a passage of narration which illuminates the absurd nature, the irrational nature of the killing spree of the .22-Caliber Killer.

Wednesday, October 1, 1980.

The FBI enters the investigation because, according to US Attorney Richard J. Acara, the civil rights of two of the victims may have been violated because the killer interfered with their right to public accommodations. One was shot in a restaurant and one in a supermarket parking lot. The locales of the shootings allow the authorities to use the old Civil Rights legislation, from the sit-ins, to bring the Feds into the case. This legislation links the Buffalo violence to the 60's struggles when blacks in the South integrated lunch counters, soda fountains and any other facility which serves the public and is principally engaged in selling food and beverages (*Rendered Invisible*, 43).

The above passage underlines the way in which this work, and the others in this study, bear witness to a continuum of works which address the precarious nature of Black life in America. The nature of the trauma is such that not only must it be told, and shared, but that it always must be seen in its historical context. Further in the work, there is another passage which speaks to the irrational and bizarre nature of the ways in which Blacks in America seem to be in peril, which is recognized by both the Black community and the non-Black community.

According to the police, a white man in a neighborhood where one of the shootings happened said to a black woman, You're next or You're going to get it and then fled. But no black women have been shot, just brothers.

By this point in the investigation, the police have gotten over 200 calls and tips, including one from a man who identified himself as the killer. And there's another where, according to the media, a wife called the cops to say she thought her husband was the killer, but she refused to give his identity (*Rendered Invisible*, 43).

In the prologue of *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, there is a list of possible motives for the killings, all thoughts of the protagonist, all bizarre, but not implausible, given the nature of Black life in America.

White cops taking license in Black neighborhood again?

The Klan and other Nazi thugs on the rampage again?

Diabolical scientists experimenting on Third World people again?

Diabolical scientists engaging in human sacrifices?

A'Nam vet unable to make the transition?

UFO aliens conducting exploratory surgery?

Whites avenging Dewey Bangus, a white youth beaten to death in spring '79, allegedly by Black youths?

Parents of a raped child running amok with "justice"?

Porno filmmakers doing snuff flicks for entertainment?

A band of child molesters covering their tracks?

New drug forces killing the young (unwitting) couriers of the old in a bid for turf?

Unreconstructed peckerwoods trying to topple the Black administration?

Plantation kidnappers of slave labor issuing the ultimate pink slip?

White mercenaries using Black targets to train death squadrons for overseas jobs and for domestic wars to come? (17)

Some of the motives listed seem bizarre, until one realizes that the recent Flint, Michigan, water crisis, from 2014-2019, was seen by some as yet another plot against Black America. This crisis which involved the drinking water for the city of Flint, Michigan being contaminated with lead and Legionnaires' disease, was the cause of a number of deaths and stillbirths. Flint is a city with a majority African American population. During the height of the Flint water crisis, there were some in the media who compared the crisis to the Blaxploitation film, *Three the Hard Way*, in which a white supremacist scientist devises a genocidal plot against Black Americans by poisoning the water supplies of three American cities with large Black populations: Washington, DC, Detroit, and Los Angeles.

We live in an age of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. What these three novels, show, however, is that the fears of Black Americans—of genocidal plots, injustice, racially-motivated mass murders—have nestled within the hearts and minds of some Black people for many decades. The types of incidents that gave rise to the current BLM movement are as old as racist portrayals of Blacks in media. These works, *Philadelphia Fire*, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, and *Rendered Invisible*, illuminate and explore, through their examination of Black tragedy and trauma, the absurdity of racism, of a mindset that places an inordinate importance on the color of one's skin.

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