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A Journey With No End

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> *I found myself haunted by an impression I myself would not understand. I kept thinking that the land smelled queer. It was the smell of blood, as though the soil was soaked in blood.*
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> *—Carl Jung, upon arriving in Africa*

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> *Every day has been a battle against howling moral head winds, I had lived amidst stark good and evil, surrounded by mystery and magic. There was a witchdoctor in the servants' quarters, and Zionists danced around fires outside the window.*
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> *—Rian Malan, on living in South Africa*

Rian Malan is a white South African who wrote an unbelievably graphic, detailed book describing the injustices in his country and, more importantly, in his own heart. But for me Rian Malan is much more. He taught me to understand myself, to question my beliefs and open up to new ideas. In his book, *My Traitor's Heart,* he describes what it is like to be a traitor to his own people and how he decided what side to take in the struggle against racism, equality and capitalism. Malan showed me that it is all right to be born in one group, yet sympathize with another. But more importantly he made me understand that it is impossible for me to turn my back on who I am or how I was brought up. In response to foreigners questioning him about apartheid he says,

> I would have told you that only I, of all my blind clan and tribe, had eyes to truly see, and what I saw appalled me. I would have passed myself off as a political exile, an enlightened sort who took black women into his bed and fled his country rather than carry a gun for the abominable doctrine of white supremacy. You would have probably believed me. I almost believed myself, you see, but in truth I was always one of them. I am a white man born in Africa, and all else flows from there (Malan 29).

This statement made me think about myself, where I was born and who I am. I am unable to disregard the fact that I was born in the wealthiest country in the world, and even among my countrymen, I was born into the upper class. My private education, conservative parents and ingrained religious beliefs are something I will always have with me. My background shapes my morals, my beliefs and how I felt when I was in Africa.

I spent the spring semester of my junior year studying in South Africa. South Africa, the land of the racist white Afrikaner. The land of bloodshed, political strife and white supremacy. I thought I would be so different: the educated white American, coming to show all my South African friends the way it was supposed to be. I was going to show them of their evil, racist ways, judge them harshly and preach to them of a better political system. But just like Rian Malan, I was wrong. Instead I feared that perhaps I was racist after all. I began to love my own country and believe that perhaps America did not have any problems. I had no concept of South African blacks, I could not understand them, I became afraid of them. I thought my sympathy would be enough. Does sympathy make me liberal? Malan says, of his early days, "I was a sentimental little fellow who liked natives and thought it a pity that they were so poor and that so many whites were nasty to them" (Malan 51). This was how I felt. So how did I come to grips with my own fears, my own history and learn to deal with my cowardice? *My Traitor's Heart* helped me sort through these feelings. And as I lay back each night in Africa to read the pages of Malan's book I had to live with the reality of the horrors he wrote about. I woke up each morning in this strange land of hatred and murder. I was not in America, I was not safe from my fears.

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color. I trusted a pervert because of his skin color. But I was in a country where nothing made sense. I hoped to plead insanity and continued my quest for answers to my own traitor's heart.

Then I decided perhaps it was all right for cultures to be different. Often I question things that are different. My family never taught me to question capitalism, class stratification or power structures in America. I was brought up to believe in the American dream, the great melting pot. But Africa brought me to a place where I could no longer melt. Black medicine men in Africa tell people with AIDS to have sex with a virgin and they will be cured; children and babies are raped for this reason. Malan tells his own stories of black African culture:

> We're in a forest . . . watching an African father hack off his living daughter's arms. She says, 'Please father, let me go, I won't tell anyone,' but her father just keeps hacking. A political power struggle is underway...and he needs her body parts for battle medicine (Malan 331).

Malan does not pretend that these things are acceptable, but perhaps sees that they are the product of cultural upbringing. I tried to accept these vast and brutal differences. I tried to compromise my own western upbringing to accept these African traditions. But I could not get rid of my own morals. These stories scared and confused me. Science had always been truth to me. It is not humane to rape children and hack off their arms. This is where my prejudices stemmed from; I could not get over the vast differences in cultures. So I looked for answers, I looked for someone to blame. I continued to blame myself: was I unable to accept these other cultures merely because they were different from my own? But the oppressed people of South Africa are not saints, they have their own problems, inadequacies and cultural practices that may or may not be universally ethical. I decided not to brand myself a racist only because I did not agree with every cultural practice in our different worlds.

Soon I began to look at the whites inhabiting South Africa. I made generalizations about my white friends and the part they played in the racially stratified society. In South Africa it is hard not to base all assumptions on skin color because it is all anybody talks about. Malan says, "To hear me talk you'd imagine there was no more to life than being white or black" (Malan 69). And in South Africa this was true. I began to judge the Afrikaners harshly. This was the white tribe where the apartheid system had emerged. These are a people with a history of hatred and a history of fear. Hearing my friends talk about blacks I became defensive and asked them what they had ever done to help. All the violence began to wear on me. My last week at school a huge racial uprising occurred on campus. I could not understand the screaming because it was in a foreign tongue, but when the hitting began I knew what was going on. Violence is universal. I heard hundreds of black and white boys hitting each other with cricket bats and hockey sticks. I called my white friends to pick me up and take me away from it all; I was afraid. I no longer knew who to fear. The Afrikaners had been killing blacks for so many years that I thought they could not have been humane, yet the blacks continued to kill one another. The only killing in South Africa I felt was justified was then a black man killed a white. What was wrong with me? Killing could never be justified. All the violence began to skew my grip on reality. I accepted the fact that there would always be violence in South Africa, 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 tired of the confusion in his own heart. He ran to America. He decided to try my own land for awhile. He stayed long enough to learn about our system. "Indeed, many things about America puzzled the socialist in me. The US was the world's most capitalist country, and yet there seemed to be no classes in it, and no class consciousness" (Malan 96). Statements like this made me question why I was listening to this crazy journalist at all. Just as I found his system disillusioning he felt the same about mine. Yet he may have been wrong. How could he say America was class free? Malan's lack of sense made me laugh. But I suppose after living in South Africa it would be possible to think America had no problems, which would mean having no classes. By the time I returned I truly thought, for a few brief moments, that I lived in the land of the free, the home of the brave and that the American dream was a reality. Another thought stemmed from my confused and tired brain: was I becoming a socialist myself? In my Sociology class I studied South Africa's future and we discussed the best political structure for the country. Here again I thought I would boast of my own great experiences and my own great country. But the closer I looked, the more I thought capitalism was a joke; the American dream was long dead and I had not only to find a new route for South Africa, but I had to revamp my own "great" country. Malan became tiresome. He was breaking down all my walls, shattering all my beliefs.

While I was in Africa "I loved blacks, yet I was scared of them" (Malan 88). Although these are the words of another, I felt the same way. I loved aspects of black culture. It was beautiful, quiet, friendly. Yet, there were times when I was confused and scared of them as well. When I was in South Africa I loved and hated the white cultures as well. How could my friends believe what they did about apartheid? They never said they thought it was right, but they also never said it was wrong. How could I be friends with such people? I could no longer find my own moral ground. By befriending white South Africans, whose grandparents had constructed apartheid, was I abandoning my own belief system? I tried to explain to them and they tried to explain to me. I left Africa, still confused, happy to be going to a place were I could at least understand the problems on hand. How do you solve years of racial hatred and tension? I wanted to leave with an understanding of the future for the country. When I came I thought "dismantling apartheid was a 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 squints at the sun through blood and moans for water in the background" (Malan 134). This is a perfect metaphor for society. As I reap 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 fix the uncertainties 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 this out, 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 no longer 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 was put into 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 too 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.

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Dangerous Women

Heather Baggott '99

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 festers.

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 photography of herself,

> So when we looked at de 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

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