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CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND ITS REVERBERATIONS IN BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL'S *YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE*

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Novelist Bebe Moore Campbell was only five when Emmett Till was murdered on August 28, 1955. But in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (1992) she seeks to answer the question that black teenagers in Mississippi, and indeed many people from all over the United States, asked after seeing the photograph of Till's mutilated and bloated body: "How could they do that to him? He's only a boy" (Dittmer, 58). Campbell embraces the view that Lillian Smith expressed in *Killers of the Dream* (1949): "The warped, distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child also. Each is on a different side of the frame but each is pinioned there" (30–31). Campbell's decision to open her novel with the white woman's perspective and then move on to the black youth's consciousness signals her determination to name all the sources of pain and powerlessness that led to Till's murder. *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* explores the consequences of being psychically abused during childhood, whether because of race or class or gender or color, and the possibilities for reconciliation between blacks and whites, between men and women, and across class lines. In a departure from the earlier literary chroniclers of Emmett Till's story, Campbell begins her novel with his murder but then writes hope into the aftermath. To accomplish this feat she widens her focus from Mississippi to Chicago and fast-forwards her narrative into the present.

In the 1991 dedication ceremony in which Chicago renamed sections of Seventy-first Avenue in honor of Emmett Till, Michael Eric Dyson explained the significance of the occasion: "By choosing to honor the memory of Emmett Till, we make a covenant with our past to own its pain as our responsibility and to forgive its failures only if the wisdom we derive from their doing is made a conscious part of our present pacts of racial peace" (267). In *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, Campbell similarly encourages her readers "to own" the pain of the past. Like other recent novelists who have interpreted the civil rights struggle,

she takes as her task one that literary theorist Shoshana Felman describes in her analysis of Camus's *The Plague:* "to demolish the deceptive image of history as an *abstraction* (as an ideological and/or statistical, administrative picture in which death becomes invisible) by *bearing witness to the body.*" Felman argues that "the specific task of the literary testimony is, in other words, to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capability of perceiving history—what is happening to others—*in one's own body,* with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate physical involvement" (108). Campbell juxtaposes sharply contradictory sensory experiences in an attempt to shock readers into "immediate physical involvement." She also uses unexpected humiliation and violence to disrupt her plot, thereby hoping to re-create the shock of the senseless tragedies that occurred during the civil rights era and that echo in the American gun culture that thrives today.

In her attempt to allow readers to become "belated witnesses" to Emmett Till's murder, Campbell gives us access to the consciousness of her Till character, Armstrong Todd, on the night that a white man, Floyd Cox, murders him. As much as words allow, we feel the heat of that August night when the white men drive up to Armstrong's grandmother's house, we hear Armstrong's futile attempt to reason with the Cox brothers, and we experience at least some of the shock of his pain as they begin to kick him. We bear witness to his mental struggle as he strains to recall the self-effacing tactics his mother hastily taught him for dealing with southern white people, and we see the futility of his attempt to placate his attackers with what little money he has in his pockets. In *The Body in Pain,* Elaine Scarry points out that writers find it easier to describe psychological than physical pain, and she speculates about the reasons: "Contemporary philosophers have habituated us to the recognition that our interior states of consciousness are regularly accompanied by objects in the external world, that we do not simply 'have feelings' but have feelings *for* somebody or something, that love is love of *x,* fear is fear of *y,* ambivalence is ambivalence about *z* . . . This list and its implicit affirmation would, however, be suddenly interrupted when, moving through the human interior, one at last reached physical pain, for physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content" (5). And yet in the several pages in which Campbell describes the "felt-characteristics" of Armstrong's physical pain that fateful night, she makes his body a "referent," thereby attempting to render Emmett Till's pain "knowable" to her readers.[1]

Campbell represents the kaleidoscopic last minutes of Armstrong's life by alternating descriptions of his body's realization that he is going to die (urine runs down his leg, his bowels release) with his imagination's desperate struggle to stay alive. Armstrong first imagines that he has not seen a gun, and later when he knows that he has, he hopes illogically that his father, who is in Chicago, will rescue him:

> Armstrong heard the click of the trigger, and he took a deep breath. He felt his bowels ripping through him, then a soft, warm mushiness in his pants. He heard an explosion; fire seared the inside of his chest. His head slammed into the dirt. Nearby, a tired dog began panting, its ragged breathing engulfing him. If only he could find the hound, he could maybe lean against its soft, warm fur, raise himself up a little. But he couldn't see anything. He pictured his father then, as the moans of pain dribbled from his lips: his father, tall and strong, coming toward him bathed in white light, his arms like steel bands, his hands stretched out for the boy to grab. As he heard the retreating footsteps in the air around him, he thought: *My daddy could whip all of you.*[2]

Campbell's verisimilitude here and elsewhere parallels Mamie Till Bradley's decision to leave the casket open at her son's funeral so that the world would be forced to confront the terrible reality of his mutilated body, bloated beyond recognition. Throughout the novel, Campbell's use of metaphors of physical pain to convey searing psychological hurt follows Scarry's contention that often "a state of consciousness other than pain will, if deprived of its object, begin to approach the neighborhood of physical pain" (13). Whenever Armstrong's father, Wydell, is mentioned, Armstrong experiences the loss of his father's presence (his parents are separated) as if his body were in pain. When a black man he meets in Mississippi refers to Wydell as a "fool," Armstrong feels "as though someone was ripping a bandage off his bleeding sore" (12). When his grandmother criticizes Wydell as "trifling" and refers ironically to his drinking as "his job," Armstrong feels like he is "being punched in the stomach" (38–39). Later, Campbell similarly describes Wydell's despair when thinking about his own father's drunkenness and violence as a physical hurt: "he could feel the searing pain in his chest, as if his heart was on fire" (134). Such unexpected metaphors of bodily pain to describe psychological pain are surely Campbell's attempt to communicate the deep hurt of a father's absence to readers who have never experienced such a

loss. Near the end of the novel, when Wydell is listening to the blues, he feels the "pain in the old man's voice": "There was grieving in his song, a mourning that was deep and profound. And when the old man was singing, it was as though his hurt entered Wydell, because how else could he explain the blues inside him, how else could he interpret his sudden tears" (361). In bearing witness to the body through her intensely metaphoric prose, Campbell attempts to create a visceral experience for her readers.

When Armstrong looks into the face of his white murderer, he wonders, "Where did all that hatred come from?" (43). This is the question that leads Bebe Moore Campbell to imagine the childhoods of all those directly involved in the racially motivated murder of an innocent teenage boy. To answer the question, she probes the psyches and allows readers to enter the consciousnesses of Armstrong Todd, his murderer Floyd Cox, Floyd's wife Lily, and Jake McKenzie, the dark-skinned black man who works in Floyd's pool hall, where Armstrong and Lily encounter each other. Given the race, gender, class, and color hierarchies involved, these four characters make up a volatile quartet. Campbell suggests that insecurity, envy, and a desire for human agency motivate all four people. She represents their actions and inactions as stemming from childhood wounds that affect adult behavior. Because these wounds have not healed, they have led to what cultural critic bell hooks terms "self-sabotage."[3] As she explores psychological causes for behavior, Campbell also makes clear their link to social issues and the dysfunction of a racially segregated society. At one time or another, each of these characters daydreams about leaving Mississippi.

But Campbell is also interested in current social problems: illiteracy, absent fathers, the culture of welfare, unemployment, and drug and alcohol abuse. The ways in which she changes some of the facts of the Till incident highlight these concerns. Whereas Emmett Till's father was killed in World War II, Armstrong's father is very much alive in the novel so that Campbell can explore the effect of a living father's absence on his children. She gives Till a much younger brother in order to examine the effects of gang culture on black families. Till's killer, Roy Bryant, and his wife Carolyn had two sons, but Campbell gives Floyd and Lily Cox a son and a daughter in order to use the feminist movement's lessons about independence and female self-assertion to benefit Doreen Cox and eventually to help Lily. Campbell makes Floyd and his accomplice full brothers, instead of half-brothers, so that she can investigate the effect a parent has on two very different children when he plays favorites and inculcates one narrow notion of

masculinity. Finally, while local black people in Money suspected that two black men, whom they termed "white folks' niggers," assisted in Emmett Till's abduction, Campbell complicates the possible motivation for such unlikely collusion and includes not only economic dependency on whites but also revenge for skin color bias within the black community.[4]

Using flashbacks to explain her characters' personalities and motivations, Campbell proposes that seemingly inexplicable human behavior can be understood and that apparently transparent actions are more complex than they seem. The behavior of Jake McKenzie, the black man who betrays Armstrong by tattling to the Cox men about Armstrong's brief encounter with Lily, seems especially paradoxical, but Campbell uses a flashback to Jake's childhood as insight. When Jake was growing up, lighter-skinned black children taunted him about his physical appearance, calling "Black Jake. Ugly as a snake!" (12). As a result, Jake takes an instant dislike to Armstrong Todd because he is light-skinned and handsome and because he lives in the very city where Jake has always dreamed of playing in jazz clubs. To punish Armstrong for being the person that he can never be, Jake makes disparaging remarks about Chicago, and when Armstrong responds by calling him "ugly," the word reverberates with the pain of Jake's childhood. Jake retaliates by telling Floyd that Armstrong has flirted with his wife. Thus, Jake ironically uses the racist white power structure, which he hates, against Armstrong, just as lighter-skinned black children used a white standard of beauty against him. Jake does not understand his envy of Armstrong and so considers their tense encounter Armstrong's fault rather than in any way his own. Uncomfortable with Armstrong's self-confidence and sophistication and angered by the familiar old retort, Jake denigrates the very qualities that he envies, saying Armstrong is "trying to be white" (78). When Jake hears of Armstrong's death, he represses his indirect role in the murder by mentally chastising Armstrong for disregarding the racist conventions that he himself detests, "Yella bastard shoulda kept his mouth shut" (80). By implicating Jake as an accessory to Armstrong's murder, Campbell suggests that racism's victims can become its unwitting perpetrators.

In a similarly complex way, Campbell examines Armstrong's motivations for speaking to a white woman in the Deep South, representing the action not simply as an impetuous boyish response to a dare but as a conscious refusal to let southern racial conventions define him. Campbell's Till figure is keenly aware of how subservient his country cousins are to white people, and he does not

want to be seen in the same light, by either the black "*country fools*" (11) with whom he plays pool or the "poor-white-trash" (13) for whom they work: "He deliberately made his voice loud and condescending, so that everyone understood that he was a Chicago boy, born and bred, city slick and so cool that nobody better not mess with him" (11). Jake's disrespectful comment about Armstrong's father, whom Armstrong rarely sees, only increases Armstrong's determination to set himself apart from other black people so as not to be seen as a stereotypical fatherless black boy. To the uncomprehending black men in the pool hall, he shows off the French phrases he learned from his father, a World War II veteran: "*Voulez-vous danser avec moi ce soir? Vous êtes belle, mademoiselle*" (12). Nonsensical in this context, they simply suggest bravado. But when Armstrong unwittingly repeats the phrases in front of a white woman, they produce a different effect, although it is significant that Lily does not comprehend his French and so does not sense any provocation in his remarks. With their connotation of intimacy, however, these phrases suggest to readers just how daring Armstrong's subsequent eye contact and exchange of laughter with Lily is, transforming their chance encounter into an almost deliberate flirtation, which is exactly what Floyd Cox will accuse him of. That Campbell portrays the encounter as accidental only amplifies readers' shock at its outcome.

To establish the link between southern race and gender oppression, Campbell represents Lily, whose dreams have died in her stifling marriage, as pleased by Armstrong's attention. Lily unexpectedly experiences a powerful moment of sexual attractiveness and social daring because her encounter with Armstrong functions as a double defiance: first, of gender conventions (she has disobeyed her husband's order to stay in their truck) and, second, of southern racial conventions (she has had an encounter with a black man). While the stolen time exhilarates Lily, it threatens her husband's control over her body and focuses readers' attention on how inextricably southern white womanhood was linked to racial attitudes in the Jim Crow South. Immediately before Lily's encounter with Armstrong, Campbell depicts her as eager for sex with her husband who has been away on a job but repressed by Floyd's beliefs that only whores initiate intercourse. Campbell portrays Lily as a woman trapped—horrified by Floyd's plan to retaliate against Armstrong but economically dependent on him. This feeling of powerlessness inhibits Lily from acting on her better instincts and telling the truth about her encounter with Armstrong. Lily's failure to prevent his murder ends her budding relationship with Ida Long, a black woman she

has encountered in the train station, a place that both women frequent in order to fantasize about escaping their circumscribed lives. Campbell suggests that the only way Lily can live with Floyd's emotional and physical brutality is to embrace a narrative of his heroism in protecting her from the proverbial "black male beast," even if he is actually a harmless teenage boy. So Lily consoles herself by thinking, "I've got a man who'll kill for me" (64, 150). As with Jake, Campbell uses Lily's childhood to explain her convoluted thinking about sex and sin and race. Lily is haunted by memories of an uncle who sexually abused her. Campbell flashes back to these awful memories whenever Lily doubts herself in the present, such as when she wonders whether her sexual desires for her husband are normal and whether the chance incident with Armstrong was her fault.

Finally, Campbell probes the psyche of Armstrong's murderer, once more following a trail of psychic pain back to childhood. She links Floyd's need to control his wife and his decision to kill Armstrong not only to southern society's sexist and racist ideology but also to a deep uncertainty about his own manhood, caused by a feeling of inferiority to his macho older brother and to a fear that his father loves John Earl more because his brother is more masculine than he is. Floyd's insecurities manifest themselves in violent behaviors toward those he avowedly loves when they disappoint him, like Lily and his son, and toward those his society has taught him to hate, like Armstrong. Floyd's father first questioned his son's manhood during his first hunting trip. Only nine and afraid of blood and guns, Floyd throws up when he sees the wounded "deer, still alive, bleeding and twitching, a terrible, hysterical lowing coming from its half-opened mouth." His father's callous gender-inflected response—"I didn't know I was taking a girl hunting" (121)—influences Floyd's choices for the rest of his life because he is forever trying to win his father's love by proving his own manhood. Floyd is always worried about his father's reactions and ever conscious of how his brother would act. As Campbell makes clear through Floyd's thoughts, an attempt to be appropriately masculine governs Floyd's reaction to Lily's encounter with Armstrong. The southern racial code his father has instilled in him requires that he confront Armstrong in order to affirm his masculinity. Only when Floyd has pulled the trigger that he could not pull at age nine does he win his father's qualified approval: "Well, you might can't fix everything that needs fixing, but damned if you can't make some things right." The reassurance that Floyd gains from finally "knowing that his father, at last, was satisfied with him" (43) is short-lived because his father blames him when all three Cox men

are arrested for Armstrong's murder. Then the cycle of violence, in which an abused person becomes an abuser, begins all over again as Floyd discharges his emotional pain onto Lily, who absorbs his blows because of her own insecurities. For Campbell, the psychological wounds that Floyd experienced growing up combine with southern society's racism to provide the answer to Armstrong's question: "Where did all that hatred come from?"

There is a fifth significant player in Campbell's racial drama, although he is a passive onlooker. Her portrait of the closet liberal Clayton Pinochet answers a corollary question: Why didn't liberal white southerners do anything to stop the violence? After the not-guilty verdict that freed Emmett Till's murderers, a white minister from Atlanta, Joe Rabun, wrote to the *Atlanta Constitution*, expressing his shame and responsibility as a white man for Till's murder and the biased verdict that followed: "As long as we remain silent and inactive before the corruption of justice, all of us are criminal. When we see anyone deprived of his rights as an equal citizen in these United States, and make no objection, our own rights, lives and liberty are in jeopardy" (151–52). Clayton acts as such a "silent and inactive" witness to Armstrong's senseless murder because he does not do all that he could have done when Armstrong tells him he has gotten into "some trouble" with Floyd Cox. Rather than intercede, Clayton takes the easy way out, deciding to pay for Armstrong's college education to make amends for his cowardice: "He liked the grandness of the notion, and for a moment his high-minded intentions took hold of him and blotted out his nagging guilt. He didn't need to go to Floyd Cox; that wasn't his duty, he reminded himself" (25). Although after the murder, Clayton, a reporter, works behind the scenes to alert northern reporters, he has never told his neighbors what he really thinks about their prejudice or worked openly for racial justice or even contemplated marrying his long-time black mistress Marguerite. He is unhappy because he does not have the courage to defy his rich father or to face the disapproval of his neighbors. Campbell depicts Clayton as a complex product of his upbringing. He is in love with Marguerite, who reminds him of the black woman who raised him, but he is unable to give up his inheritance and the wealth to which he has become accustomed in order to marry her. As a result he loses her. The son of the richest white man in town, Clayton does have a social conscience, but the racial guilt money that he doles out behind the scenes is his father's, the product of cheap labor by poor blacks and poor whites.

Campbell's decision to intersperse scenes set in Chicago with those in Mississippi, especially in the second half of the novel, allows her to examine African

American migration from the Jim Crow South. Perhaps unexpectedly for some readers, Campbell draws a very clear line from old southern slave quarters to newer northern housing projects,[5] from sharecropping in the rural South at the beginning of the twentieth century to the disappearance of good factory jobs in the urban North at century's end, from early hopes of a promised land up North to contemporary despair in urban ghettos. The two settings remind readers that blacks who migrated North still had deep roots in the South (family ties, cooking, the blues, jazz), but they also suggest that, even today and well outside the South, African Americans are not out of the reach of what Campbell believes are the twin legacies of slavery and segregation: white racism and the potential for black "overidentification with being a victim," which can lead to feelings of powerlessness.[6] Campbell illustrates her point by giving Wydell and his cousin Lionel menial jobs in the same Chicago factory, which discriminates against black employees in the 1930s and 1940s. While Wydell becomes discouraged and turns to alcohol, Lionel saves his money, buys a small shoe repair business, expands to open a retail store, and sends his sons to college. In the first half of the novel, Campbell depicts many of her characters, white and black, as victims to one extent or another, but in the second half she pays special attention to those characters who rise above their unfortunate, painful childhoods. However, even as she champions constructive resistance to hardship, she does not downplay or obscure the effects of individual or institutional racism (or sexism or colorism or class elitism, for that matter).

After Floyd's trial, chapters alternate between the Todds in Chicago, struggling to make a life after Armstrong's death, and the Coxes in Mississippi, struggling to make a living in a town shell-shocked by the bad national publicity the family has brought down on their community. This juxtaposition between black and white families points up the irony of Campbell's title, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*. Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson are not Hank Williams and Patsy Cline, but Campbell links the pain that the lyrics of the blues and country music give voice to and the solace that the music provides—blues to poor blacks and country music to poor whites. Both the Todd and Cox families are dysfunctional, warped by childhood abuse and society's race, class, and gender biases. Both black and white fathers, Wydell and Floyd, attempt to escape family and employment problems through alcohol. Both black and white sons, W. T. and Floydjunior, are wounded by their fathers' lack of attention and by narrow notions of masculinity that are synonymous with domination. Both fall prey to drugs and violence. Both black and white women struggle with poverty and single parent-

hood as their husbands are increasingly absent, but it is the white woman, Lily, who goes on welfare, much to her daughter's dismay, and the black woman, Delotha, who works hard and opens her own beauty shop. By reversing racial stereotypes, Campbell underlines that some of the problems that demoralize the Coxes and the Todds—such as low wages and lack of education—are class related not simply race based, although she does not obfuscate the historical causes of the disproportionate link between race and class. By comparing these two working-class families, who because of white racism have not been able to see the similarities in their lives, Campbell prepares readers for the cross-racial labor coalition with which she concludes the novel.

The psychological realism that Campbell employs to probe the motivations of the characters linked by Armstrong's murder gives way to a more sweeping exploration of social change in Mississippi and Chicago over the three decades following Emmett Till's murder. Campbell needs those thirty years in order to arrive at her surprisingly happy ending, which leaves readers with hope that Mississippi (and the South) may rise above its notoriously racist past and that poor Mississippians, black and white, may someday come to understand that they share an economic struggle despite their racial differences. Wydell Todd and his son W. T. flee Chicago's violent, drug-infested streets for a bucolic sojourn in Mississippi, and Ida Long's son Sweetbabe and his family leave Chicago's cold weather and growing crime wave so that he can teach in his Mississippi hometown. Both returns are harbingers of the black migration back to the South which began in the 1970s and increased dramatically in the 1990s.

Clayton Pinochet, the closet liberal who has cowered behind his racist father's bank account, splits his inheritance with his biracial half-sister Ida, an act that foreshadows the late 1990s trend in fictional and nonfictional explorations of hidden black-white family connections as well as the debate about reparations for slavery. Indeed, the resolution of this subplot suggests that reparations may not be simply a handout for past social injustices but in some cases a rightful inheritance withheld—an inheritance, however, that Campbell clearly believes will not be shared without plenty of proof and provocation. Floyd and Lily Cox's daughter Doreen reaches across the color line during a labor dispute at the New Plantation Catfish Farm and Processing Plant where she works with Ida Long. Ida emerges as a spokesperson for black and white members of the working class. While incidents such as these can and do sometimes occur in the South, to conclude with all five surely paints a rosy picture of racial reconciliation in rural

Mississippi. In part because labor unions are rare in the South, the interracial alliance along working-class lines is an especially unusual occurrence, a fact that led one reviewer to conclude that "the ending tries to force an upbeat notion onto what is a bleak reality" (Katzenbach). In contrast to Campbell's novel, Anthony Walton's nonfiction portrait *Mississippi* (1996) depicts rural race relations as closer to polite but distant tolerance, and anthropologist Carol Stacks's study of African Americans returning to the rural Carolinas, *Call to Home* (1996), reveals more than a little white resistance to their new ideas and their increased presence in elected offices.

Campbell would more likely term her happy ending utopian rather than unrealistic, for the social changes she orchestrates in her novel do not come totally out of the blue, even though they may not exactly match current southern realities. Simply to chalk up her happy ending to the generic demands of popular fiction, as some reviewers did,[7] is to miss how the successes of her triumphant characters, also victims of a variety of social prejudices and pressures, drive home Campbell's strong personal belief in the possibility of rising above one's social circumstances. The contrast she sets up between Lionel and Wydell is one example; another is the contrast between Floyd Cox and his daughter. Doreen also grows up poor and prejudiced, but, unlike her father, she has encounters with African Americans at school and at work that broaden her perceptions of black people. While Campbell has Doreen acknowledge that she will probably never totally overcome the daily diet of racism on which she was raised, Campbell emphasizes through Doreen's exchange with her mother the economic reasons that nudge her toward a new way of thinking: "Mama, either I work with them or I get in the welfare line with them, and you know how I feel about that. I was raised around here, and even though I went to school with them, I always felt like they was different from white people, like I was better than they were. Hell, I was raised on that feeling, and I'll probably take it to my grave, but Mama, you know one thing: It's getting to where I just can't afford thinking like that no more. Them feelings just ain't practical when you work at the New Plantation" (377–78).

For Campbell's characters, white or black, to improve their lives, they must work hard in an adverse society as well as face the consequences of their own misperceptions and the actions or inactions that follow from them. Given the racist murder that provided the germ for her narrative, Campbell is especially interested in racial misperceptions and in strategies for overcoming them. In

Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, television and popular culture play no small role in reeducating working-class white women. Watching an acclaimed documentary on America's civil rights era, surely a reference to the 1980s PBS television series *Eyes on the Prize,* Doreen gains a different perspective on her father and mother's involvement in Armstrong Todd's murder. Even Lily admits aloud what she refused to say to anyone thirty years before: "He didn't deserve to die" (380). The ensuing years also teach Lily that Floyd did not kill Armstrong for her, the racist fantasy that she clung to when the murder occurred, a male master narrative that she finally abandons during a final confrontation with Floyd: "You ain't done nothing for me. Everything was for you. To make you feel good. Even that boy" (426). While Doreen grows up listening to black soul music on the radio (the Dells, Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross and the Supremes, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, and the Temptations), television provides her mother with a new perspective on race. When Lily accidentally happens upon the *Oprah Winfrey Show,* she finds herself hooked because Oprah, like Lily, was molested by a relative when she was a child. As a testimony to Oprah's championing of women's self-help and to her appeal across the color line, Campbell has Lily watching Oprah when Floyd returns near the end of the novel. Although he expects to reunite with Lily, as he has done many times before, Lily for the first time is able to muster the will power to withstand his pleas. Oprah, with Doreen's encouragement, has given Lily the belief that she can assume responsibility for herself.

Cultural critic Benjamin DeMott argues that contemporary advertising and the popular media have promulgated a misleading and simplistic assumption that racism has to do "solely with the conditions of personal feeling" between blacks and whites—a shallow understanding of the problem that omits racism's "institutional, historical and political ramifications" (23). But despite popular culture's drawbacks, Campbell suggests that it can work to increase familiarity between the races, to dismantle some stereotypes, and to explore possibilities of interracial interaction. Unlike other popular novelists who write about race relations and focus on personal relationships, Campbell, whose mass-market paperbacks reach a large and varied audience, does not ignore the "institutional, historical and political ramifications" of racism. For example, in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine,* when Stonewall Pinochet tries to enlist his son in his latest money-making venture, the New Plantation Catfish Farm and Processing Plant, Clayton refuses to become involved, privately mulling over concerns that Campbell clearly shares: "But he heard enough to know that the new industry his father

was heralding offered nothing to the legions of poor whites and blacks who had become idle because of the mechanization of cotton farming. The profit margin of catfish farming would be maintained by the abundance of cheap labor in the area" (222). Clayton's more socially meaningful epiphany comes belatedly, after his father's death, when he realizes that no matter what his neighbors think he cannot in good conscience assume his father's old position among the town's white powerbrokers, the so-called "Honorable Men of Hopewell" (422). Thus, rather than continue to sympathize privately with black people and occasionally work behind the scenes, Clayton finally goes public with his liberal views and makes common cause with Ida Long in an attempt to change working conditions at the catfish processing plant. Readers last glimpse Clayton joining Ida and her co-workers on the picket line. Campbell does not sentimentalize Clayton's decision. She makes clear that his father's death has made Clayton's choice far easier and that Clayton's silence until his father's death has insured him an inheritance that leaves him financially secure. But his silence comes at a great personal cost, for in kowtowing to his father, Clayton, as a young man, gives up his romance with a poor white woman whom his father deemed inappropriate, and later Clayton loses the love of his long-term black mistress, Marguerite.

The lower-class white men, Floyd Cox and his son Floydjunior, are not as successful in altering their attitudes towards race and race relations as Doreen and Clayton because they never see beyond their own point of view. The Cox men equate black progress with stealing white jobs, and thus they label integration as the source of their own economic problems. They see themselves as victims of affirmative action and refuse to accept any responsibility for their own fate, a position Floyd regularly expounds on to Lily: "Now you got niggers with jobs, and white men can't find work. I ask you, is that right? In Birmingham I used to see niggers dressed in suits. Suits! Going to work. The women wearing high heels and dresses, going downtown to their jobs. That's what's done happened to us, Lily. I mean, why should the kids try hard in school when they know damn well that when they get out, everything that's worth having is going to them?" (308). Most insidiously, Floyd attempts to heal the bad relationship he has with Floydjunior by capitalizing on their mutual racism. After watching an interview on the nightly news about a black businessman who owns his own contracting company, Floydjunior yells, "Goddamn niggers have everything. There ain't nothing left for us." His father's reply—"They giving them everything. Affirmative action. And where's the affirmative action for white men?"

(338)—makes the Cox men, who are frequently at odds, realize that they do have one thing in common, hatred of black people.

This contemporary backlash against affirmative action parallels the 1950s backlash against the Supreme Court's *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision, which Campbell suggests led to the escalation of racial hatred and violence, such as the murder of Emmett Till. Campbell highlights how race and gender identities are intertwined with class because the Cox men are preoccupied with whether white people will view them as "white trash" if they work the same jobs as black men. In 1956 when Olive Arnold Adams published *Time Bomb: Mississippi Exposed and the Full Story of Emmett Till* under the sponsorship of the Mississippi Regional Council of Negro Leadership, she drew this character sketch of the lower-class southern white man: "he knows he is looked down on as 'white trash,' but he compensates for this by grinding his heel on the neck of the Negro. That way, he can be better than somebody, or at least feel better. Actually, he questions his superiority. He knows he does not command respect, so he demands it through acts of violence and terror" (216).

But in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine,* misplaced blame does not occur on only one side of the color line. Delotha's attempt to bring Armstrong back to life by reuniting with Wydell in order to have another male child backfires when she begins to ignore her husband, to spoil her son W.T., and to blame his behavioral problems on the white teachers who try to intervene in order to stop his fighting. When a white policeman questions W.T. about a gang-related robbery, Delotha lies to provide him with an alibi. At first Delotha thinks she is protecting W.T. from white people, but eventually she begins to face up to a more complex truth. First, she acknowledges her responsibility in the family's breakdown—her mistake in trying to replace Armstrong with W.T.: "Had she pushed her daughters away from her and held her son too close?" (399). Although Delotha thinks she is being a good mother to W.T., her overindulgence, which she perceives as loving care, teaches "grandiosity rather than self-acceptance,"[8] and he takes to the streets first to avoid his parents' frequent fights and then to prove he is cool. Eventually, when Delotha finds a gun in W.T.'s room, she accepts the truth and concurs with Lionel's assessment of Chicago, "The streets is killing more black boys than the white folks ever could. We always had more than one enemy" (407).

Nor does Campbell let Wydell escape blame. While he proves himself an excellent father to his two daughters, he assumes that he does not know how

to father sons because his own father was not a good role model. As a result, Wydell never establishes a good relationship with either Armstrong or W.T. but leaves the parenting of his sons to Delotha. Only when Wydell works through his own childhood trauma does he begin to understand his role in shaping W.T.'s fate. Wydell's intervention near the end of the novel literally saves W.T.'s life. Their trip to Mississippi, which removes W.T. from Chicago's perils, concludes the novel, functioning simultaneously as a lesson in family history and African American history. Significantly, the trip allows Wydell to introduce W.T. to the blues. Today's young black men prefer rap music to the blues, bell hooks argues, because they "do not want to hear an honest emotional expression of black male vulnerability": "They would rather hear rap music with its aggressive presentation of invulnerability. If the choice is between exposing the true authentic self and clinging to the false self, most males maintain their fantasy bonding rather than seek the real" (99). W.T.'s growing interest in the music that his father loves and used to sing suggests that he may finally be ready to express his own pain, rather than mask it with bravado.

By delving into the consciousnesses of all those involved in Emmett Till's murder and by extending her examination to those of the next generation as well, Campbell suggests that it is simplistic to read past racial incidents solely through the lens of race and problematic to see contemporary interracial interactions solely through the prism of past race relations. Embedded in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* is her strong belief that the act of verbally expressing pain—in this case both psychological and physical—is, as Scarry argues, "a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain" (9). Although Campbell suggests that watching Oprah on television may help Lily verbalize her pain, she is especially concerned with literacy and fashions several scenes in which learning to read paves the way to a better life, for children and adults. For example, Clayton Pinochet tutors Ida Long's son Sweetbabe so that he can go to college, and later he takes on other young black pupils. He even teaches Marguerite how to read with the result that she becomes a person with "her own opinions and demands" (315), eventually refusing to be a kept woman. With the importance of reading and education occurring as a leitmotif in the novel, Campbell shares a concern that hooks emphasizes in *We Real Cool* (2004), repeatedly showing that books can liberate the spirits of people demoralized by stereotypes, that books can teach people how to hope (38). In *The Body in Pain* Scarry argues that "the story of *expressing* physical pain eventually opens into the wider frame of *invention.*

The elemental 'as if' of the person in pain ('It feels as if . . . ,' 'It is as though . . .') will lead out into the array of counterfactual revisions entailed in making," in creating something new (22). Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* simultaneously expresses America's complex racial pain, physical and psychological, and invents a cure for it. In functioning both as a way to express pain and a way to move beyond pain, Campbell's novel sings the blues for readers.

NOTES

1. Here I use Scarry's terms and theories in *The Body in Pain*, 13, to describe Campbell's technique and thus amplify and extend my own earlier analysis of Campbell's novel, which appeared in *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction since the Sixties*, 22–27, 217–19.

2. Campbell, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, 42. Subsequent citations are indicated parenthetically in the text.

3. This is bell hooks's assessment of the consequences of psychological wounding in early childhood in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, 98.

4. To compare the fiction and the alleged facts, see Olive Arnold Adams, *Time Bomb: Mississippi Exposed and the Full Story of Emmett Till*, excerpted in Metress, *Lynching*, 217. In the Metress collection, see similar accounts by James L. Hicks and L. Alex Wilson. See also Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta*.

5. In *Mississippi*, 43, Anthony Walton points out this link on which I elaborate here.

6. Graeber, "It's about Childhood." Campbell's concern is one that bell hooks raises in her focus on black men in *We Real Cool*: "Excessive focus on the ways racism wounds black male spirits is often evoked to deflect attention away from all other sources of emotional pain. That deflection is disempowering because it sends the message that there is nothing black males can do to create positive change since they are 'powerless' to end white supremacy. Racism does damage black males, but so does sexism, so does class elitism with its hedonistic materialism, and so does abandonment and abuse in family relationships. All the sources of black male pain and powerlessness must be named if healing is to take place, if black males are to reclaim their agency" (100).

7. See the anonymous reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* and Katzenbach, "Ricochets in Their Hearts." In Alison Light's discussion of feminist utopian fiction, "Fear of the Happy Ending," she argues that part of the "fear of the happy ending" has been a definition of radical politics that "conceives its job as one solely of critique" and rarely of desire fulfilled (92).

8. While hooks (*We Real Cool*, 94) sees the overindulgence as a product of patriarchal privileging of male children, Campbell seems to suggest that another cause may be the danger black men are exposed to, whether from white racism or black gang violence.

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