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Part 1

African-American narratives provide us the opportunity to see differing point of views and differing voices. The word is an important element. Through the word we can express ourselves, see ourselves but most importantly learn from others and learn from history. African-American narratives offer us the opportunity to see the forgotten history of this country or at least the history we are taught never happened. Like our histories, the word is part of us.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B Du Bois shares his experience as an African-American in American society. Through his experience, the theme of the color line is prevalent. In *47*, Walter Mosley introduces us to *47* (a slave in the Corinthian Plantation) and Tall John (a runaway slave). Because of certain events, the most prevalent theme in *47* is the desire for freedom and liberation. Du Bois begins talking about the concept of “the veil,” and says, “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois iii). And the veil separates white people from black people, it is like a curtain that divides the experience of the black soul and its self-awareness. Du Bois goes on to explain “this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s

self through the eyes of others, “(Du Bois 2) as a way of documenting how the negro can feel an American with two identities and how he’s always competing with the other world to be accepted. Du Bois calls the veil the “double-conscious” effect, where black people see themselves two ways: as an African-American and the way white America looks at the black person.

In the first chapter: “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” Du Bois asks himself “how does it feel to be a problem?” (Dubois 1), and often criticizes society for making African Americans feel like a problem and as if somehow, they are not worthy for being part of white America, and its contributions. Despite the clash of races, the American negro does not wish to “bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (Du Bois 3). In other words, the Negro does not feel shame for being Negro, although America had taught him, he should be ashamed and should hide himself to not have knowledge, power or a voice. Therefore, white America has worked tirelessly to make the Negro feel all the opportunities are being closed in his face. Returning to the passage, the Negro carries “the burden on his back of being a problem, “(Du Bois 5) which continuously interrupts his way of life and puts him in a place of competition among the white masses. This is to say, that racial prejudice and alienation are part of the veil, which set apart African Americans from whites and the rest of society. Unfortunately, African-Americans are forced to see themselves through their own eyes and through the racism they experience by others, which can cause

confusion. I understand this double-consciousness effect as I've experienced it as a Mexican, and American, and sometimes a little bit of both. Ultimately, African-Americans must carry the burden of freedom because they aren't free if they are being oppressed and criminalized unjustly.

Equally important, we have the character of 47 who is given a number as a form of identity, and Jane 57821 from Janelle Monae's narrative film, *Dirty Computer*. Both characters represent the ignorance of the African-American person. White America portrays them as a community without a history, without a past, as if slavery never happened, when it did and we need to acknowledge it. In the film Jane, who goes by 57821 is taken into a facility to be "cleaned" from all her memories and history. In it she shows us a futuristic type of society. And like Jane 57821, the character 47 doesn't have a name either. 47 says that "it was the custom on the Corinthian Plantation to give all field slaves numbers" (Mosley 17). It was a means to not acknowledge who they were because the slaveholders intention was to work them to death.

In the case of the Corinthian Plantation, all slaves were given numbers. And they felt chained and trapped under the orders of their masters. 47 really believed that he "was going to be a slave until the day he died, and he'd rather die sooner than live a life of pain" (Mosley 46). It was until Tall John (a runaway slave and the so called "high john the conqueror") came along that he began to show 47 that he wasn't really a slave unless he believed it. In the following quote: "Free is when you say yea or nay about what you will and

will not do. Nobody can give you freedom. All freedom is you,” (Mosley 91) indicates that man has the potential to not let society say what he is and isn't. And although 47 lived like a slave in a slave plantation, he had been brainwashed all this time of his true potential. And maybe it was like that for millions of slaves. They were given a number, an insignificant number and were told they should follow the rules always. It was a concept ingrained in their brains and it took the arrival of Tall John for there to be change.

Towards the end of the story 47 comes full circle and realizes he was “free even though he was clamped in chains and locked away” (Mosley 146). As 47 puts it:

I was free because I had made the decision to run away if I could. Most of the slaves on the Corinthian Plantation would never actually try to run away.

They knew they'd probably get caught and whipped or worse. And I could see that the real chains that the slave wore were the color of his skin and the defeat in his mind (Mosley 146).

In the passage above it is evident of the type of brainwashing and conditioning that occurred. At this time in history, slavery was normalized and acceptable to everyone else but the slave. Through this interpretation we can clearly see the picture Mosley was trying to paint of slavery and what slavery is. Even now, there is modern day slavery. And with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, we see African Americans fighting against violence and systematic racism. Despite

slavery being “over” there are other ways in which African Americans experience it. We only see one side of the story.

Up to now, from reading about the African American experience, I feel compelled to keep learning about their stories. Through W.E.B Du Bois and Mosley, we see the themes of: the veil, double-consciousness and freedom and how these themes overlap with one another. Maybe it has to do with the fact that African Americans are still dealing with some of these ideas. Maybe they feel compelled to only show one side of themselves because the other half won't be accepted, and so they live within the veil. Furthermore, in these stories the “forgotten” history is coming alive and we, as a society are learning the truth. Sometimes the truth is not as we'd like but on the other hand we can't pretend it never happened. By speaking about it, by reading about it we are liberating others who have felt chained.

Part 2

Close Reading: *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá*

1. **Words of importance:** Afro-Cuban, drums, batá, marginalized, non-English words
2. **Passage:** “What you feel, you have to express through the drum. If what you’re feeling is divorced from the drum, then it’s bullshit. It’s not just you. You are one part of a group. You have to unify yourself with the drum you are playing, with the other drummers, and with the people. I can’t play if I don’t feel. I can’t play unless I remember something (*si no recuerdo algo*) and hold that image in my mind. A collective of people: the drummers, the singer, the priests, *los sinvergüenzas* (the peanut gallery) ... You have to understand a whole series of things. In Cuba you can learn everything, or at least a lot, in three or four months, but not here in California. Folks don’t play every day here” (34).
3. **Themes from passage:** community, love for the drum, unity
4. **Analysis:** In the selected passage, Carlos Aldama represents the importance of knowing and feeling the drum and that as the drummer you need to be completely immersed because the way I see the drum is a form of expression and belonging. He starts by saying “you have to express through the drum.” In that moment when you are playing, you need to “unify yourself.” In this sense all the drummers are a “collective of people”. Therefore, a drummer shouldn’t be thinking of anything else, but the drum. The drummers are a family, a community who rely on one another. Unlike Cuba, in California “folks don’t play every day.” And as a result, the learning process isn’t the same. A person must immerse themselves. In other words, you must “separate yourself” (35). Aldama continues saying “I want you to learn from my era, my moment when

they taught me” (35). Now there are too many distractions that a person cannot concentrate in doing one thing at a time. I see Batá as a form of uprising, “as a means of real and symbolic empowerment for those who would otherwise have no voice” (39). The drum tradition/culture was another instrument that the colonizers took from Cubans and the only way to preserve it is to keep standing up for it, giving it life even when outside forces are trying to change it.

5. **Summary of passage:** To conclude, I felt like I could connect to this passage because of Aldama’s passion for the drum. It is present, alive, and a commitment not every person can take. Aldama uses it as a form of oppression, as an opportunity to stand up for something he really believes in and he aims to only teach those who are willing to learn and commit themselves. The drum isn’t an instrument that can be played on its own. It is an instrument that has to be played with others.

References

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