Sweden as Symbolic 'North' in African American Narratives of the Vietnam War: George Davis' *Coming Home* and Terry Whitmore's *Memphis-Nam-Sweden*

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Abstract. Representation of the Vietnam War by African American writers ranges from oral narratives to novels to drama to poetry. This vast corpus often explores the heroic quest within the context of the protagonist's rite of passage/identity quest. Because the Vietnam War era coincided with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in America, matters of identity, self-determination and liberation figure prominently in an exploration of the conundrum of fighting to defend a country that devalues the black soldier's humanity. This presentation focuses on George Davis' novel *Coming Home* and Terry Whitmore's oral narrative *Memphis-Nam-Sweden*, both of which use first-person narration to portray the psychological and emotional impact of the war. The characters spend an inordinate amount of time thinking – about why they are in Vietnam, about their tenuous relationships, about the larger implications of the war, about the consequences of their actions, about escape. Davis portrays the thought processes of a black Air Force officer who is so plagued by his complicity in the oppression of other peoples of color and by the loss of his identity as he ascends the ladder of success that he becomes a deserter from the military; whereas Whitmore chronicles his own personal odyssey from the southern United States to service in the Vietnam War, which he deserts. In both instances, asylum is found in Sweden, a neutral country that symbolizes humanitarianism. The escape route to freedom in Sweden is via a Japanese "underground railroad," a trope of escape and liberation that signifies upon the slave narrative in early African American literature.

Keywords. Vietnam War literature, African American narratives, *Memphis-Nam-Sweden*, rite of passage, *Coming Home*, tropes of escape and liberation, underground railroad, Sweden as symbol of humanitarianism.

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The air war in Southeast Asia must be the great metaphor for depersonalized evil of our age. It dehumanizes the killers.

-- Peter Rand, The New York Times

The essential tragedy of being Black and male is our inability, as men and as people of African descent, to define ourselves without the stereotypes the larger society imposes upon us.
-- Manning Marable, "The Black Male: Searching Beyond Stereotypes"

We can only know ourselves through our histories, but once we've discovered that history-defined self, we must transcend it.
-- Charles C. Verharen, "African-Centeredness and the New Black Millennium"

Coming Home, a novel by George Davis, and *Memphis-Nam-Sweden*, an oral narrative by Terry Whitmore, were both written in 1971, perhaps without either author having knowledge of the other's existence. Interestingly, however, both chronicle the desertion of a black American soldier from the Vietnam War to asylum in Sweden. In great part because of the use of language in service to character in both, the novel reads more like an oral narrative, and the oral narrative seems, at times, a novel. Both of these works signify upon, i.e., they "revoice," the nineteenth century slave narratives through imagery and symbolism of bondage, escape, and freedom. Like the narratives also, both books are replete with an "underground railroad" as a means of escape to freedom in the "North," in this instance symbolized by Sweden.

Of the many novels about the black soldier's experience in Vietnam, *Coming Home*[2] by George Davis is one of few that deals with the Air Force experience. Davis emphasizes the psychological ramifications of war by revealing the thought processes of the characters rather than focusing on battlefield carnage, a strategy which results, perhaps, from the air war being viewed from a different perspective than the ground war and therefore lending itself to a different kind of treatment. Because pilots were removed

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[2] All references are to the 1984 edition and will be indicated by parentheses in the text.

from the results of the damage they caused in the wake of bombing missions, they often dealt with their destructiveness in an abstract way.

Focusing on the tremendous, seemingly insurmountable, odds the black pilot faces because of institutionalized racism, *Coming Home* has been described as the first "naturalistic" black novel about the Vietnam War (Watkins xii) in that it explores the depths of the hero's *angst* as he fights against the "enemy" of racism in the upper ranks of the military while empathizing with the ostensible "enemy" he bombs in Vietnam. Unlike many mainstream authors who depict the battlefield carnage of the ground war through the eyes of infantrymen and artillerymen, Davis gives readers a bird's eye view from the perspective of the fighter pilot in the officer corps, depicting more the cerebral rather than the visceral aspects of battle.

Davis focuses on the mindset of the characters, through first-person narration, as a way of making the psychological and emotional impact of the war immediate and compelling. All the characters spend an inordinate amount of time thinking – about why they are in Vietnam, about their tenuous relationships with wives and girlfriends back home, about the larger implications of the war, about the consequences of their actions.[3] These soldiers spend very little time interacting with each other. Not unlike the black deserter Whitmore, who says in his dramatic autobiographical account *Memphis-Nam-Sweden* that "The Nam really forced me to think" (33), Davis portrays the thought processes of a black Air Force officer who is plagued by his complicity in the oppression

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[3] Similar to the movie, <u>Coming Home</u>, Davis' novel of the same title depicts soldiers questioning "the essential rightness of what they were forced to do" (Hillstrom and Hillstrom 73).

of other peoples of color and by the loss of his identity as he ascends the ladder of success in academia and the military.

Instead of the war being foregrounded, however, it serves as a backdrop to the main action at an air force base in Thailand from which the pilots fly bombing missions over North Vietnam. Perhaps Davis uses this literal "distancing" from the war as a basis for his metaphorical treatment of the distanced, rationalistic approach that was responsible not only for America's engagement in the Vietnam War but also for its continued assault, even after all signs pointed to its inability to win. Whatever the reason for his focus, Davis gives a poignant and memorable portrait of the psychological implications inherent in killing an unseen enemy by a black fighter pilot whose alienation, from himself and others, hinders his ability initially to take decisive action. Only after he realizes the extent of his complicity in the oppression of the Vietnamese is he led to an awareness of his own oppression as a black man in America. This awareness leads to his decision to become a deserter from the Vietnam War and flee to Sweden as he attempts to find wholeness of self and freedom from the binary thinking that has held him in psychological bondage.

After traveling the journey to self-awareness, the hero, LT Benjamin Williams (Ben), adopts an epistemological framework rooted in what Linda James Myers refers to as "diunital thinking" based on a cosmological view that "contains and transcends all opposites" (34) and that enables him to discover that he cannot know himself without an awareness of his being a part of a larger communal experience encompassing his ancestral past. The stream-of-consciousness technique that Davis uses in Coming Home,

one of the earliest fictional representations of the black experience in Vietnam, captures the psychic transformation that Ben undergoes on his heroic quest.

<u>War on Two Fronts: "In Country" and in "The World"</u>

The protagonist, Ben, is an Air Force officer stationed in Thailand. His hootchmates are two other officers, LT Childress, also black; and LT Stacy, who is white. Childress is a militant, flamboyant ladies' man. Ben, on the other hand, is more reticent, somewhat reclusive, and more prone to acceding to the status quo. Stacy prefers the company of Ben because he is more "acceptable" according to the standards of white middle-class society. Though Ben is married to Rose back home in Washington, DC, he and Childress (who is single), are consorting with the same Thai woman, Damg Tasuri, while on assignment in Thailand.

Having become disheartened about his contributing role in the slaughter of the Vietnamese to advance what he calls the "capitalistic," "imperialistic" motives of the American government, Ben decides to stop flying bombing missions over North Vietnam. Then he goes on R&R in Bangkok where he meets a black enlisted infantryman from the Army who gives him a view of the horror of the war from the ground. Following this consciousness-raising experience, Ben is brought face-to-face with the devastation and destruction of war from which he has been distanced as a pilot. The GI, having decided himself to desert the military, informs Ben of the Japanese "underground railroad" to Sweden for deserters. Ben follows suit.

The Plight of the Black Officer

Memory and Black Consciousness: Comparative World Views

While climbing the ladder of success, Ben is unaware of the existential

ramifications – the isolation and loneliness – of his stellar achievements in academia and

the military. Like the tortured hero in Richard Wright's naturalistic novels, Ben is

plagued with what Ronald Billingsley calls the "burden of the black hero (39)."

Consequently, he must strive to find meaning in his absurd existence and then "actively

forge an identity out of the agony it brings."   In what I call a "fictional oral narrative,"

Coming Home captures the psychological tension, or the "interiority," of those affected

by the Vietnam War: the soldiers "in Country" as well as their families and friends back

home in "the World." By entering the consciousness of his characters, Davis performs

what Toni Morrison calls an act of "rememory," which she explains "as a journey to a

site [of memory] to see what remains have been left behind and to reconstruct the world

that these remains imply" (qtd. in Samuels and Weems 97). .

Davis delves into the consciousness, or inner life, of each character to reveal how

the devastating effects of racism on the black male psyche, during and after the war,

engendered anomie, self-doubt, self-abnegation and identity crises. Consequently,

similar to Charles Johnson's Middle Passage and Morrison's Sula, Davis' Coming Home

offers a critique of binary thinking and its role in creating these psychological

conditions.[4] Using a tripartite structure in the novel, he traces the quest of the hero for

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[4] Daniel M. Scott, III, discusses Johnson's critique of binary thinking in Middle Passage through his use of "Platonic parable" and "Cartesian dualism . . . [which] simultaneously and contradictorily acknowledges its debt to preceding Western writing and defines itself against it" (645). See also Rita A.

self-knowledge through the following phases: ascendance, immersion, and transcendence. Since binary thinking delays the hero on his quest for wholeness, a discussion of it and its oppositional complement, diunital thinking, is in order.

<u>Binary Thinking</u>

The way a person thinks emanates from his worldview, that is, the way he makes "sense of [his] surroundings, of life, and of the universe" (Dona Richards 204). Linked to person's world view is his ability to survive. Ben finds hindrances to his quest for self-fulfillment and freedom because he becomes distanced from his own cultural worldview. Only after he is able to re-connect with it is he able to survive the devastating effects of racism during and following the Vietnam War. Linda James Myers defines the primary mode or reasoning of binary thinking as "dichotomous, yielding either/or conclusions," often resulting in we/they configurations such as "racism, sexism, and imperialism which breed fear, anxiety, insecurity and alienation" (9). Additionally, the "epistemological perspective" of binary opposition "assumes external knowledge [or that which we can perceive with the five senses rather than intuition] to be the basis of all knowledge" (11). A resulting byproduct is a mechanistic, fragmented approach to life that breeds alienation from the self and others.

This dichotomized view of reality, which bases reason on "rational" logic, is characterized by "dualities," among which are either/or bifurcations of mind/body, theory/practice and art/science, to name only a few. During his undergraduate years at Harvard, Ben has been influenced by binary thinking which, according to Marimba Ani,

Bergenholtz's account of Toni Morrison's interrogation of such binary constructions as black/white, good/evil, literal/metaphoric, etc. (91) to shed light on Sula's identity search.

is based on the philosophies of Plato and Descartes, Plato, all of whom propounded the "invention of an abstract language of descriptive science to replace a concrete language or oral memory" (31). Ben has unfortunately become distanced from orality while becoming influenced by "abstractionism," which is diametrically opposed to orality. Owing to binary opposition, this situation leads to Ben's self-alienation.

Also, binary thinking posits a dichotomy between the mind and the body, which established, according to Descartes, "the superiority of the intellect over the emotional self" as "spirit is separated from matter" (qtd. in Ani 32). Such dichotomization has the effect of sacrificing the "wholeness of personhood." Ben feels this self-alienation as he wonders about the destruction he and Childress have caused in Vietnam:

> Eighty more missions for me. Twenty gone. I wonder how many people I have killed. I never think about killing unless I consciously decide to think about it. Childress must never think about it. I must be more lost than he is, more self-divided, or maybe he's more self-divided than me. (6).

<u>Diunital Thinking</u>

On the other hand, diunital logic, or the union of opposites," encompasses "both/and" (Ani 13) rather than "either/or" conclusions. Consequently, it emphasizes an expressive mode that is "dialogic," such as call-and-response (Elbow 103). This Afrocentric worldview is called diunital because it assumes the "interrelatedness and interdependence of all things," yielding a worldview that is "holistic" (Myers 4) rather than fragmented. African philosophy (forming the basis of African American culture)

consequently holds that the mind and the spirit, or emotions, are not antagonistic, neither is one valued more highly than the other. Rather, the so-called opposites – intellect and emotion – are viewed as "complementary and necessary parts of a whole" (Ani 33). The aim in Afrocentric thought is to achieve "balance of complementary," seemingly "antagonistic," forces in humans (35), which John S. Mbiti refers to as "paradoxical complementarity" (32).

<div align="center">Dialectic versus Dialogic Expression</div>

Dialectic, a type of "authoritative discourse," according to Mikhail Bahktin (qtd. in Coleman 42), is associated with binary thinking. Furthermore, it is characterized by rhetorical language, not addressed to anyone in particular, in which "meanings, concepts and words interact with each other" (Elbow 72). The goal of dialectic discourse is to get language to "make meaning rather than display that meaning toward an effect (74)." Consequently, it is often laden with abstractions.   During his tenure at Harvard, Ben has been unduly influenced by such dialectical thought which has affected his self-image and causes him to remonstrate himself for periodic fragmentary lapses during his interior monologues. In Coming Home Davis counterpoises dialectic with dialogic expression. Emanating from black expressive culture, dialogic expression, on the other hand, is characterized by what Henry Louis Gates calls the "speakerly text" that privileges the vernacular, or "the black speaking voice" (698). Its communicative modality is call-and-response, which emphasizes synthesis of dualities.

Internal Call-and-Response "Dialogue"

      Davis, therefore, uses a dialectic/dialogic juxtaposition in Ben's interior monologues; or, stated another way, Ben has a call-and-response "dialogue" with himself. In one instance he ponders the deleterious effects of Eurocentric thinking on his psyche:

> I've gotten into a habit of hiding myself. I don't trust friendliness.
> Harvard started me to believing that a smile covers malevolence as often
> as it does . . . malevolence, damn. Ben, you're a pitiful poor nigger. (86)

This internal conversation reveals Ben's struggle to think in the vernacular from which he has become distanced. On more than one occasion he wrangles with the internal "war" between the expressive (Afrocentric/dialogic) and the discursive (Eurocentric/ dialectic) modalities. For instance, one particularly hot day in Thailand, Ben does not feel like taking a shower. His self-consciousness concerning his personal hygiene becomes apparent as he muses:

> I have sweated in bed . . . I feel the sweat – perspiration, a Harvard man
> would say – along the side of my body . . . so that my arms stick to my
> body when I press them against me. I feel myself funky. I feel like I am
> funky. As if funky." (7)

The last three sentences above – disjunct, abbreviated and fragmentary – convey the true nature of dialectic discourse, or "language as play." Ben's words "interact with each other" and are indicative of the "warring" tendencies of double-consciousness associated

with his early attempts to divest himself of dichotomous binary thinking and invest himself with the vernacular as he attempts to "re-member" his fragmented psyche. .

Double-Consciousness

This externalization of Ben's subconscious thoughts epitomizes what W. E. B. Du Bois calls the "peculiar sensation" of "double-consciousness," this sense of always "looking at oneself through the eyes of others . . . One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, *two thoughts*, two *unreconciled* strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body" (215; emphasis added). Consequently, Ben is at "war" not only with the Vietnamese and with his fellow white officers but also with himself.

External Call-and-Response "Dialogue"

Davis externalizes Ben's interior dialogue by setting up parallel universes with a call-and-response virtual dialogue between characters "in Country (Thailand/Vietnam)" and those in "the World (America)." In so doing, he allows the characters figuratively to "speak" to each other across space and time by having a topic discussed in Southeast Asia that reflects or responds to a conversation or an interior monologue by a girlfriend, wife, or friend back home in America. This style further supports the bifurcated, fragmented view of binary opposition.

Most of the action in Coming Home occurs on the periphery of Vietnam in Thailand. This marginal view of the war metaphorically underscores the theme of Ben's marginality as a black male in the officers' corps. Distance, as it relates to the space/place continuum, lends structure to Coming Home. The space between earth and sky where he flies his plane is a paradoxical "middle passage" for Ben. Place, on the

other hand, particularly as it relates to Thailand, becomes a compass point on the hero's cultural map as he searches for self-awareness.

Significantly, geographical places and place-names map out bearings in space and time. Therefore, rather than chapter numbers or titles, Davis divides the novel into major "parts" headed with names of places, or geographical locations – "in Country," i.e., "THAILAND;" and in "the World," "WASHINGTON, DC," and "SCHENECTADY FALLS, NY." Structurally, Coming Home approximates a flight pattern map. In his attempt to re-member, or connect with black cultural memory, Ben, like Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's heroic masterpiece Things Fall Apart, constructs "a cultural map" as he strives to harmonize his opposing selves."[5]

Within each of the parts of Coming Home are "sections" headed with the names of characters associated with Ben's memory of the Vietnam War who are "in Country": "Ben," "Childress," "Stacy," "LTC Milligan," "Captain Fitzhugh," "Bordreau," and "Damg." Dovetailing with the thoughts of the soldiers in Thailand are those of their counterparts back in the US, or the "the World": "Rose," "Calvin," "Edward," "Roxanne," and "Lionel." By using names as section headings, Davis focuses on the characters and their "conscious" thoughts rather than on their actions *per se*. Their interior monologues drive the action of the novel.

Instead of proceeding in a linear progression of time that is characteristic of a Eurocentric world view, however, the action proceeds in a cyclical fashion, as in African cosmology, with a confluence of past, present and future that depicts simultaneity of

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[5] See Ousseynou Traore's "Matrical Approaches to Things Fall Apart: A Poetics of Epic and Mythic Paradigms," for an excellent treatment of Achebe's Igbo classical epic of the African heroic quest.

existence. Action begins in Thailand and then goes back and forth from Washington,

DC, back to Thailand to Schenectady, NY, then back to Thailand, cyclically repeating

itself and ending in Washington, DC. In some instances action flashes back in time while

in other instances it flashes forward though being presented simultaneously. Stylistically,

Coming Home is "cinematic," which, in addition to the time reference, enables Davis to

achieve a certain "immediacy" (Rand 221) that places the reader in the action.

Consequently, like a movie camera, each part, or "scene" "cuts" from one geographical

location and from one person to the other.

<u>Three Stages of the Black Heroic Quest</u>

Coming Home has a tripartite structure that conforms to the framework for

analysis of the heroic quest in Afro-American narrative established by Robert Stepto in

his pioneering work *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. For the

black hero in Vietnam War fiction, knowledge of the racial memory and individualized

application are at the center of successfully dealing with the contradiction of double-

consciousness and survival. In his identity quest for wholeness, Ben goes through the

three stages that Stepto delineates as necessary for the black hero to experience on his

journey to self-realization: "ascendance," "immersion" and "transcendence." The

ascendant stage is one of isolation and indecision. The immersion stage is characterized

by community and camaraderie wherein the heroic quester finds direction in "ritual

grounds" within a "symbolic geography" (68). The final, or transcendent, stage consists

of a metaphysical space, "outside or time," offering hope for resolution of double-

consciousness, or a "harmonizing of the two selves" as Harris rightly observes (57). In

the transcendent stage race is not the primary issue. Instead, this is a symbolic space of racelessness and humanitarianism.

<p style="text-align:center;">Stage I: Ascendance</p>

In the ascendant stage, Ben seeks academic and military pursuits at Harvard and Air Force Officer's Candidate School, respectively. Armed with such stellar credentials, he is no ordinary fighter pilot. The approbation he has garnered would ordinarily result in a sense of self-worth for such accomplishments, particularly for a male of European descent in America. Being of African descent, however, Ben is fraught with anomie, ambivalence and isolation because the same self-affirming rewards, whether in the military or other field of endeavor, available to males of the majority population in America are not forthcoming for him.

Isolation

Ben experiences a sense of isolation in the ascendant stage because he lacks self-knowledge and the ability to "connect" in a meaningful way with others. For example, he remonstrates himself for being led like a lamb to the slaughter when he goes to fight in Vietnam:

> I should never have come to the war but I came like a sheep. During all
> my life in America I've been led to loving the wrongs things and hating
> the wrong things, like I was nothing more than a goddam sheep. (18)

Failure to question authority or sort out issues for himself leads Ben to view himself as prone to manipulation and hopelessness. Being in Thailand, on the periphery of war in Vietnam, with long periods of time away from battle affords him the opportunity to

reflect on his role in a conflict that he did not choose to be a part of but nevertheless went to serve simply because he was called to duty.

Ambivalence

Coming Home, therefore, "revoices and revises" the theme of double-consciousness in other novels about the black experience in Vietnam (e.g., *Captain Blackman, De Mojo Blues,* and *Tragic Magic*). Dual allegiances, to race and to country, characterize the black war hero's paradoxical quest for wholeness on the journey to selfhood. His survival on this quest is inextricably tied to his ability to immerse himself in black cultural ritual by connecting with black cultural memory. Leading such a marginalized existence, Ben is forced to seek avenues for communal engagement and interaction. However, before making this connection, he must first stop flying.

Flying as Bondage: Symbolic "Middle Passage"

Traditionally flying has mythic implications in world cultures. In black folklore, for instance, flying often signifies "freedom" an observation Susan Blake makes in her analysis of Ralph Ellison's short story "Flying Home (83). Ironically, however, for Ben in Davis' *Coming Home* flying represents "bondage" rather than freedom – bondage to binary thinking that is inimical to his belief in self-determination for peoples of color and to the development of a positive self-concept. Prior to his decision to discontinue flying, Ben is suspended in the middle distance, a symbolic "Middle Passage," as he flies his jet in the space between earth and sky. As one of the "defining moments" in African American culture and history, the Middle Passage functions as a space of "transformation" and "reconfiguration" where, as Pederson observes, "an African past

and the American future, one in danger of fading from memory, the other imposing its hegemonic will," were constantly in conflict over contested spheres of power (43). In *Coming Home* the sky represents the hegemonic will that Ben experiences in academia (Harvard) and the military (OCS). The earth, on the other hand, represents the vernacular, or that which will "ground" him in African American culture and provide a sense of identity.

In this symbolic middle passage, Ben has to decide whether to continue his aspirations in Eurocentric terms or to try to re-connect with black vernacular culture from which he has become alienated. In this respect, the middle distance becomes a space of "growing self-awareness" (48) similar to that which Charles Johnson presents allegorically in his novel *Middle Passage*.[6] As Ben thinks about the impersonal aspect of bombing people without seeing the result of his actions and about his complicity in the destruction. He then analogizes the experience to matriculation at Harvard:

> For me this war is like Harvard . . . Everything is abstract. This is like
>
> Harvard. The killers never see the killed. (17)

Ben, therefore, questions his own involvement in the war and empathizes with the Viet Cong, concluding: "Maybe I really want the VC to win" (18).

Liminality – Rite of Passage. Davis interrogates this middle distance, the space that Ben inhabits between cultural world views, in *Coming Home*. This liminal phase, or middle passage, serves for Ben as the beginning of a rite of passage that will not be

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[6] In Johnson's *Middle Passage* the African American protagonist, Rutherford Calhoun, is transformed from a philandering thief to a loving husband and family man after his encounter with his African ancestors on a slave ship.

completed until he stops flying and is grounded, literally and figuratively. Ultimately, his quest is to re-connect, or re-member, his divided selves; but that can occur only after the rite of passage and "immersion" in black vernacular culture.

Liminality – Tricksterism. While flying one of his bombing missions, Ben refuses to drop bombs on what his field officers have told him is a bridge on the main trail-line from North Vietnam to China. If they successfully destroy this bridge, then the Viet Cong will be unable to transport supplies and munitions from the Chinese. Since the time of Ben's refusal LTC Milligan has had him under investigation. Though Ben thinks the investigation has to do with his failure to drop the bombs, the authorities are trying to find out what his role is in the so-called Communist plot related to the leaflets they have found in Damg's bungalow.

Ben flies back to the airbase with a full load of bombs and tells his commanding officers that he did not drop the bombs because they "wouldn't toggle and they wouldn't jettison" (88). However, Stacy learns that Ben has concocted that story to mask the real reason. Admitting to Stacy that he made a "conscious" decision not to bomb the Vietnamese, Ben says:

> I did not see any troop concentration. It looked like a village to me and all
> I could imagine was millions of pellets of steel ricocheting through an
> unbunker [sic] village. I couldn't drop them . . . I lied and said they
> wouldn't toggle. (88)

In this middle passage Ben is the liminal trickster at the crossroads. Betwixt and between heaven and earth as he flies sorties over Vietnam, he has left his old status as an

indecisive young man in lock-step obedience to the dictates of mainstream society as he puts on the new mantle of a hero who consciously decides not to bomb innocent Vietnamese villagers.

Grounding as Freedom: Symbolic Cultural Connection

Ben's conscious decision not to drop the bombs reveals that he can no longer straddle the double-consciousness fence. The side of his consciousness that identifies him with mainstream America can accept the delusion that he is bombing the Vietnamese to "contain the spread of communism" among the South Vietnamese.   Resolved to carry out his act of defiance, he tells Stacy:

> I decided what I'm going to do. When I get back from Bangkok I'm not going to fly any more . . . I'm tired of helping white men keep their hold over the world. (88)

He has discovered the connection between killing other peoples of color and destroying himself. Consequently, the only way to "find" himself is to stop carrying out the wishes of the oppressor. Concomitantly with this action, Ben decides to embrace his own culture.

Stage II: Immersion

Connecting with Black Cultural Memory

Site of Memory – Community. The immersion stage of the black heroic quest is characterized by community and camaraderie. Prior to his decision to stop flying, Ben feels bereft of emotion, and he has a desire for those things that make him feel connected to his black heritage. Thailand, as a site for black cultural memory, serves as a symbolic

connection to his Southern roots in Georgia. While walking through the streets of

Bangkok with Papa San's daughter he muses:

> In some places the air is chilly, and in others we walk through warm air.
>
> Walking through ghosts we used to call it down South (89).

"Walking through ghosts" expresses the notion of harmony with nature and the

immanence of loved ones who provided guidance while alive but are now deceased .

The significance of Ben's experience of "walking through ghosts" in Thailand resides in

what the French historian Pierre Nora refers to as "*lieux de memoire*," or "sites of

memory," (qtd. in Fabre and O'Meally 7). Symbolically, therefore, Ben feels the

presence of ancestral spirits from his southern family, signaling an early indication of his

attempt to recapture the racial consciousness that he has lost on his ascendancy up the

ladder of success in Eurocentric culture.

During his sojourn in Thailand, Ben feels a sense of freedom from the

constrictions of his academic and military experiences. The tone of his interior

monologue is more mellifluous at this time than in previous instances in which his

thoughts are more abrupt, disjunct and fragmentary.   On Ben's cultural map, Stepto

would refer to this Southeast Asian country as "symbolic geography" wherein the hero

experiences "*genius loci*," or "spirit of place" which is a defining feature in cultural

immersion rituals (70). The "spirit" of black culture is here in Thailand. In this regard,

Thailand serves as "cultural referent" (Scott 31) on Ben's heroic quest.

Site of Memory: Ritual Ground. The black protagonist who is alienated not only

from himself but also from the black community and white society can only hope for

"reconciliation and self-identification" by establishing or restoring "a sense of cohesion" with his own race through some symbolic "member or custom" or experience (Doyle 165). Similar to the way in which Ben's experience in Thailand functions as a metaphysical *lieux de memoire* by evoking for the hero a sense of "community," the "Club" is a physical *lieux de memoire,* or "ritual ground," on the heroic quest. Ritual grounds are important in the hero's quest for self-fulfillment and wholeness because they provide a place where "race spirit or race message" can be expressed. This camaraderie occurs within the realm of what Victor Turner calls "communitas," which "characterize[s] relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition" (qtd. in Stepto 69). The other black GI's Ben encounters in the club atmosphere share his negative attitude toward the war and a common desire to leave it as they engage in black male bonding rituals, such as "the dap."

Eulogizing Space. Soul Alley, the place of the blues, is a marginalized space on the periphery of the Officers' Club and other facilities that are frequented most often by whites. Gaston Bachelard's term "eulogized space," or space which has the "potential to liberate" (qtd. in Baker, Workings 72), aptly describes Soul Alley. Immersing himself in this cultural milieu gives Ben the will, the courage and the fortitude to advance on his quest, or in the vernacular, to "keep on keepin' on." James Weldon Johnson, in *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, uses the "Club" symbolically as a space where "responses to oppressing social structures are made or in some measure sustained" by what Stepto calls "tribal bonds" (123). In a similar way, Davis uses the club in *Coming Home* as a eulogized space that conjures up conviviality, camaraderie and brotherhood.

Ben has missed this feeling of "community" in the officers' corps where he is in a small minority of black officers and where he has to wear the mask of upper-middle-class so-called "civility."

An obvious sign of Ben's transformation to self-awareness is the breaking down of boundaries between himself and the black enlisted men. As an officer he has been placed on a pedestal, of sorts. This status has given him privilege in the white world. However, much to his chagrin, it has also set up boundaries between himself and the majority of black men in the military, particularly in the Army where most blacks are in infantry and artillery units fighting in the muck and mire of the ground war. When Ben enters the African Star Club in his hometown of Washington, DC, he is "happy to be hearing familiar tones and familiar rhythms" (167). A young black GI named Wilton Smith sits at his table, and he tells Ben "No, man . . . It's a whole lot different war down in the mud" (168). In his own self-effacing way, Ben attempts to put himself on the same level with Smith when he says, "I'm quitting flying anyway" (169). Smith, who has already been AWOL for twenty-one days, reveals to Ben that he cannot take the war anymore and that he is going to desert to Sweden. Consequently, Smith says he will choose going into exile in Sweden over going to prison, which, for a black man, means "death."

> "I shot a kid, man. I shot a little Vietnamese kid right in the back, man. The night before I left the 'Nam. I was on patrol in a village near Thuc Yen and this little kid came up to me in an alley and asked me did I want a shoeshine. And sometimes they have bombs in those little boxes. So I

told him to set his box down and back off, and he turned and ran, and I

shot him right in the back."

His voice cracks and he is silent for a moment.

   "Then I went up and looked in this little box and do you know what I

found? . . . Shoe polish, man. Not a goddam thing but shoe polish. I went

back to the base and packed my shit and left. I ain't never gon' kill no

more innocent people, man. And I ain't going to no jail either. I'm still

young." (169)

Acting out of paranoia and fear, Smith has committed an act so inhumane and

reprehensible that his conscience will not let him rest. The military has reduced him to

the status of a child killer, all in the name of stamping out "Communism" and bringing

"democracy" to Southeast Asia. Through this soldier, Ben is brought face-to-face with

the ground war in a way that he never would have otherwise. As a high-flying pilot

oblivious to the carnage being caused on the ground during the war, he descends to

knowledge and awareness. Ben's experience is not unlike that of Janie, Zora Neale

Hurston's heroine in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who descends to a prototypical

"bottom" when she goes "on de muck," a place of self-discovery—both a physical and a

symbolic setting where "the black hero repeatedly accomplishes the feat of self-

knowledge," as Jerome Thornton observes (262). Downward is the place where the black

hero finds his identity.

Smith then informs Ben of a Japanese underground network[7] that is mainly run by Buddhists who can help him escape the country by going through Japan, up to Russia, and then over to Sweden into exile. Smith's demeanor and passion are such that the horror of the ground war becomes real and tangible to Ben, and for the first time he begins to ponder the two alternatives that black men have historically had a choice between in impossible situations: "catching trains," (i.e., hitting the road), or waiting around and being imprisoned. The latter is not a viable choice.

As a result, Ben begins to realize the meaning of the African proverb: "I am because we are," i.e., interdependence rather than individuality is primary in making oneself whole. Terry Whitmore reveals in his autobiography, *Memphis-Nam-Sweden*, that when he decided to desert the military he found himself having to make a decision: "to say *no* to Sam and *no* to America and its jails . . . [i.e.] *no* to everything I know, my family, my block, everybody – have to start out all over again" (120). After Ben ponders his choices, like Whitmore, he decides to desert the military and go AWOL to Sweden. Though desertion carries an amount of uncertainty, he is willing to take that chance in the interest of finding himself and freedom (199). According to Whitmore, Sweden offered the chance to "start to live my life" (200). It represents the same for Ben. Similar to Ellison's Invisible Man, Ben had to "discard his old identities and illusions" (Wright 158) before he could have a voice in determining his own destiny. His self-awareness could not come until then.

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[7] Such an organization actually existed, according to Terry Whitmore in his autobiography, *Memphis-Nam-Sweden*, and it was instrumental in helping him to escape to Sweden. Known as Beheiren, this group consisted of "pacifists" whose avowed aim was to "try very hard to help men who do not want to kill" (133).

Stage III: Transcendence

Before Ben can "find" himself, he must divest himself of the binary, dualistic world view that has hampered his self-awareness. He must adopt a different way of seeing the world and his place in it. Traore's summation of Okonkwo's predicament in *Things Fall Apart* can also apply to Ben's: "When in an environment that is 'foreign' to your world view, you are not allowed to choose 'your own space'" ("Quarrel"). Having one's own "space" is liberatory, as it was for the enslaved Linda Brent, who purposely "confined" herself to a "cramped attic space" over a period of years so that she could "achieve freedom" (Washington "Meditations" 12). Ben, consequently, is liberated when he occupies the symbolic space that he "consciously" chooses in Sweden.

To discover his identity, Ben must transcend both the dichotomous, binary vision of Western civilization and the harmonizing, diunital paradoxes of African civilization by seeking a humanitarian solution that mediates between these two world views. He accomplishes this task by going AWOL to Sweden, a "neutral" country that symbolizes "humanitarianism" (Whitmore 169), or what the Swedes call "humanitarian asylum." Whitmore's vernacular definition of asylum is that the Swedes will

> allow a person to live at peace in Sweden if his own country is forcing him
> to kill other human beings in war which he believes is immoral, unjust,
> illegal – in other words, if there is no goddam good reason for all the
> killing he refuses to do. (169)

After several consciousness-raising experiences, Ben decides that the war is immoral and unjust. Consequently, his refusal to drop any more bombs and his decision to discontinue

flying bombing missions coincide with the aims of the Swedes. These efforts culminate in Ben's decision to desert the Air Force and to go into exile in Sweden.

Transcendence, the final stage of the hero's quest for wholeness and freedom, is a "metaphysical space," outside of time and place. In that respect, it is a "spiritual" goal. Because it offers hope for the resolution of double-consciousness, transcendence allows unification of the human spirit. Stepto refers to this phase of the black heroic quest as the "epiloguing space," similar to the underground hole[8] in which the Invisible Man in Ellison's novel finds himself, where the hero becomes a "group-conscious" as well as a "self-conscious" person (169). Ben's experiences with the black enlisted men in the Lance-A-Lot Club and the African Star Club enable him to embrace group consciousness, which he now realizes is a necessary complement to self-consciousness.

Du Bois provides an apt description of the final, transcendent, stage of Ben's quest when he says there is a constant "longing" of the black male to "attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double-self into a better and truer self" (215). In this phase of the black hero's journey, race is not the primary issue, as it has been in the ascendant and immersion phases. Rather, this is a symbolic space of racelessness where Ben seeks to transcend the boundaries that race had set for him in America and in Vietnam to be treated as a human being.[9]

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[8] Baker refers to this space as the "black (*w)hole*," or "the domain of *Wholeness*, as achieved relationality of black community in which desire recollects experience and sends it forth as blues." Furthermore, adroitly signifyin(g) on its Eurocentric negative connotations Baker concludes: "[T]o be Black and *(W)hole* is to escape incarcerating restraints of a white world (that is a *black hole*)" (*Blues* 151-2).

[9] Black literary and musical artists such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Paul Robeson left the U.S. for Europe where they were better received and respected as artists and as human beings.

Ben's fate in Sweden, as it was for Whitmore when he first defected, is uncertain. Approached by the Japanese Underground group, Beheiren, after recuperating from war injuries in Japan, Whitmore responded in his usual tragicomedic way when offered the opportunity to desert to Sweden: Sweden. Where's that? I don't know. The cat says Sweden, so we go to Sweden. Where else? Sweden sure as hell must be better than the States or Nam as far as I'm concerned, so why *not* Sweden? (200).

Similar to that of Whitmore, Ben's external freedom scarcely compares with the internal freedom that he discovers through self-awareness. From the outset he has been troubled about his role in senseless killings and the destruction of Vietnamese villages. The reason does not occur to him until he is well on his way in his heroic quest for manhood because as a fighter pilot he has been removed from the consequences of his destructive acts. Not until he is literally and figuratively grounded does the connection between his identity as a black man and his role as a soldier fighting a war for America become clear. He opts to be a self-conscious black "man" rather than a soldier being led to slaughter like a "sheep."

Ben becomes aware of the "world of possibility" that awaits a hero on the journey to self-discovery, not unlike Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* who "pulls in the horizon and drapes it over her shoulder" (Washington 148) . By dividing the novel into sections according to geographical location, Davis reveals that identity, or self-awareness, is a "journey" that Ben has not yet completed. The journey for Ben, ironically, begins in Thailand. It continues during his exile in the "symbolic topography" of Sweden, away from America, which has been the source of his *angst* as a black man

and has contributed to his dehumanization. Consequently, he must not return to America

if he desires to discover true humanism.[10] Where is "home" for the hero in *Coming*

Home? It is the ultimate destination of the hero on his journey to self-knowledge, where

he can re-member his divided consciousness, through cultural memory, without the

burden of the confining social structures or the institutionalized racism which plagues

military life in Southeast Asia and civilian life in America.

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[10] I use *humanism* here, not in the manner of "classical humanism," but rather in the sense in which Phanuel A. Egejuru applies it to the character of the noted African scholar, Chinua Achebe: "one who appreciates his fellow human beings and does everything possible to uphold and promote their humanity" (38).

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