CSCanada
Studies in Literature and Language
Vol. 17, No. 1, 2018, pp. 86-90
DOI:10.3968/10235

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]
ISSN 1923-1563[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

Racial Politics in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat", Toni Morrison's "Recitatif", and James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

Chakour Khaoula[a],*

[a]Master student. Studies in Literary and Cultural Encounters, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Beni Mellal, Morocco.
*Corresponding author

Received 24 March 2018, accepted 9 August 2018
Published online 26 August

Abstract
The African American literature is a committed literary framework which subsumes a tremendous corpus of works whose intent is to re-echo the variegated traumas African Americans have gone through in the course of history. In doing so, it sheds light on the intricate conundrums of slavery, social discrimination, racism, the African American history, culture and identity, and interracial relationships. In this context, in their short stories "Sweat", "Recitatif" and "Sonny's Blues", Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and James Baldwin respectively endeavor to foreground the same issue of racial politics, yet each of these authors embrace a quintessentially different perspective.

Key words: Racial politics; Racism; Sexism; Essentialism; Reconciliation.

Chakour, K. (2018). Racial Politics in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat", Toni Morrison's "Recitatif", and James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues". *Studies in Literature and Language, 17*(1), 86-90. Available from: http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/10235
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10235

INTRODUCTION
Since its inception, the African American literature has been the mirror of a history of excruciating suffering and traumatic experience which the African Americans have gone through. More particularly, this literature of commitment broaches among other issues the perennial conundrums of slavery, social discrimination, racism, the African American history, culture and identity, and interracial relationships – all being issues centered on the question of race. Indeed, it is true that the African American literature has undergone a plethora of vicissitudes throughout its history; nonetheless, its writings have invariably carried out the tradition of articulating in one way or another the racial politics of each era given that the latter confer a peculiar typicality on the African American experience. In this regard, being prototypal representatives of different variants of the African American literature, notably the Harlem Renaissance, African American modernism (Werner & Shannon, 2011, p.265), and postmodernism, respectively, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison devote their short stories "Sweat", "Sonny's Blues", and "Recitatif" to underscore the racial politics prevailing within each story's community and to put forth a particular stance to handle these politics. Yet, each of these authors addresses this query differently. While, in her story "Sweat", Hurston sheds light on racial politics as concretized in the interfusion between racism and sexism and calls for resistance, Morrison erects her story "Recitatif" as a ground in which racial politics are articulated in the form of an ambivalent relationship between the black and white races and seals her intellection with an attempt of reconciliation between the two races. Aside from these women's writings, racial politics in Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" manifest in more intricate forms, for they materialize in the essentialist, inimical relationship between blacks and whites and in the internal conflict instigated within the confines of the African American community as a repercussion of racism. Eventually, Baldwin negotiates racial politics in his story by advocating at once an African American resistance to racism and reconciliation between the blacks through the blues.

1. AGAINST DOUBLE DOMINATION
To get started with, racial politics in "Sweat" can be discerned in the intricately inextricable nexus between

racism and sexism. As a matter of fact, sexism cannot be abstracted from racial politics, a fact which is consolidated by the black feminist bell hooks:

> Much of the work of hooks has focused on how both 'race' and class influence the degree to which male domination and privilege can be asserted and how racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another. (Maynard, 2003, p.21)

In this regard, racism and sexism intertwine in a cyclical relationship in the life of Delia Jones, the black protagonist of "Sweat", subjecting her to a double oppression. On the one hand, racism is ubiquitous in the story through Delia's endless sacrifice of her life's essence and through her physical reduction. In her struggle of survival within a society racially governed, Delia finds herself compelled to work as a wash-woman for the whites, sacrificing her own "sweat and blood" (Hurston, 1923, p.2) which symbolize the very essence of her existence. Being the title of the story, Delia's "sweat" becomes a leitmotif on which her very being hinges as evidenced through her profound verbalization, "Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!" (p. 2) Besides, the predominance of this racist power is typified in the physical degradation of Delia. In this respect, through her implementation of such statements as "Delia never looked up from her work, and her thin, stooped shoulders sagged further" (p. 1) in which she puts side by side Delia's work and physical weakness, Hurston intends to establish a link of causality between the two: Delia's tough work initiated by the oppressive white community is proffered as the foremost cause of her physical debilitation. On the other hand, sexism, which is epitomized in Delia's husband, Sykes, is strongly articulated by dint of the metaphor of the snake and the metaphor of the sugar-cane. In point of fact, overly proud of his possession of the snake, "Sykes himself embodies the snake, for he is evil, treacherous, sneaky, and lethal" (Jones, 2002, p.84), which renders this creature a key metaphor for Sykes. So, just as the snake culturally connotes evil, Sykes typifies the same construct through his sadistic nature vis-à-vis Delia as illustrated in his laughter at her extreme fear from the whip she takes for a snake. Identically, at Joe Clarke's store, Sykes wastes the money Delia arduously earns in her labor on his mistress Bertha, and when Delia witnesses the scene, "it pleased him for Delia to see" (Hurston, 1923, p.5), which substantiates his sadism. Additionally, finding no better metaphor to portray Sykes's patriarchal hegemony and abuse over Delia, Joe resorts to the metaphor of the sugar-cane whereby he sets an analogy between women and the sugar-cane to elucidate the sexist reduction of women as Delia into mere objects of pleasure which are utterly consumed like sugar-canes and then are thrown away. In the light of this, it can be inferred that these two institutions of domination, racism and sexism, are closely interrelated and shape the system of racial politics within the story. In fact, it is the racial circumstances wherein Delia lives which stimulate Sykes's sexism. That is to say, within the Eatonville community, racism precludes work opportunities for black men like Sykes at a time when Delia is fortunate enough to find a labor which assures her financial independence. Accordingly, this socio-economic discrepancy between Delia and Sykes provokes the latter's "weakened sense of manhood, which is evidenced by his womanizing tendencies," (King, 2008, p.100) engendering, thus, his sexism. Hence, racism upholds sexism. Also, the relationship between the two can be construed the other way around. More particularly, subjugated to the truculent, sexist will to power of Sykes, Delia finds no stronger alternative to contest him than to seek refuge in the powerful white community as she defiantly addresses him: "Ah'm goin' tuh de white folks bout you, mah young man, de very nex' time you lay yo' han's on me" (Hurston, 1923, p.7). Correspondingly, in her attempt to flee Sykes's sexism, Delia acknowledges the supremacy of whites and, therefore, dooms herself to the inescapable grasp of racism.

Certainly, Hurston is not prone to confine her protagonist to the silence imposed on her by racism and sexism. As mentioned earlier, these two tyrannical forces are correlative; ergo, resistance to one is inevitably resistance to the other. Consequently, Delia's obliteration of her husband as an epitome of sexism necessarily implies her autonomy from the racist system, for she no longer needs it for protection. Thus, Delia emerges as a new woman emancipated from the shackles of sexism and more able to resist racism. Additionally, with the rebuttal of Sykes, she precludes his laziness, his lust, and his wildness, all being "symbols of the discriminatory white stereotypes of blacks and the 'folk type'" (Milne, 2004, p.196). Then, what Delia really eradicates is the foundational stereotypes of racism, which demystifies a potent, double resistance by Delia to both sexism and racism.

2. BLACK AND WHITE: INTERSTITIALITY AND RECONCILIATION

Furthermore, in Morrison's "Recitatif", racial politics are negotiated within a racially ambivalent framework, the extremes of which are essentialism and anti-essentialism. As a matter of fact, Morrison herself claims:

> The only short story I have ever written, 'Recitatif,' was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial. (Reames, 2007, p.133)

Therefore, predicating her "Recitatif" on the preclusion of any racial identification of her protagonists but of the blackness of one and the whiteness of the other, Morrison strikingly suffuses her narrative with a racial ambivalence which fluctuates between the essentialist and anti-essentialist disposition of each protagonist,

Twyla or Roberta, towards her racial counterpart. In fact, racial essentialism is noted within the story through the nature of the two protagonists' mothers and through their antagonistic confrontations. Indeed, Twyla's mother and Roberta's mother are set in contradistinction to each other given that "their difference from each other is portrayed through their bodies and clothes, which make them seem practically a symbolic juxtaposition of *sexuality* and *religion*" (p. 135). At the outset, the story opens with the blatant narrativization of the mothers' stark differences through Twyla's claim: "My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick" (Morrison, 1983, p.1). Then, given the two facts that one's mother stands for one's origin and that Twyla intends from the very beginning to weightily enact the uncompromising divergence between her mother and the latter's racial counterpart –Roberta's mother–, it can be extrapolated that the juxtaposition between the sexuality and religion of the two mothers pinpoints the racial roots of Twyla and Roberta on absolutely antithetical poles; thus, the racial bond between Twyla and Roberta is approached in essentialist terms. Further, this essentialism vehemently culminates when it comes to the cultural dissimilarities between the girls' races. Put differently, the cultural chasm between the two is crystallized through Twyla's ignorance of who Jimi Hendrix is as she refers to him as "she" (p.7) at a time when he constructs the vogue of Roberta's culture; however, Twyla may have in mind Nona Hendryx (Obadike, 2003, p.227) as another cultural icon when she addresses Roberta, but the latter also misunderstands her due to her ignorance of Twyla's cultural codes. Hence, the outcome of this cultural clash is the dismissal of Twyla by her friend's rude response: "Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix, asshole. He's only the biggest– Oh, wow. Forget it" (Morrison, 1983, p.7). Again, this evinces the essentialism underlying racial politics between Twyla and Roberta. Most importantly, this essentialism rises to a crescendo when Roberta and Twyla irrefragably voice their opinions concerning the issue of busing; their stances, being at odds, result in their antagonistic confrontation symbolized by both girls' reiteration: "I wonder what made me think you were different," (p. 15) that is, "different from the rest of your race". This signifies that "they have [extremely] different perceptions of what is right and wrong in the ensuing 'racial strife'" (Gillepsie, 2008, p.163), which heightens their essentialism. Nevertheless, the racial politics embedded in the story are also dramatized in the anti-essentialist mindset the two characters hold vis-à-vis each other, which corroborates the racial ambivalence within "Recitatif". This anti-essentialism can be grasped through the urgent need of each girl for her racial counterpart in pursuance of her existential meaningfulness and her identity. In this respect, by dint of her disclosure, "my sign didn't make sense without Roberta's" (Morrison, 1983, p.16), Twyla acknowledges that her sign, which symbolizes the intricacies of her intellectual life, cannot be granted the slightest significance without Roberta's sign, that is, Roberta's existence. So, the lives of the two girls who are paragons of the white and black races are inextricably dependent on each other. In the same vein, Roberta and Twyla drastically need each other to affirm the shared memories of their past at St. Bonny's orphanage, especially those about Maggie's race, as a sine qua non of their racial identities. In other words, each girl needs "to work out her relationship with [the other] to have a stable sense of her past and her identity" (Reames, 2007, p.140). As a result of their interdependence, their relation can be discerned as typically anti-essentialist.

So as to seal the aporetic ambivalence which structures the racial relationship between Twyla and Roberta, Morrison artfully contrives a reconciliatory character: Maggie. What is peculiar about Maggie is that her racial identity remains a more indecipherable enigma than the girls' races, since, while having witnessed the same memory of Maggie, Roberta conceives of her as black, whereas Twyla relentlessly rebuffs this characterization. In this context, it may be inferred that Morrison's obfuscation of Maggie's race unearths her intent to radically dismiss the racial barriers impeding the development of human relations; instead, she ransacks a far deeper signification. Put differently, pondering on Maggie, Twyla depicts her as follows: "Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb [...] I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't-just like me- and I was glad about that" (Morrison, 1983, pp.17-18). In this reflection, Twyla identifies her mother as well as herself through Maggie. Similarly, at the end of the story, Roberta's mention of Maggie comes unexpectedly just after the reference to her mother as if to parallel between the two. Thereupon, both Twyla and Roberta identify their mothers as well as their own selves with the muted, tyrannized and powerless Maggie who is elevated to a prototype of the "subaltern" in either race. Therefore, Morrison's foremost end is the reconciliation between whites and blacks through her removal of racial barriers and through her subtle assertion that what deserves utmost attention is every subaltern "Maggie" regardless of her race. Under these circumstances, Roberta's resonant question, "What the hell happened to Maggie?" (p. 20), is but a recondite alternative of another question: Has the subaltern spoken?

3. BLACKNESS: THE CONFLICT WITHIN AND WITHOUT

Finally, Baldwin purveys a double-facetted account on racial politics within his story "Sonny's Blues" as the latter expounds at once the implacable racism towards African Americans and the conflict instigated within the black community as a crucial repercussion of racism. Indeed, racism in "Sonny's Blues" is quintessentially

articulated through the vivid memory of the narrator's mother in which she recollects the tragic, savage murder of the narrator's uncle by the white men for the sake of pleasure and fun, which depicts the apex of racism. This incident is symptomatic of the cruelty of racism which situates Sonny's family within "a history of violence, victimization, and suffering that is specific to African American people obviously at the hands of white Americans" (Panish, 1997, p.73). However, Baldwin transcends this facet of racial politics to delve into a deeper level: the conflict amongst African Americans themselves. In this respect, this conflict is spurred between the narrator and his brother, Sonny, by the racial dynamics of class and music which engender a schism within the black community. In fact, in his attempt to escape the ramifications of racism, the narrator centralizes his life on preserving his relatively privileged, middle-class position as an algebra teacher as opposed to Sonny who chooses to become a jazz musician and is eventually trapped in heroin addiction from which he strives to recover. The narrator's class initiates his assimilation into the white culture, and this is demonstrated through his reaction to his mother's account on the brutality of racism: "I guess I didn't want to believe this" (Baldwin, 2009, p.29). Subsequently, through his immersion in the white system dictated by his class, the narrator disavows his racial identity and sets himself in acute contradistinction to Sonny, whose class as a jazz musician buttresses his ties with his black folks, to the extent of raising a racial confrontation between the two as the narrator imparts: "he treated these other people as though they were his family and I weren't. So I got mad and then he got mad" (p. 36). Moreover, this racial dilemma is further perceived through music, more particularly the jazz-blues. It is worth mentioning here that "The Blues-singer describes first-person experiences, but only such as are typical of the community and such as each individual in the community might have" (Jahn, 2007, pp.149-150), which makes of Sonny's music a cultural repertoire of his community's and his experience. Accordingly, this induces a cultural antagonism between Sonny and the narrator given that the latter fails to grasp the cultural connotation of this music through his pondering: "I simply couldn't see why on earth he'd want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands" (Baldwin, 2009, p.31).

Probably, the essence of Baldwin's racial politics is encapsulated in Sonny's blues which are advanced both as resistance and reconciliation in racial terms. Indeed, the blues as a metaphor of the African American identity generate resistance through the violence which suffuses their "discourse". This is best exemplified in the narrator's rendering of the drama occurring within Sonny while playing the blues: "Everything had been burned out of [Sonny's face] [...] by the fire and fury of the battle which was occurring in him up there" (p. 46). This image points to the intractable violence present in the blues; it is "the kind of violence committed by whites against blacks [and] the anger blacks feel as a response to the oppression they have experienced and continue to experience" (Panish, 1997, p.73). More significantly, this violence is eventually followed by the narrator's feeling of freedom as engulfing the setting, which transmutes the blues into a racial pattern resisting the hegemony of racism. In addition, the blues have a reconciliatory drift through their rapprochement of the two brothers. That is, the narrator at the end opts for going beyond listening to the blues to "understanding" them; consequently, he succeeds to vicariously sense Sonny's suffering through all the memories ingrained in his own soul: his mother's, his uncle's, his little daughter's, his wife's as well as his own tragedies. In the long run, this stands for the history of suffering of the African American prototype and, hence, reconciles the narrator with his brother and his black heritage.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be inferred that in their endeavor to represent their culture, history and identity, African American authors substantially focus on the narrativization of racial politics within their societies as these form the quintessence of their legacy. Yet, what is strikingly noticeable is that this issue is approached quite differently by the pioneers of the African American literature. In this regard, a meticulous examination of Hurston's "Sweat", Morrison's "Recitatif" and Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" unveils multifariousness in their approach to racial politics. While Hurston establishes a parallelism between racism and sexism as forms of oppression which she dissolves through her call to resistance, Morrison molds her story as a middle ground for a racial ambivalence fluctuating between essentialism and anti-essentialism which she settles through her solicitation of a racial reconciliation as a necessity to reinforce human relationships. As for "Sonny's Blues", Baldwin seems to showcase the black communal experience of suffering which is concretized in the racist oppression and in the schism the latter creates amongst African Americans; that's why, he incites resistance and reconciliation on the part of blacks in furtherance of their thorough freedom but more momentously of their communion.

REFERENCES

Baldwin, J. (2009). Sonny's blues. In S. Feinstein & D. Rife (Eds.), *The jazz fiction anthology* (pp.17-48). Indiana UP: Bloomington.

Gillespie, C. (2008). *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: A literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, Inc.

Hurston, Z. N. (1926). Sweat [Online]. Retrieved from http://wwwi.mcpherson.edu/~claryb/en255/handouts/sweat.pdf

Jahn, J. (2007). *Neo-African literature: A history of black writing*. Quoted in J. M. Reilly, "Sonny's Blues": James Baldwin's Image of Black Community. In H. Bloom (Ed.) *Bloom's modern critical views: James Baldwin* (pp.149-155). New York: Infobase Publishing.

Jones, S. L. (2002). *Rereading the Harlem renaissance: Race, class, and gender in the fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West*. London: Greenwood Press.

King, L. (2008). *The Cambridge introduction to Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Maynard, M. (2003). 'Race', gender and the concept of 'difference' in feminist thought. In H. Afshar & M. Maynard (Eds.), *The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions* (pp.9-25). London: Taylor & Francis.

Milne, I. M. (2007). Sweat. *Short stories for students, 19,* 187-209.

Morrison, T. (1983). Recitatif [Online]. Retrieved from https://www.cusd80.com/cms/lib6/AZ01001175/Centricity/Domain/1073/Morrison_recitatifessay.ddo.pdf

Obadike, M. L. (2003). Music. In E. A. Beaulieu (Ed.), *The Toni Morrison encyclopedia* (pp.225-230). Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

Panish, J. (1997). *The color of jazz: Race and representation in postwar American culture*. United States: University Press of Mississippi.

Reames, K. L. (2007). *Women and race in contemporary U.S. writing: from Faulkner to Morrison*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Werner, C. H., & Shannon, S. G. (2011). Foundations of African American modernism, 1910–1950. In M. Graham & J. W. Ward, J. R. (Eds), *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* (pp.241-265). New York: Cambridge University Press.