

FLYING AWAY: VOLUNTARY DIASPORA AND THE SPACES OF TRAUMA IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN SHORT STORY

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Now the land itself, the only one they knew and knew intimately, began to terrify them.
Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*.

According to Gaspar de Alba, “home, or place, is a fundamental aspect of identity” (103). And yet this particular space—one’s home—is not merely a geographical location as much as a symbolical site working through memory and desire. Rather than a physical enclave or a domestic enclosure, home is an ever-changing concept that keeps evolving, in both personal and collective memory. Moreover, no matter how intimate and private home feels for the individual, it also transcends its own walls inasmuch as it inevitably links with the public spaces of the community—as evident in the notion of “home town,” or “home country.” Generally speaking, cultural communities call home their place of origin, the land in which they, as their ancestors, were born and grew up. Individuals as well as cultural communities would normally develop a series of affective links that bind them to their originary spaces and make them unwilling to part from it. As the home becomes invested with symbolic meaning, geography turns from a mere physical location into a site of memory, from a spatial setting to a mystical site of communal identity.

However, this attachment to the originary site—what Yi-Fu Tuan called “topophilia” (Price, 27)—does not equally affect all communities, not even when they share the same geographical spaces, as is the case with different ethnic groups in the US. The traumatic memories of slavery invested in the American geography has historically led some African-American individuals to feel an

acute sense of oppression in their native land. In failing to work through such trauma, the African American individual may end up looking for ways to escape from it and even contemplating the idea of voluntarily exile. This paper analyzes this tension as represented in four African-American short stories, namely, Richard Wright's "Almost a Man," Ralph Ellison's "Flying Home," Arna Bon-temps' "A Summer Tragedy" and James Baldwin's "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon." All these narratives present, in different ways, characters who cope with traumatic memories through somewhat ambivalent reactions to their sites of memory.

As these stories amply prove, the word "home" invokes many contradictory meanings for different individuals. Likewise, it also carries distinctive cultural meanings and is constructed differently in different communities. According to Kondo, for "people on the margins" such as the African-Americans portrayed in these short stories, rather than standing "for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders," [...] "the 'haven' of home can be a site of violence and oppression" (97). Such disparate conceptions of the cultural space are particularly visible in the United States, where several cultural communities share the same space but have very different notions of it. White American society, for instance, has traditionally viewed the land they occupy as theirs by right of colonization, as evidenced by notions like the "Manifest Destiny," according to which "there existed a preordained, God-given mandate for white, English-speaking Europeans to expand and fill the North American continent" (Price 40). Those settlers felt like conquerors on an "errand into the wilderness" (Perry Miller, 1956), out on a mission to subdue an inhospitable territory and make it theirs. The long history of appropriation and settlement of the American geography make them view it—and consequently themselves—differently from other communities that coexist there. For the white community, the American geography became that blank slate on which to inscribe a history of dreams and desires, of religious zeal as well as worldly aspirations. If this geography as text granted especial privileges to white Americans, it simultaneously wrote other communities out. As Richard Wright explains, being American in the U.S. "means to be white, protestant [sic], and very rich. This excludes almost entirely black people and anyone else who can be easily identified" (qtd. in Weik 468).

Landscapes, says Price, are "political products," and, as such, "attempts [...] to tell a certain tale above all other existing narratives" (16). Gradually since their arrival, white Americans became the political rulers of the land. Consequently, the textual landscapes they created told a tale constructed to silence other communities' textual inscriptions on the same territories. Native Americans, for instance, had a long history of mystical attachment to their native lands. Many communities associated their present tribal lands to the site of the tribe's original, sacred emergence. This resulted in a series of links between the land and the tribe that made their original space a nurturing and consoling site, an essential element

in the collective creation of identity. As Clark and Powell argue in reference to Native American communities, “Knowing where they come from and how they are connected to the places that are the origins of their human and other-than-human families [...] is essential to knowing who they are as distinct peoples” (10). Jewish communities partake of a similar symbiosis with the land which shows, as Amir Eshel explains, in the word *makom*, that means both “place” and (with a small variant) “God” (121).

This connection between religion and land enforces these communities’ natural bond with their original site. Inasmuch as both communities suffered a forced estrangement from their native land, their return there (be it the tribe’s emergence point or Israel) is seen—and thus reflected in literature—as a fulfilling and extremely enriching experience for the individual. Another transplanted community—that of the African-Americans that Wright referred to—has also felt ambivalent towards their original space. Even though this culture’s ancestral origins lie in Africa, the southern landscape in the United States is equally relevant. Descending from generations born and raised there, many African Americans individuals adopted the southern states as their original space. When separated from the American south, it is there they want to return, not Africa. Many authors such as Toni Morrison or David Bradley have written about the experience of returning to the south, and of the search for roots there; or, in short, the search for one’s true sense of self. Sometimes, that original space is at first, as in the case of Bradley’s protagonist in *The Chaneyville Incident*, considered traumatic and hateful, overloaded with painful memories: “I don’t understand how you can be so calm about all the things you know about and still be so afraid of this town,” says Judith, to which John Washington replies, “I’m not afraid of it, [...] I just hate it” (274). It is for this reason that the return to that original space, in these cases, is not made willingly. However, both in Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident* and in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, this return to the south, though painful, becomes the starting point to a series of discoveries about the history of the protagonists’ ancestors, and to a wholly new relationship with the spaces of slavery. Insofar as this communion with the original landscape brings about the discovery of the family history, the south is no longer a menacing place but becomes the interior space in which the individual can feel free and comforted.¹

However, the idyllic rediscovery of ancestral roots is just one of the many ways African-American literature represents the black individual’s ties with American spaces. Such diversity resounds equally when the African American writer addresses American spaces to the north, presumably free from the traumatic

¹ Though generally used interchangeably, place and space are rather different concepts. Place would refer to the geographical site and to all its regulatory inscriptions of institutional power, whereas space would be the personal, particular, appropriated, highly symbolized, internalized place. See Buchanan 1993.

memories of slavery. However, the contradictory connections to the land are significantly transplanted and reactualized in the north, as evidenced in the fiction of many contemporary African American writers. Regardless of whether we refer to the big cities of the north, where a good percentage of the African population continue to live in ghettos, or to the southern setting, with its slavery and oppressive history, there is a comparable ambivalence in these spaces between the sense of “home” and “hell,” a place of comfort and a place of pain and frustration.

Besides portraying the aforementioned dichotomy between good and evil, between the menace and the comfort, the narratives analyzed here address different ways of dealing with this situation. All the protagonists of these stories can make their Du Bois’ lament when, in *The Souls of Black Folk* he exclaimed: “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?” (2) This feeling of alienation in their own homeland makes the individuals of these narratives try to escape that place one way or another, though most of the roads to escape end or are bound to end in personal disaster.

For Dave, Richard Wright’s young protagonist in “Almost a Man,” this “road to perdition” begins with the buying of a gun. It seems the solution to his problems, a way to obtain respect in a land that offers none to him or his fellow citizens, so that “then they can’t talk to him as though he were a little boy” (Wright 91). Dave wants to be treated as an equal by his family and his neighbors, by the people he has been working hand by hand with. He is eager to be seen as a man, not as “nothing but a boy” (95). However, this is not just a case of a group of tactless adults abusing a boy. What Dave is inadvertently suffering from is the racial prejudices inherent in the land he lives in. During slavery times, the subjugation of the black race was justified by the belief in their inferiority. Because black slaves were considered savages, they were viewed as mentally weak, simple and stupid; in sum, “more animal than human” (Hatt 22) and consequently, not “men.” Dave’s being repeatedly called “just a boy” brings back unconscious memories of this oppressive belief as well. As J.H. van Evrie stated, white people in the south would normally call “boy” any black male of any age. The reason, he explains, is straightforward: “as the negro reaches his mental maturity at twelve or thirteen [...] [he] is, therefore, always a boy” (qtd. in Hatt 22). Consequently, insomuch as the land has already inscribed Dave as a boy and allows no other space for personal reinscription, Dave will always be considered a boy no matter what he does. Even with a gun (his imagined solution to his problem) he is made fun of by both black and whites: “all the crowd was laughing now. They stood on tiptoe and poked heads over one another’s shoulders” (101).

When he accidentally kills his master’s mule, life in his hometown becomes even more reduced to servitude and humiliation as he will have to pay for the dead animal with his salary for what seems to him a lifetime. This is the moment when

the tragic consequences of his choice reach him and he has no option but to leave. He can no longer stay in his hometown because this native land does not offer him anything but disrespect, humiliation and virtual slavery. However, it is too late to go. Had he chosen to flee in the first place, he might have had better chances, but because his first decision was inadequate, everything in the narrative leads to the feeling that he is running towards further self-destruction. His final escape is a desperate effort to flee from the spaces of oppression, from the aftermath of slavery. Dave is unaware of his replication of a traditional African American motif, that of the train, which as Houston Baker claims, symbolized freedom and mobility for black men during the Great migration—as was repetitively recorded in male blues songs. However, by the 1930s, when Richard Wright was writing the story, the idealized hopes of escaping oppression by escaping the South were already proved wrong, inasmuch as oppression traveled north with the ex-slaves. Wherever Dave escapes to, a land that has already inscribed him as “a boy” will meet him. Despite Dave’s exhilaration at the end of the story, his spatial escape carries hardly any promises of personal or economic liberation.

If Dave is finally unable to escape the ideologies of power inscribed in Southern rural spaces, so does Todd, Ralph Ellison’s protagonist in “Flying Home.” In a similar manner, this young man also wants recognition, to be treated fair, to escape a place where colored men embarrass him and white men choose to ignore him. As Ellison himself puts it in the introduction to *Invisible Man*, he is “a man of two worlds,” one who “felt himself to be misperceived in both and thus was at ease in neither” (xxxii). Todd feels the same racial prejudices inherent in the land that Dave felt, and it will not be the train—as for Dave—but flying that will offer him the promise of full manhood. For Todd, being able to fly is to demonstrate that he is “not a monkey doing tricks but a man” (Ellison, *Flying* 154). And yet, the recognition never comes; those in power—the white officers—will not allow him to reach his goal: “Can I help it because they won’t let us actually fly? Maybe we are a bunch of buzzards feeding on a dead horse, but we can hope to be eagles, can’t we?” (161) African-Americans have always faced their inequality with whites no matter how hard they try. Toni Morrison would describe it in these terms in *Song of Solomon*: “you can join the 32nd if you want to and shoot down a thousand German planes all by yourself and land in Hitler’s backyard and whip him with your own hands, but you never going to have four stars on your shirt front, or even three” (63).

The motif of flying is very common in African-American literature. In Ralph Ellison’s story, for example, Todd is not the only character that dreams with flying. Jefferson, an old man that comes to the rescue after Todd’s accident, tells a story in which “flying” acquires clearer connotations of freedom. In his tale, Jefferson appears as an angel that decides to fly without a harness—yet another symbol of oppression and of the beastliness ascribed to black men: “I ain’t gonna be bothered with no harness!” he says “‘Cause if God let you sprout wings

you oughta have sense enough not to let nobody make you wear something that gits in the way of flying” (159). When he sets himself free from the oppression imposed by the dominant angels he begins to fly faster and faster and to do more tricks: “Man, I like to scare the devil outa some ole white angels. I was raisin’ hell. Not that I meant any harm, son. But I was just feeling good. It was so good to know I was free at last” (159). In this sense, flying becomes a way of escaping, of elevating oneself away from the oppressive land with its imposed machineries of control. However, this could not last long; the “ole white angels” did not approve, and that freedom was soon finished when St. Peter—another figure of power—expelled him from heaven.

This freedom, as it has been explained, is seen by Todd in its other variant: equality and recognition. What he wants is “to measure himself against the mirror of other men’s appreciation” (Ellison, *Flying* 154). As Foucault explains, a mirror is a utopia. “In the mirror,” he says, “I see myself where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not” (Foucault 24). In this sense, Todd sees himself in an unreal world, one in which he can fly—which he cannot, since he crashes down—and in which he is considered a man—which he is not, due to the racist inscriptions of the land. Consequently, in wanting to fly (both literally and allegorically) too high, Todd is pursuing a series of transcendental illusions of freedom and equality that are, due to the overpowering physicality of the land and its ideological inscriptions of power, clearly unattainable for him. When he not only crashes down, but is also put on a straight jacket, he is forced to surrender and accept these two earthly realities as the inevitable control of the land over the individual, here represented by the madhouse. This institution is, as Foucault calls it, a “heteropia of deviation”, or a disciplined space, where the structures of power inherent in the land—in this case, those established by white society—place “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm” (Foucault 25) in order to keep them under control. In the same way as the stereotypical enclosure as “boy” became one of the mechanisms of control in Richard Wright’s story, the enclosure of the madhouse is the perfect embodiment of the oppression exercised by the power spheres over minorities. Again, the choice Todd makes is not the right one, and although it does not lead him directly to death, it makes him devoid of all liberty and dignity—if he still had any.

Arna Bontemps’ “A Summer Tragedy” offers yet another way of escaping an oppressive space. In this case, the story presents a couple of old black workers in a cotton plantation in New Orleans. In the southern states, even after the Civil War, black people were constrained to working in the fields for miserable wages and always for the benefit of white landowners. According to Carolyn Jones, for African-Americans, the landscape of the South was “neither legally nor economically their own, but became spiritually their own through their own labor and under the most difficult circumstances” (qtd. Wardi 35). This is precisely the

situation in which these two farmers find themselves. They have been working on the same land (their original landscape) all their lives being but in name slaves to a white landowner until the time comes when they have exhausted themselves:

He could not help reflecting that the crops were good. He knew what that meant, too, he had made forty-five of them with his own hands. It was true that he had worn out nearly a dozen mules, but that was the fault of old man Stevenson, the owner of the land. [...] Jeff thought it killed a good many share farmers as well as mules, but he had no sympathy for them. (Bontemps 63-64)

According to Yi-Fu Tuan, a person has specific feelings towards a certain place “because it is home, the locus of memories, and the means of gaining a livelihood” (qtd. Price 28). Those feelings, that sense of “topophilia” is what links individuals to their homeland and what helps them construct a sense of identity. However, when—as in the case of Jeff and Jennie—those feelings are negative, the possibility of constructing a positive sense of identity in their native land evaporates. Partly because they can no longer work there (Jeff has suffered a stroke and Jennie is blind) and partly because the space they occupy offers them nothing but suffering and painful memories (they have lost all their children), that space, which is “spiritually their own,” is no longer valid in order to forge their positive identities and the only way out, as painful as it may be, is to give up and commit suicide. Just as Jeff acknowledges: “ ‘They ain’t nothin’ else for us now – it’s the bes’ thing’ ” (67). However, inasmuch as they choose water to put an end to their lives, their death comes inscribed in overtones of rebirth and renewal. Directly related to amniotic fluid, water has been traditionally considered as a symbol of life, of cleansing and renewal. This connection has always been present in literature and examples of this metaphorical meaning are to be found in many African-American works. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* offers one of these examples with the constant allusions to water in any of its forms throughout the novel, but especially when dealing with the birth of Denver: “Sethe was looking at one mile of dark water [...] It looked like home to her, and the baby (not dead in the least) must have thought so too. As soon as Sethe got close to the river her own water broke loose to join it” (108).

And yet, in African American culture, as Wardi proposes (37), water does not only have this rebirth meaning, but also the opposite, as it can be seen as a symbol of death and burial. This refers back to the “middle passage,” the hard circumstances in which the first African slaves were taken to America through the Atlantic Ocean on slave ships. On board those ships death rates were extremely high and the bodies had to be disposed of in the sea. This idea of the aquatic grave links back to “A Summer Tragedy” making water appear both as a symbol of death and as a symbol of birth. This is why, when the decisive moment comes,

“the two old black folks, sitting quietly side by side, showed no excitement” (69). Jeff and Jennie are decided to give up their lives because they have nothing else to live for, but also because they know it does not mean death exclusively but also life, a return to their original place. The ideologies of racism, oppression, and exploitation inscribed in the land by the forces of power as well as the subsequent incapacity of forming a positive sense of identity in that place move these individuals to take this drastic and dramatic decision.

This symbolic return to the original place is explained also by the profound cultural symbolism of the “Middle Passage.” Inasmuch as water (in the form of the Atlantic ocean) was the link between Africa and America in the aforementioned slaves’ transatlantic voyage, it has stayed in the African-Americans’ communal memory as a bridge between their original homeland and their new imposed home and as a symbol of change. This third meaning is reflected in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* when Milkman, the protagonist, feels the need for a change of scenario:

Truly landlocked people know they are. Know the occasional Bitter Creek or Powder River that runs through Wyoming; that the large tidy Salt Lake of Utah is all they have of the sea and that they must content themselves with *bank*, *shore* and *beach* because they cannot claim a coast. And having none, seldom dream of flight. But the people living in the Great Lakes region are confused by their place in the country’s edge –an edge that is border but not coast. [...] Once the people of the lake region discover this, the longing to leave becomes acute, and a break from the area, therefore, is necessarily dream-bitten, but necessary nonetheless. (179)

Similarly, in James Baldwin’s “This Morning, This evening, So Soon,” the main character chooses to leave his homeland and look for the sea. As in the case of the other short narratives already discussed, the protagonist cannot find solace in his own homeland and needs to hit upon a way to escape. This time, the choice is not to encounter death, buy a gun, or learn to fly, but to exile himself. Precisely because of that, the consequence is not personal disaster but success and fame. To pursue freedom by voluntarily exiling oneself is something that many African-Americans did and still do, among which there are notable figures such as Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Julian Mayfield or even Baldwin himself. Some of them, as Baldwin’s protagonist does, find in their exiled lands a more open, less hostile place and decide to stay there even if it is not their original space.

Clear proof of the hostility of America towards its African-American inhabitants surfaces in Baldwin’s short story when this happy, successful singer living in Paris reminisces about his former life in the States:

There's a room in the courthouse, a room where they beat you up. Maybe you're walking along the street one night, it's usually at night, but it happens in the daytime, too. And the police car comes up behind you and the cop says, Hey, boy. Come on over here. So you go on over. He says, Boy, I believe you drunk. And you see, if you say, No, no sir, he'll beat you because you're calling him a liar. And if you say anything else, unless it's something to make him laugh, he'll take you in and beat you, just for fun. The trick is to think of some way for them to have their fun without beating you up. [...] Or to go along with the ways they dream up. And they'll do anything, anything at all, to prove that you're no better than a dog and to make you feel like one. (Baldwin 236)

This is the reason why he sees America, the land that should be his home, as a threat, a place that means nothing to him but danger and certainly, a place to which he does not want to return nor take his small, Paris-born son: " 'I never really intended to go back there. I certainly never intended to raise my kid there—' [...] 'Why should he want to cross all that water just to be called a nigger? America never gave him anything'" (231).

In contrast, his new place of residence *has* given him something; a wife, in the first place: "If Harriet had been born in America, it would have taken her a long time, perhaps forever, to look on me as a man like other men; if I had met her in America, I would never have been able to look on her as a woman like all other women" (217), [...] a son, a career, fortune and success... happiness, in sum; something he could never have achieved in America. Therefore, it comes naturally for him to love this place as much as he hates the place he should love, his homeland, where his roots and affections should ideally lie: "I love Paris, I will always love it, it is the city which saved my life. It saved my life by allowing me to find out who I am" (223).

When dealing with the issue of African-American roots and affections, the African element plays a relevant, if elusive, role. As Tomlinson puts it, the African-American individual is "irremediably exiled from his/her African past, yet denied access to the new American culture" (137). Inasmuch as this culture is naturally a transplanted one, this feeling of the first (forced) alienation has remained within its individuals leaving them forever marked with a sense of loss. This situation has made some individuals idealize Africa as a place they consider their origin and their home more than America. This experience is described in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*:

Did I mention my first sight of the African coast? Something struck in me, in my soul, Celie, like a large bell, and I just vibrated. Corrine and Samuel felt the same. And we kneeled down right on deck and gave thanks

to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried—and lived and died—to see again. (120-121)

It is for this same reason that many African-American authors such as Richard Wright (who also suffered voluntary exile in Paris) traveled to Africa in search for their roots. In many cases, however, they came back with a sense of disillusionment. Alexa Weik explains Wright's distaste of Africa and its culture in these terms:

more often than not, he shudders with Western distaste and delicacy. He cannot come to terms with the sight of publicly exposed black breasts, [...] Nor can he, an atheist, accept tribal rituals or superstitions. He perceives them as examples of pre-modern irrationality that make the Gold Coast 'pathetic,' inferior to the Western rationality he knows. Life in Accra turns out to be overwhelming and nauseating. (464)

And yet, the fact that he traveled there in the first place is further proof that there is a certain curiosity from the part of African-Americans toward the African culture. This is somehow what Baldwin's character, a black American singer, feels and what makes him approach any African living in Paris that he encounters: "I once thought of the North Africans as my brothers and that is why I went to their cafes" (223). This, according to Tomlinson, also happened to Baldwin himself:

He [Baldwin] thought he saw that the Africans he met in Paris in 1961, while suffering from the prejudice and oppression which he knew so well, were not alienated from themselves and their culture [...] The envy he felt in the presence of Africans was something like a nostalgia for Eden, for the undivided self he imagined Africans to possess. (143)

And as he later continues, there is a difference with the African and the African-American expatriate: the African emigrant "can go home." Even if certain African-American individuals consider Africa their original home, it is undeniable that they have already been unavoidably separated from it and thus Africa is divested of the category of homeland. On the other hand, because the American space is not welcoming or comforting (the inherent characteristics of "home") this land can hardly be considered home either. Be it as it may, African-Americans often feel at a loss when choosing a place to call "home" and therefore think they do not have one to return to or to be proud of. Hence, their decision to remain in their chosen exile.

This is reflected in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" when the character of Boona, a Tunisian ex-prizefighter that strives for survival in Paris is introduced. Although he probably cannot go home, since all the news that he gets

from there are bad, he is proud of his Tunisian origins. This fact is emphasized by the main character because it contrasts with his own situation: although he is able (and ultimately forced) to go back, he does not want to and very much prefers to stay in Paris. The reason behind this is that, unlike Boona, he does not feel proud of his native land. Likewise, Richard Wright, due to his blackness and his being married to a white Jewish woman, found his position in racist America untenable and in 1947 decided to permanently move to Paris (Weik 461).

What happened to Wright, it is predictable that will also happen to Baldwin's protagonist. He has a white wife who has borne him a child whose English is "strongly accented and is not, in fact, as good as his French" (Baldwin 214). That situation, which was accepted in Paris, will not be overlooked in The States and will turn them into "people of the margins," as Kondo defined them. His former experience and all the already discussed inscriptions of power inherent in the land foreshadow some difficult time for the entire family.

These four stories already discussed share a point in common: they all portray characters for whom home is not a safe "haven" but a dangerous and oppressive prison—or madhouse. Individuals in cultural communities tend to derive their sense of the self in relation to their connections with their homes and with their personal and collective memories derived from that place. When those connections are negative, "home" loses its positive connotations and is therefore no longer valid as a way to construct a positive sense of identity. "Flying away" can be one solution to this problem.

If, as Bachelard argues, home is "our corner of the world" (4), it should seem only normal that people could choose the "corner of the world" that they want to call home (Wright himself proclaimed that he was "perfectly able and happy to 'make [him]self at home almost anywhere on this earth,'" Weik 459). In some instances, according to the above stated, African-Americans have found reasons not to feel "at home" in their land of origin; the space where they should ideally find their identity and that should nourish and protect them. Consequently, and due to this feeling of alienation in their native land, they feel compelled to create their own particular space, alien, at first, but one in which they can obtain freedom, dignity or a better life. A place, in sum, they can call home.

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