Monday, August 1, 2011

MOVING WRIGHT AND MOVING EAST

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Richard Wright once encouraged African American writers to look to African American folklore for inspiration and material. It would appear as if your work begins in African American folklore but then moves East into Buddhism and Eastern philosophy. Is this a correct assessment? Do you see your work opening a "new" door for African American writers to explore? Or is this simply "the changing same" something that African American writers (such as Toomer, and Wright himself) have always explored? In other words, where do the new text books on African American literature begin and end?"

RICHARD WRIGHT

That seminal 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" by the father of modern black fiction, Richard Wright, had a very large influence on my conceptualization of *Faith and the Good Thing*, a novel *in* the form of a folk tale that is *filled* with folk tales, a few of which I adapted from Zen Buddhist stories. But as Ethelbert notes, with my next novel, *Oxherding Tale*, the "mini-stories" within that philosophical slave narrative are generally drawn from Hindu and Buddhist sources. As an American writer, my personal, philosophical, literary and artistic journey begins in the "ground" of the black American experience, expands to include the warp and woof of Western philosophy, then---as in the case of Jean Toomer--- adds to that the philosophical and religious traditions of the East. Writer Tony Ardizzone once told me, way back in the early '80s, that he saw me as a "transitional figure" in black American fiction. (Transition to *what*, he didn't say.) Perhaps there is some truth to that. I'll let the literary scholars decide. But let me shift gears for a second or two.

I must confess that the last part of Ethelbert's question makes me feel a tad uneasy. Educators, literary critics and the anthologies they use in their courses have always been fond of organizing literary art in ways that are, say, either thematic or historical. We could "begin," for instance, with slavery and slave narratives, and "end" with the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." But why not begin earlier with tribal life and folklore in African villages before the start of the trans-continental slave trade and end with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s? It all depends, I suppose, on whether one sees black American life and literature as unique to these shores or as part of an African Diaspora,

which is the approach taken by the PBS series and its companion book, *Africans in America.* Personally, I generally tend toward the former way of framing this material, *i.e.*, that there is a unique and distinctive black American experience, but I'll certainly break that mold if the demands of a particular story require that I do. These conceptualizations or ways of shaping the raw material of the "black" experience create a neat and manageable narrative, are heuristic, and help students get a temporary, provisional handle on a large body of complex, ambiguous and often contradictory information.

However, this very notion of where things "begin" and "end" is deceptive (especially for a Buddhist like Thich Nhat Hahn) and far from being unproblematic. Our brains are pattern-seeking engines, which is all well and good, but sometimes we impose patterns that create as many problems as they solve. Talking about where the new black literature---or any literature---"begins" or "ends," then, has for me a slightly Procrustean bed feel to it, for we tend to eliminate whatever fails to fit with that conceptualization. In terms of black American literary production in the post-civil rights era, and especially in 2011, we are better served, I believe, if we just think of this new body of work in terms of what writer Reginald McKnight says of black Americans in general: namely, that we are "as polymorphous as the dance of Shiva." There is no reason to see our artistic creations at this hour in human history representing any sort of "end," or even exhaustively portraying the lives of people of color.

But let's return to Ethelbert's first question:

If you order, The Teaching Company's Great Courses DVD (or Audio CD) for "Great World Religions: Buddhism," which is taught by Boston University Professor Malcolm David Eckel, you'll see that toward the end of that course (Course No.687, 24 lectures 30 minutes each) he has a section on how "Buddhist influence has permeated many other aspects of American culture." In the 24th and last lecture, "Buddhism in America," Prof. Eckel, who is winner of the Metcalf Award for Teaching Excellence, says, "To grasp the significance of Buddhism in American life, it is important not to stop with organized denominations and centers. Buddhism has also influenced literature and the arts."

He then lists what he feels are three examples to support his claim: (1) The "novels of Jack Kerouac and the Beat Poets, especially Gary Snyder"; (2) "*Siddhartha*, the novel by German author Hermann Hesse"; and (3) "The African American author Charles Johnson has written novels that explore the implications of the change of consciousness that takes place when ex-slaves experience freedom. Buddhism weaves its way through these characters' lives and produces a distinctive image of enlightenment."

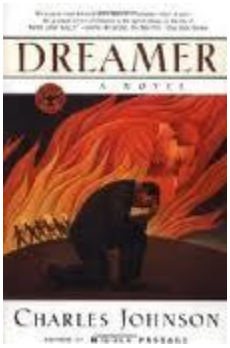
So the answer is, yes. I do feel, humbly, that my work contributes in some small way to opening a door to the East for Western readers. But that is certainly not the *last* door to philosophical explorations that will open in black American fiction.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:14 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/moving-wright-and-moving-east.html

Monday, August 1, 2011

THE CENTRAL CONFLICT IN DREAMER BY CHARLES JOHNSON

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What impression of King did you want your reader to have after reading the " Prologue" in DREAMER?"



The essence of *Dreamer*, the meaning that organizes all the other events and details in that story, is contained in these words offered in the Prologue:

"He was a tightrope walker straddling two worlds. One of matter. One of spirit. Every social evil he could think of, and every 'ontological fear,' as he was fond of saying lately, arose from that mysterious dichotomy inscribed at the heart of things: self and other, I and Thou, inner and outer, perceiver and perceived. It was a schism that, if not healed, would consume the entire world."

That is what one might call the central conflict of the novel, the conflict or problem from which all other political and social and personal conflicts arise: dualism. Gandhi often referred to leading the spiritual life as being like "walking on a razor's edge" (which, by the way, is the title of a 1944 Eastern-influenced novel by Somerset Maugham). The Mahatma took that thought from the *Katha Upanishad*, where it says, "The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path to Salvation is hard." So it is with Martin Luther King Jr. in this novel. The very difficult goal he has set for himself is realizing the kingdom of God on Earth, achieving spiritual ideals in a realm that is political and secular and drenched in a divisive dualism that pits black against whites, black against black, men against women, Left against Right, communist (or Socialist) against capitalist, Jew against Gentile, Christian against Muslim, Muslim against Jew, gay against straight, West against East, on and on these forms of dualism are endless and arise from a primordial dilemma that Captain Ebenezer Falcon describes this way in *Middle Passage*:

"Conflict *is* what it means to be conscious. Dualism is a bloody structure of the mind. Subject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other---these ancient twins are built into mind like the stem-piece of a merchantman. We cannot *think* without them, sir. And what, pray, kin such a thing mean? Only this, Mr. Calhoun: They are signs of a transcendental Fault, a deep crack in consciousness itself. Mind was *made* for murder. Slavery, if you think this through, forcing yourself not to flinch, is the social correlate of a deeper, ontic wound."

In *Dreamer*, my portrait of King presents him as an exquisitely educated, Western, black man, a theologian and philosopher by training, a spiritual seeker whose vision is that of a social world in which men and women transcend this ontic wound, this transcendental Fault by realizing a "beloved community" in which "I" is seen as "Thou," Self is understood to be Other, and subject and object are ontologically experienced as one.

Put another way, my fictitious King in *Dreamer* is not simply laboring to end racial segregation and integrate lunch counters or even take care of the poor, but is trying mightily to address the metaphysical root causes *in* humankind that give rise to difference and dualism, oppression and evil. For that reason his quest at time seems quixotic and he---like Gandhi---doomed to failure and death. And as we read in that same passage from which I quoted earlier, "Martydom held no appeal for him, but for every sorcerer named Jesus there was a Judas; for every bodhisattva called Gandhi, a Poona Brahmin named Nathuram Godse. The way to the crown was, now and forever, the cross. And it made no sense to carry the cross unless one was prepared to be crucified" in the social world.

The novel's Prologue, therefore, sets the spiritual and philosophical tone for the rest of the story.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:04 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/central-conflict-in-dreamer-by-charles.html

Wednesday, August 3, 2011

REMEMBERING LEE GOERNER

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "You dedicated your novel Dreamer to the memory of Lee Goerner. Who is Lee Goerner?"

In order to talk about my friend and former editor Lee Goerner, I'll need to provide a little bit of "back story" that traces my works of fiction through the publishing world in the 1980s. On a couple of occasions editors have inherited my novels from other editors because I signed contracts for them before they were written.

When *Oxherding Tale* came out in 1982, its publisher at Indiana University Press, John Gallman, submitted it for the National Book Awards. The wife of Tom Stewart, the publisher at Atheneum, was one of the judges for that prize. In order to help her go through all those boxes containing hundreds of novels and short story collections, he read some of them for her, or so he told me. Tom liked *Oxherding Tale* and wrote me a letter of appreciation. I wrote him right back, saying, "Thank you. Oh, and by the way, I've just put together my first collection of short stories. Would you be interested in seeing this?" He was, and accepted for publication the book that became *The Sorcerer's Apprentice.*

By the time that story collection was published, I'd written the first two chapters of *Middle Passage*. I sent them along to Tom Stewart to get his reaction, and he promptly sent me a contract for the novel. Then Tom left Atheneum. His position was filled by Lee Goerner, who had spent 15 years as an editor at Knopf. *Middle Passage* was one of the novels he inherited from his predecessor, and the first time he experienced it---and the first time we met---was when I read fiction with novelist Richard Wiley at an event for PEN/Faulkner. (*The Sorcerer's Apprentice* had been a nominee for the PEN/Faulkner earlier; the award was given to Wiley for his novel *Soldiers in Hiding*, and since we were friends---he grew up in the Tacoma, WA area and our families had gotten together for dinner earlier in the '80s---we agreed to read on the same ticket.) Lee Goerner told me that after hearing me read the first chapter of *Middle Passage* that night, he felt relieved that he'd have something good to publish as the new head at Atheneum.

Then *Middle Passage* won the National Book Award. I have a photo on my study wall of Lee, myself, and Ralph Ellison at that ceremony, all three of us in our tuxedos; when my novel was announced as the winner that night, Lee tossed his napkin from our table straight into the air. (He gleefully referred to the book as being a "Stealth missile" that took the publishing world by

surprise.) Immediately, the novel became a bestseller, and Lee Goerner gave me a "good six-figure" contract for my next novel, *Dreamer*. Most likely, Lee thought I'd write the book in two years. I'm sure he never imagined I'd spent a whole year just researching King's life and the Civil Rights Movement before I wrote the first sentence, then another six doing more research and composing it. Shortly after the publication of *Middle Passage*, Atheneum was acquired by Scribner, and as so often happens in the publishing world, Lee was informed that he was out of a job. He spent a year and a half looking for a position commensurate with his experience and skills, then died when he was way too young. I traveled to New York City to add my voice during an event to honor this fine man and outstanding editor.

In the publishing world, Lee Goerner was Old School. Not exactly Maxwell Perkins, but certainly of the caliber of the best editors of our time. He was extremely well-read. His taste in literary fiction was impeccable. And he *cared* about his writers and counted them as friends. (Among those writer friends he admired was Isabelle Allende, whose path I crossed when we did back-to-back interviews for the same radio program.) Indeed, he cared about and nurtured literary culture in general during his time as an editor and publisher. I have perhaps 10 pages of notes he sent me on the manuscript for *Middle Passage* ("Just how many people *are* there on this ship?" he asked).

I had to send Lee my proof-read galley for the novel by government courier from Amerika Haus in West Berlin because I was doing a 4-country lecture tour for the State Department in December of 1989 (Germany, Czechoslovakia, Portugal and France) and he said he couldn't wait until I got back to America to receive it. So I went over it quickly in my cramped dormitory room in Bonn while I was editing a lecture I had to give the next day on "Cultural Pluralism in American Literature" at Bonn University. Among the many paintings on the walls of the first floor in my home there is a gift I treasure from Lee---the original art for the cover of *Middle Passage* (It rests side-by-side with the painting of ML King for the hardcover edition of *Dreamer*).

He was a friend and professional colleague whose insight, intelligence, literary values, and critical acuity I greatly valued during our all too brief years of working together. I deeply regret that Lee Goerner did not live to see the publication of *Dreamer*. It is dedicated to his memory, because without him it would not exist.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:27 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/remembering-lee-goerner.html

Thursday, August 4, 2011

A LOOK INSIDE THE DREAMER

E. Ethelbert Millers asks: "The first chapter of *Dreamer* contains a considerable amount of violence. From the riot outside on the streets of Chicago, to Chaym Smith providing an account of his life. Why the reference to so much violence around King - a man of peace? Smith seems like another black man having difficulty with black women. Might a literary critic accuse you of creating negative stereotypes of black family life?

Readers of *Dreamer* should easily see that Chaym Smith is Cain, the first murderer in human history, and the fictitious King in this novel is Abel. "Chaym" is, in fact, another name for Cain.

If a literary critic *did* accuse me of "creating negative stereotypes of black family life," I would say that "critic" needs to go back to school and study literature, philosophy, and world religions a little longer. Such an accusation would be embarrassing for its naivety. Forgive me for dwelling on this, but I think it should be addressed.

I once spoke with a group of black high school teachers and their students in an east coast city. One of the teachers, a nice lady, said to me in all innocence, "We read your story 'A Soldier for the Crown' in *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*, and we liked it when the soldier turned out to be a black woman. But then you created Isadora Bailey in *Middle Passage* and made her fat and unattractive." I guess that detail about adipose tissue caused this teacher to feel uncomfortable. But let me assure you, there is simply nothing a serious writer can *do* with her comment.

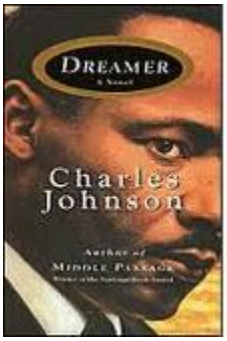
A "critic" of the kind Ethelbert is describing is obviously not a trained, professional critic at all. And not even a good reader. He (or she) by such an accusation reveal that they have no imagination and wear their feelings on their sleeves. They have too little courage when it comes to facing reality and what is *given* to us in experience, which isn't always pleasant. Should every fictional portrait of a black man and woman or family be a sugar-coated, feel-good, air-brushed fantasy intended to soothe a black reader's ego? (Remember: we're talking about literary art here, not what you see in a sitcom on your television screen.) I think not, even though I've always been a proponent for more "positive" images of black Americans. Why? Because I'm also a realist. I don't flinch from ugliness or the evil human beings, white and black, are capable of doing.

Dreamer presents the inspiring family images a black reader might wish to see when the character Amy Griffith describes the life of her kinfolk in southern Illinois. But the novel also delivers Chaym Smith's tragic relationship with Juanita Lomax, which is based 90 percent on a real, unpleasant event I was privy to in my teens, one that was very painful for me to finally put on the page.

In my view, then, such a hypothetical "critic" must be judged as someone who simply doesn't know how to read literature and needs a good teacher to assist him (or her) in developing the ability to do a close, unbiased reading of complex, multi-leveled works of fiction---stories that contain all the contradictions we find in life.

In this novel's parallel depiction of Cain/Abel and Smith/King, we have a meditation on inequality: two men who are physically identical but who fate has given very different lives. As a man who trains to becomes King's double, Smith is acutely aware that King has experienced advantages that he will never know---loving parents, a childhood of happiness (he is consumed by envy, like Cain)---and King, for his part, is deeply troubled by the misfortunes life has visited upon this man who looks enough like him to be his twin. This meditation on sameness and difference in the novel is very much about the perennial question of Self and Other, and why some men (Abel) are favored by the Almighty or Providence or fate and some men (Cain) are not.

Furthermore, the years *Dreamer* spans (1966 to '68) were steeped in violence, especially cities like Chicago during the "long hot summers" of rioting. In the 1960s, the federal government was preparing for the possibility of civil war. Of race war. And so the novel opens in *media res*, at the white-hot center of that social violence, which feels as if it has torn the world asunder, and perhaps even torn at the very fabric of reality, allowing a character as unusual, dangerous, existential, and unpredictable as Chaym to enter King's life from a parallel world in the multiverse or an alternate reality. Sad to say, this kind of violence followed King during his entire career, beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He consistently set an example of nonviolence and *ahimsa*---"doing no harm." Those associated with him in the Movement adopted that same stance. But not all black people (or whites) embraced nonviolence as King did in the cities where he challenged segregation and inequality. Thus, as it says in *Dreamer*, violence followed him "like a biblical curse."

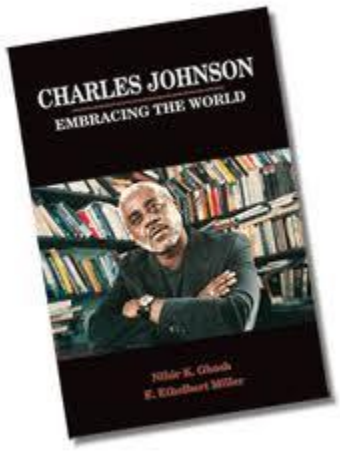


Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:31 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/look-inside-dreamer.html

Thursday, August 4, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON EMBRACING THE WORLD

"The erudite articles, insightful essays, vibrant poems and stories, glowing tributes and animate interviews in this memorable volume not only address multifarious dimensions of the Charles Johnson canon but also bring into bold relief the magnetic appeal of a veritable activist relentlessly engaged in making the world a better place to live in." Jacket copy, *Charles Johnson*: *Embracing the World.*



E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "The book CHARLES JOHNSON EMBRACING THE WORLD was just released in India. How do you feel about this book? Any surprises in it? How often do you tend to disagree with what critics say about your work?

Actually, this stunning book was *full* of delightful surprises for me. When it arrived (on Monday, August 1), my first reaction was to feel humbled right down to my heels. I felt as if I might faint. And whenever I look at it or hold it in my hands that's *still* how I feel. So many of my old, dear friends and colleagues from the art and academic worlds for the last forty years (as well as outstanding scholars I've yet to meet) made contributions to this remarkable work published by Authorspress in India, which is co-edited by scholar Nibir Ghosh of Agra College, who with his wife Sanskrit scholar Sunita Rani Ghosh spent the 2003-04 academic year at the University of Washington on a Fulbright to study black American literature in general and my work in particular; and the indefatigable, prolific poet and arts activist E. Ethelbert Miller.
In a word, it's *more* than wonderful to see all these thought-provoking and original works gathered together between the covers of a single, inexhaustibly rich book---as if everyone, West and East, is having a grand, international party as they simultaneously discuss *and* create literature, criticism, and philosophy. That cross-cultural, inter-disciplinary orientation has always been dear to my heart. In 308 pages, we have beautifully composed tributes, remembrances, essays, interviews, critical articles, fiction and poetry by Gary Storhoff, Geffrey Michael Davis, John Whalen-Bridge, Linda Furgerson Selzer, Shayla Hawkins, Marc Conner, Sharyn Skeeter, Adam Tolbert, Aurélie Bayre, George Yancy, Zachary Watterson, Michael

Boylan, Richard Hart, Robert Abrams, Chris Thomson, John B. Parks, Julia A. Galbus, Sunita Rani Ghosh, Nibir Ghosh, David Ray, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, Qiana J. Whitted, and Amritjit Singh (as well as reprints of seven of my essays and stories).

And listen:
I have *no* intention of disagreeing with anything the critics, scholars, and artists say about me and my work in this gorgeous book. Well, let's say I won't disagree *too* much because I feel so grateful to them. As a matter of fact, I am in their debt forever for their kindness and generosity, for creating scholarship that begins with my work, yes, but goes so far *beyond* it, opening numerous new doors of discourse on culture and ideas for serious readers; and for using the occasion of this book to create poetry and fiction that stand on their own as literary artworks of distinction.

So Nibir, Ethelbert, and everyone who made this amazing book possible, let me say thank you thank you thank you. All of you have enriched my life over the years, and done so yet again with this book. And let me say thank you in Sanskrit, that beautiful creation of India, too:

दन्यवाद (danyavāda)

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:41 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/charles-johnson-embracing-world.html

Friday, August 5, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON'S NEXT MOVE

E.Ethelbert Miller asks: "With names like King and Bishop in DREAMER should one look for (or acknowledge) the symbolism of chess in your novel?"

Today's answer, I'm afraid, will be briefer than I would like for it to be. I know that may sound unnecessarily cryptic, but I'll explain why I have to be tight-lipped in just a moment.

My house is filled with chess games of all kinds. There is an elaborately carved one with wooden-and-brass figures I purchased in Berlin in 1989; an equally gorgeous one with sculpted figures representing the followers of the Muslim leader Saladin and Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade that sits on a chess table. I have electronic chess games where you play against a computer (and your invisible opponent's pieces move by themselves); a game where three players can participate at once; and a small chess game that slips easily into my briefcase.

Since my teens I've loved chess and think it is the greatest board game ever created. One of my friends in philosophy and I played chess all the way through our undergraduate years. (And that friend later went on to engage in serious competitions.) At least once, the term for a chess strategy worked its way into my fiction (and maybe more than once but I can't remember more examples). So, yes, I was aware of how the names "King" and "Bishop" in *Dreamer* have a whimsical resonance with the figures on a chessboard.

When I was writing *Dreamer,* the idea for a variation on the traditional game of chess came to me. A different way of playing the game that is inspired by the campaigns of Gandhi and ML King, and by the principle of nonviolence. The ontology of this way of playing is firmly anchored in Buddhist philosophy and a non-dualistic vision of the world. My son, who is also an avid chess player, and I tried out this new approach, testing it back in the 1990s. During the composition of *Dreamer*, I even thought about the various characters (Matthew Bishop, Amy Griffith and Chaym Smith) playing chess this new way. Back then, between 1991 and 1998, I even considered copyrighting this idea. But I didn't and put the idea off to one side because all my thought and energy needed to go into finishing that novel.

I would love to explain this spiritual, Buddhist approach to chess, but I'm afraid I can't because right now I *am* in the process of applying for a copyright for it. I've only discussed the details with my wife and two good friends. But if you can be patient, and wait as I trudge through the paperwork and process of securing a copyright, in a couple of years a board game based on this idea might become available for your enjoyment. Or at least I hope so.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:43 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/charles-johnsons-next-move.html

Monday, August 8, 2011

LOOKING FOR CHARLES JOHNSON INSIDE CHARLES JOHNSON

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Many novelists often claim their fiction is not autobiographical; yet reading about Mama Pearl and Amy one wonders if the inspiration for the creation of these characters didn't come from your mother, wife and aunts. Is this possible? How does an author, turn a real person into fiction and then create something fictional that seems real?"

Some literary scholars have pointed out that very few autobiographical details work their way into my novels and stories. From my perspective, there isn't much "drama" in a life that has been devoted to just study and work. But the one exception to this is *Dreamer,* and for reasons I'll explain.

Dr. King's only northern campaign in Chicago began in 1966, the year I was a senior at Evanston Township High School. Although all my energies were focused on graduation, I remember well the turmoil created by this campaign, which is seldom written about or discussed---certainly not to the same degree as his more successful ones in Montgomery and Birmingham. When writing *Dreamer,* I covered in that novel the years 1966 to 1968 for a couple of reasons. (1) Because the last few years of King's life before his assassination in Memphis, the years after his major triumphs and the Nobel Peace Prize, highlight the complexities of his approach to the black liberation struggle as well as his transition from being a civil rights leader to an international advocate for peace and a champion of the poor. And (2) Because the site of this campaign, Chicago and its environs, is a geography I knew well. I was born, raised, married, and worked there as a young journalist on *The Chicago Tribune,* and my first book was published in that city.

Naturally, then, I saw this story that details King's Chicago campaign as the occasion for invoking that city and my hometown, Evanston, at a certain moment in its history. I'm very pleased when readers tell me they can't tell where fact ends and fiction begins in the novel's portrait of King. The good doctor never visited the suburban township of Evanston, but I have him do so in the novel, speaking at a disguised version of Springfield Baptist Church (It's called Calvary A.M.E. in the novel), which was built by my great-uncle William Johnson (I renamed him Bob Jackson),our family patriarch who built churches, residences, and apartment buildings all over the North Shore area. He's the one responsible for my father, uncles and aunts moving from South Carolina to Evanston because in the '40s he offered them work with his all-black construction company.

The novel doesn't contain any events or facts from my own biography, but it does offer references to real places and people I wanted to honor, like Dr. Elizabeth Hill who in the 1940s almost single-handily brought about the creation of all-black Community Hospital (where I was born; I renamed it Center Hospital)) because at that time Evanston Hospital did not take black people, which meant she had to take her patients to a hospital on Chicago's South Side, and many died during that long ride. All my black friends when I was a kid were delivered by Dr. Hill (in the novel she is called Jennifer Hale), who kept track of and remembered me even when I was in my early twenties.

These rare "autobiographical" elements in *Dreamer* (it's better maybe just to call them "historical") are, or so I hope, an exercise in capturing the "spirit of place" of my past, an exercise one might refer to as "Speak, memory." Mama Pearl is literally based on one of my poor, Chicago in-laws----the remarks she makes in the novel are from notes I took on her in the mid-1970s. The Black People's Liberation Library is based on the Black People's Topographical Library, a place my wife and I visited once when we were dating in 1969. In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, Evanston was an unusual, special place in the shadow of Northwestern University. One woman I know who grew up in Chicago once told me, "Oh, Evanston? That's where the uppity niggers lived." I could only laugh at her remark because black people in Evanston during my childhood *were* proud (or "uppity," thinking quite highly of themselves) and industrious, most of the men being tradesmen of one sort or another, and we formed a very tight, mutually supportive community with roots than ran deep in the black church. In his book, *Charles Johnson's Fiction* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), literary scholar William Nash did solid, shoes-in-the-dirt research on black people in my home town and portrays them accurately. So does Linda Furgerson Selzer in *Charles Johnson in Context* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

But that "world" is gone now. As someone once wrote, you can never go home again. Except, perhaps, in a work of fiction.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:37 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/looking-for-charles-johnson-inside.html

Tuesday, August 9, 2011

THE DREAM INSIDE THE DREAMER

And I guess one of the great agonies of life is that we are constantly trying to finish that which is unfinishable. Martin Luther King Jr., "Unfulfilled Dreams," 1968.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "DREAMER opens with King dreaming about India. Since this novel takes place after 1963, it would appear that King's dream is no longer an "American" dream. Has King become frustrated with the state of the movement by this time? Does he seek peace elsewhere? our opening chapter shows the influence of Buddhism on this novel? Should one "read" DREAMER within the context of Buddhist literature as well as African American literature?

In 1959, Martin Luther King Jr., and his wife Coretta traveled in India as guests of the Gandhi Peace Foundation. They met with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during that trip, and King returned to America committed to devoting one day a week to silence and meditation. My sense is that this trip to India---a country that has been so generous in the spiritual traditions that it has given to humankind---inspired young King and helped him understand that if he wanted to improve the world he must also work on and daily improve himself.

For this reason, I couldn't resist opening *Dreamer* with King remembering what he experienced there during his difficult campaign in Chicago. That memory or dream gives him solace. (The italicized King sections of the novel also end with his thoughts returning to India.) There can be no question that King was frustrated with the state of the Movement in the years between 1966 and 1968---after Stokely Carmichael's promotion of the idea of "Black Power" (King felt that would only inflame racists to clamor for more White Power) and the violence he saw consuming American cities. His dream is one of world peace, as he so eloquently stated in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech when he said:

"Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial and moral question of our time...The foundation of such a method is love...I have the audacity to

believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits."

Should *Dreamer* be read as Buddhist literature? I would say, yes. (Let me repeat once again that the Buddhist experience is nothing more than the human experience.) That dimension enters the novel through Chaym Smith and what Matthew Bishop learns from him. But it should also be read---and I certainly intended for it to be read---as a celebration of the black church and the positive contributions of the philosophy we call Christianity to the Western world. That statement may cause some discomfort and unhappiness to atheists and agnostics.Through the eras of slavery and racial segregation, the black church offered its parishioners a very effective weapon (a moral worldview and activist stance) to use in their fight against white racism and oppression. It was the center of black social life and a foundation that held black communities together. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the finest products of that church and liberal black theology.

I once gave a reading from the Prologue for *Dreamer* at a university in one of the Western states. During the Q&A, a white philosopher asked me, "Is there any way we can have King without the Christianity?" I replied, "Sure, you can take that out of your discussions about King, but you won't be discussing ML King anymore if you do." Back in the 1980s, this is what I meant, in part, in my early essays when I used the phrase "Whole Sight," *i.e.*, an interpretation of phenomena that is coherent, consistent and, most important of all, *complete.* I could have just as easily added *honest* as a characteristic for Whole Sight. You can't understand King, his motivations, the spiritual source of strength he drew from when he was physically attacked (beaten, stabbed, spat upon), reviled in the press during his opposition to the Vietnam war, or the certainty he had about the righteousness of his work, and his willingness to lay down his life if you remove from your conception of him the words Thomas
à Kempis used for the title of his beautiful devotional classic: *The Imitation of Christ.* Remove that from ML King, and you have someone else entirely.

Just as King is inconceivable without Christianity, so too are two millennia of Western intellectual history, culture, philosophy, the history of science, folklore, politics, and literature before 1960 impossible to imagine without the shaping influence of that religion and its many variations. But, sure, we can give a Buddhist reading to *Dreamer.* (We can give a Buddhist reading to *any*thing.) After all, one of King's favorite hymns was "In Christ There Is No East Nor West."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 8:14 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/dream-inside-dreamer.html

Thursday, August 11, 2011

MIND OVER RACE MATTERS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Do you still feel that much of the work of black intellectuals is still confined to race and race matters? Is this a result of "duty" to community or a form of intellectual segregation? Do you feel your interest in philosophy unlocks the race box many black thinkers are placed and locked in? Do you see your essays on Buddhism still holding on to race matters? Is Charles Johnson a free man?"

I'm going to concentrate on the last sentence in today's question. *In Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, edited by Jim McWilliams (University of Washington Press, 2004), the second interview in this work was conducted in 1987 by my former student, writer Nicholas O' Connell. In that interview I said---and I truly meant, "The great fight in life and literature always is to prevent some form of idea or situation from enslaving you. It's to keep your mind open and your eyes open and your life open, to find ways of not being limited. Fiction should open us up to new possibilities. It should clarify for us. It should change our perception."

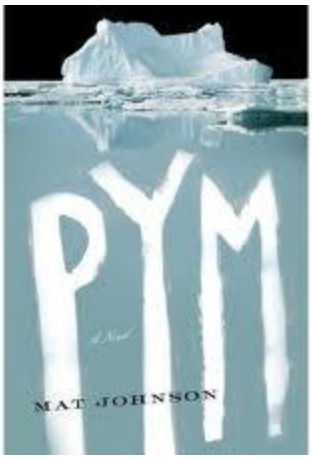
Let's start this discussion with an obvious fact: real artists are sensitive people. They *must* be sensitive in order to see and feel what others ignore or don't see and feel as intensely, or have not consciously confronted in terms of the human experience. During the creative process artists must make themselves vulnerable, sometimes exposing their hearts and hurts in ways that are painful, or presenting ideas and innovative works that challenge the status quo. Some superb black male writers I've met (I'll name no names) are very fragile people in social situations, a bit awkward because they never learned how to bullshit and bluster or they prefer not to do that. (The one I'm thinking of is a genius and received one of the first MacArthur fellowships; he seems to have no ego-armoring at all, speaks softly and seldom, but when he does speak, everything he says---and publishes---is brilliant, insightful, and true.) They might even seem eccentric. If they are not careful, they can become the prey of bullies or those who are less sensitive.

So a first rule emerges, I think, one that every writer and artist, young and old, would do well to pay attention to: *You must protect yourself and your talent*. You and you only have to be the shepherd of your talent. (Have you noticed how seldom literary scholars use that term, talent?

Perhaps this is because we, as Americans, tend to emphasize equality and egalitarianism.) This is doubly true if you are an artist of color in a Eurocentric society such as America. From childhood forward, you will meet people who will recognize your talent and support you. (Sadly, some young artists will have parents not able to recognize or appreciate that talent. Or they will be born in communities that historically do not have the support structures for nurturing various kinds of intellectual and artistic gifts.) But you will also encounter people---a great many people, I'm afraid---who will either deliberately not recognize that talent or, if some do, they might out of jealousy try to suppress or destroy it (or direct it as they think best), which is the storyline for the play and film *Amadeus.* Some people, recognizing a black artist's talent, will try to exploit it for their own purpose or agendas. This is especially the case with those who embrace a particular religious or political agenda. Or some will oppose that talent simply because the work it produces does not reflect the cherished ideas they are attached to. There are well-meaning people who feel that a black artist should only address matters of race or politics. That his or her curiosity about this vast, mysterious universe we find ourselves in should be limited to a single subject.

This is a result of the tragedy of racial segregation. What I mean by that is simply this: the institution of Jim Crow, with all those decades of erasing or marginalizing the black experience in America from our school books, curriculum, and the national consciousness, *did,* in fact, render black people---their lives, histories and ideas---invisible to white people. Both Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright used the metaphor of "blindness" to powerfully describe the epistemological damage done to white America by racial segregation. On the other hand, black Americans do know whites. We *had* to in order to survive, and to excel. Furthermore, we are bombarded 24/7 with information about our fellow white citizens in our schools, media, etc. A natural consequence of this situation is that a black artist or scholar can speak with greater authority about race in America that a white writer or scholar can. It's easy for us to do that---clarifying questions related to "race." (And during the decades between the 1970s and now such a limited focus could be very profitable in terms of speaking engagements, teaching posts, and writing assignments.) James Baldwin, for example, spent his entire career doing that, and was much loved by blacks and especially whites for performing that sociological service.

But therein lies a trap for a black artist. Therein lies a minefield littered with IEDs that an unsuspecting black writer or artist might step on. We feel it is crucial for us to do the "race work," as my friend, scholar Rudolph Byrd puts it, because others can't or won't do it as well as we can. For example, I've always been eager to write introductions and prefaces to clarify and celebrate the work of my black predecessors whom I admire, from Ellison to Gordon Parks, James Weldon Johnson to Jean Toomer. And who is better qualified to discuss and dramatize the lives---trials and triumphs---of my black parents, grandparents, ancestors, and friends systematically removed from official "history" than I am? And, yes, the subject that editors at some Buddhist publications overwhelmingly ask me to write about is Buddhism and the lived-illusion of "race." But should that be the *only* thing I direct my intellect and imagination toward? (I'm thinking now of a well-known native American writer, much celebrated, who bemoans the fact that he has difficulty publishing his works that are not specifically about being native American.)



Just now I'm reading Mat Johnson's very funny novel *Pym*. At the beginning of the novel, the black protagonist loses his job because he was hired to teach black American literature, as I was in 1976 at the University of Washington because the white faculty, with a stroke of honesty, admitted they were not culturally or intellectually or personally prepared to teach those classic texts of American literature. He was hired to be a "Professional Negro," which is something quite different from being a Negro who is a professional. But he stops doing that in order to teach American literature in general. (He also refuses to serve on his school's Diversity Committee.) His specific interest is in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym.* The school's president makes it quite clear that the protagonist is no longer *useful* to this white institution if what he wants to do is teach what the white faculty members are teaching. "You were hired to teach African American literature," says that school's president. "Not just American literature. You fought that...We have a large literature faculty, they can handle the majority of literature. You were retained to purvey the minority perspective. I see nothing wrong with that."

As well meaning as this fictitious school and its president might be (and the students certainly want and need to read these works), what they have done---and Mat Johnson's narrator recognizes this---is intellectually segregate the protagonist. If he had not stopped teaching only black literature, if his interests and curiosity had not gone elsewhere, he would have received tenure. To his credit, the protagonist realizes that promotion at this school would be nothing more than golden manacles on his mind.

Let me toss two other items at you for the purpose of adding a couple of more logs to the fire of my argument:

Some years ago, Modern Library published a list entitled, "100 Best Nonfiction Books of the 20th Century." Out of l00 books only seven are by African-Americans. These are *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, *Notes of a Native Son* by James Baldwin, *The Souls of Black Folks* by W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *Why We Can't Wait* by Martin Luther King Jr., and *Shadow and Act* by Ralph Ellison. To be sure, these texts are among the most influential, discussed, and debated books in black literature since l901. No one can doubt that they have been foundational---indeed *seminal*--- for any and all discussions of race for the last five generations.

But compare now these "black" titles to the ones by white authors on the Modern Library listing. William James explores *The Varieties of Religious Experience;* John Maynard Keynes offers *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*; G.E. Moore gives us *Principia Ethica*; and Lewis Thomas explores *The Lives of a Cell.* Readers would have to be blind not to see that the intellectual commerce represented by white authors ranges over all possible subjects and phenomenon---from mathematics (*Principia Mathematic)* to literary criticism (*Aspects of the Novel*), history (*The Making of the Atomic Bomb)* to philosophy (*A Theory of Justice)*--- including titles on race (*An American Dilemma* and *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*) while the work of black intellectuals is confined to race alone.

Now consider National Academy Press's "Summary Report l992: *Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities,"* which I quoted in my essay, "The Role of the Black Intellectual in the 21st Century." There, we discover that in the early l990s only five black mathematicians were at America's twenty-five top-ranked universities, and that less than 2% of this nation's scientists were black. For doctorates earned by various groups in l992, this report provides the following breakdown:

	Whites	Asians	Hispanics	Blacks	Native Americans
Mathematics	423	51	12	4	2
Computer Science	376	86	8	5	2
Physics and Astronomy	733	92	30	7	6
Chemistry	1,211	132	42	l7	6
Engineering	1,874	447	72	48	11
Biological Sciences	3,043	262	101	61	l3

Added to that, in 1992, nearly one-half of all black doctorates were in a single field, education, with most of the rest in fields like social work and sociology. In a long list of specialized areas, such as algebra, geometry, logic, atomic physics, geophysics, paleontology, oceanography, biomedical engineering, nuclear engineering, cell biology, endocrinology, genetics, microbiology, geography, statistics, classics, comparative literature, archeology, German language, Italian, Spanish, Russian, accounting, and business economics, in l992 there were no blacks who earned doctorates in the United States.

I sincerely hope and pray that in the 19 years since that report was issued, things have changed, with black scholars working in all the fields mentioned in the previous paragraph, seeing all the phenomenon in our enveloping world as proper subjects for their intellectual exploration, and not just the narrower range of topics assigned to a Professional Negro, an archaic role that dates back to the era of racial segregation.

"Is Charles Johnson a free man?" asks E. Ethelbert Miller. The answer is that I *work* day and night, from my childhood until this very hour, at being free to pursue passionately intellectual and imaginative questions and problems that stretch the modicum of talents I was blessed to have at birth. And I have always been very careful about doing whatever nurtures those talents, and avoiding anyone who would deny or attempt to diminish or re-direct them in ways that did not serve what I saw as best for their efflorescence. This is a subject I could talk about forever, so I think I'd better wrap things up now insofar as this post is already a bit long.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 8:33 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/mind-over-race-matters.html

Saturday, August 13, 2011

EXAMINING LIFE WITH W.E.B. DU BOIS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: " In an essay on the role of black intellectuals in the 21st century you briefly talk about the importance of Du Bois. Can you expand your comments about him? I just finished reading *Dusk of Dawn*. I find few people have read it. It seems as if Du Bois is reduced down to one book---*The Souls of Black Folk.* What works by Du Bois do you often return to for inspiration?

Those poor souls (black as well as white folk) who have read a lot of my writing can tell you that I don't often quote from Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, but I have leaned heavily on three remarkable, endlessly fascinating (to me) paragraphs that appear early in his talk, "Criteria of Negro Art." This was an address Du Bois delivered in 1926 at the Chicago Conference for the NAACP. His lecture, which was later published in *The Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, which Du Bois himself edited, took place during the most entrenched period of segregation when the opportunities for black people were so painfully circumscribed. Twice now, and for very different reasons, I've quoted these paragraphs in essays as different as "A Sangha By Another Name" for *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* and "The End of the Black American Narrative" for *The American Scholar*. Here are those three paragraphs:

"What do we want? What is the thing we are after? As it was phrased last night it had a certain truth: We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?

"If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful;---what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?

"Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your heart that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that---but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of world we want to create for ourselves and for all America."

More than anything else, I admire and marvel at the compression of thought, feeling and vision that Du Bois achieves in such a brief passage. With his first paragraph, beginning "What do want?," he presents the black liberation struggle as a question of *desire*, and takes it from the realm of the immediate civil rights work of his era---securing for black people their rights as "full-fledged Americans"---to a larger and older realm of reflection on perennial ethical questions that reach back to Plato, Aristotle, Epicuris, and Marcus Aurelius. In other words, Du Bois urges his black audience in Chicago to begin thinking about what an "examined life" might look like. When the "group" or collective struggle is over, how will they choose to live as free, individual men and women? What values, he asks, are the best ones for a free people? Du Bois, genius that he was, was able to imaginatively project in 1928 *beyond* the bloody struggle of the moment, one of the most entrenched decades for Jim Crow in the last century, and to ponder how he and his NAACP colleagues should live in its aftermath, *i.e.*, our time or the post-Civil Rights period.

Viewing the second paragraph from the vantage point of 2011, a reader is immediately struck (and amused) by how everything he cites as goals that a black person might pursue if he or she were truly free *are* opportunities in our time and have been for decades. Moreover, his examples represent the most vulgar kind of materialism and conspicuous consumption. One can't help but think of the $2 million Bugatti Veyron Grand Sport car that Beyonce recently gave her husband Jay-Z for his 41st birthday. Or the gold and diamond watches that rappers Usher and Kanye West purchased from watch maker Tiret, each having its owner's face made from diamonds on the dial, Usher's costing $250,000, and West's having a price tag of $180,000. For Du Bois, these are not "goals and ideals" that can bring satisfaction, even if they seem to be enjoyed by some white (and black) Americans.

In his third paragraph, where he dismisses such "tawdry and flamboyant" materialism, Du Bois settles down to business. The "true spirit" he would like to see in black America involves the Seeing Eye (vision), the Cunning Hand (skill), and the Feeling Heart (compassion, empathy). A Buddhist easily sees in this list aspects of the Eightfold Path---Right View and Thought, Right Conduct---and the Dharma's call for us to practice *metta* or "lovingkindness." And what makes for a noble life in Du Bois's opinion? *Plenty of good hard work.* Wisely, he tells his audience that "perfect happiness" is probably an illusion; that pain and suffering are inevitably part of our individual lives; that "sacrifice and waiting" (does he mean delayed gratification?) are structural, lived experiences for those who have the "true spirit"; and that knowledge, creativity and self-realization (or self-actualization) are the things that make life worthwhile.

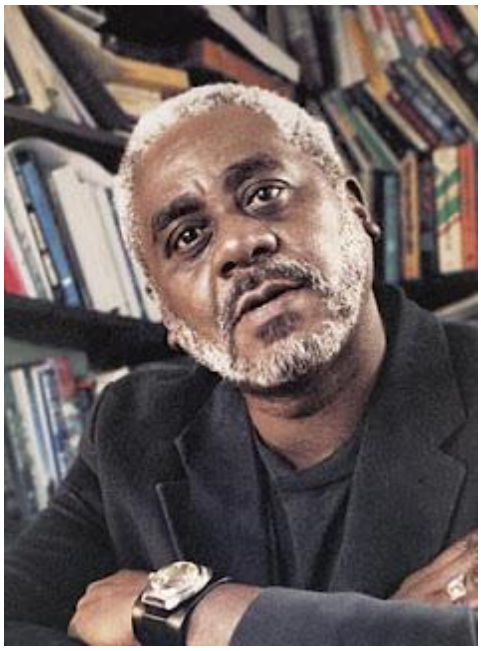
And all of that---a trustworthy map for a rewarding, examined life---Du Bois accomplishes in only three, tight paragraphs. A mere 349 words. It's a haunting passage I can't forget or get out of my head, one that I reflect upon as often as I do Buddhist sutras and well-wrought pages from Western philosophy. I frequently re-read it for inspiration. And I'm sure I'll quote from it again in future essays and addresses.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:35 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/examining-life-with-web-du-bois.html

Monday, August 15, 2011

FRIENDS AND WRITERS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "One thing I've always found interesting is that many African American authors don't really know one another. It's as if we are living in different time periods and not simply different time zones. If I was putting together a program (this fall) I would place you and John Wideman on the same stage and monitor the exchange about writing, race and family. Have you had any "long" conversations with Wideman? We know about your relationship with August Wilson...What well known African American writers have you never met and would like to?"



In order to attempt an answer for today's question, let me repeat something I said in an interview published in *Callaloo* (Vol 33, No.3, Summer 2010) that was conducted by Geffrey Davis at Pennsylvania State University.

"Writing is a solitary, lonely activity. What August and I enjoyed were long evenings (seven to ten hours) of just relaxing and talking and letting our hair down. This is rare for so-called "successful" writers, and even more rare for black male writers in America. My friend, writer John McCluskey (We co-authored *Black Men Speaking*), told me that he and a few other faculty members at Indiana University invited film-maker Melvin van Pebbles to their campus. After van Pebbles' presentation, they all went to dinner. At some point in their conversation, McCluskey told me, van Pebbles got tears in his eyes. The others at the table were surprised, and asked him if anything was wrong. No, he replied. He said he simply never has the chance to sit down with other black artists and writers---the experience brought tears to his eyes. August and I experienced this joy as often as we could----whenever we both were in town. We couldn't have been farther apart in, say, our politics, but that didn't matter one bit. In August, I saw a man with

the true spirit of an artist, someone who loved the creative process as much as I did, who had devoted himself to it since the 1960s as I had done, and who shared my deep respect for the generation of our parents, the hard-working, moral men and women who raised us at the very end of the era of segregation. Here in Seattle we did many literary events together; we were, naturally, at the same literary events for the 15 years he lived in Seattle.

"While August and I enjoyed 15 years of good, long dinner conversations, I've had a long-term *working* relationship with my best buddy, Art Washington. He did the *Showtime* dramas on Jimi Hendrix and Adam Clayton Powell, and has spent more than thirty years in the Hollywood industry. He and I have been like brothers since we worked at KQED on the family drama "Up and Coming" in 1981. We talk or email each other almost every day. I'm godfather for his son. But notice the difference in our disciplines of choice. Wilson was a playwright; Washington is a film-maker. I'm primarily a novelist, short story writer, essayist, and comic artist. There is little overlap in terms of our primary creative focus, and therefore no professional competition. When you have two black male writers, or any two writers in general, regardless of race or gender---Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, say, or Wright and James Baldwin, who told Wright he was the "father," and therefore he, Baldwin, had to "kill" him---there is the possibility for a kind of Cain/Abel jealousy and professional competition to arise. I find it remarkable and refreshing that this did not seem to arise between Ellison and Albert Murray. With August and Art, I always deferred, graciously and gratefully, to their greater experience in theater and Hollywood, and they deferred to my greater experience as a literary and visual artist, and as a philosopher. Mutual respect was always present, and there was even the desire to collaborate on new projects. Art and I have worked on things together for decades, and pitched stories together to Barbara Streisand, Denzel Washington, and Wesley Snipes, and conference called together with Marvel's Stan Lee."

In addition to friendships with Art and August, I maintain an email correspondence with many writers, black and white, male and female. Obviously, Ethelbert, you're one of them! As for John Edgar Wideman, we've met on a couple of occasions, once when he read at a conference for the Associated Writing Programs, and another time in Seattle when he and Terry McMillan were traveling around the country, reading their works together and doing on-stage conversations. I've long admired Wideman and, as you know, speak of him highly in *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (pages 74-75). In my opinion, he is one of our most serious literary artists, has been publishing I think since the 1960s, and I would enjoy an on-stage conversation with him at any time.

Others I would like to sit down and chat with? I would love to have a long dinner conversation with astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, the Frederick P. Rose Director of the Hayden Planetarium at the Rose Center for Earth and Space. I would also love to have a long chat with philosopher George Yancy, and astronaut Charles F. Bolden, the 12th (and current) Administrator of NASA. And also with Buddhist nun Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, Rebecca Walker, and Vajrayana teacher Choyin Rangdröl.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 1:14 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/friends-and-writers.html

Monday, August 15, 2011

IN SEARCH OF CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM

E. Ethelbert Miller says: "No one talks about Christian Socialism today. You claim this was King's third and final stage of development. Is it something we should still seek to achieve? Is the Beloved Community defined by Christian Socialism?"

In my writing about Martin Luther King Jr., I do say that his political orientation at the end of his life can be called "Christian Socialism." As early as 1951, King wrote a note to himself, saying, "It is a well-known fact that no social institution can survive when it has outlived its usefulness. This capitalism has done. It has failed to meet the needs of the masses."

Before he was assassinated, King told members of his staff not to be afraid of the word socialism. He was exposed to European socialism when he traveled to Norway to receive his Nobel Peace Prize, and I believe he felt that economic system might work in America, though from what I've read his father, Daddy King, remained at the time a believer in capitalism. But for King, "Christian" must precede "Socialism," because, as a Baptist minister, he simply couldn't embrace the atheism of Karl Marx, and many other communists and socialists.

Ethelbert is right, I think, when he says no one talks about Christian Socialism much today (except maybe Cornel West, if I understand the contours of his thought and public positions correctly). Nor is there much discussion of the kind of "liberation theology" James H. Cone is known for. I suspect the reason for this, in part, is because activist black churches today, like that of King in the 1960s and the one Rev. Jeremiah Wright led in Chicago, are frequently overshadowed by other churches---some of them "megachurches"---that offer a religious orientation called "the Prosperity Gospel."

My first exposure to the Prosperity Gospel was in the 1970s when I saw (in a state of complete bafflement) Reverend Ike, "the Success and Prosperity Preacher," on television ("You can't lose with the stuff I use," he said over and over again). Since that time, other black ministers have successfully used his approach, among them Bishop Eddie Long at his megachurch in Atlanta. When the multiple allegations of sexual abuse emerged recently about Bishop Long, DeForest B. Soaries Jr., senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens in Somerset, N.J., published an article entitled "Black Churches and the Prosperity Gospel" in *The Wall Street Journal.*

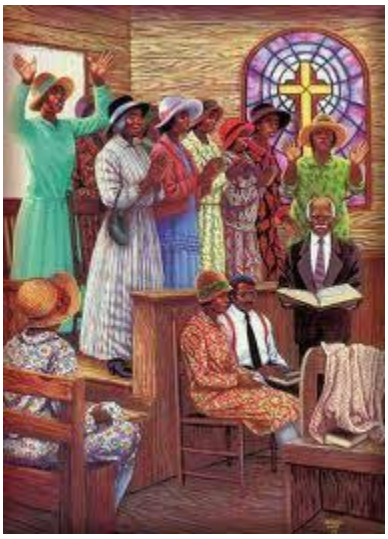
Soaries Jr. wrote that, "To their credit some prosperity ministers, like Bishop T.D. Jakes of the Potters House in Dallas and Dr. I.V. Hilliard of the New Light Christian Center in Houston, have motivated many people to avoid the traps of thinking of themselves as permanent victims and to defy conventional stereotypes. The prosperity gospel says that everyone can succeed financially, regardless of race or gender or class. The prosperity movement has effectively changed life expectations for millions of people. However when leaders of this movement assert that God

wants everyone to be wealthy and that riches are the automatic outcome for all faithful believers, we should be suspicious...Teaching that desire for more material possessions is a sign of one's religious piety is simply offering a justification for crass consumerism. Prosperity theology elevates greed to a virtue instead of leaving it as one of the seven deadly sins."

Continuing his critique, Soaries Jr., added that:
"Traditionally, black churches have emphasized spiritual renewal, social justice, educational uplift, community improvement and civic engagement in addition to individual achievement. The fact that the church was the locus for community and personal advancement was what made it such a powerful force for hope and survival...In light of today's weak economy, perhaps the prosperity movement should consider focusing on financial literacy, personal discipline and saving for the long term, rather than emphasizing supernatural possibilities."

He concluded his piece by observing that, "Reasonable people know that faith in God must be accompanied by responsible actions to achieve lasting prosperity. Education, hard work and discipline are key components to any authentic prosperity plan."

I agree with DeForest B. Soaries Jr's critique. But in light of his assessment, and in acknowledgement of the current popularity of the prosperity gospel, I would tentatively say that anyone who hopes to return our discourse to Christian Socialism as envisioned by M.L. King will probably have to wean parishioners away from the approach to theology offered by the "prosperity movement."



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:21 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/in-search-of-christian-socialism.html

Tuesday, August 16, 2011

IN DEFENSE OF OUR LANGUAGE

E. Ethelbert Miller asks an important question: "How has language changed for you as a writer? What is your opinion of how modern technology (especially texting) has changed writing? Many writers as well as journalists now use more vulgar words in their work. This seems to be the new norm. What are the moral implications of this? Is language "neutral" when it comes to conveying values and shaping human thought?"

Whenever I start reading something, the first thing I look for is a high level of language performance. It doesn't matter whether the work is fiction or non-fiction, if the prose is as pedestrian as the language we read in newspapers or overhear at the supermarket or DMV, merely utilitarian, then I will be disappointed and feel that work is de-totalized and minimalistic. (And what passes for political discourse in this country ---as well as the jargon of the Academy---is offensive enough to the ear and mind to make a lover of language run screaming from the room.) A literary work is, first and foremost, a performance of language. For that reason, I expect the instruments of expression---sentences and paragraphs---to be music and poetry. I expect them to be polished, and the writer to have at his or her command a mastery of the English tongue so complete and sophisticated that, as I read, I learn more about the possibilities of language performance. I want to be surprised by the prose, ambushed by its beauty. Words are the flesh of thought. And that means the language is my portal into the consciousness of the writer who, on the page, is singing an interpretation of being that transforms and refines my reflections.

(And, by the way, these 140 E-Channel posts so far are *not* an example of what I mean because they have to be written too quickly---on the run, as it were---and lack the weeks I typically invest in revising fiction and essays; these posts, at best, can only be utilitarian and journalistic; they are as close as I ever get to releasing first-draft material.)

Language is sound and, therefore, is never "neutral." The sounds we make in speech are guttural, palatal, cerebral, dental or labial. In *The Anatomy of Poetry* (1968), Marjorie Boulton makes it evident that on the level of what Aristotle once called *melos,* even the most microscopic datum of speech carries an affective quality or tone, and is sedimented with feeling or sense (and therefore not "neutral"). *B* and *p* sounds feel explosive; *m, n* and *ng* we experience as humming

and musical; *l* as liquescent, holding within itself something of streams, water, rest; *k, g, st, ts* and *ch* are experienced as harsh; *t* and *d* are best suited for short actions; and *th* tends to be soothing. Emotion has *become* sound. (For more discussion of this topic, language and being, see chapter two, "Being and Form" in my book *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*).

I've read that the English language contains over a million words (and is still growing, of course), that the average speaker uses about 20,000 words in his or her everyday speech, though we know and recognize far more words than that. Our humanness, and especially our ability to achieve an inter-subjective relationship with others in the social world, is based on the possibilities of language. To a degree, then, I believe the health of a culture can be measured by the performance of those who speak and write its language. If that thesis is credible, then perhaps we should be worried by the coarseness, vulgarity and at times obscenity that we encounter so often today in American speech. In one of the many pages of writing instruction that John Gardner gave to his students in the 1976, he observed that, "You live in a world in which it is possible to buy flavored, edible panties (strawberry, lemon-lime---), a world where the word 'asshole' passes for elevated diction. Think about it."

As a much younger writer, I *did* think about that. And today, more than thirty years later, I brood daily about the debasement of American speech. (In the last few decades we have not only turned the word "asshole" into proper diction, but we have moved on to mainstream many four-letter words in our fiction, stand-up comedy routines, and daily speech). In his posthumously published book, *The Art of Fiction* (1983), Gardner also said this: "Pettiness, vulgarity, bad taste fall away from him (the serious writer) automatically, and when he reads bad writers he notices their lapses of taste at once. He sees that they dwell on things Shakespeare would not have dwelled on, at his best, not because Shakespeare failed to notice them but because he saw their triviality. (Except to examine new techniques, or because of personal friendship, no serious apprentice should ever study second-rate writers.)"

In a world that offers us the truncated language we find on Twitter, the anonymity of the Internet, and the triumph of Hip Hop and gangster rap, does anyone ever talk anymore about *taste*? Is that old-fashioned now and "corny"? Have we become, as American men and women, too liberated and progressive for good taste in our daily and literary use of language? Do we now have so little respect for those who listen to us and for ourselves? As Gardner said, long ago:

> Think about it.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:04 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/in-defense-of-our-language.html

Thursday, August 18, 2011

NOTHING BUT A PRESIDENT: BARACK OBAMA AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF BLACK MEN

E. Ethelbert Miller rolls a grenade into the room with *this* question: "I'm helping an editor of a magazine develop an issue that is going to look at President Obama and Black Masculinity. How important do you think doing something like this is? Did the election of Obama force us as Americans to look at blackness in new ways? Do White men have a problem with a black man with power? How do we explain the rudeness shown Obama on a number of occasions. Is this simply politics or is race a factor? Is the attempt to define Obama as an alien linked to his blackness or the "sound" of his name? Would black women embrace Obama the same way if his wife was white? If Obama is defeated next year, how might this alter the American narrative? Will we jump to the conclusion that "Reconstruction" failed again?"

Many years ago, back in the 1980s, my friend Dr. Joseph Scott, then the director of Ethnic Studies at the University of Washington, and I crossed paths in the parking lot behind the building where his department and mine were located. We started talking, and Joe expressed to me his belief that black women had done a very good job of publicly defining themselves since the 1970s, *i.e.*, creating an image (or meaning) for themselves and their lives that was positive and widespread in popular culture. And then he said, "When it comes to black men, people don't know who we are." In that same decade, writer John McCluskey Jr. and I published *Black Men Speaking,* which begins with Joe's powerful and moving memoir of his life growing up in Detroit in the 1930s, entitled, "Making a Way Out of No Way."

I've never forgotten Joe's observation. *People don't know who we are.* A library of books could be devoted to examining that remark. In fact, for a time I was on the editorial board for the *Journal of African American Men*, an academic publication devoted to studies of the situation of black males. Naturally, when McCluskey and I worked on *Black Men Speaking,* we discussed this matter---who are black men in America?---and he, like Joe, made a remark that was memorable. What he said was this: since the beginning of this republic, and probably starting during the time of the colonies, black men have always been a "problem" for white men. In just Darwinian terms, the black man was the white man's competitor---for power, the means of survival, prestige and, of course, women. The power white men enjoyed during slavery meant, to put this bluntly, that they could pass their genetic information along to white women *and* rape black women with impunity.

Black males had to be prevented from any and all sexual dealings with white women. One of the most powerful tropes or mythologies in American pop culture is that of the black man during either the eras of segregation or slavery being hunted, killed, lynched or burned for making

overtures that were interpreted to be of a sexual nature toward a white female. (Ah, yes, remember Bigger Thomas's roof-top run across a building in Chicago after he kills Mary Dalton in *Native Son*?) The ground-breaking, classic film *Birth of a Nation* was popular for a reason---it depicted black men (actually white men in blackface) during Reconstruction rampaging and raping across the South until the "knights" of the KKK suppressed their "bestial," uncivilized behavior. Black women, then as now, obviously did *not* pose the same threat to white male power, and perhaps this is one reason why they have done so much better than black males in terms of integrating into American mainstream society---that is, gaining advanced academic degrees and jobs in greater numbers than black males, many of whom feel (or so August Wilson once told me) that passage through the white man's institutions is basically a form of cultural (and racial) indoctrination, and this is something August said young black males rejected. Indeed, many literary works by black women since the 1970s reinforced the popular---and I would add, *dominant*---image of black males being violent, animal-like, stupid, and dangerous.

Whole libraries have been written about the American practice of emasculating the black male. We remember how sexually neutered the film roles were in the 1950s for Sidney Poitier prior to his appearing in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" (and during the Black Exploitation film period of the 1970s that sexual neutering was reversed with a vengeance that did little to improve the imagery associated with black men). In the iconography of black men in America, we notice several carefully reiterated images. Black men are often granted by whites the status of being physically superior, as animals are. That meaning is dwelled upon in sports (football, basketball, boxing), and such a meaning leaves undisturbed and in place the racial propaganda of the intellectual as well as creative superiority of white men (except in an area like jazz or black music, where excellence is reluctantly acknowledged). That is a territory the majority of white males categorically refuse to relinquish. That of the mind. (By the way, I seldom talk about being a life-long martial artist because back in the 1990s, I noticed that white interviewers seemed way too interested in that dimension of my life---because it suggests violence---and not at all interested in my equally life-long passion for philosophy; I've always noticed with equal amusement how in the book world my Ph.D. in philosophy, represented by "Dr." before my name, is frequently dropped, as if the work required to earn a doctorate in a field dominated by white males for 2500 years never took place.)

I was recently conversing via email with film-maker Brian McDonald about how in popular culture we simply *never* see a black man who is a visual artist, who can *draw,* who has that natural talent (there are many such images of white males). Similarly, we seldom if ever see portrayed in the popular imagination black men who are geniuses---scientists, inventors, authoritative scholars. After six decades of living, and studying American culture, I understand full well that the very *idea* of a black man who is intellectually or artistically superior brings tremendous discomfort to the white racist mind, even to the liberal white mind. (Ishmael Reed once called this "liberal racism.") For fifteen years, August Wilson and I discussed this matter long into the night. He was a two-time Pulitzer prize-winning playwright, a man who dominated the American stage for two decades, but the incidents of disrespect he received and told me about were---well, endless. (He always noted each year how many plays by white playwrights became motion pictures while his ten plays, year after year for two decades, remained unadapted

for that medium.) And I, of course, had countless examples of my own since childhood to share with him.

This is what we live with, as black American males. (Just for the record, let me add that black females in the popular imagination today are granted moral superiority and professional competence, but, like black males, not unquestioned intellectual or artistic excellence.) We have lived with being demonized, and our talents and gifts ignored or denied, since the time of slavery. The evidence for this in the historical record is overwhelming so I don't need to repeat any of that in this post. And it is what Barack Obama must live with, too. He has an I.Q. of 147. (There are white people who will say that is because he had a white mother). For some white Americans, his very existence is threatening. And they feel they must try to understand and interpret him in terms of a 300-year-old mythology about black men. That's blunted a bit because he chose a black wife rather than a white one (*i.e.*, he chose not to compete with white men for their women). But---and this is quite amusing to me---columnist Peggy Noonan, who writes for *The Wall Street Journal*, has since Obama's election been returning again and again to her feeling that Americans don't "know" Obama, that he doesn't fit any previous cultural molds for a president. She's right. He doesn't. And lately, she and others have been chipping away (after the debt ceiling deal) at both his intelligence and competence. Americans don't know or understand a black man like Barack Obama. What he culturally represents---a black male who is brilliant, not bestial; eloquent not inarticulate; confident, comfortable in his own skin and even at times arrogant, not humble; cool and rational, not emotional or "angry"---is the annihilation of every cherished, bigoted notion about what black men are or should be in a Eurocentric culture. That image is well understood to be a threat to white supremacy. Many white Americans want him to fail so that the mythology of black male inferiority can be maintained.

Ethelbert, my friend, long ago I came to believe that this situation as I've described it for black American males will not change in our lifetimes. We can only do, one day at a time, what the ancestors we revere did, and what Obama seems to try to do: take care of business---the duties and responsibilities given to us in this life---step over racism as if it was a puddle at his feet, strive for personal and professional excellence, and take some small comfort in the fact that we, like the predecessors who inspire us, fought the good fight.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:31 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/nothing-but-president-barack-obama-and.html

Sunday, August 21, 2011

THE TEACHER CHARLES JOHNSON

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "You taught for over 30 years at the University of Washington. How did you change as a teacher during those years? What did you learn from teaching? What did you learn from your students? Was it difficult balancing teaching with the writing life?"

When I'm writing (or drawing), immersed in a fictional world that is unfolding before my eyes, I have to withdraw from the social world. The latter more or less ceases to exist for me. I become solitary. I go underground. The phone or doorbell ringing, the headlines of the day, stock market news, the weather and enveloping world of others and objects---all that recedes to the periphery of my consciousness. None of it moves from background to foreground unless it directly relates in some way to the story I'm trying to imagine with detail and precision. I can't "punch in" and write for just a few hours a day, then "punch out" as I did when I was a young journalist. I have to live and breathe the work all day long. When writing, I get silent. I don't want to talk because all my language is going onto the page. I don't shave. I forget to eat and live on coffee, walk around the house in a sweatshirt and sweat pants, unmindful of the passage of time, making notes to myself for dialogue I suddenly hear in my head. I sometimes sacrifice my daily workouts. Personal hygiene suffers. (I have no idea how my family tolerates me during times I'm intensely at work.) I deliberately get sloppy and embrace chaos so that whatever I'm working on can have all the order I'm capable of mustering. I'm slow to return phone calls or answer email or even look at the day's snail mail---and have to apologize to others when I finally complete the work and break radio silence. I just work quietly, steadily, sleep when my brain needs rebooting (and sometimes find the work entering into my dreams), then go right back to work as soon as I wake up. I lose sense of time's passage. In effect, I leave the real world behind because all my thought is directed toward the characters, their speech and actions and emotions; all my mental energy goes into writing and rewriting sentences in my head. All of it is devoted to problem solving. I'm living only for the "Aha!" moments of discovery and surprise as the story pushes ahead, one paragraph at a time.

I'm not the best person to be around when I'm working. I even doubt that I'm a "nice" person. For the sake of the characters, I have to sometimes let myself become emotionally raw and tender, irascible and "tetchy" and capable of saying and doing things (in my imagination) that I would never do or say in the real world. During these bouts of work I am not very attentive to others,

what they are doing or their needs. Intellectually and imaginatively, I have to put myself at risk, be ready to throw out everything I think I know or believe about what writing should be for the sake of discovery; I have to drop all the masks we use in the social world, be vulnerable if a character is vulnerable, rude if a character is rude, intolerant if a character is intolerant, wicked if that character is wicked, and let the story lead me where it wants to go as I prayerfully move from one page to the next. To be frank, I love these periods of total immersion in work when I almost completely forget the external world and live entirely in one conjured from the imagination. When these periods are done, I usually treat myself to a good meal.

But in order to teach for 33 years I had to be exactly the *opposite* of what I've just described above. I had to make a 180-degree shift. From Mr. Hyde to Dr. Jekyll. From Dionysus to Apollo. From Cain to Abel. Because students and their needs *always* come first, they and they alone---their desires, needs, etc.---were at the center of my consciousness during class time and when I was on campus. As a teacher, I learned how to talk in other people's sleep (as the old joke goes), to fill an hour with speech if the students themselves were laconic, and (sigh) to wear a suit if an occasion demanded that (and I've always hated wearing a suit and tying a little noose---oh, those are called ties---around my neck.) To know which books and authors to point an individual student toward to help him or her with their own writing and research.

I learned how to exist completely as a public self, by which I mean that I left my personal life and needs outside the classroom door. (I never stepped on campus unless I first practiced meditation or mantra. Usually mantra.) For an artist or writer teaching is an invaluable experience (at least for the first five years or so), because one has to learn how to explain to others matters that remain on the level of the intuitive and instinctive when one is creating. (And when creating one *has* to trust the intuition, the unconscious, the mysteries of the creative process itself.) You must learn how to explain what you and other writers do, *how* we do it, and make that doing something portable, *i.e.*, understandable to both the tortoises and the hares in the classroom. Teaching makes you learn patience. And how to explain the same thing in several different ways. And over and over again, if necessary. If a student sent me an email, I'd answer it immediately. I was greatly amused by a remark that my friend Nicholas Delbanco made when I visited his writing program at the University of Michigan. He said, "Ask him a twenty second question and you get a twenty minute answer." That's what three decades of teaching conditions an otherwise quiet and sometimes shy person to do. (But when I'm creating, my speech is spare, telegraphic, brief.)

Teaching required complete concentration on a roomful of others who were at first strangers then like new friends by the end of the second week, and an awareness of time so that a class would be well-paced, giving each student exactly the right amount of room or freedom to express himself or herself, knowing when to steer them back to the subject at hand if they started to wander, and provide structure that did not feel to the students to be in any way a constraint on their creativity. In other words, the classes I created had to have a clear form yet also be flexible based on individual student needs. Every student needed to feel respected, valued for his or her presence in the room. Don't let anyone tell you differently: Teaching was *work.* For me *and* my students. See my essay, "A Boot Camp For Creative Writing." I built my classes so that students couldn't hide; they had to work and be responsible to their professor and their peers in class. A

teacher needs to be relaxed and at the same time as focused as a dog gnawing a bone. As writer Jonathan Baumbach once said to me, it can be "emotionally exhausting."

After a class---especially one that ran for three hours---I never fooled myself into thinking I could easily go back to my own creative work, slipping effortlessly from such an outer-directed consciousness to an inner-directed one. The class, the students, thoughts of what I'd said or should have said (which I promised myself to say during the *next* class), ideas for how to make the next class even better, new handouts I wanted to photo-copy and distribute to the class, would swirl through my head for the rest of the evening. (Now that I think about it, some of the same creative energy that went into a story had to go also into teaching ten weeks of classes.) A nap that night might reboot my brain so that I could resume my own work during the wee hours before dawn. Or sometimes it would have to wait until the next day after a good night's sleep.

So that's how I'd whimsically answer today's question. And don't be fooled by the dualism I used with comparisons to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Cain and Abel, and Dionysus and Apollo. Every Buddhist knows those opposites are really "one."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:54 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/teacher-charles-johnson.html

Tuesday, August 23, 2011

THE FUTURE WE FACE: INTEGRATION AND MULTICULTURALISM

"He who reveals to us the meaning of our mysterious inner pilgrimage must be a stranger of another belief and another race." Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries.*

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "In an interview with Geffrey Michael Davis you mentioned that you were an integrationist. What does this term mean in 2011?
What are the challenges of integration and multiculturalism? How might these terms (concepts) differ? Some European leaders believe multiculturalism has failed? Do you agree with this? Might America fail too?"

There are several reasons why I have always been an opponent of separatism and a supporter of integration, and these reasons share in common the same kernel of truth: namely, our lives are all *already* integrated.

First, on the individual level, I believe Guy Murchie when he writes in *The Seven Mysteries of Life: An Exploration in Science and Philosophy*, that "There is no such thing as a pure race, nor any race of men on Earth that is unrelated to other races...In fact, no human being (of any race) can be less closely related to any other human than approximately fiftieth cousin, and most of us (no matter what color our neighbors) are a lot closer...The world's children are your children and mine, and not only spiritually but genetically as well...Your own ancestors, whoever you are, include not only some blacks, some Chinese and some Arabs, but all the blacks, Chinese, Arabs, Malays, Latins, Eskimos, and every other possible ancestor who lived on Earth around A.D. 700...It is virtually certain therefore that you are a direct descendent of Muhammad and every fertile predecessor of his, including Krishna, Confucius, Abraham, Buddha, Caesar, Ishmael and Judas Iscariot...And as cells metabolize and circulate in the body, so do bodies and their genes circulate throughout humankind, joining everyone to everyone else at least once in fifty generations, so that not only does the ancestry of each of us include all fertile humanity of fifty generations ago, but our descendents fifty years hence in turn will include every living being." Finally, Murchie says, "It is a great absurdity of the so-called race problem in the United States, for instance, that anyone who admits having any African or Hebrew ancestry is classed as a black or a Jew regardless of his or her appearance...When it gets to be realized someday that

there is no absolute criterion of race, that all of us literally have some white, some black, some yellow and some other kinds of heredity, the race issue may well fade away into the notebooks of anthropologists where it belongs."

Secondly, on the level of culture I believe that down through human history, the 100 million years we have existed as a humanoid species, our cultures have interpenetrated, borrowing from and enriching one another. As Murchie writes, "Even this book, written by an American, is made of paper invented by the Chinese and printed with ink evolved out of India and made from type developed largely by Germans using Roman symbols modified from Greeks who got their letter concepts from Phoenicians who had adapted them partly from Egyptian hieroglyphs."
And, thirdly, as a Buddhist, I believe in *pratitya samutpada* or "dependent origination," (expressed in the formulation, "this coming to be, that is; in the absence of this, that does not exist"), which tells us that nothing can arise independently, a condition of interconnectedness that Thich Nhat Hahn refers to as "inter-being."

As a concept, "multiculturalism" as I understand it (and I have lectured on this subject in Germany, Portugal and Indonesia) differs from the rendition of integration that I've offered in the preceding paragraphs. To be honest, when people generally use the term multiculturalism, it is in such a way that this concept is only vaguely defined and has soft and blurry edges. What people mean to say (I think) is that each culture has its integrity and in a democratic society different cultures should be able to exist together. Ideally, the aim of a multicultural educational curriculum would be to give students (or citizens) an appreciation for different cultural orientations.

In an informative post on *The Moderate Voice* (TMV) dated January 12, 2010, columnist Jerry K. Remmers addressed French President Nicolas Sarkozy's efforts to start a national dialogue on French identity. Remmers quotes Sarkozy as saying, "Nothing would be worse than denial" that the French and Europeans "feel that they are losing their identity." In France, Remmers points out, there are "three million Muslims who are essentially segregated in isolated conclaves and discouraged by the unions and a caste system to assimilate into the culture" after moving legally "to France from former French colonies after the arrival of Turks, Italians, Spaniards and eastern Europeans who were brought in after World War II to rebuild the nation."
"Sarkozy's government also banned girls from wearing burkas and head scarfs in schools," wrote Remmers. "The purpose was a direct charge at Muslims to do more to blend into French society." On the subject of immigration, the columnist quotes his brother Lee, who has lived for 30 years in a small town outside Paris, and observed that, "Many Muslims are making a statement. Their appearance labels them as different, not of the same culture of their hosts. It would be unfair to put all in the same pot, but I think a fairly large number, especially the young, are showing these external signs as a form of f---all of you. The Muslims do have cause for being angry since they are discriminated against. They tend to live in poor neighborhoods, many only 1 generation away from the boondocks of Algeria or Morocco, primitive customs, poorly educated, and high levels of unemployment. It is something of a vicious circle...Some of the older generation practice old country customs like slitting the throat of a goat or a lamb for their big religious meals (Muslim equivalent of Thanksgiving or Christmas). Butchering an animal in an apartment or in the communal garden does not endear them to the non-Muslims in the neighborhood."

Recently, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that multiculturalism had "failed" in Germany. Perhaps in response to this conclusion that stirred up such controversy and discussion, an August 21, 2011 post appeared on a site named "Facts about Germany." This post, which seems to be on a promotional site created or sanctioned by the German government, states that "Lots of immigrants work as unskilled laborers, as Germany recruited workers in particular for simple activities. Studies have revealed that immigrant families in Germany have difficulty climbing the social ladder or improving their economic situation. Nonetheless, over the past two decades progress has been made with regard to integration...Since 2006, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel has held an Integration Summit, which representatives of all social groups impacting on integration, including immigrant organizations, attend...It contains concrete goals as well as over 400 measures for government, business, and social players. This way a network of 'education patrons' is being built up; so far more than 5,000 have become involved, supporting children and young people from immigrant families in their education and vocational training. More than 500 companies and public institutions with over four million employees have joined 'Charter of Diversity'."

I leave it to the leaders and people of European countries to decide if multiculturalism has failed in their societies. I do not see evidence that efforts in support of cultural diversity have failed in America, despite the fact that we have the occasional lunatic (and rather isolated) "Christian" preacher burning the Koran as a publicity stunt, and Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer wrongheadedly signing a bill that targeted for criticism the Tucson school district's Mexican-American studies program. Clearly, there are numerous ways that we, as Americans, can improve in being more tolerant of difference and the cultural "Other" who, as Mircea Eliade stated, can assist us in better fathoming our inner as well as outer pilgrimage through this life.
(With thanks to educator/writer Sharyn Skeeter for her help with some of the research in this post.)

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:59 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/he-who-reveals-to-us-meaning-of-our.html

Thursday, August 25, 2011

JOHNSON ON AVOIDING THE SPOKESPERSON BOX. NO GUILT HERE.

"Nothing historical ever has just *one* meaning; meaning is ambiguous and is seen from an infinity of viewpoints. Everything is always *becoming* meaningful, and the task of the philosopher is to practice Socratic 'doubt' and 'irony,' to probe, to test, to challenge the meanings which have been given to history in order that what it *means* may become clear." From the preface to *In Praise of Philosophy.*

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "How does a successful black writer like yourself avoid becoming a spokesperson? When might your personal silence turn to guilt?"

A day or so after *Middle Passage* won the National Book Award 21 years ago, I was interviewed by a reporter who asked me if I was now going to become a "spokesman" for black America. She did not define what she meant by spokesman. Nor did she indicate which positions taken by black Americans I might be a spokesman *for.* In a vague, and typically uncritical way, she was assuming that---well, *naturally* a suddenly highly visible black person had to be a racial spokesperson, as so many writers had been during the era of segregation.

Black American writers today have to patiently (or maybe not so patiently) disabuse people of these antique assumptions and presuppositions. For example, I am a fiction writer and essayist, yes. But I'm a trained philosopher, too, one who finds inspiration as well as a bit of humor in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's beautiful lecture, *In Praise of Philosophy*, which was translated by John Wild and James M. Edie (Northwestern University Press, 1963). This address was delivered by Merleau-Ponty as his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France on January 15, 1953. In it he said:

"For it is useless to deny that philosophy limps...The serious man, if he exists, is the man of one thing only, to which he assents. But the most resolute philosophers always wish the contrary---to realize, but in destroying; to suppress, but also to conserve. Always, they have an afterthought...He does not take sides like the others, and in his assent something massive and carnal is lacking. He is not altogether a real being...There is much that is artificial in the portrait of the man of action whom we oppose to the philosopher. This man of action is himself not all of one piece. Hate is a virtue from behind. To obey with one's eyes closed is the beginning of

panic...One must be able to withdraw and gain distance in order to become truly engaged, which is, also, an engagement in the truth."

In their preface to this lecture, Wild and Edie expand upon Merleau-Ponty's meaning when they write, "The philosopher is a 'man of action' of a special kind; he joins movements, he writes manifestoes, he engages in political activity but only in so far as he remains 'free,' not only to subject his action to critical reflection but even to reject it altogether at the moment when it begins to go beyond its original intention...This is why the philosopher, in spite of his engagement, is always alone, never completely *of* a party or movement or an orthodoxy of any kind, though he may be *for* it while remaining outside it...For 'men of action' this kind of philosopher is an insupportable burden and a dangerous ally; they are rightly suspicious of him because he is never fully *with* them. For any orthodoxy the very fact that a man will think through its commands for himself, even though he obeys them, is a source of uneasiness; he always *could* rebel."

Obviously, during the course of my writing career I have taken stands of one kind or another, particularly in those areas where I have some expertise and feel I have *earned* the right to express an opinion. (On many, many subjects I do not feel I have earned that right.) But I've never seen black America in the post-Civil Rights period as being monolithic. I've never believed we are that simple. It's difficult for me to imagine speaking *for* so many millions of people. And besides, I believe individual black Americans are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves and do so all the time.

Also, I'm not someone who enjoys engaging in name-calling; or *Argumentum ad Hominen* (discrediting someone on a personal level to discredit his argument); or Special Pleading (presenting one's case without offering its drawbacks, faults, limitations or problems); or the Black-or-White Fallacy (the false either-or-dilemma); or Extension (exaggerating an opponent's argument to make it vulnerable); or Pettifogging; or Misuse of Authority (citing someone who is competent in one field but not an authority in the one under discussion); or Misuse of Emotional Words; or *Argumentum ad Misericordiam* (appeal to pity or sympathy); or *Argumentum ad Populum* (appeal to popular sentiment); or Misuse of the Mean (avoiding an extreme position by saying we must *always* compromise); or Begging the Question; or Poisoning the Well (If the source of evidence is discounted, then the evidence from that source becomes impaired in argument; a variation on *ad Hominem*); or Hypotheses Contrary to Fact; or Obfuscation; or Oversimplification; or Leading Questions; or *Tu Quoque* ("You do this yourself so you can't argue against me"); or The General Rule (rigorism; disregard of special circumstances) or *any* of the other fallacies that freshmen are supposed to learn in "Introduction to Logic 101."

So the philosopher/writer is a "man of action" of a peculiar kind, one who probably infuriates and frustrates others who never have "an afterthought" (as Socrates did) and are always certain that *their* interpretations of the world and positions are right and the *only* acceptable interpretations and positions---and will do violence to and/or insult those who do not accept their way of seeing things. (I rather suspect this is why we have gridlock in our government right now and some Tea Party supporters who will not modify their positions.) I guess I think too dialectically to "get with" that way of doing things. I think such people need a dose of epistemological humility. And as a follower of the Buddhist Dharma, I always feel it is

imperative that I "think through...commands" for myself and confirm them in the depths of my own experience.

Since I'm not silent (as today's question erroneously assumes) and do take positions and support the causes that make sense to me with time and energy and money, the question of "guilt" as it is raised here is simply unintelligible. And also a bit insulting. It is an accusation *disguised* as a question. And a very transparent, easily recognized and refuted accusation at that. This is not to imply that the interviewer, my dear friend E. Ethelbert Miller, intended accusation or insult. Oh, no. His spirit is too large for such pettiness. As large as all out doors. His questions are best described as "probes"---like his regular E-Notes---honestly delivered in the spirit of inquiry. But would I answer this question from anyone other than Ethelbert?

Probably not.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:54 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/08/johnson-on-avoiding-spokesperson-box-no.html