



ALIENATION VS. BLACK COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN JM HOLMES' *HOW ARE YOU GOING TO SAVE YOURSELF?* A COMPARATIVE STUDY

MÓNICA FERNÁNDEZ JIMÉNEZ
UNIVERSIDAD DE VALLADOLID

"Why do you blame everyone else for your problems?" he said. [...]
"You attack the police?" Eddy said. "You need a cause so you make one up?"
"Attack the police? Ha," Kalli, said [...]
"What, you think the academy teaches us to be racist?"
"No, America does," I said. (Holmes 2018, 232-233)

The exchange listed in this opening epigraph takes place towards the end of JM Holmes' first and only publication *How are you going to save yourself?*, published in 2018. In it, Eddie—a white policeman whose cousin is Gio, the mixed race protagonist of the first person narrated short story cycle—embodies a contemporary trend in relativistic positions regarding race, gender, and sexual identity that, drawing on a comparatist approach to the ills of the past, dismisses structural violence in the present and rather advocates for individualistic positions. JM Holmes' work becomes an extraordinarily interesting object of analysis because of its ultra-contemporary character which offers a mirror up to current society. In a time where social media opinions quickly travel and fallacious positions can spread rapidly and develop into xenophobic and populist trends—which directly affect political life—the fragmented and *epi-phanic* quality of this work becomes a great mechanism of awareness.

The position of the policeman has been taken repeated times by President Donald Trump. He uses the term "racist" when it applies to racism inflicted on white people by non-white people and turns to anti-structural individualistic positions when such racism refers to that exercised by white people (calling anyone who dares to invoke structural racism a racist):

 **Donald J. Trump** 
@realDonaldTrump

Seguir

If racist Elijah Cummings would focus more of his energy on helping the good people of his district, and Baltimore itself, perhaps progress could be made in fixing the mess that he has helped to create over many years of incompetent leadership. His radical “oversight” is a joke!

12:18 - 28 jul. 2019

 **Donald J. Trump** 
@realDonaldTrump

Seguir

There is nothing racist in stating plainly what most people already know, that Elijah Cummings has done a terrible job for the people of his district, and of Baltimore itself. Dems always play the race card when they are unable to win with facts. Shame!

11:35 - 28 jul. 2019

 **Hilo**

 **Donald J. Trump** 
@realDonaldTrump · 27 jul.

Rep, Elijah Cummings has been a brutal bully, shouting and screaming at the great men & women of Border Patrol about conditions at the Southern Border, when actually his Baltimore district is FAR WORSE and more dangerous. His district is considered the Worst in the USA.....

30,4 K 34,9 K 147,2 K

 **Donald J. Trump** 
@realDonaldTrump

....As proven last week during a Congressional tour, the Border is clean, efficient & well run, just very crowded. Cumming District is a disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess. If he spent more time in Baltimore, maybe he could help clean up this very dangerous & filthy place

In these tweets Donald Trump alludes to congressman Elijah Cummings, a key figure in his impeachment recently passed away in October 2019, and who has repeatedly denounced the inhumane treatment of migrants at the US-Mexico border (Mars 2019). Cummings, who lived through segregation in the United States, has expressed and raised an awareness on the violence, marginalisation, and poverty that black majority neighbourhoods in Baltimore are subject to as a result of a long history of racism in the country (Bellware 2019.). Far from acknowledging the structural nature of the situation, Trump contributes to consolidate the stereotypes affecting black lives while enhancing a neoliberal individualistic position. It also becomes paradoxical that he defines Baltimore district as a “disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess” where he would not like to live (as stated in another tweet) and to which, as we can guess, would not pay any attention as a governor.

Another example of his particular use of the term *racist* appears when he talks about films and TV.



Journalist Matt Ford commented on the last tweets stating that

Good-faith interpretations of those two tweets are hard to come by. It's doubtful that Trump meant to weigh in on the long-running debate over Quentin Tarantino's treatment of black culture and characters over the past 20 years. Nor is it plausible that he somehow mistakenly thought that ABC meant to insult Blackish's cast by describing them as anything less than fully African American. The likeliest explanations are the worst ones: He identified with Leonardo DiCaprio and the other slave-owning white villains, not the black freedman hero who burns down a slave plantation in the antebellum South; and he resents references to blackness in pop culture that white Americans could not replicate in a socially acceptable manner. (2019)

This shows the duplicitous nature of contemporary discourses which manipulate structures and terms in order to just create new ways of oppression, representing what I would term relativism instead of anti-essentialism.

Renni Eddo-Lodge advocates in her also very recent book *Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race*, published in 2017, for the term *black* that I use in my title. She claims that she uses it "to describe people of African and Caribbean heritage, including mixed race people" (2017, xvi). The nature of the African-American situation considerably differs from the situations Eddo-Lodge relates since she is British. However, she unites all the postcolonial migrants that compose in their majority the black community of England under the umbrella of sufferers of racism. She defines racism as opposed to prejudice in this way:



Some black people hold a burning hatred for white people, they will say, and it's unacceptable. It's 'reverse racism', they insist. Prejudice is real across communities of colour. Years ago, buying myself a lunch of Caribbean food, I was greeted by a smiling owner behind the counter who waited until his white customers had left before confiding in me that he saves the best cuts of meat for 'people like us'. Yes, that man was prejudiced. Yes, my lunch was delicious. No, the owner of the cafe couldn't possibly affect the life chances of his white customers with his feelings against them. All he could affect in any terms was their lunch. This is the difference between racism and prejudice. There is an unattributed definition of racism that defines it as prejudice plus power. Those disadvantaged by racism can certainly be cruel, vindictive and prejudiced. Everyone has the capacity to be nasty to other people, to judge them before they get to know them. But there simply aren't enough black people in positions of power to enact racism against white people on the kind of grand scale it currently operates at against black people. Are black people over-represented in the places and spaces where prejudice could really take effect? The answer is almost always no. (2017, 89)

The situation she describes can be shared, as bell hooks would put it, "by folks across race, class, gender, and sexual practice" (1990, 12), as racism emerges from an essentialist premise which does not take into account specificities such as migration history or nationality. Her definition considerably differs from that suggested by Donald Trump or Eddie the policeman. Within the ultra-contemporary context we are assessing, this strategic essentialism has been effectively engaged with by contemporary rap and hip-hop singers and many sorts of popular culture. A fragment by rap singer Kendrick Lamar's song "Sing about me I'm dying of Thirst" stating "... hereditary All my cousins dying of thirst" (2018, 83) features as the epigraph of one of the sections or chapters of Holmes' collection. And in the acknowledgements he thanks hip-hop for being the way to find his voice as a black person in the United States, something which his fictional protagonist Gio has not found, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

Scientific evidence for the biological or genetic non-existence of race has been wrongly appropriated for ignoring its social dimension. Ana María Manzanás acknowledges this dimension but adds something else. She writes: "Even if 'white' and 'black' race are misnomers [...] once 'invented' they acquire a life of their own. Even if such essentialist terms as 'ethnicity' and 'race' have been deconstructed in post-modern discourses, the fact remains that both categories remain all too real in the daily life for African Americans" (1999, 32). In the rejection of essentialism and a poststructuralist take on identity, positions such as the policeman's might emerge while Gio and his friends fail to enact a strategic essentialism which, according to Marta Caminero-Santangelo "can be used effectively, even against more 'radical' notions of race, to construct a solidarity based on the exigencies of American life" (2004, 221). In brief, acknowledging that those categories exist because they are used for hegemonic



reasons is not the same as repeating essentialist discourses for purposes of self-representation.

Caminero-Santangelo's quote is taken from an article on Piri Thomas' *Down these Mean Streets*, an autobiographical novel describing the growing-up process of Piri, a black Puerto Rican boy whose family is white. His self-development consists on being able to assess such categories in the context of American life and socialisation. Being part of a family who is not targeted because of how they look as he is, he learns the power dynamics of race in the United States and defends such strategic essentialism in the face of his family members, who conversely insist on emphasising his Puerto Rican identity in opposition to his black one. In his journey towards self-discovery, Piri encounters the need to travel South the Mason-Dixie line, where he meets Gerald Andrew West, who describes himself as "so blended racially that I find it hard to give myself to any [...] of the blends" (1997, 174). Caminero-Santangelo explains that

this description would seem to fit perfectly with much more recent, resistant accounts of racial and ethnic identity, [...] within a contemporary, poststructural critical context in which stable, fixed, and singular notions of identity have been challenged and debunked to powerfully suggest subversion of socially-constructed and all-too-limiting racial categories that, in truth, have little meaning in biology (2004, 205)

but that "As it turns out, however, Gerald [']s rejection of racial paradigms is wholly predicated on his desire to 'make the next step to white' (2004, 177), as he himself admits [...]. Thus Gerald, whose understanding of race seems more 'radical,' is actually a deeply conservative character (2004, 205-206).

Going back to JM Holmes' work, *How are you Going to Save Yourself?* is a short story cycle relating the coming-of-age processes of a young black man from Rhode Island, Gio—of Italian and African-American descent—and his also black friends. The work features a great deal of alienation among these men, who are unable to enact this kind of strategic essentialism and fail to articulate a black collective consciousness. Furthermore, black masculinity is put at stake when the female characters in the book engage in the discussion in successful collective ways, even though—as Reni Eddo-Lodge expresses—it can be emotionally exhausting for them and puts them in a dangerous position (2017, xii). This dialogue, as already mentioned, takes place at the very end of the collection; it represents the only moment where Gio in fact manages to express more definite views regarding racism, which he only does when he is around Kalli, a female character described as a critical activist. However, during the whole chapter, Gio makes comparisons between Kalli and his rich white girlfriend Madie, openly admitting how he behaves differently according to who he is with, and how he never articulates this discourse on structural racism around her family:



My mind wandered back to Madie sitting with her family on their veranda by the pool. The place I should've been. But her parents always asked me about the mayor of New York and I could never tell if they meant to ask me about his high-yaller family or his policy, so usually I came out sounding like an idiot. The only way that would change was if I was around them more. (2018, 223)

Gio makes a difference between worlds, statuses, and education but fails to place himself among those. He simply adapts to the situation, which he finds slightly more difficult with Madie's family, as in this paragraph he explains that he would need to spend more time with them to understand their codes, foreign to his own. He just presents himself as an outside spectator. Gio and his friends often find themselves ridiculed in white settings and yet fail to articulate a discourse such as Kalli's. Gio's failure compared to Kalli's and, to a certain extent, to Whitney's—his teenage half-sister—success in “talking about race,” quoting Eddo Lodge's book title, puts black masculinity at stake.

How are you Going to Save Yourself is a work about race relations, a phrase which may seem old-fashioned; nonetheless, that is exactly the value of the collection which purposely positions its characters within a continuum of tradition. The protagonists encounter a series of situations in which they are out of place no matter what, even when through fame and an unexpected inheritance they overcome economic problems, since the opposition between “us” and “they” is always present in the language in an extremely trenchant way. Because Gio's career as a rap artist has taken him to new circles, “new demons” in the words of Irenosen Okojie's review in *The Guardian* (2018), the chapter “Kinfolk” relates an episode in which he has invited his childhood friends to a Manhattan's night out. During the night there are many occasions in which, whenever they let loose and are spontaneous, the protagonists cause outrage or disapproval, even among some non-white people, due to the existence of codes and taboos to be respected within elite circles. At one point there is even a fight because Dub, one of the boys, has uttered a racist comment about a Philippine boxer. Then, after taking some drugs and overcoming his previous sober reluctance, Gio raps some verses:

I kept rhyiming about if black skin make our legacies worthless.
And then Blake stopped the beat. Rolls was staring at me. Dub looked like he wanted to slap me. The girls had put their phones down and Blake scraped his insurance card on the plate, lining up more white. (2018, 113)

In a society where uttering racist comments causes the same discomfort than talking about racism, the protagonists of this work remain unable to find their own voice.

Constant situations like this one cause the estrangement between Dub and Gio, but they never talk about why, they never talk about their ghosts, how they were



repudiated or ridiculed, and why. Instead, these men dissipate anger and pain through violence against women, white women in some relevant chapters, who are seen like bodies to be consumed. They had even inflicted this kind of sexist violence as a group in one specific occasion, when they all observed Rolls having sex with his girlfriend Tayla while she was forced to stay and be watched, something they never talked about again and pretended it had never happened. The first chapter of the collection starts by describing a sort of competition on how many white girls the boys had had sex with; the situation becomes uncomfortable when one of the boys, Rye, becomes upset. Rye does not find the courage to talk about his experience in front of all his friends, but he finally confesses his secret to Gio: a former sexual partner had humiliated him with racial slurs during sexual intercourse and he had liked it. The collection ends with Gio asking his girlfriend Madie to do the same thing when he goes back home after the family meal described at the beginning of this article. Madie is outraged and leaves, the last sentence of the book stating: “She got sick of being haunted by ghosts she’d never even met” (2018, 240). The circle that closes with this sentence speaks for the need of communication—both among non-white people and in the face of white people—as well as of articulating a collective consciousness among black males as a mechanism to avoid alienation, rage, misogynic behaviours, and an emotional double consciousness. The fragmented nature of the collection denounces such sexist behaviours and places black males as unable to cope with this alienation.

In conclusion, JM Homes’ collection speaks about contemporary issues within a contemporary context, making an emphasis nonetheless on their relation with the long tradition of slavery, segregation, and racism in the United States. I tried to illustrate both tradition and the present moment with my references to a work set during pre-segregation times in America—*Down these Mean Streets*—and to the tweets of the country’s current overtly racist president. In the transition from segregation to structural racism, the end of the former justifies the alleged non-existence of the latter in the discourse of some current political actors. With an intrinsic collective trauma rooted at the core of the racial slur which Rye’s sexual partner utters, JM Holmes’ work demonstrates an awareness on the historical presence of racism in the United States while revealing, at the same time, the new ways in which xenophobia takes place, disguised under relativism. Such populist attitudes permeate the American social panorama and impede these men from articulating their collective identity, an inability which is nonetheless also determined by toxic masculinity, a question exposed in the collection with the abject combination of desire and repulsion. Inhabiting such a Freudian world, the characters in the novel constantly reveal a misogyny which becomes related with their inability to find a satisfying collective voice. Because of the sexual violence it depicts, the collection has created controversy as it seems to transmit an ambiguous meaning. Nevertheless, the short story form, with its capacity to express “moments of truth”



(Pratt 1981, 182), attempts to delve into such ambiguities without justifying them—both in the context of the present and the past.

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