1997

A Journey With No End

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My first reaction to this book was that it was all right for me to be afraid. South Africa is anything but a safe country. When I first arrived, I was given countless lectures to watch my back, who to look out for and when to be afraid. Afraid? Who did they think they were talking to? But I soon learned of the violence that grows from fear. South Africans turned to violence because they could not understand one another, and they grew to fear each other. It was from this violence that my own fears arose. If the daily news reports were not enough to scare me, my friends had their own personal experiences to share. But Malan scared me the most. And who was I afraid of? This was a country where everybody hated everybody. Whites against blacks, blacks killing blacks and whites slaughtering each other. Malan was also confused.

One minute, you'd be harrowed with guilt and bleeding for your suffering black brethren, the next, you'd recall in horror from the things they did, and from the savage lacunae that seemed to lie buried in their hearts. Youaved between extremes. Sometimes you completed the round trip in fifteen minutes. (Malan 88)

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The . . . father asked the [black gang] to stay away, but they don't like being told what to do. so they throw the father into his son's grave and hit him with shovels . . . the old man eventually gives up and sits down on his dead sons coffin, cradling his bloody sons head in his hands. The [gang] buries him alive (Malan 531).

Why would blacks be fighting against one another when there is a much larger evil to overcome: the white government (this was before the abolition of apartheid). Were they stupid? They should have understood the power in numbers they had. My cultural upbringing made me think they would understand this. But for them it was a fight against tribes as well. This was something I was unable to understand due to my background. In Africa I had classes with mostly black people. I walked into one of my classes on the first day and sat alone in the upper right corner. The three other white people in the class joined me. The blacks sat in tribes, in small groups, huddled together, talking among one another. And I was in the corner with my own tribe. I began to understand, it was not about skin color. It was about culture, language and history. Why did I group an entire country of people together because they are all black? I think of everyone living in my country as American. But I soon realized that in South Africa their country does not tie people together. Instead, they are bound by the history and cultures of their tribes. And what was even stranger was that I began to learn that whites hated one another as well. The English against the Africans, it had always been that way. Where did I fit in? I was alone in this strange land of hatred. But I kept looking for the answers, I kept trying to find out if the fears in my own heart about being racist were true.

Cultural differences began to frighten me. I found the Africans to be stubborn racists, yet most of my friends were of this tribe. My illusions of grand sentiments on equality had left my mind. Soon I would have to preach them to myself. I was walking one day and a black man pulled along side me in a car. My heart raced, I looked around for safety. The man asked me where the university was, I gave him directions. He thanked me and the conversation was over. I felt silly for being afraid. A week later the same scenario occurred, yet this time the man was white. No pounding heart, I was not afraid. After I had given the man directions to the university, he began driving along side of me. He said crude, sexual things to me and exposed himself to me. I ran, and his car followed. I was afraid of a perfectly decent man because of his skin
I continued my quest for answers to my own traitor's heart. The country where nothing made sense. I hoped to plead insanity and escape the contradictions. I was brought up to believe in the American dream, and I chose, what I thought was the most just violence. My confusion had led me to become numb to violence. And Malan confused me more. He brought my fears home, he brought them to my own sacred land.

Malan ran away from his native land, South Africa, had caused him to ask too many questions he could not answer. He grew tired of the blood, tired of black and white and most of all the confusion in his own heart. He ran to America. He decided to try and find my own land for awhile. He stayed long enough to learn about our system. "Indeed, many things about the socialist constitution and different people are just that, different. But difference played in the racially stratified society. In South Africa it is hard not to become caught up in what to call black Americans. I am no longer worried about the question of allowing blacks to move to the front of the bus, use the drinking fountains, and sit alongside whites at lunch counters" (Malan 163). Rian Malan goes on to explain that the whole process is about power. Just as it is in my own country, I thought. How do I change it? Will I die in my own country with the same pathetic contradictions in my heart?

Just as Malan was always glad to leave Soweto (the largest township in South Africa), I was happy to come home. Both of our happiness stemmed from the fact that we left unharmed and moving further from the violence. I realize now that it was all right for me to be scared. It is not a safe country. My Traitor's Heart helped me to see that being afraid is not the problem. The problem is letting the skin color or the tribe of a person direct my fears. Instead I need to learn where the violence and hatred emerge and act accordingly. I want to share one more story from Malan's tales of ordinary murder. A savage white Afrikaner beat a black man within an inch of his life during a barbecue. A barbecue that was complete with family, friends and children. As the white man beat and kicked the black man, "the white children jumped up and down... they were happy" (Malan). This is learned behavior. All my fears and conflicts stemmed from my culture and what I had learned, not from myself alone. The barbecue went on as the black man lay dying. "All these strong, suntanned white people standing around a fire, stuffing meat in their mouths... while a hog-tied black man squats at the sun through blood and moans for water in the background" (Malan 134). This is a perfect metaphor for society. As I reaped the benefits of my education, wealth and opportunity, there are millions of others who feel hog-tied. For they have no where to go, they have no means of moving up in society. I continue to stuff myself with more and more benefits of my luck, turning my back on those who need my help.

Near the end of this book Malan says, "Are you sick and confused, my friend? I'll make you sick yet. I'll hold you down and pound these images into your brain" (Malan 331). Yes, I am sick and confused; I needed to drain the emotion out of my body. My Traitor's Heart brought out more emotion, confusion and understanding in me than anything else I have ever read. Combined with the fact that I was in the midst of South Africa, the experience left me drained and confused. How can I fit the inconsistencies in myself and change the inequalities of my society? Furthermore, I have yet to fully understand what those inequalities are. Malan had yet to figure out this one, and I am still on my way to a conclusion. The first step for me was to begin asking the right questions. I need to learn to go through life with understanding that I am from one cultural context and different people are just that, different. But difference is not a bad thing in my mind. I cannot begin to answer the questions of racism in America. For now people seem to be too caught up in what to call black Americans. I am no longer worried about these political terms for cultural groups. There are bigger problems at hand. Being in Africa when I read My Traitor's Heart forced me to realize the realities and truths of racism. I still battle in my own mind whether or not I can accept mutilating one's own child as a cultural difference. For now I am content to congratulate myself for not being racist. I put myself in a situation in which I did not know how to react. Only through careful, almost painful, understanding will we all learn to accept one another. I hate to be a pessimist, but I can never see it happening. We have all been brought up differently, we will find similarities in some cultures and vast differences in others. I cannot find an answer, even the questions are getting harder to ask. Malan prides himself on being the first white man to be truly South African. I thank him, for during his journey, he took me on my own journey.
The master narrative is a broad term that can be used and applied in many contexts. It is a term that, in many ways, is relative to the exact situation in which one is placed. In one situation the term might refer to social protocol while in another situation it might refer to the dominant culture's oppression of the minority classes. Both Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison in *Sula,* however, use the master narrative in reference to authority. This authority is rooted in the accepted traditions, rules, expectations, and definitions which any society or culture attempts to levy against and upon which to judge its members. The authority of the master narrative can be most easily understood, as an often silent, yet unbelievably oppressive force that operates under the surface of common culture. It searches to define and, consequently, confine all members of the society in which it fosters.

Given this understanding of the master narrative, it is not surprising to find that women, especially African-American women, have often fallen prey to the dictates of authority which rests within its control. The dominant authority of the master narrative desires to classify women as one thing or another. The master narrative thrives on being able to label women as black, white, mothers, whores, bitches, etc. Once such labels are placed upon women, the master narrative seeks actively to confine women to such predetermined roles. The biggest threat to the power of the authority is an authentically defined woman. In this way, the master narrative strives not to give women the ability to be more than one thing at a time. It does not want to overtly realize that women are human and, consequently, have the human capability of total and complete definition. If the authority of the master narrative admits that the true existence of a woman is as a completely actualized human being then its power crumbles—women become self-defined. Thus, the key to feminine power rests in women's ability to become dangerously unpredictable through self-definition. The cry is then called for women to find an existence outside of the stereotypes that the master narrative actively assigns. Both Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *Sula* attempt to answer this cry. Although written nearly fifty years apart, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Sula* similarly trace the physical and spiritual journeys of two African-American women as they search for authentic existence outside the confines of the master narrative which attempts to impose definitions of race and gender upon them. The two struggles differ, however, as Janie, being more compassionate than Sula, has significantly more trouble in finding the power of her voice outside of the oppressive demands of authority. Yet, in the end, both Hurston and Morrison are successful in sculpting Janie and Sula into new models of womanhood.

Let us begin our analysis with the character of Janie. Throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Hurston makes it undeniably clear that Janie has no real concept of race or racial identity. Furthermore, it is clear that Janie scorns being identified and categorized by her race. She naturally has no concept of race. Instead, starting from her childhood, Janie knew that she was something other than her race. Hurston describes that Janie, although African-American, has many Caucasian features, thus indicating a mixture of the blood lines. As a result of her Caucasian features juxtaposed against her dark skin, Janie is exotically beautiful. As a child, however, Janie has no concept of her external identity either in relation to her beauty or race. She remarks after seeing a photograph of herself, "So when we looked at the picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where..."