Between a Failure and a New Creation: (Re)reading Yusef Komunyakaa's "The Beast & Burden" in the Light of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic

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BETWEEN A FAILURE AND A NEW CREATION  
(Re)reading Yusef Komunyakaa’s “The Beast & Burden”  
in the Light of Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic

by Katarzyna Jakubiak

If “saturation” is incomplete in a given work, and the poem is presumably complete (i.e., it makes sense), then it is somehow complete outside of the tradition, or the framework of Blackness. What, then, do we call such a work? Hybrid? Incomplete? A failure? A new creation?

—Stephen Henderson, “Saturation”

The question of the “essence” of the black experience has run like a rift through the body of African-American literary and cultural criticism ever since the beginning of this discipline. Already in the 1920s and 1930s W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston promote essentialism, as they emphasize the uniqueness of the black perception of reality, stress the originality of black creativeness, promote a belief in the “beauty of blackness,” and reprove their fellow black writers for setting the white standards at the apex of their artistic aspirations. In response to these harbingers of a Black Aesthetic, Richard Wright in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” complains that black writers cannot achieve artistic autonomy if they continue to separate themselves from the experience of the white majority. In Wright’s view, only through “integration with the American scene” and the relating of black experience to the larger experience of the working class will black writers manage to fulfill “their roles” (52). Wright’s approach, later labeled by Houston Baker as “integrationist,” becomes the dominant paradigm for criticism of African-American cultural expressions in the 1950s. According to Baker, the integrationist paradigm owes its popularity mainly to the editors of the influential anthology The Negro Caravan, Sterling Brown and Ulysses Lee, who asserted that “black” and “white” literatures need to be judged by a “single standard of criticism” (“Generational Shifts” 182).

With the rise of the Black Arts Movement, the 1960s and 1970s witness yet another “generational shift,” to use Baker’s term, from the integrationist to the essentialist paradigm. Such critics as Larry Neal, Addison Gayle, Stephen Henderson, and Houston Baker (in his early writings) advocate separation, or at least “bifurcation,” of the black aesthetic from the dominant white aesthetic on account of their essential disparity of experience, and promote the metaphysical concept of “blackness,” which is not “a theoretical reification, but a reality, accessible only to those who can ‘imagine’ in uniquely black ways” (Baker, “Generational Shifts” 190). One of the most
peculiar of the Black Arts Movement theories is Henderson’s theory of “saturation,” a category through which a critic can measure the presence of “blackness” in a given literary text in the way that a hygrometer can measure atmospheric humidity.

In contemporary criticism, Black Aesthetic essentialism finds continuation in Afrocentric theory, promoted by Molefi Kete Asante and based on a belief in the existence of an essential, racial pan-African self. Like Henderson, Asante perceives “blackness” as an entity that to various degrees can be present within a literary text, and distinguishes two types of texts produced by authors who fail to include “blackness” in their literary creations: “the decapitated text” and “the lynched text” (13). Asante describes these two types of texts in the following way: “A text that is decapitated exists without cultural presence in the historical experience of the creator; a lynched text is one that has been strung up with the tropes and figures of the dominating culture. African-American authors who have tried to “shed their race” have been known to produce both types of texts” (13).

Although the divisions between “essentialists” and those who oppose the concept of essence still form the main point of conflict in contemporary criticism of African-American literature, it is now much more difficult to delineate the boundaries between particular “camps” than it was for Baker to delineate the boundaries between consecutive “generational shifts” in his 1981 article. Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, the two most influential figures in African-American criticism since the 1980s, base their writings on the post-structuralist theories of Derrida and Foucault, and post-structuralism is, by definition, anti-essentialist. Since the basic premise of post-structuralist theories is that meaning is never completely ascertainable, the belief in a fixed essence of a literary or cultural text would defy the main goal of post-structuralist interpretations: the exploration of the effects of the plurality of meanings. This is indeed the main point of Gates’s criticism of the Black Arts Movement in 1979. In “Preface to Blackness,” which lays out the main paths for his future work, Gates rejects the essentialist view of literature as a “repository for ideas” and “a cultural artifact” and asserts the post-structuralist vision of a literary work as “a system of signs that may be decoded with various methods” (159). Thus, “blackness” for Gates, rather than being a material object, is simply a sign, “a metaphor; it does not have an ‘essence’ as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity” (“Preface” 163). In the conclusion to “Preface to Blackness,” Gates calls for attention to black figurative language and inclusion of the notion of intertextuality in the interpretations of African-American literature. He answers his own call nine years later in his influential book The Signifying Monkey. There he manages to find “the trope of tropes,” the figure of the “Signifyin(g) monkey,” with which it is possible to decode the plurality of meanings of African-American texts and expose the constant intertextual plays between them.

Despite his initial affiliation with the essentialism of the Black Arts Movement, in his post-1980 writings Houston Baker, like Gates, perceives literature not as “repository of ideas,” but as a linguistic system, the meaning of which is never fixed. Four years earlier than Gates, in Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, Baker emphasizes the importance of finding a trope that would allow for appropriate characterization of African-American cultural expressions. His trope is the metaphor of the blues
and the figure of a black blues singer at the railway junction, transforming his experiences into a song. The blues matrix, like the figure of the “Signifyin(g) monkey,” illustrates the main premise of post-structuralism, mentioned above: the view of meaning and of identity as a “ceaseless flux,” marked by transience and multidirectionality (7). In Baker’s metaphor there is no place for an African-American subject, possessed of a fixed racial self; instead there is only the “language” with its flux of meaning, “speaking the de-centered subject” (1).

Thus, Gates’s and Baker’s theories, on account of their alliance with post-structuralist views, could be classified as anti-essentialist. Consequently, it is surprising when Asante acknowledges these two scholars as major influences in the development of his Afrocentric theory. According to Asante, Gates’s and Baker’s contributions to Afrocentrism lie mainly in their choice of specifically black experience as the basis of their tropes: the African-American ritual of signifyin(g), the Yoruba myths, and black music. The distinctions between essentialists and anti-essentialists become even more blurred when Joyce A. Joyce, who by her own declaration identifies herself with Afrocentrism, attacks Gates and Baker for creating what Asante would define as “lynched” critical texts. Although Gates and Baker have rooted their tropes in the black experience, their theoretical tools are almost exclusively “the master’s tools,” theories of white male critics: Derrida, Foucault, Hegel, Jameson, and Eco. Joyce blames Gates and Baker also for their esoteric theoretical language, which makes their criticism inaccessible to most African-American readers. The debate between Joyce, Gates, and Baker takes a lot of unexpected twists and turns, which have already become notorious. However, as Joyce is supported in her argument by Barbara Christian and Sandra Adell, it becomes clear that the early-century conflict over the legitimacy of using “the white man’s standards” has moved at the end of the century from the realm of literature to the realm of criticism. In “The Crisis in Black American Literary Criticism,” Adell questions whether we can “derive a valid, integral ‘black’ text of criticism or ideology from borrowed or appropriated forms” (525). Thus, the earlier question “Can ‘the white man’s standards’ be used to express the black experience?” has been modified in the contemporary form of essentialism by the question “Can the white man’s standards be used to interpret the black experience?”

It is important to note, however, that although Joyce, Christian, and Adell represent views deriving from the essentialist standpoint, their essays also express concerns usually articulated by anti-essentialist theories. Their critique of Baker and Gates—for what they characterize as a simplified view of the African-American subject, which does not take into account class and gender differences—situates these three scholars in the proximity of the postcolonial theory and writings of such figures as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, who strongly assert their anti-essentialist positions. In her classic essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, which lays out the foundations of the main strain of postcolonial theory, Spivak stresses that “the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous” and the “‘true’ subaltern group . . . identity is its difference” (26–27). Thus, rather than being a physical or metaphysical entity, “race” and, what follows, “blackness” in postcolonial theory are often envisioned as open signifiers, internally divided by class, gender, ethnicity, and so on. The critics of postcolonial theory, however, point out that the anti-essentialism
of some of the postcolonial scholars is merely a mirror reflection of essentialism. Ann duCille in “Postcolonialism and Afrocentricity,” an article that encourages mutual learning between the discourses of African-American studies, postcoloniality, and Afrocentricity, remarks: “Where Afrocentricity is culturally exclusive and self-centered, postcoloniality is intellectually elastic and decentered. . . . Where the one is ‘unembarrassingly black’ . . . the other is ‘black’ only by default—de fault of being nonwhite” (35). Concluding her article, duCille analyzes passages by W. E. B. DuBois and Edward Said, attempting to bridge the gap between essentialism and anti-essentialism and observing that “[b]oth passages suggest the extent to which imperialism and colonization have given us a world out of joint, have turned the planet and its people upside down and inside out so that indeed no one is purely or simply any one thing” (40).

The denial of pure or simple “one-ness” of identity can be found among the main points of Paul Gilroy’s seminal book The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness. The theory presented in The Black Atlantic is designed to bring peace into the confusion of the disciplines that focus on post-slavery and postcolonial cultures. Gilroy not only encourages the abandonment of sharp boundaries between African-American and postcolonial studies, but also attempts to disrupt the conceptual binaries underlying the two fields, by proposing, in his own words, an “anti-anti-essentialist theory,” which is not essentialist. To this end, he advocates studying black cultural expressions through his paradigm of “the black Atlantic.” In Gilroy’s definition, “the black Atlantic” is a modern political and cultural formation, which can be defined, on one level, “through [the] desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (19). On another level, “the black Atlantic” is a system of cultural exchange, open to multiple influences and engaging in dialogue with both non-Western and Western cultures, and at the same time, unified by the commonality of experience, at the center of which lies the common memory of racial terror.4

The concept of common memory inevitably evokes the issue of tradition, which plays a crucial role in the discussions between essentialists and anti-essentialists. An appeal to African tradition is, in fact, what makes Afrocentrists embrace the post-structural works of Gates and Baker. At the end of her article, which criticizes Baker’s and Gates’s failure to free “Afro-American literature from the hegemony of Eurocentric discourses,” Adell notes that the two scholars still express “a nostalgia for tradition:”

to summon a tradition, for example, by reconstructing it, is to search for an authority, that of the tradition itself. Such an enterprise, even as it pits two or more traditions against each other, or even as it attempts to fuse traditions, is inherently conservative. Something is always conserved; something always remains the Same. (538)

In Gilroy’s theory, however, the evocation of tradition does not have to entail conservatism. He proposes a view of tradition neither as the lost past, which stands
in opposition to modernity, nor as “a culture of compensation,” which restores access to the past (Gilroy 198). Instead, Gilroy uses Amiri Baraka’s phrase to redefine tradition as “a living memory of the changing same” (198). Through the concept of “the changing same,” we can understand the paradigm of the black Atlantic as “a non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding” (198).

To visualize the concept of the black Atlantic as “the changing same,” Gilroy introduces a parallel trope of a ship in the first chapter of his book. In Gilroy’s description:

ships were the living means by which the points within [the] Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected. Accordingly, they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade. They were something more—a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production. The ship provides a chance to explore the articulations between the discontinuous histories of England’s ports, its interfaces with the wider world. Ships also refer us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernisation. As it were, getting on board promises a means to reconceptualise the orthodox relationship between modernity and what passes for its prehistory. (16–17)

The image of a ship evokes Baker’s image of a railway junction and thus beckons parallels between the paradigm of the black Atlantic and Baker’s blues matrix. Constant transformation, crossing, multiplicity, and multidirectionality—in other words, a quality of being in a “ceaseless flux”—are characteristic of Gilroy’s black Atlantic, just as they are characteristic of Baker’s blues (Blues 7). However, for Gilroy, the place of the crossing is not merely the southern railway junction, where the various elements of the national identity intersect. Gilroy’s ships move transnationally, transcending the boundaries of nationality and ethnicity. Moreover, since the ships themselves form political and cultural units, their movement results in gradual mutation rather than in a complete and abrupt change. As Gilroy stresses throughout his book, the paradigm of the black Atlantic emphasizes, most of all, the hybrid character of postcolonial and post-slavery identities. To paraphrase Henderson’s question quoted in the epigraph of this essay, Gilroy views the black identity as a hybrid, which is neither a failure nor a new creation but an old creation in constant remaking.

Gilroy’s most compelling discussion of hybridity in black cultural expressions can be found in chapter three, which is devoted entirely to black music. Music has always occupied the central position in African-American criticism. The debate over “the forms of Things Unknown,” as Richard Wright defined blues, jazz, gospel, folktales, and ritual boasts, has always been an integral part of the argument between essential-
ists and anti-essentialists. The integrationists of the 1950s see the disappearance of these forms as the condition for fulfillment of their egalitarian ideas. Critics of the Black Arts Movement emphasize the centrality of music in the specifically black experience, and the best example of this approach can be seen in Henderson’s decision to call the blues structures “Blacker” than any other form (106). Post-structuralists, like Houston Baker, on the other hand, see certain forms of black music as a “code,” an “enabling script,” that conditions African-American cultural discourse (Blues 4–6). Gilroy also emphasizes the preeminence of music in the “essential connectedness” of the communities of the black Atlantic. However, at the same time, he stresses that “the histories of borrowing, displacement, transformation, and continual reinscription that the musical culture encloses are a living legacy that should not be reified in the primary symbol of the diaspora and then employed as an alternative to the recurrent appeal of fixity and rootedness” (102). For Gilroy, music is exactly the black tradition, which as it is subjected to “transnational structures of circulation and intercultural exchange” undergoes mutation while remaining “the same” (87).

To support his view of music as “a changing same,” Gilroy focuses his discussion on hip-hop as perceived from the perspective of his native England. Pointing to hip-hop’s African-American roots, Gilroy simultaneously remarks on its cross-fertilization with Caribbean culture and its interaction with other multiple cultural influences, to which this form of black music is exposed as it wins popular culture markets worldwide. Through the example of hip-hop, Gilroy demonstrates that in the process of transnational circulation, the African-American forms are borrowed to work in new locations and are often deliberately reconstructed, thus assuming an “unashamedly hybrid character,” which “confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal” (99). It is important to remember that the “unashamedly hybrid character” is not specific to hip-hop alone. In the same chapter, Gilroy discusses spirituals performed by the Fisk University Jubilee Singers, and the cross-cultural circulation of these songs after the choir’s European tour; he also examines the English reinvention of Jimi Hendrix’s performances, and makes references to transnational reinscriptions of blues and jazz. In this way, Gilroy proves that all forms of black music, together with its surrounding rituals, can be used to create a model where identity can be understood as a hybrid: neither a fixed essence nor “a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists, and language gamers” (102).

Gilroy’s model, with its emphasis on hybridity, can help us interpret texts in which the images of black identity escape easy classifications. Yusef Komunyakaa’s long poem “The Beast & Burden: Seven Improvisations” is definitely one such text. “The Beast & Burden” has fascinated and puzzled me ever since my first encounter with Komunyakaa’s poetry in 1998. As an international graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa at that time, I did not have an extensive knowledge of the black experience in America or anywhere else in the world. Still, I responded to Komunyakaa’s poetry in a similar way that, perhaps, teenagers in my native Poland respond to hip-hop: on the intuitive level. Komunyakaa’s musical, imaginatively complex,
sometimes even esoteric, language captivated me emotionally and gave me an
incentive not only to become involved more deeply with the study of his poetry, but
also to delve into the field of African-American literature in general. Since 1998 my
engagement with Komunyaka’s poetry has resulted, among other things, in two
extensive academic projects and a translation of his selected poems (including “The
Beast & Burden”) into my native Polish. Gilroy’s paradigm has inspired me with an
impulse for a new reading of Komunyaka’s poetry, especially for a rereading of “The
Beast & Burden,” which, for me, remained resistant to interpretation even after I had
created my own version of the poem in another language.

Gilroy’s model of the black Atlantic, in which hybridity of music plays a significant
role, is particularly useful to the study of Komunyaka’s poetry, because Komunya-
kaa’s work is heavily laden with musical forms. Poems in the majority of his
collections contain direct references to blues and jazz: they are addressed to particular
musicians, contain quotations from blues or jazz songs, describe musical performanc-
es, or imitate blues/jazz structures. In a conversation with Robert Kelly and William
Matthews (another jazz poet), published in The Georgia Review, Komunyaka
attributes many of his poetic inspirations to jazz musicians, presenting this form of
music as a vehicle for poetic discovery. In his own words, “jazz has been the one thing
that gives some symmetry to [his] poetry, gives it shape and tonal equilibrium” (661).
Komunyaka has also been involved with jazz in a direct artistic way: he has issued
a CD in which he performs his poetry with an avant-garde jazz musician, John Tchicai;
he has written a number of lyrics for an American jazz singer, Pamela Knowles, and
has composed a libretto for an opera, Slip Knot.

Apart from using direct references to music, Komunyaka’s poetry often imitates
the logic of musical compositions through imagery. Sascha Feinstein, discussing
Komunyaka in his study of Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present, comments on the
poet’s remarkable ability to bring together disparate concepts and images and likens
this ability to the techniques of jazz musicians: “Like Monk’s use of dissonance and
silence, Komunyaka offers imagery that seems too large to visualize while giving the
reader the space to think, respond” (170). Feinstein’s remark certainly rings true with
“The Beast & Burden”: on the first reading of the poem the clusters of images are so
overwhelming that the reader needs space and time (perhaps even several years, as
in my case) to respond.

That “The Beast & Burden: Seven Improvisations” directly relies on jazz structures
is explicit in the title. The seven parts of the poem are treated as seven parts of the
musical performance: “Seven Improvisations” on the same theme. What is perhaps
less obvious is that the “burden” in the title also constitutes a reference to African-
American music. According to Craig Hansen Werner, “burden” is one of the basic
elements of gospel music, in which both blues and jazz are deeply rooted:

If the blues impulse can be described as a three-stage secular
process—brutal experience, lyrical expression, affirmation—then
the gospel impulse can be described in parallel terms derived
from the sacred vocabularies of the African-American church:
the burden, bearing witness, the vision of (universal) salvation.
Bearing witness to his/her experience of the “burden,” the gos-
pel artist—possessed by a “Spirit” transcending human categorization—communicates a vision affirming the possibility of salvation for any person willing, as Forrest phrases it, to “change their name.” Whether phrased as “burden” or “brutal experience,” as “near tragic, near-comic lyricism” or as “bearing witness,” as existential “affirmation” or spiritual “vision,” the blues/gospel process provides a foundation for the jazz artist’s exploration of new possibilities for self and community. (253)

Through the lens of the above description we can see that in his title, like a jazz musician improvising on popular musical motifs, Komunyakaa builds on the common English phrase “the beast of burden” to mark the gospel/blues/jazz theme of brutal experience as the key to his poem. The other part of the title, “the beast,” might be read as an ironic reference to the discourse of slavery and racism, which dehumanizes black people to the status of mere animals. Thus, Komunyakaa’s title establishes the poem as an imitation or a version of musical composition which improvises on the theme of black identity, defined first and foremost by the experience of “burden.” It is useful to notice that the inseparability of the beast and burden is emphasized in the title by Komunyakaa’s choice of conjunction “&” in favor of the longer “and.”

It is impossible to overlook the fact that the main concepts of Gilroy’s theory of identity can already be found at this early point in “The Beast & Burden: Seven Improvisations.” The poem’s title introduces at the outset the image of the “changing same:” with seven improvisations we are going to experience seven mutations of black identity, of which the core, “burden,” will remain the same. Moreover, Komunyakaa’s indication of the gospel/jazz/blues theme of the brutal experience as the key to the poem confirms Gilroy’s claim that the memory of “racial terror” and oppression forms the main unifying force for the cultures of the black Atlantic. As we find out throughout the reading of the poem, the seven parts of “The Beast & Burden” indeed constitute seven varied images of black identity and its relation to “burden” in a transnational context. The black experience of the “racial terror,” which transcends the boundaries of the nation-state, is introduced already in the first improvisation, which evokes the image of Johannesburg, the South African city known for the ruthless and often violent politics of apartheid, which was practiced there for ninety years until 1994. This first improvisation, titled “The Vicious,” contains some of the most violent images in the poem: fear that feels like a needle thread through the bones, and that undergoes transformation into a syringe and a stiletto; a Spanish garrote, used for executions, which, when juxtaposed with the prison image of a sheet-metal door, makes even “a blue feather” seem like an instrument of torture; finally, blackout, which, while evoking film techniques, may also refer to a loss of consciousness.

After this violent opening, the first image of the second improvisation moves the reader across the Atlantic from South Africa to the American South. The word “Scalawag” in the first line of the “Decadent” improvisation activates a complex net of connotations related to “brutal experience,” which includes slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. As the imagery of this part of “The Beast & Burden” suggests, Herr Scalawag is in fact the white Southerner in the North, enchanted by the “decadent” atmosphere of Harlem bars: late-night dances, sexual games, alcohol,
music, and the performances of Josephine Baker. The “burden” motif is evoked in this improvisation through the skillful metaphor of Herr Scalawag’s “smile working / like a time-released / Mickey Finn.” Like a drug, “a mickey,” slipped cunningly into somebody’s drink, Herr Scalawag’s smile reveals its harmful effects only after some time. His embracing of African-American culture proves to be superficial and fake, like the paper flower he holds in his hands. When the black subject realizes that he has been misreading the white Southerners’ “come-on,” the awareness of the superficiality of white people’s interest becomes a painful experience of epistemic violence.

The third improvisation, “The Esoteric,” presents a version of black identity reminiscent of what Homi Bhaba calls “the mimic man.” The persona’s “burden” in this improvisation is actually the lack of identity: he feels somebody else’s grief, steals somebody else’s expressions, cherishes the Bible, from which his own name has been crossed out. He is merely a shadow mirroring somebody else’s life. Such imagery evokes the concept of black identity shaped exclusively by the “white man’s standards,” identity “civilized” only to become the perfect imitation. At the same time, however, this identity is esoteric to the white man, who cannot see past the superficial mimicry to notice the black man’s search for his own idiom.

The fourth improvisation directs its focus toward a woman, initially presented in the traditional feminine role of “emissary to the broken,” then, shown half-absently engaged in a sexual act, and finally portrayed in an ambiguous position of control: knowing “every doubtful wish” inside the beast’s (clearly marked here as masculine) “housebroken head.” This “Sanctimonious” improvisation brings to mind another common theme of African-American music, which can be perceived as one of the aspects of the “burden” of the poem. Michael Denning, in the chapter of The Cultural Front devoted to blues, singles out the theme of love and mistreatment as the central one in blues songs, and, at the same time, as an allegory for the love-hate relationship between the black people and the American state (344–345). Gilroy, in his book, points in the same direction when he quotes Al Hibbler’s definition of impulses instigating the blues creativity: “Hibbler’s list contains three items, offered, we are told, in the order of importance: ‘having been hurt by a woman, being brought up in that old time religion and knowing what that slavery shit is all about’” (202). Consequently, Komunyakaa’s image of a woman who sanctimoniously performs her “charity work” of love and sex in order to gain full access to and manipulate the “beast’s” mind might be read as yet another blues allegory, which exposes the hypocrisy of the state in its occasionally favorable treatment of African Americans.

Commenting on the love theme in blues, Gilroy demonstrates that the particular treatment of guilt, suffering, and reconciliation, expressed through the love allegory, proves that blues forms, rather than promoting vindictiveness, reflect “a process of identity construction” and “affirmation of racialised being at its most intently felt” (202). This affirmation entails the acceptance of inconsistencies and interruptions in experience, embracing “syncopated temporality,” a different rhythm of living and being, and what Ellison calls a sense of never being “quite on the beat,” all of which is reflected in the rhythms of black music. In Komunyakaa’s poem such affirmation of “racialised being” is expressed in improvisation six and in the epilogue. While the fifth improvisation, “Vindictive,” echoes the earlier images of “burden,” imprison-
ment, torture ("tabulated spine"), hypocritical smiles, and deceitful kisses, the sixth improvisation, "Exorcism," portrays a full merging of the beast and the burden. After the transformations of improvisations one through five, the beast achieves his seemingly final identity; the brutal experience proves so overwhelming that the beast becomes the burden:

Forced to use his weight perfectly against himself, the beast is transmogrified into the burden & locked in wooden stocks braced by a cross to bear.

As other elements of the beast’s identity, "geranium scented melancholia," "lost memories," and "notes of bliss" are "exorcised" from the self, leaving the brutal experience as the only defining characteristic, we have a sense of what Werner (after Ellison) defines as "near-tragic, near-comic lyricism," or "bearing witness." 5 Through an ironic image of a miracle—"transmogrification into the burden"—readers witness a transformation of the beast’s life into pure suffering.

However, in "Epilogue" the identity of the beast transformed (seemingly) forever into the burden changes once again. In a half-mocking reference to America’s founding slogan, e pluribus unum, Komunyakaa stresses the multiplicity in "one-ness." There is no longer the beast inadvertently transmuted into the burden. Instead, there is a communion in which the beast and the burden take equal part, both through acts of love and acts of violence. This final improvisation is indeed parallel to the vision of "salvation," mentioned by Werner as another characteristic of the gospel impulse. "Epilogue" abounds in mystical images of a cosmic intercourse; the union between "Tiger lily & screwworm" results in "bloodstar & molecular burning kiss;" it brings about capitalized "Conception," and entanglement between "cock & heart." This final act of communion places in mutual encounter such fundamental, though opposing, concepts as grief and joy, glory and defeat, birth and death. The final word of "Epilogue," "dream," again activates in readers’ minds an extensive net of historical connotations related to the African-American struggle against oppression. This time, however, the dream of communion and equality is defined as "a centaur’s future perfect dream" that is "almost immortal" (my emphasis). In Komunyakaa’s composition, the gospel belief in immortality has been permeated by doubt, and yet the vision of the future perfect society is still being dreamed by the beast, who in the process of improvisation and constant transformation has become "a centaur," at least a half-human creature.

The above discussion of consecutive improvisations in "The Beast & Burden" demonstrates that Komunyakaa’s use of the themes and structures of gospel/blues/jazz has allowed him to express black identity as marked by "the changing same" of black experience, underlain by the memory of brutality and oppression. To use Ellison’s terms from Shadow and Act, Komunyakaa managed to produce a "true jazz moment," which achieves its climax in "an art of individual assertion within and against the group," in the performer’s definition of his identity "as individual, as
member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (234). However, even though Komunyakaa in “The Beast & Burden” weaves the improvisations from the tradition and memory common to the black community, it is impossible to overlook the fact that the vision of identity that emerges from the lines of the poem is strongly punctuated by hybridity.

The very images of transmogrification, communion, entanglement, and interlocking that dominate the last two parts of the poem, as well as the final image of the centaur, suggest that the concept of a hybrid is an appropriate lens through which to perceive black identity. Also, the shifts of perspective throughout the poem indicate that “the beast” is truly its own self when the common black experience becomes fertilized with other cultural influences. “The Vicious” improvisation opens with the point of view of a presumably black victim of South African oppression, who, significantly, experiences “Blackout.” After the pause following the blackout, the figure that emerges in the second part of the improvisation seems to be white. He sits “under a floodlight,” wearing combat boots, which suggests his involvement with the South African army; he is reading a seventeenth-century English poet, Lord Rochester, and is accompanied by a dog named Sirius, the Greek label for the Dog Star.

The visual layout of the first improvisation, a long line that separates the black and the white personae and the two closest words “Blackout” and “floodlight,” immediately suggests Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness: two visions in one mind and one community, divided by the Veil or by the color line. However, despite abundant images of duality in the poem, the identity of the beast throughout Komunyakaa’s improvisations goes beyond simple double-ness. The second improvisation focuses on a white Southerner who in a trans-racial and transsexual dance imitates Josephine Baker. Other versions of the identity that Komunyakaa submits to poetic transformations include: “a ghost puppet” ready to absorb multiple characteristics from the surrounding world; a woman whose identity oscillates between “the sister” and “the bitch,” and who becomes united in a sexual act with a male “born loser”; and finally “Smiley, the jailer,” whose race is difficult to define, but who seems to have experienced oppression as he exercises control over “the prisoner / on the cell floor” out of vindictiveness.

Apart from shifts in perspective, another marker of hybridity of the identity on which Komunyakaa improvises in “The Beast & Burden” is montage. In his discussion of hip-hop, Gilroy points out that montage, by juxtaposing diverse and dissimilar sounds, invites us to place “an aesthetic stress . . . upon the sheer social and cultural distance which formerly separated the diverse elements now dislocated into novel meanings” (104). In “The Beast & Burden” the most conspicuous juxtaposition is that of the sacred and the profane, the high and the low discourses: “candlelight & crab lice,” “cock & heart,” “beauty & ugliness,” “wooden stocks” and “a cross,” “gut string” and “lost memories,” “charisma” and “dust,” “mystical sleephold” and the physical repulsiveness of “a carbuncle.” However, the cultural and social distance between diverse concepts, which makes montage a unique aesthetic experience, is emphasized even more strongly when Komunyakaa introduces distinctive elements of European culture into his jazz-blues composition. As I have already mentioned, in the first improvisation, he dislocates poems by a seventeenth-century English poet,
Callaloo

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, into the South African landscape of Johannesburg. In the second improvisation he places the famous lines from Shakespeare’s Tempest—“We are such stuff / As dreams are made on”—in the carnivalesque context of Harlem bars. In the fifth improvisation he sets the music of Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung in the corridor of a (presumably) American jail.

Dislocating the elements of European culture, Komunyakaa simultaneously strips them of their superior, elitist status. A seemingly sophisticated act of “reading My Lord Rochester / to a golden sky over Johannesburg” reveals its other side when we realize that Lord Rochester authored very witty but extremely obscene, practically pornographic, satirical poems and became legendary in literary circles for his religious conversion as he lay dying of syphilis. The merging of the sacred and the profane in the figure of Wilmott points to the hybrid character of European expressive forms themselves. In the context of South Africa, on the other hand, his evocation of Wilmott, known also for his criticism of Charles II, accentuates the corruption of Johannesburg’s white governors, who created the politics of apartheid out of greed for the city’s gold, ironically referred to in the poem through the image of “golden sky.” Thus, “The Vicious” improvisation throws the European culture off its traditional pedestal, turning it simply into a resource that can be used freely in transcultural contexts. It is also for this reason that Komunyakaa takes the star labeled by the Western culture as Sirius literally off the sky and turns it into a simple dog, licking a soldier’s boots.

In “The Decadent” improvisation Shakespeare undergoes a similar process of “desacralization.” Like in a jazz composition, the lines of the original song—Shakespeare’s lines—are not repeated in an identical form, but broken, remade and connected with new sounds. Thus, Prospero’s words “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on” become re-created by Komunyakaa in the image of Herr Scalawag “reduced from flesh / into the stuff / dreams are made of” (my emphases). The contemporary, colloquial meaning of “the stuff” and the use of the preposition “of,” more appropriate in modern English than “on,” convert Shakespeare’s message into a language accessible to the average reader. However, despite the change of diction, the core meaning of Prospero’s remark is transferred to Komunyakaa’s poem. In The Tempest, Prospero utters the above lines to Ferdinand and Miranda in order to teach them that everything that surrounds them—the palaces, the servants, the island, even their own lives—is not reality but merely a theatrical performance. Herr Scalawag’s dance is also simply an act in the theater of imagination. Using the transformed lines of Shakespeare’s Prospero, Komunyakaa indicates to his readers that his own poem, like The Tempest, is not a fixed form forever frozen in its meaning but a performance always open to new re-creations on the stage of the mind.

Komunyakaa’s evocation of The Ring of the Nibelung in the context of a dirty cell floor, crab lice, and a repulsive jailer, apart from dislocating Wagner’s opera from its traditionally high context, also points to the performance function of “The Beast & Burden.” The Ring of the Nibelung is one of the first modern compositions that combine spectacle, drama, dance, and music to express allegorical meanings on multiple levels. The work is also one of the first operas in which Wagner used his famous structure of a leitmotif. Since in popular definition the main functions of a leitmotif
are allusion to dramatic events and transformation or continual modification of the theme, Komunyakaa’s use of *The Ring* within his gospel/jazz/blues composition points to the similarities between black and white musical expressions. Like Wagner’s opera, Komunyakaa’s poem is also a spectacle, the main purpose of which is to allude to dramatic events of black brutal experience and to introduce constant modifications of this theme through improvisation. Putting the opera and gospel/jazz/blues together in a new meaning, Komunyakaa indicates that white and non-white expressions can constitute sources of cultural exchange for one another.

The performance character of “The Beast & Burden” is accentuated by Komunyakaa not only through references to performance expressions borrowed from European culture but also through multiple and varied images of spectacle, which permeate the poem. “The Beast & Burden” contains references to costume (Herr Scalawag wearing “Miss Misery’s / spike heels”; Smiley, the jailer, connected with “blameful mask” and “white glove”) and theatrical props (“fake flower,” “paper rose,” “ghost puppet”). The poem’s personae are often portrayed as dancing (Herr Scalawag’s “come-on” and “high step”; the woman’s “rocking”; the final “waltz” and “slow dance” of the beast and the burden), humming (Herr Scalawag and Smiley), or singing (the “Esoteric” persona sings “canticle” and “cleftsong” to the accompaniment of “hearttriff”). According to Gilroy, gesture, kinesis, and costume—those inseparable elements of performance—provide additional venues for the expression of self and allow the audience to experience the performer’s identity in the most intense ways (78). However, since another function of all the elements mentioned above is to invite the audience into the active participation in the performance, the identity of the performing musician appears not only intense in its self-expression but also open to expansion through an exchange with the audience. As Werner points out in his introduction to *Playing the Changes*, jazz performance provides the musician with “a way of exploring implications, of realizing the relational possibilities of the self, and of expanding the consciousness of the self and community” (xxi). This process of exploration, realization, and expansion can occur thanks to the interaction with the audience, which Werner describes in the traditional African-American terms of “call and response.”

Werner reminds us that, at its West African roots, call and response always begins with the voice of the leader expressing himself or herself through a traditional song, story, or image related to a shared communal history. If the community recognizes and shares the experience evoked by the call, it responds with another, usually also traditional, phrase, which either supports the initial call or presents a different perspective on it. In his further explication of call and response, Werner demonstrates this tradition’s power to constantly reshape the community:

> Whether it affirms or critiques the initial call . . . the response enables the leader to go on exploring the implications of the material. Rich in political implications, this cultural form enables both individual and community to define themselves, to validate their experiences in opposition to dominant social forces. When working most effectively, this process requires individuals not to seek a synthesis, to deny the extreme aspects of their own
experiences, but to assert their subjectivity in response to other, equally personal and equally extreme, assertions of experience. Call and response, then, is African-American analysis: a process that, by admitting diverse voices and diverse experiences, supports a more inclusive critique than any individual analysis. (xviii)

As already demonstrated in this discussion, Komunyakaa’s call, like the call of the West African leader, follows the traditional forms of expression of the African-American community and relates to the shared communal experience of “burden.” However, the hybrid quality of “The Beast & Burden,” achieved through trans-racial and transsexual shifts of identity as well as through the techniques of montage and performance, demands of the readers’ response not only an assertion or a critique of the call but also contribution to the evoked experience and, consequently, co-creation of the poem itself.

Such a call for poetic co-creation, to paraphrase Henderson’s epigraph, results from Komunyakaa’s poem’s resistance to “making sense.” The juxtaposition of culturally distant concepts and images without clearly drawn connections between them and the clustering of metaphors too complex to grasp bring about an effect of incompleteness, which can apparently be remedied by the reader’s active participation. Komunyakaa himself, in the short essay “Improvisation/Revision,” expresses his poetic philosophy of favoring incomplete forms:

After I have written everything down, sometimes hundreds of lines that meditate on the poem’s central subject, I begin circling words and phrases that seem to undermine the poem’s emotional symmetry; I am eager to find the elastic pattern and tonal shape within the words. The surprises. A composite of surprises. . . . Revision means to re-see, and, at times, it seems more accurate to say re-live. The poem evolves from a body place. The intellect hums there in the juices and muscle of imagery, churning forth questions: Can it begin here and work backwards? How many ways can this tune be played? Bodily and intellectually, an image or linguistic nerve ending has to feel right, resisting any pre-cast mold. For me it is always a cutting back, a honing that compresses energy, as I hope for a last line that is an open-ended release. Working back up through the poem, listing all the possible closures, I search for a little door I can leave ajar. (36)

Like Gilroy’s “radically unfinished forms” of black musical expressions, which are open to the influences of other cultures by virtue of their incompleteness, the “doors left ajar” in “The Beast & Burden” let even distant cultural responses enter the poem’s already hybrid universe. In fact, the hybridity of “The Beast & Burden” makes it clear that Komunyakaa’s call is not directed only toward the African-American or black diaspora community. My own reaction to “The Beast & Burden” in 1998 can serve as an example of a culturally distant response, evoked by music, rich imagery, and the
theme of suffering, all of which allowed me to recognize the experience expressed in
the poem despite my lack of extensive knowledge of the African-American “burden.”

However, my response to Komunyakaa’s call has gone far beyond simply recog-
nizing certain elements of the evoked experience. As I have already mentioned, the
multilevel hybridity of “The Beast & Burden” and of other Komunyakaa poems
stimulated me to actively participate in the poem’s “performance.” I can best charac-
terize my participation in Komunyakaa’s poetry by referring again to Werner’s
descriptions of African-American music. Exploring the implications of call and
response, Werner quotes Alan Nadel and his discussion of the similarities between
the strategies of African-American traditions and deconstruction. For one thing,
Nadel mentions the constant undermining and reconfiguring of the audience-text-
performer relationship, which ultimately “reveal[s] the instability of the assumptions
that give each of those positions its positionalty, its center” (xix). To support the
above claim, Nadel stresses the way the “response” in a “call & response” exchange
“turns the audience into the performer,” with the result that “the authority of the
performer derives from his/her ability to shift his/her role to the audience, i.e., to
decenter that authority” (xix). My own response to Komunyakaa’s poetry has turned
me into the performer and has shifted to me the role of authority. After reading “The
Beast & Burden” and other poems by Komunyakaa, I not only started a long and
extensive study of African-American culture and history but I also became an author
who re-created, or re-performed, Komunyakaa’s poems in my native language. Thus,
I became another originator of a call, which, in turn, has received response in my
culture, as my translations of Komunyakaa’s poems have been published in Polish
journals.

My experience with Komunyakaa’s poetry, just like Komunyakaa’s own trans-
racial, transsexual, and transnational improvisations in “The Beast & Burden” con-
firms Gilroy’s view of black identity as neither a contingent construct nor an essential
racial self. In order to give an adequate response to Komunyakaa’s call, evoked in
“The Beast & Burden” and in his other poems, I needed to learn and explore the
particularities of black experience in the United States. At the same time, however, my
cultural distance from the African-American experience did not deprive me of the
ability to improvise on the identity expressed in Komunyakaa’s poem with the
resources of my own culture. Were racial identity “a pure essence,” my translation
would not have been possible. Were identity merely “a construct,” my knowledge of
the intricacies of English would have been enough to formulate an equally intricate
and playful “Polish response” to the poem. And yet my translation experience, like
the text of “The Beast & Burden” itself, demonstrates, in accordance with Gilroy’s
theory, that identity is indeed a hybrid. Like the constantly swaying union of “the
beast & burden,” identity is a composition of asymmetrical, disparate, and open
elements that change in the same manner as the lines on which jazz performers
improvise: among the endless disarray of new sounds we still recognize the distant
and mutated “same.”
NOTES


2. The term “bifurcation” was used by Baker in “On the Criticism of Black American Literature.”


4. The main constituents of “racial terror” in the memory of black people, as defined by Gilroy, are lynching and the ontological rupture of the middle passage.

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