

Images of Disaster: Facing the Vietnam War with the Senses

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Abstract

The article sets out to analyze the manner in which Yusef Komunjakaa addresses in his poetry one of the greatest military disasters in American foreign policy – the war in Vietnam–, which he himself experienced directly, as a war correspondent. I will investigate the poet's reliance on strong, visceral images as Komunjakaa proceeded almost like a painter. I will also look into the role played by music, jazz in particular, in articulating a vision of the war which gives ample space to the reader to negotiate the images that engage all five senses. I will illustrate the fact that Komunjakaa's war poetry is characterized by more than a mere documentary drive, as one can discover healing and renewal of the self behind the apocalyptic images that describe the war.

Keywords: the Vietnam war, disaster, images, senses, the self, the other, music, tone, motif, improvisation, healing

Writing about disasters has been one of the greatest challenges writers have faced. Their approaches to this topic have differed widely, from a tendency to respond with unwords to an attempt to create images which would suggest sensory responses to tough experiences. European modernism has evinced a tendency towards negativity, as Shane Weller aptly pointed out in her study that

focuses on writers such as Frank Kafka, Paul Celan, Samuel Beckett, Maurice Blanchot or W.G. Sebald, who have responded to different types of disasters. At the opposite pole, an African-American writer such as Yusef Komunyakaa (1947-) has responded to the war disaster in which he was directly involved by employing visual and sound language meant to help the reader reconstruct the Vietnam war not only from the perspective of the American soldiers, but also from that of the native population. At the same time, the powerful images offer the reader a glimpse into the emotions experienced by the poet which intimate the possibility of self-renewal and cleansing.

Interestingly enough, Komunyakaa published his first poems about his war experiences in 1988, almost two decades after he had served as a Vietnam war correspondent (1969-1970) and later as an editor for *The Southern Cross*, a military newspaper. By that time, a lot had been written about the Vietnam war, from the *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972) collection of poetry compiled by Vietnam veterans Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry and Basil T. Paquet, to anthologies such as *Demilitarized Zone* (1976), *Carrying the Darkness* (1985) or *Unaccustomed Mercy* (1989), to a very diverse body of poetry written by women veterans, Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. All these war veterans felt the need to respond to a chapter still unresolved in American history (Buntz 228), delineating their experiences in a war which lacked the usual frontlines, and in which the well-established views about war were absent. As Veit Buntz points out, "to the individual soldiers, the war was at the same time frighteningly present and absent, without inside and outside . . . unable to hold on to a sense of preconceived reality, the immediacy of being wounded or killed further ungrounded the soldiers, causing a high level of trauma" (229). Consequently, much of the literature about the Vietnam war foregrounds trauma and its ineluctable effects on the individual.

However, what distinguishes Komunyakaa's poetry from Vietnam war literature is the fact that the poet avoids foregrounding trauma. It goes without saying that trauma infuses his poetry, that it is overpresent, and that it could not have been otherwise.

Nevertheless, the thrust of Komunyakaa's poetry is, all things considered, optimistic, turned towards a future which may be one of reconciliation. It is optimistic because it is turned towards the other. Komunyakaa does not write about the Vietnam war in abstract terms, but about how it affects the other, and, through the other, how it affects the self. In most of the poems included in *Dien Cai Dau* (*They Were Crazy* in Vietnamese), the reader can identify a pattern: the self contemplates the other (the face of the other, as Emmanuel Levinas would say) and the suffering the other undergoes is projected back on the self who is bound to carry this burden due to the fact that, having been caught in this war, he was unable to act justly.

Any discussion of Komunyakaa's war poetry should start from an understanding of the role played by poetry in relation to his war experience. The poet was unequivocal about the fact that "poetry cannot serve as an emotional bandage for the blood and guts of warfare; such an industry is doomed to dishonor the dead as well as the living" (*Condition Red* x). On the contrary, for Komunyakaa poetry is "a kind of distilled insinuation . . . a way of expanding and talking around an idea or a question" (*Condition Red* x).

Worth mentioning is the fact that the speaking persona present in the poems does not foreground himself as the central character. The poems are not about how difficult it was for the poet to be part of this war and to witness terrible scenes of suffering. It is the other's suffering which takes centre stage, it is the human costs which are emphasized, from among both the Vietnamese soldiers and the civilian population alike, as well as from the American troops. Komunyakaa does not write about the suffering of the American soldier, but most often about the suffering American soldiers inflicted on the Vietnamese population, about the suffering of the other, which inevitably affects the lyrical subject. Rarely does the speaking persona reflect on his own suffering occasioned by what he witnessed in the war and even then, it is the suffering of the other that is foregrounded.

However, in writing about disasters, wars in particular, there is always the danger “of poeticizing horror,” a problem that Carolyn Forché correctly points to, as it “resembles the problem of the photographic image that might render starvation visually appealing” (qtd. in Dowdy). Interestingly enough, Komunyakaa manages to sidestep this danger through his use of images that draw the reader inside the poem. In an interview, suggestively entitled “Still Negotiating with the Images,” taken by William Baer, Komunyakaa indicates the fact that he remembers the war through images, and this correlates with the way in which he has written his war poetry: “That’s pretty much how I remember the war – imagery that we sort of internalized, that was informed by the whole vibrations of the body” (7). Furthermore, when asked by Baer whether he created these images which often comprise incidents in order to make the reader hold on, rather than simply come up with a number of striking images, the poet suggests that for him “poetry works best when it’s aware of music and is formed from a composite of meaningful images” (7). The poet alludes in this context to his previous interest in photography and painting, which fed his preoccupation with images, but he also alludes to another vital dimension of his poetry: music. Komunyakaa subtly intimates that poetry should be “aware of music,” though what this awareness means is not explained in this interview. However, in a conversation entitled “Jazz and Poetry” with William Matthews and Robert Kelly, Komunyakaa dwells on the role music plays in his poetry, as well as on the importance of music to African Americans. Komunyakaa reaffirms the role of music as the primary means of reuniting African Americans with the future and with themselves. Thus, their inventiveness stemmed from their ability to move, improvise, and transform; it allowed them to perceive the positive even in the midst of the unpleasant. Their music evolved into a nonverbal expression of their sorrow, an argument with the odds. Even the blues dirge can be seen as an affirmation in this sense. According to Komunyakaa, music has always served as a conduit for what Houston Baker calls “the journey back,” a necessary trip

back to the place where African-American culture first began (Komunyakaa et al. 646).

Furthermore, Komunyakaa is aware of the fact that many middle-class African Americans looked down upon jazz, thinking of it as the “devil’s music” that originated in the whorehouses of Storyville (649). This was noticeable during the Harlem Renaissance, a movement defined by European standards, with several notable exceptions, among whom Langston Hughes, who acknowledged jazz and blues as major influences on him. In keeping with Komunyakaa, the true fusion of jazz and poetry occurred only in the 1960s and 1970s, when two jazz/blues philosophers, Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka emerged. Komunyakaa acknowledges the influence of jazz on him, and implicitly on his poetry. He remembers first hearing jazz as a child, on his wooden radio in 1950s Bogalusa, Louisiana: Louis Armstrong’s trumpet or a Dinah Washington ballad. They were followed by the cadence of the Bible, which he had read twice by the time he was fourteen, and gospel music, then Shakespeare, then the modernist poets. Later, in the early 1970’s, he used to listen to Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Elvin Jones, and many other progressive players, without realizing how profoundly they would influence his poetry. He confesses: “I just loved the sound” (649). However, the effect of music was long-lasting:

Music helped me free up my mind for more vivid extrusions. Jazz was just a part of my life, a continuous score to the images inside my head. It helped to expand my creative universe. It taught me I could do anything in a poem – more so than what Villon or Ginsberg taught me. The music took me back to the importance of irony, to how the dynamics of insinuation work, particularly in African-American poetry. Jazz is tonal insinuation, and it showed me how to make writing fun. (Komunyakaa et al. 649-650)

In a conversation with Jacob Wilkenfeld on “Celebration and Confrontation in Walt Whitman,” Komunyakaa explains the way in which the jazz musician works: “The jazz musician has a musical phrase or melody that expands, deconstructs musically, and he puts

it back together, reconstructs” (*Condition Red* 168). The explanation is interesting because it helps the reader discover this pattern in Komunyakaa’s poetry. The poet further comments on the structure of his poems which are “usually a composite of short lines. I think that it has something to do with contemporary time, a kind of vertical plunge, with the shorter lines coming out of the Beat movement, reading some of the poets associated with that movement. The long line for me invites more of a meditation, and not that same kind of vertical urgency” (*Condition Red* 173).

Komunyakaa further emphasizes the role played by improvisation in his poetry, both in the actual process of creation and in the product itself. He admits being influenced by the whole spectrum of jazz, be-bop in particular, since “listening to be-bop released me from that whole lineal connection to everything. I could skip around. I could improvise with words and sound – not necessarily to imitate what the musicians were actually doing, but to discover, again, a direction I could take” (Komunyakaa et al. 651). Komunyakaa points to the importance of sound in his poetry:

I think sound is very important – rhythm – a new kind of meter that can approximate our contemporary landscape. And also, you have to realize that there is a kind of internal and psychological landscape that one gets to. This is not necessarily thought out, but is something that is achieved improvisationally. (Komunyakaa et al. 651)

In order to feel this rhythm, one should read out the poems, in the same way in which Komunyakaa has read out the poems to discover what works and what does not.

The constant experimentation with music leads Komunyakaa to a different perception of poetry, in keeping with which what matters is the tonal not the emotional thread, though the latter has its own relevance: “Often we hear about the emotional thread holding poems together. But, as in jazz, we also have to think about a tonal thread holding the poem together, whereby we are able to

make leaps not necessarily through logic, but through feeling” (Komunyakaa et al. 654-655).

The tone of Komunyakaa’s poems is usually related and directly influenced by the first poem that he wrote for each collection. Thus, he admitted that the central tone of each of his collections had been dictated by a “first” poem. In *Dien Cai Dau*, this “first” poem was “Somewhere Near Phu Bai” (*Condition Red* 188). This statement offers the reader a clue to decoding the poems, or rather to perceiving the poems in the right key, if we are to stay in the field of music. To this, one should add rhythm, shape, and sensory description that come together in Komunyakaa’s poetry, to take the reader on a journey that will affect them profoundly.

Though not occupying the first position in his Vietnam war collection of poems, “Somewhere Near Phu Bai” seems to have been the first poem Komunyakaa wrote about his war experiences, after many years in which he refused to talk about the war.¹ In the poem, a soldier on watch battles sleep, while he counts the claymores and looks about the base to make sure nothing is hidden in the shadows. The speaking persona sounds insecure and unprepared, and this is only normal, considering that the Vietnam War combatants were very young.

The first stanza brings about a feeling of unease in the reader. The moon is likened to a saw, that “cuts through / the night trees like a circular saw” (*Dien Cai Dau* 7), and the stars are depicted as being as painful as blue steel. The soldier leans and points at whatever, giving the impression of a listless watchman, worrying that the Vietnamese, who are cunning enough to slip into camp and aim in your direction, will strike. This ongoing worry is evident to the reader in the next stanzas: “I don’t dare blink an eye. . . // If I hear a noise . . . / will I push the button / & blow myself away?” (*Dien Cai Dau* 7). Like in music, the motif of the moon is repeated. These two stanzas also feature the moon, which is compared to a saw, a bomb, and a stealthy object that moves between the woods. In the twilight, the moon rules the sky and is ever-present, much like the troops’ subconscious terror of the Vietnamese. But before he knows it, the guard nods off and puts himself in danger. The

melody ends on a quivering low note. The motif of the moon and of darkness will be employed, however, in later poems.

Thus, one of the first nightmares from his past that Komunyakaa confronts is the fear of the unknown and the terror of being attacked. Equally unnerving is the memory of what the poet lived on the front, and *Dien Cai Dau* includes a number of poems about the Vietnam war that offer the reader a disorienting and agonizing exposure to wartime sentiments. Komunyakaa tries to come to terms with the events he experienced on the front, and with the rage and anguish that permeate the works of many other poets. Megan A. Moore makes an interesting point when stating that the structure of *Dien Cai Dau* is crucial to its impact in the sense that “[t]he reader is drawn in in the first moments of the first poem. The journey of the inexperienced reader, unfamiliar with the subject, the poet, the style, parallels that of the inexperienced soldier, unfamiliar with the terrain, the culture, the combat, the violence” (11). The strategies by means of which Komunyakaa draws the reader in are worth analyzing, as most of them originate in music, leading to what critic Tao Huang called soundscapes – the encoding and orchestration of different sounds between the poetic lines, in order to form sui generis soundscapes that are imbued with historical, social and cultural signifiers (1941).

Thus, musical strategies are successfully employed in “You and I Are Disappearing,” in which the poet seems to be at a loss for words, creating the impression that he is unable to describe what he remembers. He sets out to delineate the image of a girl consumed by the flames brought about by a firebomb called napalm that is alluded to in the poem “Report from the Skull’s Diorama.” The poet expresses his ambivalent feelings – guilt, horror, terror – at the sight of the girl burning, while the soldiers were helplessly watching the scene: the “girl still burning inside / [his] head” (*Dien Cai Dau* 17). In order to do so, he creates a cascade of very pungent similes, all beginning with the verb “to burn.” The repetition of the verb suggests the inability of the poet to come up with the right simile, acting like a crescendo that calls for a climax, which, however, never arrives. The visual images combine with auditory

(“like a sack of dry ice”), olfactive (“She rises like dragonsmoke”) and tactile ones, in an attempt to suggest what the experience must have felt like for the woman who was tormented in this abominable way. The final simile employs biblical imagery – “She burns like a burning bush” (*Dien Cai Dau* 17) – to intimate the never-ending character of the trauma that is going to affect those who experienced Vietnam. Worth pointing out is also the crescendo that Komunyakaa resorts to in the images he creates, the climax being the image of “the burning bush.” The woman burns “like paper,” “like foxfire,” “like a cattail torch,” “like oil on water,” “like a shot glass of vodka,” “like a field of poppies” (*Dien Cai Dau* 17) – images that all suggest flammable materials that ignite easily and that a reader can picture, and that will stay in one’s mind for a long while. The author combines these images with the piercing cry the speaker brings down from the hills. Being the very first word of the poem, the cry alerts the reader to what the poet is going to disclose, making the images of the poem more memorable. The final metaphor – “the burning bush” – points to the huge degradation humanity has undergone, from the holiness of the divine presence that revealed itself to human beings, to human beings destroying and killing other human beings in the name of vain ambitions. The poet employs short and pungent sentences, made up of one predicate, with only two exceptions, when references are made to the American soldiers who do nothing to save the woman.

The trope of repetition that Komunyakaa makes use of in this poem is a technique clearly associated with jazz music. As a matter of fact, the poet had admitted that the rhythm of the poem “came out of listening to Thelonious Monk. Monk would give you enough space to fit your heart into: repetition with slight variations, playing with pauses and silences, an unspoken call-and-response” (Komunyakaa et al. 656). Komunyakaa was very much drawn to Monk’s “jagged tonality,” to the way in which he wrote his music: “how he was able to leave a piece unresolved – a door left ajar that invited you in as a participant. I try to write poems like that” (Komunyakaa et al. 656).

In “Re-creating the Scene,” Komunyakaa foregrounds the violent act of the raping of a Vietnamese woman by three American soldiers and her subsequent murder. As Angela Salas points out, Komunyakaa “began a strikingly active imaginative engagement with the perspectives of other people” (*Dien Cai Dau* 38). The scene is re-created, again, with the help of intense images, which suggest not only the violence perpetrated on the woman but also the racial divide in America. The Black soldier is painfully aware of this divide in the moments when soldiers lose their humanity and stoop to actions which are beneath them. While “The Confederate flag / flaps from a radio antenna” (*Dien Cai Dau* 20), the Vietnamese woman is taken inside the tank and abused by the soldiers, despite the fact that she “is shielding a baby in her arms,” who, at the end of the poem, “makes a fist & grabs at the air, / searching for a breast” (*Dien Cai Dau* 20). Her complaint is soon forgotten as “money changed hands,” while, according to rumors, she is already buried.

The scene is re-created in the present tense which brings things in front of the reader’s eyes, giving them immediacy. Auditory images open the poem – “the metal door groans,” anticipating the rapists’ future groans. Visual similes point to the woman’s helplessness, as she is “like a torn water flower” floating on a sea of rage, in opposition to the soldiers who are referred to as “gods” who dispose of the lives of the native population as they desire, despite the fact that these are war crimes. Rules are bent to one’s heart’s desire. “While these US soldiers serving in Vietnam may be the victims of a racist and classist nation, they also do irreparable damage to those who are smaller and weaker than they are, they shore up their wounded self-regard through rape” (Salas 38). The metaphor of the sun “fizz[ing] like a pill in a glass / of water” may well suggest the woman’s excruciating pain that nothing can alleviate.

Komunyakaa brings, thus, in front of the reader’s eyes the experience of a character who is rarely foregrounded in American literature, while also intimating the impossibility of truly “knowing this experience” (Salas 38). Furthermore, as Salas argues,

Komunyakaa's persona, a military journalist, like the poet himself, stays outside of these events and never professes to comprehend anything, from the soldiers' reasons to the victim's eventual fate (38). The details he offers are all assumptions, as the reader can infer from the title. However, the poem is a highly unsettling one due to the powerful images it creates. The attitude of the soldiers who witness the scene does nothing but add to the intensity of the scene.

What is interesting in Komunyakaa's poetry is the fact that, in spite of the "ability to incorporate the unsuspecting reader into the poem" (Moore 12-13), the poet is able to bring about a multitude of feelings, even opposite ones, at the same time. He manages to adopt different viewpoints without losing his own voice, thereby fostering an atmosphere where the enemy, who is perceived as the other, is to be both feared and respected (Moore 12-13). This is very much the case of the woman in the above-analyzed poem, as well as of the men in "Tu Do Street," in which, yet again, an auditory image opens the poem, adumbrating its theme which has to do with divisions and various types of (color) lines. Interestingly enough, "[m]usic divides the evening" (*Dien Cai Dau* 29) at the beginning of the poem, this constituting the background against which a black man walks into a segregated bar in Saigon, fully aware of the fact that he is crossing the color line. This crossing prompts a meditation on the many lines one artificially draws in order to prohibit others to enter one's space, or simply in order to assert one's superiority: "I close my eyes & can see / men drawing lines in the dust" (*Dien Cai Dau* 29). The paradox lies in the fact that only when one closes his eyes and starts pondering on things can one begin to understand the lines that end in divisions which ultimately generate disasters:

There's more than a nation
 Inside us, as black & white
 Soldiers touch the same lovers
 Minutes apart, tasting
 Each other's breath,
 Without knowing these rooms

Run into each other like tunnels
Leading to the the underworld. (*Dien Cai Dau* 29)

Baer correctly argues that “this is an amazing image of our connected humanity” (9), in which the connection with “the underworld” can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a harsh reminder of death, which should prompt us to show more kindness, and, on the other hand, as a pessimistic reflection of the human inclination to self-destruct. In response to Baer’s statement, Komunyakaa admitted to the existence of “many symbolic underworlds in Vietnam – the underground tunnel systems, some of the bars, and the whole psychic space of the GI – a kind of underworld populated by ghosts and indefinable images” (9). It follows from here that “it was a place of emotional and psychological flux where one was trying to make sense out of the world and one’s place in that world” (9). This brought about a fluctuation between the internal world and the external space which translated into “an effort to deal with oneself, and with the other GIs, the Vietnamese, and even the ghosts that we’d managed to create of ourselves” (9). Consequently, for Komunyakaa, this was “a very complex picture of the situation of the GI – going back and forth, condemned in a way to trek back and forth between those emotional demarcations while trying to make sense out of things” (9).

In a conversation with Mena Mitrano, Komunyakaa points out how soldiers were divided “by race and the culture of social apartheid in America” (524). They had internalized it, and it had become part of their background. They were also divided within their collective psyche, but, interestingly enough, they were brought together through this lady of the night, this nameless person. They depended on her to keep them human. Komunyakaa also discloses what he found out years later when he visited Vietnam (in 1990), namely the fact that these women gathered information from G.I.s, and this made local missions simpler. Furthermore, Mitrano makes a very interesting point when alluding to the strange way in which

Komunyakaa addressed a very political matter such as the war in Vietnam through the perspective of intimacy and sexuality (523).

The same metaphor of connection is foregrounded in “Jungle Surrender,” where the poetic persona contemplates the idea of his becoming a prisoner of war in a picture by Don Cooper. Visual images create an eerie atmosphere, in which the prisoner “sleepwalks a labyrinth of violet / measuring footsteps from one tree to the next, / knowing we’re all somewhat connected” (*Dien Cai Dau* 37). Komunyakaa links the destinies of Americans and Vietnamese, suggesting our shared humanity, beyond the dividing lines we artificially impose on others.

This connection is also powerfully suggested in “We Never Know,” in which sharp kinetic images help the reader visualize the scene of the death of a Vietnamese soldier shot by an American platoon. Death is imagined like a dance in which the soldier is caught: “He danced with tall grass / for a moment, like he was swaying / with a woman” (*Dien Cai Dau* 26). This kinetic image becomes a very unsettling one, once the speaking persona reaches out towards the soldier, and, in a gesture of humanity, turns him over, “so he wouldn’t be kissing the ground” (*Dien Cai Dau* 26), after having pulled from his fingers the crumbling photograph of the woman with whom he had fallen in love.

“A Break from the Bush” is written in a lighter mode only to strike a blow when looking into a future unbeknownst to the G.I.s. The poet describes a time of quiet, when the American soldiers enjoy a break from the war. Most of them play volleyball, pretending they are somewhere else, while the point man buries himself up to his neck in sand. However, even if the poet takes a break from brutal descriptions of the war, he casts a dark shadow over the poem by anticipating the future death of one of the G.I.s: “CJ, /who in three days will trip / a fragmentation mine” (*Dien Cai Dau* 27). For now, the poem ends with him laughing, “running after the ball / into the whitecaps,” but the image is all the more pungent as laughter will be replaced by deep suffering.

However, if these poems offer glimpses of Vietnam, his best-known poem about the Vietnam war – “Facing It” – is set in a

different background and comes up with different images. The idea of disaster is suggested, again, by a combination of sensory images which point to the trauma suffered by the speaking persona. The background is represented by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial – its black granite acting like a mirror which reflects and, simultaneously, distorts things. As matter of fact, there are mirrors everywhere, the poet playing with them and suggests that truth is relative, that there is a doubleness in everything, that mirrors distort and that reflections are everything we get in life.

The poem operates with a series of juxtapositions which reflect and refract the feelings expressed by the black speaker. Past and present, night and day, the self and the other, the dead and the living, help the lyrical I engage with “the past presence and present absence that visitors encounter at the Memorial” (Eastman 50). These dichotomies highlight the paradoxical nature of the Memorial, which, as Susan Eastman suggests, “reflects the past war and the war dead while simultaneously reflecting present visitors” (50).

The poem plays with the past and the present, invoking one and reflecting the other, reflecting the past through the mirror of memory, while literally mirroring the present through the granite material. The lyrical I is simultaneously caught in the past and living in the present, inside and outside the memorial. He is both a physical presence – “I’m flesh” and a palpable absence – “my clouded reflection eyes me,” caught between past and present, between the need to forget and the impulse to remember a past which still hurts. Alliterations of various kinds captivate the reader and ensnare them in the poem by establishing the tone for its melody. The sounds in the poem pull us even deeper in. The poem’s formal and acoustic tactics successfully lure the reader into its world of doubling, wherein we are both “stone” and “flesh,” as well as the “I” and our own selves.

As countless Vietnam veterans, he half expects to find his name on the memorial. Therefore, he touches a name on the wall and is instantly drawn into the past, into “the booby trap’s white flash ” (*Dien Cai Dau* 63). The flashback slides into the present,

which the poem delineates as a reflection of the past. Visual images create the illusion of “[n]ames shimmer[ing] on a woman’s blouse,” but also of “a white vet’s image” floating close to the lyrical I. Interestingly enough, the metaphors the poet creates are related to binaries such as black and white, this having obvious racial implications, (“my black face,” – “a white vet”), night and day (“the profile of night” – “morning”), light and darkness (“depending on the light/ to make a difference,” – “clouded reflection”). The most salient binary – the one between the black speaker and the white veteran – has elicited many discussions, given the high degree of ambiguity of the image of the white vet who has “lost his right arm / inside the stone.” It is not clear whether his arm was amputated, or whether the memorial has dismembered the white vet, making his arm invisible. It is not clear, either, whether the white vet notices the black vet, or whether the latter is still invisible, even after fighting in Vietnam next to the white soldiers. The black vet describes himself as a “window,” which might point in the direction of invisibility. The white soldier does not look at him but through him, at a past which amputated him. However, all interpretations “depend on the light,” on what they see in the black granite of the memorial presented in the poem as an embodiment of collective memory. However, one thing is clear: the I is always reflected in the other, the I can only achieve significance through the other, no matter who or what colour he / she is.

Since this poem has been placed at the end of the collection, many have wondered whether one can find any hope for healing from the war. Critics tend to answer in the affirmative, given the final image of the poem in which the woman alluded to earlier is not erasing names (in other words, is not threatening with forgetfulness) from the memorial but “brushing a boy’s hair” (*Dien Cai Dau* 63). Thus, Kevin Stein argues that “the woman’s thoughtful, nurturing, thoroughly quotidian act of love closes the book on perhaps the most redemptive note imaginable for such a text” (557-558). The poem signals, in this way, an optimistic look at the future, “a future outside of the glass-like surface of the

Memorial and ahead of the faceless window the speaker has imagined himself to be" (558).

Despite the fact that this was one of the first poems written by Komunyakaa, the poet placed it strategically at the end, as it encapsulates his view on the war, on humanity and on the future. The poet admits that he is still affected by his war experiences; he makes efforts not to cry ("I said I wouldn't / dammit: No tears."); he admits he had suffered because of the color divide and the discrimination which was still manifest in a war in which the white soldiers fought alongside the black ones. However, Komunyakaa chooses to end the poem and the volume on an optimistic note, gazing at a future characterized by affection, by normal human relationships. As Vincente Gotera has aptly suggested, Komunyakaa's "ultimate focus is on humanity and on humaneness" (292). Humanity may be capable of horrible crimes; it may bring about terrible disasters resulting in a lot of suffering, but there is still hope in humanity, as long as mothers continue to love their children, as long as human nature does not change irreversibly for the worse.

Note:

¹ Worth mentioning in this context is the fact that Komunyakaa included poems about his war experiences in other collections of poetry as well, for instance the poem "Poplars" in *Thieves of Paradise* (1998).

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