

**“THE SMOOTH CRIMINAL ON BEAT BRAKES”: B(L)ACK HISTORY,
HYBRIDITY, AND HOVERING FATES IN YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA’S
POETIC THOUGHTS**

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Abstract

African Americans were saddled with building what today is referred to as the United States of America, despite being enslaved as articles of commercial value with the emergence of the Industrial Revolution. Occupying this marginal space relegated them to the background of mainstream culture, and sociopolitical representation. It also excludes them from fiscal distribution of wealth and housing entitlements. Certain literary works explored aesthetic experimentations in Komunyakaa’s poetry, his autobiographical influences and the long history of plantation slavery in America. This paper is interested in looking at the techniques of Black music – particularly jazz, that have been deployed to interrogate these concerns and moments in Black history. Through a new historicist exploration of American social and political challenges, Komunyakaa defies Black realities through panoramic allusions to global and popular cultures. These demonstrate how African Americans survived unequal representation and racial discrimination in a system that tries to push them to the edge of society in spite of their citizenship status. Komunyakaa’s *Thieves of Paradise* (1998) therefore, universalizes the plight of not only African Americans, but also minority groups struggling to have a pride of place, and making their mark in the world while facing histories of subjugation and underrepresentation.

Keywords: African American, Komunyakaa, deification, hybridity, and underrepresentation.

It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6, 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you – James Baldwin.

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring to order and democracy, and that it uses its force only as a last resort – Edward Said.

The black experience is a history of diverse struggles and improvisations by people of African descent brought to the New World in 1619, Jamestown Virginia (Bennett, 1988, 29). The marginalization they are forced to face from the transatlantic voyage – Middle Passage, life on the plantation and racist policies that entrench them in servitude and subservient positions found expression in not only their literatures which Morrison argues have been burdened to bear “artistic desires” and “always perceived as working out somebody’s else’s agenda” among other exceptional responsibilities (Brown, 455-473), but in their music as well. The collision of African folk tradition later improvised on European instrumentation laid the foundation for the different genres of African American music comprising of the spirituals – as extended sermons, to gospel, blues, jazz and contemporary hip hop rap. Black poetics act as either a litany for lost souls in the Black struggle or witness bearers of the grim reality of underrepresentation, statutory discrimination and institutionalized racism. It is within this framework that we can situate

the poetic thoughts of Yusef Komunyakaa as informed and influenced by contemporary Black urban musical forms like jazz, blues, folklore, and also by his childhood experiences at Bogalusa, Louisiana – which has been a “site chronicling America’s race relations, beginning in 1865 with the Louisiana Black Code,” treatment of African Americans during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 (later Hurricane Katrina, 2005), and has one of the highest number of plantations, producing 96 percent of the nation’s raw sugar through the use of over 325, 000 slaves among other forms of prejudices (Ducre, 65-67).

Komunyakaa’s poetry, like those of his predecessors and contemporaries, is influenced by his marginalized atmosphere and the towering history of black servitude among policies that have established white racial supremacy that undermines the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness among African Americans. It interrogates the view shared by Baldwin (1965) in the epigram above, seeking answers to why African Americans pledge allegiance to the flag – America as an institution, but the flag does not pledge allegiance to them in the sense that they are lacking representation and respect for their rights as citizens. It is this attempt to negotiate fault lines within the perimeters of race, identity and belonging which offers access to the American Dream that engages Komunyakaa’s artistic rendition and unconventional approach to thematize Black experience by exploring the malleability of language, music and the power of orality from folk traditions and roots. Feinstein in his foreword to Komunyakaa’s *Testimony*, contends that the poet “celebrates the emotional complexity of human experience by fusing opposites” (Komunyakaa, 2013: viii). This Siamese expression of pain and relief through music is also captured in Komunyakaa’s poetic expression saying:

Language is music, so when poetry embraces the sounds made by instruments, the two shouldn’t collide; they should work together to produce a whole sound if musicians are listening to the words, and vice versa. I’m not talking about harmony; I’m talking about lyrical discords that create tension and thought (113).

Beyond the synchronized harmony is the interpolation of meaning and thoughts that critically question the place of African Americans in a democracy that promises freedom for all, but is selective in its political and criminal justice system. It is on this pedestal that improvisation leads to a hybridization of experiences and appropriation of foreign material resources that the topic of this paper is built. Though Komunyakaa has his reservation on hip hop as a Black music genre, it shares outstanding relationship with jazz which “represents a synthesis and transformation of several cultures, with a dominant West African influence” (White, 88). While jazz is cultured on the blending of African, European and other ethnicities, serves as the music Komunyakaa cosigns to on the one hand; on the other, Dyson (1994) avers that the existence of hip hop results from “The increasing isolation, economic hardship, political demoralization, and cultural exploitation endured by most ghetto poor communities in the past few decades have given rise to a form of musical expression that captures the terms of the ghetto poor existence” (7). Saddled with the uneasy responsibility of being the burden bearers of the Black experience and forced to sample different musical expressions to capture political activism, unequal fiscal distribution of wealth, housing discrimination through redlining, structural injustices and racial inequality; rap, like jazz, adopts and hybridizes on whatever tools within its reach to excel and articulate Black struggle with poise and grace. This self-expression and quest for personal liberty and lending a voice to interrogate black socioeconomic misery, isolation, police brutality and suburban negligence informs the

second verse in “New York State of Mind” by Nasir Jones (1994), particularly lines 20-29:

Life is parallel to hell, but I must maintain
And be prosperous, though we live dangerous
Cops could just arrest me, blaming us, we're held like hostages
.....
My rhyming is a vitamin held without a capsule
The smooth criminal on beat breaks
Never put me in your box if your shit eats tapes
The city never sleeps, full of villains and creeps (20-29)

This exceptional quality of preserving sanity in the midst of chaos, excelling in spite of different forms of discrimination – Black Codes and Jim Crow laws being used to subjugate African Americans, and the restlessness of inner-city life, influence Komunyakaa who like Nas, finds the “vitamin” of the rhyme to act as antidote – capsule, to survive. Already being “criminalized” for being black, he still moves smoothly on the “beat breaks” of difficulties – black deejaying that comes with turn-tabling, to give expression to a Black state of mind. New York in this context, stands as a microcosm for the larger African American society where life could be difficult and dangerous to draw comparison to living in “hell,” as well as surviving harassment from the police. This hybridity of forms is what hip-hop music shares with jazz. White (2017) contends that “Early Jazz did not attempt to ignore or destroy the rules of European classical music,” rather, “it extended and reinterpreted conventional musical principles by blending them with an African-influenced folk approach to tone, melody, and rhythm” (90). It is in reference to this type of positive fusion of energies that Said (1994) surmises that “rather than the manufactured clash of civilization, we need to concentrate on the slow working of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other and live far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow” (35).

This paper, “The Smooth Criminal on Beat Breaks”: B(l)ack History, Hybridity, and Hovering Fates in Yusef Komunyakaa’s Poetic Thoughts,” explores the politicization of race, colonization of black labor through slavery, alternative history of contributions from multiple races that help build the United States, but are undermined by discriminatory policies. It also highlights how Komunyakaa through his “collaborative” artistry delves into myths and folklore, jazz music, literary allusions, offering a poststructuralist perspective – intertextuality and hybridity, to illustrate progression of not just African Americans, but America as well in *Thieves of Paradise* (1998). The paper also calls attention to racial hierarchical positions and abuse of power dynamics within America, particularly the plights of African American veterans through vestiges of new historicism and earmarks poetic manifestations of trauma.

The *Thieves of Paradise*: Komunyakaa’s Intertextual Deification of the Black Experience

Through vivid and sometimes precise autobiographical renditions of the past and present, Komunyakaa teases out the consequences of loss, psychological and physical violence, memories and implications of racial inequality in America. Inspired by his experience of growing up during the Civil Rights Movement, diversity, hybridization of sounds couched in jazz which is a “collective creation drawn from various musical, social, cultural, ancestral, ethnic, and religious elements” (White, 2017). With *Thieves of Paradise* as the title of his fifth collection, Komunyakaa deifies the Black experience through an appropriation of Charlie Parker’s song, “Bird in Paradise” in the last stanza

(XIV) of the poem “Testimony” where he eulogizes the genius of the jazz musician (see also Haddix, 2013). This overlapping of layered ideas is an intertextual trope deployed to render multiple narratives about relational selves. Fowler (1997) contends that intertextuality involves “a recognition that interpreting an individual text involves reading it against a background of many other texts that constitute the literary system, then it is a process that is inherently multiple” (16). It is the adoption of this way of unfolding American and African American realities that Komunyakaa explores in this collection.

While celebrating the musicianship of the black artist – Parker, Komunyakaa spontaneously calls attention to the conditions of American soldiers in Korea, and the imminent thirst for the spoils of war as well as the prized collector’s item – a “recording of Bird of Paradise/ from a dead soldier’s hand” (151) derived from such a situation. He, in the process intimates the sociocultural significance of Black music as the zeitgeist of the time that it was being spread by word of mouth. This is not only the deification of Charlie Parker’s 1947 song, but of the record as an article of commercial value with religious significance attached to both the Buddha and the Sphinx (151). The racially charged atmosphere of the South is portrayed with a musicality of train locomotive engines – signaling African Americans’ The Great Migration from the South to attain freedom in the North and its booming industries, that does not betray the injustices and black marginalization still prominent in the South. Komunyakaa posits:

Moving eastward to the Deep
South with Jay McShann,
on trains whistling into dogwood
& pine, past shadows dragging balls
& chains, Bird landed in jail
in Jackson for lallygagging
on the front porch of a boardinghouse
with the lights on. For two days
he fingered a phantom alto
till “What Price Love” spoke
through metal & fluted bone (IV, 141).

Amidst the soothing music of jazz pianist and vocalist, McShann the “shadows dragging balls” is suggestive of a chain-gang during slavery, or a group of working prisoners who might be Black because of the South’s unequal racial relationship that most times is tilted against the poor Black population. Like a jazz percussion, Komunyakaa moves from an unjust incarceration of Parker, to the brilliant resilience of his spirit to still make music while being held behind bars. This biting sarcasm that Komunyakaa accuses Parker of in part VII that “...He’d go inside/ a song with enough irony/ to break the devil’s heart,” (144) is the same way he admonishes America’s racial injustices.

Komunyakaa’s postmodernist poem, “The Thorn Merchant’s Wife,” intertextually appropriates Ezra Pound’s poem of a similar title “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter” which is both a translation and an improvisation of a poem by the Chinese poet Li Bai (94). Komunyakaa has a series of this poems “The Thorn Merchant’s Daughter,” “The Thorn Merchant’s Mistress,” and “The Thorn Merchant’s Right-Hand Man,” (Komunyakaa, 2001) among others. This intertextual approach should not be mistaken for plagiarism, rather, it is a pastiche that involves open and intentional imitation or copy of an original object or text (Murfin & Ray, 2003). Komunyakaa draws inspiration and allusions from Greek, and Judeo-Christian religious belief systems of the concepts of

heaven and hell that is reminiscent of Dante Alighieri's "Inferno," and a Biblical reference to Bathsheba who was responsible for King David's adultery and homicide in the case of Uriah the Hittite – her husband, whom David ordered to be drawn into the thickest part of the war so he could covert his wife (2 Samuel 11: 5-27) 1 Kings 15: 5). This lends weight to one of the running themes of the poem demonstrating the dangers of deceptive appearances and lust. However, a poem of 26 lines of blank verse, Komunyakaa is able to unpack so much within nine:

She looks as if she's tiptoed
out of *Innocence Choosing Love*
over *Wealth*. A Janus-headed
Figure tarries at a junction
With twelve versions of hell
& heaven. She's transfixed
By bluejays pecking dewy figs
Down to the meaty promise of a heart.
She's *Mary Magdalen in the Grotto* (162).

Komunyakaa, like a typical jazz maestro switches gear in "The Trapper's Bride" where he takes a postcolonial approach to comment on the history of colonization with non-white individuals serving as victims of a situation beyond their control. A brief history of American coloniality, the exchange of goods for free labor or indentured slaves is captured in one block of blank verse through the mentioning of two warring states that sprang into existence due to the British Raj's mishandling of power at the end of their leadership round in India. This resulted in the bloody Partition of 1947, causing a division that saw Pakistan forming its own country, and another breaking out of it in 1972 (Chatterjee, 2020, Hajari, 2015).

The merging of popular cultural figures like James Dean – American, holding the hand of a woman who could either be from Kashmir – fighting to break away from India, and Bengal which has succeeded to be independent of Pakistan, reinforces the bleak history of marginalized nations forced to reconfigure their sense of identity and belonging due to the national boundaries created by colonial masters without considering the cultural implications and human factor but spurred by their imperialist quest to divide, conquer and rule mentality. Komunyakaa's spontaneous switch in both subject matter and allusions to offer another way of seeing, to interrogate global Black experience and mass atrocities shares inspiration with T. S Eliot's "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock," particularly the artistic, but romantic atmosphere created by the suggestion of museum or gallery visitation and admiring of art works by the two supposed lovers. While Eliot posits: "Let us go and make our visit/In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" (11), Komunyakaa unveils the romantic experience through the narrativization of torture, raid, plunder and capitalist exploitation of America's non-white (Indian) population on an artwork thus:

What about the other woman
Half nude on the ground
In a red garment, like hush
& rage brushed over primer?
The trappers sit like Jesus
& a shepherd in a rawhide,
Years from the future

On a hill of buffalo skulls
At Michigan Carbon Works.
We survey the vistas of gold
& dark accents. She says “Oops,”
When our eyes meet, as she leans
Forward in a low-cut blouse, almost
Touching the canvas... (58).

The geographical space depicting a pastoral setting with herders dressed in rawhide who have lost some of their animals by the evidence of “buffalo skulls,” and the rich mineral resources in “vistas of gold” inscribed on the painting, alludes to the familiar history of subjugation and exploitative capitalism. Komunyakaa continues a similar theme in “The Tally” (63) where an alternative history of colonization is given, except the poet did not indicate whether the slaves were white or black, and did not speculate if they were bound for the New World, Caribbean or Australia where Britain at some point, is known to deposit her renegades, outlaws and criminals. This is because in the cargo:” They’re counting women/ & men: twenty-two prostitutes, ten/ pickpockets, one forger, countless/ thieves of duck-eggs and black bread” (64). While these lots may be lacking in virtues that society upholds, the quote portrays the trapped individuals are the working-class poor trying their hands on anything they could survive on, as well as shows the poor of the Western world who are considered for slave labor long before options were taken from the global South. However, Komunyakaa narrativizes the long history of forced migration, exploitation alongside the abuse of power dynamics that occur on colonial voyages by drawing strong references to Pythagoras and *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1970) wherein a group of sailors lost at sea did the unthinkable by cutting off their source of life as epitomized by the albatross which is the metaphoric compass that is to trace their way home. Komunyakaa depicts this barbarous atmosphere where unruly men take charge of a ship to do as they pleased:

A soldier pries open a man’s fist
to tally twelve marigold seeds
here for lobbing off a half pound
of butter. Deck hands winch in
the drag of lines. A young officer
surveys the prettiest women, before
stashing *The Collected Quotations
of Pythagoras* for the governor.
Albatross perched on the mast
Await another burial at sea,
shadowing a stoic nightingale
in a bamboo cage mended with yarn
where a red-headed woman kneels,
whispering his song to him (64).

The ability of music, for instance jazz, to surprise and to complicate ordinary experience is exemplified above. On the one hand, soldiers exploit their captives, and deny women a right of choice while doing the bidding of their “master,” and on the other, an instant apocalyptic warning concerning the fate of the ship from the allusion to the burial at sea, probably suggesting that one of the women who might have known their way out of the storm that is to come, have been abused, and she could as well be one of the mythical siren women in Homer’s *Odyssey*, “a red-headed woman kneels/ whispering his song to

him,” which is usually a ploy used by sea nymphs to lure sailors to their death. This intertextuality, by drawing references to classical literature gives a universal appeal to the reality of colonization and capitalist marginalization. It buttresses the history of conquests, social stratification, and racial hierarchy in terms of the working conditions the ruled masses are forced to endure or adhere to. Similar views are explored in “Mediations on a Dingo” where Komunyakaa discusses slavery and enslaved minstrels singing their way to either freedom or self-identification like the protagonist – Blind Tom, in Jeffrey Renard Allen’s *Song of the Shank* (2014).

Komunyakaa’s *Thieves of Paradise* succeeds in its improvisational application of allusions and the manner it inter-textualizes classical literatures or popular texts and cultures by teasing out fresh meanings and perspectives about the modern condition, and the place of the Black man or anyone struggling against an unjust system, most especially in white societies. By juxtaposing Vietnamese history and experience of African American unequal representations, Komunyakaa revitalizes the bleak reality of concurrent sociocultural and political underrepresentation, as well as imbalances in abused systems that cut across geographical spaces and racial lines. The prose poem, “A Summer Night in Hanoi,” is thematically in conversation with “The Poplars”. Though the first depicts a conscious Black man abreast with the history of Blacks being hanged from trees, and therefore draws resistance by eulogizing the struggle of Ho Chi Minh, a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist statesman and member of the Communist Party of Vietnam that defeated the French Union in 1954 for the liberation and unification of Vietnam (Westheider, 2007; Gustafsson, 2009 & see Neville, 2018). The other, is concerned with a biracial relationship between a white soldier and a Vietnamese girl, and the bitter experience that comes with skin pigmentation with regards to the persona “sitting in the prison” of his skin (124). Most importantly, the two poems draw inspiration from a popular poem, “Strange Fruit” by Abel Meeropol (also called Lewis Allen) which was published and set to music on April 20, 1937 (Margolick, 2013). Its performance by several artists like Billie Holiday and Nina Simone popularized and called attention to the lynching of Black men across America, particularly in the South where Komunyakaa had his formative years. To illustrate the intertextual layers embedded in Komunyakaa’s poetry with regards to “Strange Fruit,” it is important to quote the first stanza:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

The poem in its complete three stanzas protests the lynching of Black men through a sharp comparison of its victims as “fruits” hanging from the poplar trees in southern states. It reinforces the notion that “You have to degrade before you can kill” (Komunyakaa and Alleyne, 2018). The poet-persona in Komunyakaa’s “A Summer Night in Hanoi,” reminisces in a movie house about Billie – probably Holiday, and tries to erase the image of “five lynched black men” by conjuring up the image of the revolutionary Ho Chi Minh as sharing similar subjugation, and the need to fight against white domination or imperialism. It is no coincidence that Meeropol, a white Jewish school teacher was also a member of the American Communist Party. The denigrating situation causes the poet to lament:

This scene printed on his eyelids is the one I was born with. My face
up there among the poplar leaves veined into stained glass. I’m not

myself here, craving a mask of silk elusive as his four aliases (124).

The poet wishes that since his struggle and that of the revolutionary are similar, he would have loved to fight the system having one of the aliases used by the Vietnamese leader known to have several pseudonyms. Komunyakaa's "The Poplars" therefore, decries this injustice in a psychological, but profound manner by couching it in a cautious biracial relationship in which the poet-persona observes the fears of a lover:

I step off the path, sinking into one-hundred years of leaves. Like
trapped deer, we face each other. Her hand in his. His blue eyes. Her
Vietnamese face. Am I a ghost dreaming myself back to flesh?

I stand in the skin's prison. A bluejay squawks till its ragged song pulls
me into the day burning like a vaporous temple of joss sticks. June
roses in beds of mulch and peat moss surround me. I hear her nervous
laughter at my back, among the poplars (115).

The first line interpolates with the history of runaway slaves or Black people being lynched in the south. It regurgitates the regrettable past where "blood on the leaves and blood at the root," leaves bodies swinging in the southern breeze," as well as invokes the history of Black servitude, institutionalized racism made ripe with Jim Crow laws and the Black Codes implemented after the period of Reconstruction.

The "Palimpsest," divided into eighteen subtitled parts, could pass for the bleakest poem in Komunyakaa's *Thieves of Paradise*. The first part subtitled 'Modern Medea,' narrativizes the history of Black slavery by alluding to the life of Margaret Garner, a former slave who in 1856, loved her daughter so much that she had to kill her in order to save her from the clutches of slavery and the slave masters (Weisenburger, 1998: 39; Smith, 2013: 134). It also alludes to Euripides' Medea of Greek tragedy who violates the female space by killing her brother, then, her children because in her own words: "There's no way this can be – that I should leave my sons alive to suffer outrage from my enemies. In any case, it's necessary that they die, and since they must, I'll kill them, I who gave them life" (Blondell, Gamel, Rabinowitz and Zweig, 2002: 202). Komunyakaa asserts that there is "a dead child on the floor between his mother/ & four slavecatchers in a Cincinnati hideout/ Blood colors her hands" (34). This allusion to Greek classical tragedy, and the fusion of a historical character into the deification of Black experience is a good example of pastiche, the fifth mode of intertextuality to which D'Angelo (2010) contends it is "a word or style produced by borrowing fragments, ingredients, or motifs from various sources."

On another note, Kathy Wales (1989) defines pastiche as "a pasting together," a patchwork or medley of borrowed styles (339). Komunyakaa's reference to the historical Margaret Garner incident alludes to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* which also uses the same source material to comment on the bitter past of slavery and how anything coming back to life usually upsets the cosmological balance of communal relationships. There is a spontaneous transition from these moments on the plantation to the domestic reality of Black women who serve as maids in white establishments, and are saddled with the responsibility of taking care of white homes and even the wellbeing of their assumed "masters". Komunyakaa, poetically interrogates the plunder of black bodies from the levels of socioeconomic exploitation, the physical and psychological trauma of rape

committed on minors – as low as a thirteen, without the arm of the law bringing such white felons to book when he avers:

You've outlived five women
who pressed white shirts of bankers,

preachers, bartenders & thieves

You left an imprint on a pair of trousers
when he pulled her away & embraced her.
You smoothed the silk underwear

of a thirteen-year-old who died
in childbirth. You're the weapon
Three Fingers was done in with.
McGrory wiped off every smudge (35).

Komunyakaa deifies Black suffering and martyrdom in narrativizing incidents of rape and immoral attitudes of the assumed exemplars of civilization who disguise as bankers, and business owners but are thieves of black virginity and labor. Komunyakaa does not flinch in lauding the resilience of Black women as mothers – “pain merchants,” the backbones of their cultural communities and as warriors who continue to make sacrifices at the expense of injustices mated on their personhood and sense of social service. The element of surprise in Komunyakaa’s poetry as informed by music transitions ideas, history and myths into verses that at once seem abrupt, but contribute to the struggle and tension between black and white in the corridors of power. He invokes historical figures, Pharaonic kings, African myths, the blues and gods to give credence to either Black existentialism or the histories of their marginalization. There is an invocation of a ritual practice that conjures up “Papa-Legba/ from the backwoods,” to bear witness to the sacrifice of a cock’s blood to hold down the night of misery, and to seek for a cure that eludes medication. This is because in African and Haitian voodoo religion/ belief, Papa-Legba who is associated with crossroads serves as an intermediary between man and the spirit world (Wigington, 2019). In appropriating African cultural myths and superstitions, Komunyakaa engages in “the politics of cultural production” (Gikandi, 1991).

Komunyakaa comments on the efforts white establishments have put in order to eradicate or bring to a minimum, the Black populations in the American ghettos or project housing systems. First, by introducing, “milk mixed with gin or metho/ something to finish the job/ guns & smallpox blankets/ didn’t do” (75) because African Americans are seen as a hindrance to either white progression or a nuisance if their labor is not to be exploited. When this ruthless, inhuman efforts, including police brutality didn’t work, the system decides to introduce the deadly cocaine presented in an extended metaphor referred to as “White Lady.” Komunyakaa in the second stanza builds on, and metaphorizes the drug by elucidating on its detrimental effect and its dangers:

Something to erase the willy wagtail
from vesperal leaves. No one
can sniff the air & walk miles
straight to water anymore.
Their heads fill with wings
& then they touch down again
like poisoned butterflies

bumping into bougainvillea.
Fringe dwellers languish,
piles of old clothes under gums.
White Lady is their giddy queen,
her arms flung around sleeping
children, ruling dreams
with an iron scepter,
her eyes screwed into them
like knots in bloodwood (74-75).

Here, Komunyakaa illustrates the mental prison and unhealthy conditions that have been exposed on “those who/ refuse to dangle brass breastplates/ from their necks like King Billy,” and directly refers to how they die like “poisoned butterflies bumping into bougainvillea” (74). This is made clearer by the intertextual resonance of the poem, “After Avery R. Young,” by Jericho Brown (2019) wherein, cocaine is explored as a vehicle for peaceful ending – death. Komunyakaa and Brown’s poems, by alluding to the deadly drug and addiction are in conversation with each other. It illustrates and serves as an open admonition stating that Black people need not be antagonistic towards white people as they would die of drug addiction – White Lady, especially when their poor neighborhoods are saturated with drugs and its misuse. This discrimination according to Brown is brought about by slavery and social division among races, particularly due to either racial or housing discrimination that keep people to their own kind for acclaimed safety reasons. Following this train of thought, Brown avers:

We’re not interested in killing
White people or making them
Work. Matter of truth, some snorted
Cocaine until folk stared calling it
White Lady. Slavery is a bad idea.
The more you look like me, the more we
Agree. Sometimes you is everybody.
The blk mind is a continuous
Mind. There is a we. I am among them (29).

There is a sarcastic undertone to Brown’s admonition that signals the unity of all Americans indiscriminate of races when he asserts “Sometimes you is everybody.” This demonstrates that the challenges of drugs are not only a Black problem, but of white as well. It resonates with the words of Said (1994), who posits that most empires – in the case white, claim to have a “mission to enlighten, civilize, bring to order and democracy, and that it uses its force only as a last resort,” but are doing the opposite to its helpless poor population. Komunyakaa interrogates the concept of slavery which is embedded in American history and shows the marginalization of African Americans right from time in spite of their contributions. Using tropes that could be alluded to jazz music, Komunyakaa smoothly conveys the Black experience and how the intermingling of the races could be harnessed for good reasons or cause, or deteriorate into a continuation of Black denigration and unequal representation.

Conclusion

Komunyakaa in *Thieves of Paradise* explores the challenges of being black in America through a narrativization of its long history of slavery, subjugation and housing discrimination among others. In illustrating the intermingling of cultures, races and

sociopolitical ideas of community and drug use for instance, Komunyakaa delineates the imminent fates of the downtrodden, particularly the Black population who are either misrepresented or entirely lacking formidable representations. He goes on to demonstrate that the challenges of African Americans are also America's challenge. Using the language of music, and techniques, Komunyaka hybridizes cultures and alludes to African myths/ legends, and classical cultures of the Greeks to situate the Black experience within the larger canvas of minority groups that have been marginalized or have suffered discrimination. By discerning the racial and social, interrogating the defining lines of culture, and the destiny of a people with a tortured history of prejudice tied to their names, Komunyakaa calls attention to the modern condition and how alternative histories – especially couched in contemporary poetry, could offer solutions, if not resolutions to the idea of keeping a group at the edge of a society it claims citizenship to. Looking at Komunyakaa's poetic thoughts through the lens of New Historicism foregrounds his poetry in the tradition of African American rhetoric of self-assertion, identity formation, assimilation, music appropriation and historical struggles against unequal racial and social representation since their time of domicile in the United States of America.

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