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YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA: QUESTIONING TRADITIONAL METAPHORS OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Katarzyna Jakubiak

University of Northern Iowa

July 1999

ABSTRACT

The theory of language promoted by cognitive linguistics points to metaphor as the crucial element of language and thought: a mode of thinking which determines our perception of reality. Stressing the importance of metaphor in our everyday life, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner state that the nature of poetic metaphors is the same as the nature of conventional metaphors which appear in "standard" language. Creating poetic metaphors, poets simply explore "conventional" metaphors, using four major strategies: expanding, elaborating, composing, and questioning. Focusing on questioning as the main strategy through which American "multicultural" literatures can undermine basic Western concepts of the English language, this study examines the ways in which Yusef Komunyakaa questions conventional metaphors of light and darkness in his poetry.

Chapter One of this thesis situates the cognitive linguistics' theory of metaphor in the context of African American literary criticism, especially the theory of double-voice. Chapter Two investigates Komunyakaa's treatment of conventional metaphors of outer and inner sight, directly related to the concepts of light and darkness, in *Neon Vernacular,* and emphasizes the importance of the imagery of seeing in Komunyakaa's definition of power relations in the contemporary world. Chapter Three focuses directly on metaphors of light and darkness in *Neon Vernacular:* Komunyakaa's attempts to reverse the traditional definitions through criticism of light, as well as his use of the imagery of union between light and darkness as a metaphor of the African-American double-consciousness. Chapter Four analyzes Komunyakaa's use of metaphors of light and darkness in *Dien Cai Dau* to describe an extreme situation of the Vietnam war, and define the identity of the American nation in liminal circumstances. The final part of this thesis concludes that Komunyakaa's central imagery of light and darkness in union might be treated as a metaphor of the underlining feature of Komunyakaa's work: merging of Western and African traditions.

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Yusef Komunyakaa: Questioning Traditional Metaphors

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CHAPTER 1

CRITICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDY OF KOMUNYAKAA'S POETRY: AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY CRITICISM AND COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

In spite of general acclaim, the most conspicuous manifestation of which is, obviously, the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the work of Yusef Komunyakaa has not yet received the critical examination it deserves. The most extensive discussions of Komunyakaa's poems, which deal with both content and form of Komunyakaa's poetry, concentrate mainly on the Vietnam war poems which form *Dien Cai Dau*, and merely signal Komunyakaa's other collections as an important but briefly characterized frame of reference (Gotera, Ringnalda, Stein). Numerous reviews of Komunyakaa's books rarely go further than summaries of particular poems and expressions of the reviewer's stupefaction at the esoteric quality of Komunyakaa's language. One positive exception is Michael Collins' review of *Neon Vernacular* and *Magic City* for *Parnassus*, which devotes a lot of space to an insightful analysis of formal aspects of Komunyakaa's poems. Generally, however, the reviewers direct their attention more to what they think is said in the poems than how it is said.

The "how" of Komunyakaa's poetry has so far been the center of discussion of two critics: Kirkland C. Jones and Sascha Feinstein. Comparing Komunyakaa and Dove, Jones attempts to show "the folk idiom" of Komunyakaa's poetry: how "these poems examine folk concepts, folk beliefs, folk sayings, songs and the terminology of two traditionally African American musical genres, the blues and jazz" (158). Jones's analysis, however, is mostly limited to indication of certain "folk" expressions in particular poems without extensive explanation of their function. Feinstein, on the other hand, in his book *Jazz Poetry* presents an ingenious discussion of Komunyakaa's "dissonances and

resolutions" (169) and "strong visual images . . . [which] approximate sound," which, however, limited to three pages, only whets our appetite for more.

The centrality of the very matter of language to Komunyakaa's poetic creation has been emphasized in Komunyakaa's own remarks about his poetry in numerous interviews, which so far constitute the most revealing "criticism" published about the poet. In a fascinating conversation with William Matthews and Robert Kelly published in *The Georgia Review,* Komunyakaa stresses the importance of "jazz language"--"repetitions," "refrains," and "the whole improvisational spirit of jazz"--to his own particular poems and the African American literature and culture as a whole (656, 657, 645). In an interview for *Callaloo,* in response to Gotera's remarks about Samuel Delany's view on individual words in literature as "colors" which affect the whole picture, Komunyakaa provides an answer which emphasizes the significance of language not only in poetry, but in human life in general:

> Definitely. Language is color. All the tinges and strokes equal the whole picture; it is what converges within the frame of reference. The same as music and silence. And one doesn't need psychotropic drugs to see and feel the intensity of expression. After all, language is what can liberate or imprison the human psyche. (225)

Moreover, in an interview for *New England Review*, talking about traditional Western connotations of light and darkness, Komunyakaa tells Muna Asali about the necessity of awareness of our use of language and of his own efforts to make English language represent genuinely his point of view:

> . . . for myself, I've been forced to turn around definitions that we accept, to reverse them and turn them back on themselves and also to turn language back on itself. I think we have to be responsible even for those connotations buried within the context of the language. We have to be aware that each word has a social history. (145)

Later in the same interview, Komunyakaa returns to the reflections on traditional connotations of light and darkness "buried" within language, when he talks about human potentiality to create "personal metaphors:"

> . . . one of the first human activities was to name the tools we used, and that made a connection between the hand and the brain. We are able to make great leaps through language and these leaps might yield private aspects of language, each person's familiarity with the language and personal metaphors. And this allows me to transform darkness at least for myself, but also in an attempt to penetrate someone else's language. (146)

Komunyakaa's notion of "penetrating someone else's language" with "personal metaphors," especially in the context of "darkness," naturally evokes the well-known concept of double-voice of the African American artist, which appeared in African American criticism already with W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness, and developed in 1980s into Houston A. Baker's theory of vernacular and Henry Louis Gates's theory of "Signifyin(g)." Stressing his own struggles out of the imprisonment of the English language, efforts to soften its rigid structure with the liberating spirit of jazz, and attempts to change traditional connotations of fundamental Western concepts through his poetic metaphors, Komunyakaa places himself in the over-two-hundred-years-old African American literary tradition: generations of artists whose work has been marked by constant clashes between "two souls, two thoughts . . . two warring ideals" (Du Bois 215).

Double-Voice in African-American Literary Criticism

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, shortly after his famous passage on double-consciousness, W. E. B. Du Bois raises the issue of the black artist's difficulties with proper "articulation" of the double-self:

> The would-be black *savant* was confronted by the paradox that the knowledge his people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbours, while the knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood. The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people. (216)

Thus, in the view of the spiritual father of the Harlem Renaissance and one of the "classics" of black literature, the double-consciousness of the black person is naturally accompanied by double-language. Not only does the language of the African-American artist attempt to express "two souls, two thoughts . . . two warring ideals in one dark body," it also strives to satisfy the expectations of two diametrically different audiences.

Houston A. Baker Jr., in his books, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* and *Modernism and Harlem Renaissance*, develops Du Bois's idea further, using Michael Bakhtin's theory of double-voiced or "dialogic" text: a text in which a single narrative is permeated by multiple points of view. Discussing the African American literary history from the first slave narratives to contemporary novels, Baker points out that from the beginning of its development black literature in America had to face the already set discourse of "American literary history," shaped by such "governing statements" as : "divine will," "religious man," "wilderness," migratory errand," "increase in store" (*Blues* 19). Although the first slave narratives, such as the most famous *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and, later, novels which continue the "slave narrative" discourse, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, partly assimilated the language of white America's religious mission, they simultaneously elaborated on and questioned it, employing also the black perspective discourse governed by such statements as "economics of slavery," and "commercial deportation."

This dialogue and struggle of two discourses within one text reveal what Baker calls, "the blues resources" of African-American literature (*Blues* 31). For Baker, blues music is marked by a constant state of being at an intersection, being always in transition and in motion. In a like manner, the black artist, speaking with two or multiple voices, creates dynamic literature, which exists in ceaseless translation and mediation between two cultures and two identities. As Baker points out, the blues aesthetic is particularly visible in texts, which, side by side with the white culture's discourse, use folk elements, such as

authentic black speech and music. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* itself belongs to this category. According to Baker, Du Bois's employment of sound, a musical score of a black spiritual, which precedes each chapter, "deforms" the books' Western discourse (*Modernism* 60).

Du Bois's strategy, classified by Baker as *"the deformation of mastery,"* stands in contrast to *"the mastery of form,"* a strategy used by another "black classic" Booker T. Washington in *Up From Slavery.* In Baker's definition, *the mastery of form* consists in the black artist's employment of a stereotypical black persona, in order to win favor of the white audience. Thus, in the account of his life and actions Washington uses the familiar mask of a black minstrel in order to gain the white South's economic support for his Tuskegee Institute. Like *the deformation of mastery, the mastery of form* remains within the dialogic tradition of African American literary discourse. Just as in *The Souls of Black Folk* the black spirituals modify, but do not silence the language of the Western tradition, in *Up From Slavery* the mask of a minstrel covers up, but does not annihilate the black point of view.

Drawing his inspiration from Baker, Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey* traces the dialogic tradition of African American literature back to West African myths of Esu-Elgebara (or Legba), the double-mouthed Voodoo god-trickster, traditionally depicted as accompanied by a monkey. Using the African figure of the "Signifying Monkey" as the "trope of tropes" denoting all rhetorical strategies employed by African American writers to subvert the mainstream meanings of the English language, Gates points also to the affinities between black literature and the popular black "ritual" of "Signifyin(g)." Examining numerous linguistic and popular definitions of "Signifyin(g)," among which that of Roger D. Abrahams, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan seem to him most substantial, Gates remarks that the meaning of "Signifyin(g)" is not limited to the term's most common denotation, assigned to it by the non-black scholars:

the game of "dozens" in which "participants insult each other's relatives, especially . . . mothers" to "test emotional strength" (68). Rather, in Abrahams's words, "Signifyin(g) can "mean any number of things" (Gates 75). It can mean "ability to talk with great innuendo," "to carp, cajole, needle, and lie;" it can refer to "the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point; " it can denote "making fun of a person or situation" as well as "speaking with the hands and eyes," and thus, employing the whole complexity of gestures (Abrahams qtd. in Gates 54 and 75). According to Hurston, "Signifyin(g)" can simply mean "showing off rhetorically" (Gates 196). Mitchell-Kernan, on the other hand, includes in the definition of the term also the black practice of "loud-talking:" pretending to address one person with a remark in fact intended for the third person present (Gates 82). Thus, to repeat after Gates Abrahams's conclusion to the discussion of the term, "Signifyin(g)" is "the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures [which achieve] Hamlet's 'direction through indirection'" (54). Moreover, throughout his whole discussion of various meanings of "Signifyin(g)," which include accounts of Gates's own experience of the ritual, Gates emphasizes that in the mastery of the skill of "Signifyin(g)" the performance is much more important than the matter: "one does not Signify some thing; one Signifies in *some way*" (78).

Having defined the concept of "Signifyin(g)," in his book Gates proceeds to demonstrate the major kinds of "double-voiced textual relations" (xxv): the ways in which African American texts Signify on traditional Western texts and also on other African American texts. According to Gates, the early slave narratives Signify on the white American literary discourse and other slave narratives through "tropological revisions," repetitions of certain rhetorical strategies with a difference. Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, on the other hand, Signifies on the English-language literary tradition by creating "a speakerly text," in which free indirect discourse combines direct speech imitating black vernacular with a standard English third-person narrative, and thus

unites two contrasting points of view. Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* employs yet another strategy of "Signifyin(g)"--parody--not only to subvert the meanings of such divergent Western texts as the philosophy of Plato and popular detective stories, but also to play on the meanings of texts of African American culture from the myths of Legba, through the figures of Black Muslims, to contemporary black novels represented by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man.* Finally, in his last chapter Gates points to "Signifyin(g)" through pastiche, visible in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which re-writes the "speakerly text" of *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

Apart from showing the ways African American literature Signifies on the Western cultural and literary texts, in his theoretical chapters Gates remarks that the African American concept of "Signifyin(g)" itself Signifies on the standard meanings of English, or, exactly, on the Western linguistic and literary theory dominant in the twentieth century: Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism and the concept of signification. Referring to the structuralist treatment of signification as a relation between signified (concept) and signifier (sound-image), Gates points out that African American speaking community "emptied the signifier 'signification' of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts" (46). Thus, Gates argues, the act of "the disruption of the semantic orientation of signification [performed] by the black vernacular" negates Saussure's position that "masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other . . . [The] community itself cannot control so much as a single word." (50-51).

In the light of Gates's critique of Saussure, however, Gates's book itself appears to be double-voiced. Throughout the whole of his *Signifying Monkey*, although presenting an African American point of view, Gates relies on the structuralist distinctions between the signifier and the signified in his discussions of particular works, and follows traditional Western divisions between the "normal" and literary language as well as between the

standard language and the vernacular. Thus, creating, as the book's subtitle states, "a theory of African American literary criticism," Gates Signifies on the Western theory of literary criticism, combining the two opposing voices of Western scholarship and black tradition.

In my discussion of Komunyakaa's poems I decided to employ a theory of language which perhaps better than structuralism and poststructuralism fits the landscape of American literature, in which many diverse cultures have to search for their ways of expression through the single medium of the English language. Cognitive linguistics, a theory of language, founded in 1970s by Ronald W. Langacker, which relies heavily on ideas of human conceptualization developed by cognitive science, has as one of its premises exactly a critique of the concentration on the English language and the Western point of view dominant in linguistic theories so far. One of the main scholars of cognitive linguistic orientation, George Lakoff, in his book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* argues his ground-breaking views on categories and human mind relying to a great extent on language categories identified in Dyirbal, an aboriginal language in Australia. It is probably because of this departure from Anglocentrism that the cognitive linguistics has so far found the broadest use in theories of translation. Moreover, since one of the main points of focus in cognitive linguistics is the study of metaphor and relations between "conventional" and "poetic" metaphor, cognitive linguistics has proved extremely useful to the study of poetry. Significantly, Baker and Gates in their books concentrate mainly on prose, and, except for brief remarks, avoid examination of African American poetry. In this way both Baker's books and *The Signifying Monkey* comply with the general tendency to employ ideas of structuralism and poststructuralism, visible in both authors' reliance on intertextuality, mainly to the study of prose.

Cognitive Linguistics and Study of Poetry

One of the main postulates of cognitive linguistics, which, although undermining the very fundamentals of structuralism, grew out of the critique of Saussure within structuralism itself, is a rejection of the sharp demarcation line between the signifier and the signified. According to cognitive linguistics, language cannot be treated as a system of *arbitrary* signs, because written or spoken words never appear in a vacuum: they are always placed in some context and dependent on the so-called "extralinguistic" situation to the same extent as they are dependent on other words. In Langacker's classic example an expression *The cat on the mat* is used to describe the outcome of a wrestler's match with a tiger. It is evident that neither of the component words of the above expression holds or conveys its specific meaning. In this case, the meaning of the expression is sanctioned primarily by the context, only with partial help of dictionary or, in Langacker's terminology, the conventional meaning of particular words. Thus, Langacker argues, meaning is not a fixed relation between signifier and signified, instead it is "an *emergent* property: though perfectly evident in context and *consistent* with the meanings of the lexical items employed, it goes beyond anything computable or predictable from their individual conventional values" (157-58).

Stressing the contextual character of meaning, cognitive linguistics rejects also the structuralist distinction between *langue* (linguistic competence) and *parole* (performance). In the cognitivist view, *langue* cannot be the sole legitimate object of study for a linguist, because, again, in real life *langue* never appears without *parole*. There is no pure competence: it is *always* accompanied by performance. The idealized speaker "created" by structuralist does not exist. As a Polish linguist, Elzbieta Tabakowska, notices, there is no person who is "absolutely free from physical and psychological shortcomings, who always obeys the rules of grammar, always shows consistency in speech, always follows reason

rather than emotions and is never influenced by the extralinguistic context of his/her utterances" (*Gramatyka i obrazowanie* 8, my translation from Polish). Consequently, focusing exclusively on *langue*, structuralism chooses as the object of its studies an abstract, non-existent being, deprived of, what Tabakowska in her English book, *Cognitive Linguistics and Poetics of Translation* calls, the "human factor:" a quality which makes each person an individual.

Thus, pointing to *parole* and the features which have so far been considered "anomalies" of language as a legitimate object of linguistic studies, cognitive linguistics rejects distinctions and hierarchies between "normal" and poetic language, as well as between "standard" and "street" language" (which, obviously, entails abrogation of hierarchies between "standard" English and black vernacular). In general, then, cognitive linguistics abolishes the traditional border between semantics and pragmatics: in this theory, idiosyncratic connotations of words and expressions and even such "extralinguistic" elements as gestures and tone of voice contribute to meaning as much as conventional dictionary definitions do. In this way, cognitive linguistic shows that for all speech communities, not only, as Gates seems to argue, the African American one, "some way" is "some thing:" rhetorical strategies of speech and writing are always responsible for meaning.

Emphasis on the "extralinguistic" context of language underlines yet another important postulate of cognitive linguistics: a breach with the Aristotelian theory of categories, dominant in linguistic theories such as structuralism. According to cognitive linguistics, categories of the human mind are not objective: people systematize their environment on the basis of subjective experience, in agreement with the way they perceive the world. This postulate, however, is not a manifestation of the extreme subjectivism which we know from the Western Romantic tradition. In the cognitive view, the way a person perceives the world depends on the conceptual system of a linguistic and cultural

community to which this person belongs. As Iwona Nowakowska-Kempna points out, for cognitive linguistics meaning is always "a meaning *for a given person,*" but, at the same time it is "a potential object of negotiations and agreements" within a cultural community (96, my translation from Polish). Thus, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, cognitive linguistics offers "the third choice" between objectivism and subjectivism: "an experientialist synthesis" which shows that "though there is no absolute objectivity, there can be a kind of objectivity relative to the conceptual system of a culture" (192-93). If we look at the black community in the United States (and other so-called "multicultural" communities) from this point of view, we will see that for a black speaker simultaneous participation in two differing linguistic and cultural communities brings about a clash of conceptual systems: "negotiations and agreements" of meaning in the mainstream culture do not equal "negotiations and agreements" in vernacular culture. Consequently, "the meaning *for a black person*" is marked by Du Bois's double-consciousness.

Rejecting the Aristotelian idea of objective categories, cognitive linguistics offers an alternative way of categorization, developed first by Eleanor Rosch, and extended later by Langacker and Lakoff: categorization by prototype. Unlike in Aristotelian theory, according to which all members of a given category have an equal status, determined by their "essence," in Rosch's theory some members are more representative of a category than others, and membership in the category is determined on the basis of "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein's term). These best representatives, or prototypes, according to Rosch's metaphorical description of her theory, constitute the "core" of a category, while other members "surround" the "core," arranged "hierarchically," according to decreasing similarity to the prototype. Since the most peripheral members might belong simultaneously to several categories, the boundaries of Rosch's categories are never fixed and always overlap with one another. One of the most revealing points of Rosch's theory

is the observation that prototypes differ cross-culturally. While for the inhabitants of Greenland "a dog sledge" is a good member of the category "means of transport," it certainly is not prototypical for this category from the point of view of the inhabitants of California.

In his book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* Lakoff elaborates Rosch's theory, treating the "surrounding," or, as he calls them, "radiating" members of a category as extensions of the "core:" either metonymical or metaphorical ones. Thus, for example if we regard the "metal key which opens our house door" as the best representative of the category "key," "a magnetic key used in hotels" forms a metonymical extension of the core, since it "contains" the prototypical meaning of "unlocking the door." "A key to the test," on the other hand, is already a metaphorical extension, because the feature of "unlocking" has been mapped from the domain of concrete objects and actions onto the domain of abstract concepts. Similarly, to refer again to Gates's discussion, "to Signify" as used in black vernacular, from the mainstream point of view, forms a metonymical extension of the "conventional" meaning of "to signify": the conventional "to mean" becomes extended into the vernacular "to mean indirectly, to say/do one thing in order to mean another." Notably, for black culture, "to mean indirectly" meaning of "to signify" is exactly the prototypical one.

Thus, to negate Gates's structuralist metaphor, using the term "signification" in its specific meaning, the black community does not *empty* any "signifier" to *fill it* with their own concepts. In his extension of Rosch's theory of prototypes, Langacker criticizes the "conduit metaphor" of words, popular in our culture, on which Gates's metaphor is based. According to Langacker, the view of words as containers for meaning: fixed parcels of information passed from the speaker to the listener is harmful to our understanding of language. Instead, Langacker proposes a new metaphor, which abolishes even the "blurred" borders of Lakoff's "radial categories" and transcends Rosch's structure of

individual, separate cores with surrounding peripheries. Knowledge, Langacker argues, resembles rather an extensive network in which two basic cognitive concepts--entities and relations--function respectively as nodes and arcs, connected with one another by complex set of relations. An entity designated by a word constitutes a point of access to the network. Through this point an open-ended set of nodes and arcs is activated, which varies depending on the situation. To define the meaning of a word is to specify the position of its access node in the network and activate the group of nodes and arcs in which it participates. This group must, obviously, be relevant in a given context. As Langacker points out, "prototypicality" or "conventionality" of meaning translates here into relative likelihood of activation. Thus, while for the dominant culture in America the use of the word "signify" most often activates the domain of direct, "serious" meaning, for the black culture the same word activates the domain of indirect meaning, making fun, showing off. Langacker's model again denies existence of any "anomalies" of meaning: what is unconventional for one culture is quite conventional for another.

Like in Lakoff's "radial categories," in Langacker's network model of knowledge systems concepts are "connected" with one another through metaphorical and metonymical extensions. For cognitive linguistics metaphor and metonymy are in fact two sides of the same process. While in the case of metonymy features of one concept are mapped onto another within the same domain, in case of metaphor the mapping occurs across different domains. Thus, metaphor and metonymy differ solely in function. Metonymy serves as a kind of mental and linguistic "shortcut," facilitating communication. Metaphor, on the other hand, helps understanding by linking the less familiar entity with the entity more familiar or tangible to the users of language (for example: in the case of "the key to the test," the abstract act of providing solution to the test is linked with the familiar act of opening the door).

As our discussion of the cognitive linguistics theory of meaning shows so far, in the cognitive view, metaphor is the central element of knowledge and language, not, as early structuralists claimed, a rhetorical "ornament" used mostly by poets. In their books *Metaphors We Live By* and *More Than Cool Reason*, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and Mark Turner argue that metaphor is a mode of thinking rather than a figure of speech. In the first chapter of *Metaphors We Live By* Lakoff and Johnson claim that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (3). Even without realizing it, we understand abstract concepts metaphorically, in terms of concrete objects, and we use metaphors continuously in our everyday speech. Stressing the necessity of focusing on metaphor in the experientialist approach, which, as we remember, is a synthesis between objectivism and subjectivism, Lakoff and Johnson remark that metaphor "unites reason and imagination:"

> Reason, at the very least, involves categorization, entailment, and inference. Imagination, in one of its many aspects, involves seeing one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing--what we have called metaphorical thought. Metaphor is thus *imaginative rationality*. Since the categories of our everyday thought are largely metaphorical and our everyday reasoning involves metaphorical entailments and inferences, ordinary rationality is therefore imaginative by its very nature. Given our understanding of poetic metaphor in terms of metaphorical entailments and inferences, we can see that the products of the poetic imagination are, for the same reason, partially rational in nature. (193)

The above quotation once again points to rejection of separation between "normal" and poetic language in cognitive linguistics. According to Lakoff and Johnson, poetic metaphors are the same in nature as the metaphors we use in our everyday thought and speech. Moreover, although poetry often employs what Lakoff and Turner in *More Than Cool Reason* call "image metaphors," metaphors which involve an unusual mapping of images onto images (for example, André Breton's "my wife . . . / Whose waist is an hourglass"), it is also common for poetry to draw directly on everyday metaphors. Lakoff and Turner define specifically four major strategies through which poetry explores

conventional metaphors "in ways that go beyond the ordinary" (67): extending, elaborating, composing and questioning.

Discussing "extending," Lakoff and Turner quote the conventional metaphor DEATH IS SLEEP and its relation to Hamlet's famous soliloquy. While the conventional metaphor is "partial--it does not map everything in our general knowledge of sleep onto death but only certain aspects: inactivity, inability to perceive, horizontal position and so on," in Hamlet's soliloquy "Shakespeare extends the ordinary conventional metaphor of death as sleep to include the possibility of dreaming: 'To sleep? Perchance to dream! Ay, there's the rub;/ For in that sleep of death what dreams may come'" (67). "Elaborating," on the other hand is defined by Lakoff and Turner as "filling in slots [of metaphorical schema] in unusual ways rather than . . . extending the metaphor to map additional slots" (67). The technique of "elaborating" is very conspicuous in the poetry of Komunyakaa himself. While it is common in our culture to conceptualize DEATH and GRIEF as PEOPLE, Komunyakaa elaborates these metaphors depicting death as having "the smooth round ass" (*Neon Vernacular* 43) and grief as "track[ing]/ someone down in her red patent-leather shoes" (*Neon Vernacular* 114). Thus, Komunyakaa makes the metaphors DEATH IS A PERSON and GRIEF IS A PERSON specific, suggesting in this way that there is a certain attractiveness in both death and grief.

Another poetic strategy mentioned by Lakoff and Turner, "composing" relies on the characteristics of every conceptual system, which always includes "more than one conventional metaphor for a given target domain" (70) (for example, in our culture death may be seen as person, sleep, departure, darkness, and so on). The best illustration of this strategy is the third stanza of Emily Dickinson's famous poem "Because I could not stop for Death," in which the speaker and her companion, Death, on their way towards Eternity, pass successively "the Fields of Grazing Grain" and "the Setting Sun." In this image

Dickinson combines the conceptual metaphors PEOPLE ARE PLANTS, LIFE IS GROWTH and LIFETIME IS A DAY to represent different stages of human life: maturity and old age.

The last mode of poetic use of conventional metaphors, defined in *More Than Cool Reason* is "questioning:" going "beyond the normal use of conventional metaphor to point out, and call into question, the boundaries of our everyday metaphorical understandings of important concepts" (69). Lakoff and Turner notice that in this case, "the major poetic point being made can be the inadequacy of the conventional metaphor" (69). To use an example from the poetry of Komunyakaa again, in the conclusion of "Unnatural State of the Unicorn" (*Neon Vernacular* 87) Komunyakaa makes use of the conventional metaphors HUMAN BODY IS THE CONTAINER FOR SOUL and SOUL IS AN ENTITY INSIDE THE BODY. However, saying "Inside my skin,/loving you, I am this space/ my body believes in," Komunyakaa questions the conventional metaphors with the scientific knowledge that the only "entity" inside the body apart from anatomical organs is "space." Thus, questioning the metaphor of soul, Komunyakaa seems to call for another more adequate metaphor, which will show that there is something independent from "skin" and invisible as "space" which makes us all human.

In his work, like most poets, Komunyakaa uses all the poetic strategies of exploring conventional metaphors, defined above. However, if we go back to the interviews with Komunyakaa which I summarized at the beginning of this chapter, we will see that the strategy of "questioning" more than any other strategy described in *More Than Cool Reason* corresponds to what Komunyakaa himself defined as his poetic duty: "turning language back on itself," and "creating personal metaphors" (*New England Review* 145, 146). In the conclusion to *Metaphors We Live By* Lakoff and Johnson point to the dangers inherent in the metaphorical character of our thinking:

> Political and economic ideologies are framed in metaphorical terms. Like all other metaphors, political and economic metaphors can hide aspects of reality. But in the area of politics and economics, metaphors matter more, because they constrain our

> lives. A metaphor in a political or economic system, by virtue of what it hides can lead to human degradation. (236)

In the conclusion to *More Than Cool Reason*, on the other hand, Lakoff and Turner remark on the power of poetic metaphor to change the fixed human ways of thinking:

> Poetry, through metaphor, exercises our minds so that we can extend our normal powers of comprehension beyond the range of the metaphors we are brought up to see the world through . . . poets address the most vital issues in our lives and help us illuminate those issues, through the extension, composition, and criticism of the basic metaphoric tools through which we comprehend much of reality. Poets can appeal to the ordinary metaphors we live by in order to take us beyond them, to make us more insightful than we would be if we thought only in standard ways. Because they lead us to new ways of conceiving of our world, poets are artists of the mind. (214-15)

Traditional Western metaphors of light and darkness, which Komunyakaa mentions in the interview for *New England Review*, obviously belong to the group of metaphors which can "lead to human degradation:" in this case degradation of the black community. Thus, trying to "turn around the definitions" of light and darkness, or in Lakoff and Turner's terms, to question conceptual metaphors of light and darkness, Komunyakaa assumes the position of "the artist of the mind," one who "addresses the most vital social issues," and directs the readers towards new ways of thinking.

Although Lakoff and Turner in their discussion of poetic strategies quote only single metaphors taken from works of various artists, it is obvious to any reader of poetry that poets often use their own metaphorical concepts, based on extending, elaborating, composing, and questioning of traditional metaphors, in more than one poem. Sometimes, the works of a particular artist create a whole alternative conceptual system, in which certain images are always tied with certain concepts: for Dickinson "circumference" is always connected with "immortality," while for Keats "pleasure thermometer" always represents the process of "transcendence." Such an alternative conceptual system based on "personal metaphors" of light and darkness can be found also in Komunyakaa's poetry. Komunyakaa's strategy of questioning traditional metaphors of light and darkness, and, as

we will see, the related metaphors of seeing, is not limited to a single poem or a group of poems, but underlines all his works published so far. Thus, although questioning traditional metaphors of language, as Lakoff and Turner show, Komunyakaa uses methods which have always been employed by poets, regardless of race, Komunyakaa's focus on questioning specifically metaphors of light and darkness establishes him firmly as a representative of African American literary tradition. In his poems Komunyakaa continues the tradition of Ellison and Reed, described by Gates as "Signifyin(g)" on Western ideas of blackness, specifically metaphors of blackness used by Melville in *Moby-Dick* and by Plato in *Phaedrus*. Komunyakaa's specific use of metaphor emerges as a definite, though subtle, political statement.

In the context of the African American tradition, we can come to the conclusion that cognitive linguistics' notion of conceptual metaphors which influence our thinking partially corresponds to Baker's idea of "governing statements" of discourse and, to a lesser extent, to Gates's concept of the mainstream cultural texts which are Signified on by African American literature. However, to use cognitive linguistics' theory of language to study African American literature means to change the perspective slightly. Cognitive linguistics stresses the fact that all the devices which subvert the mainstream meanings of a given language are already within the language. Language in itself is double-, or multi-voiced: black vernacular, rhetorical strategies of "Signifyin(g)," and poetic metaphors are as much a part of the English language as the "standard" version of English. Moreover, concentrating on the study of metaphor, cognitive linguistics makes us realize that the so-called "standard" language itself commonly makes use of contradictory conceptual metaphors (talking about time, for example, we employ both TIME IS A HEALER and TIME IS A DESTROYER metaphors). Consequently, in cognitive linguistics view, even the "standard" English itself provides the African American and other "multicultural" communities with the tools of criticism of the Western standards. Such view of language--

as a "meeting place of opposites"--is commensurate with the spirit of works of Komunyakaa himself, who in his poetry, as we will see in the following chapters, often unites opposites.

Thus, to examine the way Komunyakaa questions conventional metaphors of the English language in his poetry is to see how he uses the resources of the English language itself to make all audiences--equally the black and the white one--aware that the concepts of language are metaphorical in nature, and thus relative. Investigating Komunyakaa's poetic "conceptual system" based on "personal" metaphors readers of all backgrounds can become conscious that conventional metaphors of the English language cannot be solely responsible for the creation of standards which we follow in our lives. We always need poets who, through their poetic metaphors, will show us the limitations of "metaphors we live by."

CHAPTER 2

"LOOK, BACK OF THE EYES:"

SIGHT AND INSIGHT IN *NEON VERNACULAR*

One of the ways in which Komunyakaa questions conventional English metaphors of light and darkness in his poetry is undermining the value of sight. By virtue of its physical nature, the sense of sight in Western culture is naturally associated with light, and lack of sight is equated with darkness. It is a common experiential knowledge that light enables us to see while darkness is a hindrance to vision. As Eve Sweetser points out in her analysis of sense-perception verbs in English and Indo-European, the English noun *light* and the Welsh noun *golug,* "sight," share the same Indo-European root *leuk-* "light" (32). Consequently, just as light is often used as a metaphor of knowledge and truth in our culture, so is the act of seeing associated with knowing and understanding. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their *Metaphors We Live By* quote the following examples from everyday speech, which prove the existence of conceptual metaphors UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING and IDEAS ARE LIGHT-SOURCES in the English language: "I *see* what you're saying. It *looks* different from my *point of view.* What is your *outlook* on that? I *view* it differently. Now I've got the *whole picture.* Let me *point something out* to you . . . That was a *brilliant* remark (48). Also Sweetser shows the conceptual connection between sight and knowledge, pointing to Indo-European *weid-* , "see" as the root of English *idea* (through Greek *eidon,* "see"), English *wise, wit* and Irish *fios,* "knowledge" (33). She also observes that "not only does English have expressions like 'I saw it with my own eyes' to indicate certainty, but studies of evidentials in many languages show that direct visual data is considered to be the most certain kind of knowledge" (Sweetser 33).

Sweetser attributes this affiliation between physical sight and knowledge, intellection mainly to vision's function as a primary source of data about the world (39).

Referring to child-language studies, Sweetser remarks that in early categorization children rely most heavily on visual features of objects. Another connection between sight and knowledge, according to her, is similarity between visual and intellectual operations. For example, both visual and intellectual acts involve focusing on a chosen element from the perceptual field, separating an object from its background, and discerning its particular features. Furthermore, both vision and knowledge approach data from a distance. In Sweetser's view, this common peculiarity of vision and knowledge puts sight in opposition to emotions:

> Vision gives us data from a distance. This ability to reach out is a significant parallel between vision and intellection, since the objective and intellectual domain is understood as being an area of personal *distance,* in contrast to the intimacy or closeness of the subjective and emotional domain (we may keep someone *at a distance* by keeping the conversation intellectual; and if we feel too *close* to someone, then maybe we can no longer be objective about that person). (Sweetser 39)

The final affiliation between vision and knowledge, which Sweetser distinguishes, is the traditional treatment of the two as objective. Intellectual operations are usually regarded as means of arriving at objective truth, shared by many people. Similarly, seeing enables different people, provided that they take up the same standpoint, to share a more or less identical view.

Commenting on Sweetser's discussion of vision and knowledge in *The Body in the Mind*, Mark Johnson concludes:

> Perceptual phenomena of this sort make vision a primary candidate as a metaphorical basis for intellectual acts in which one must discriminate features, examine details, and perform mental operations that are held in common with other people. There are, of course, other experiential bases for knowledge metaphors (such as touching, hearing, and tasting), but none of these is as dominant as vision. (109)

In Komunyakaa's poetry, however, outward sight does not preserve this dominant function as a source of true knowledge. On the contrary, often in Komunyakaa's poems sight appears to be the most impaired of the five senses, partly because seeing results in

illusions, but mainly because people are afraid or not allowed to see. The predominant imagery of *Neon Vernacular* and *Dien Cai Dau* is the imagery of "closed eyes." Consequently, the protagonists of Komunyakaa's poems are usually forced to turn their sight inward instead of outward, and look for knowledge in the darkness of their minds. In her analysis of verbs of perception Sweetser mentions the concept of "inner vision" as used in reference to the religious and spiritual realm. As she points out, "in ancient Indo-European cultures, physical and spiritual "vision" were so strongly connected that physical blindness was considered to be a necessary concomitant of the highest level of internal vision" (Sweetser 40). However, while in ancient cultures spiritual vision was accepted as a part of the intellectual world, under the influence of rationalism modern usage has tinged the concept of spiritual vision "with a coloring of personal hallucination" (Sweetser 40). In his poetry Komunyakaa questions the value of outward sight by giving *outward* vision characteristics of hallucination. In this way he undermines the cognitive concepts of outer and inner vision present in the modern English, and creates his own metaphors of outer and inner sight for his poetic vernacular.

Fatal Perception: The Function of Sight in Komunyakaa's Vernacular

In an interview for *Callaloo* Komunyakaa stresses the importance of both inward and outward reaching for vision in poetry. Commenting on what he calls "introspective poetry" of the 1980s, he says that in order "to have any kind of constructive, informative bridges to vision and expression" poetry has to contain both "the odyssey outward as well as inward" ("'Lines'" 222). In his "poems of seeing," however, "the odyssey outward" tends to be either futile or deceptive. It is the "odyssey inward" that really enables the protagonists to see. As Don Ringnalda points out in his essay on *Dien Cai Dau*, Komunyakaa emerges as "a poet of insight rather than sight" (25). In our culture we

usually associate the outside with light and the inside with darkness. Commonly, we regard our bodies as containers with the inside inaccessible to sight, invisible, and therefore dark, and the outside, visible, and therefore light. Thus, Ringnalda is right in saying that by turning inside "Komunyakaa seeks truth precisely where Plato and Western 'enlightened' cultures find falsehood and illusion: in shadows, 'invisible ropes to nowhere' . . . 'titanic darkness' . . . , 'half-lit rooms'" (25). For Komunyakaa looking "in" towards darkness appears to be more revealing than looking "out" towards light.

Ringnalda is not the only critic that notices the importance of seeing in Komunyakaa's poetry. Toi Derricotte in her review calls *Dien Cai Dau* "a book about seeing and not seeing" (219). Kevin Stein in his essay on private and public history in Komunyakaa's Vietnam poems points out that "the book details an inward turning," and quotes the poet's statement from a radio interview, calling *Dien Cai Dau* "a way of dealing with the images inside my head" (541). Alvin Aubert sees the title of Komunyakaa's fourth book, *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*, as "an ambiguously metonymical reference to the outer (physical) and inner (intuitive) facilities of sight that interact in the process of creating poems" ("Yusef Komunyakaa" 2).

It is interesting to mark how many critics use the language of seeing and light and darkness when discussing Komunyakaa's poetics. Describing Komunyakaa's "unified *vision*" Aubert classifies particular poems according to "an accessibility continuum that ranges from *obscure* . . . to *clear* ," and where the "more clear" poems "provide a unique *glimpse* into Komunyakaa's artistry" ("Yusef Komunyakaa" 2; my emphasis). Analyzing one of the most quoted *Dien Cai Dau* poems, "Starlight Scope Myopia," Michael Collins says that "the poem itself is a kind of starlight scope to which the reader presses his eye and sees ordinary words and terms under extreme magnification" (132). Later on, Collins elaborates on the starlight scope metaphor, concluding that in "writing his poems, Komunyakaa tries to steer clear of the world's starlight scopes, to correct their imposed

myopias, to reinfuse them with what he says poetry is: 'in essence . . . the spiritual and emotional dimension of the human animal'" (133). Both Philip D. Beidler and Vince Gotera, though emphasizing the murkiness and ambiguity of Komunyakaa's images, define the role of his and other authors' Vietnam war poetry as "making people see." Beidler finds "the true work of a poet after our war" in "the continuing search . . . for . . . moments of reflexive epiphany," and in the creation of "the new text . . . wherein the imagings of history and myth can be contained within some new order of *redemptory vision* " (182; my emphasis). Using a quotation from one of Komunyakaa's poems, "depending on the light/ to make a difference," Gotera suggests that "what Vietnam-war poetry (and all poetry in essence) *must* do" is "enlighten, give light, illuminate, the better for all to see and see well" (315).

Since the motifs of myopia, dangers of "clear sight" and saving quality of darkness form the most conspicuous imagery of *Dien Cai Dau,* it is no wonder that the discussion of the role of seeing and not seeing in Komunyakaa's poetry has so far concentrated mainly around the Vietnam-war poems. Very few critics have noticed that the mistrust towards sight, and the reliance on looking at "a world . . . under . . . man's eyelid"(*Dien Cai Dau* 4), is characteristic of the total of Komunyakaa's works. Alvin Aubert seems to be the only critic who makes a note of the distinction between "the outer and inner sight" in Komunyakaa's "peacetime" poems ("Yusef Komunyakaa" 2). In spite of this perceptiveness, however, Aubert's view on the imagery of seeing in Komunyakaa's poetry is still limited. He defines the problem of the freedom of looking and seeing in the modern world only in relation to the racial issues. He quotes two poems from Komunyakaa's fourth collection, "I Apologize" and "When in Rome--Apologia," in both of which, according to Aubert, the speaker is, "the archetypal reckless [African American] eyeballer," accused of looking at a white woman ("Yusef Komunyakaa" 1). For Aubert the two speakers' desperate apologies prove to be futile excuses for the quality that cannot be

changed--being human. In his opinion the ending of "When in Rome," which engenders the title of the book "I apologize for/ the eyes in my head" implies an African American person's ironic plea for forgiveness for "insisting on seeing all that there is humanly possible to see in the world," and at the same time for aspiring to poetic insight ("Yusef Komunyakaa" 2).

It is true that the denial of the freedom to look is very often a problem of African American people in Komunyakaa's poetry. Situations similar to the one identified by Aubert in "I Apologize" and "When in Rome " appear also in other poems by Komunyakaa. In the poem "Salt" from the "New Poems" section of *Neon Vernacular* the speaker, who might be identified as African American, is not only not allowed to look, but also made invisible by the refusal of others to recognize his presence (6-7). The speaker of "Salt" recounts a meeting with his childhood playmate, a rich woman whose name he cannot remember, and for whose family his grandmother used to work as a housekeeper. The reaction of "Lisa, Leona, Loretta?" towards her former African American friend is not much different than the reaction of "sirs" from "I Apologize" and "When in Rome" towards the African American who looks at their women. "Lisa" also judges the speaker according to white stereotypes or "archetypes" of an African American. She "grabs her purse/& pulls at the hem/ Of her skirt" to cover her legs, protecting herself from a potential robbery and sexual abuse. The woman's gesture of covering her body is at the same time a message sent to the speaker--a protest against being looked at by a black person. A few lines later the description of "Lena, Lois['s]?" behavior implies that she recognizes the speaker, but wants him to remain invisible. The woman's conscious effort to remove the speaker from her perceptual field is emphasized through the unusual, ungrammatical structure of the phrase: "I feel her/Strain *to not see* me" (my emphasis). Covering her body and, figuratively, covering her sight against the speaker, "Lisa, Leona" imposes non-

existence on her childhood playmate: the not-being-there either as a perceiving subject or as a perceived object.

As we proceed to read the speaker's account of how he played with the girl in his childhood, we come upon a description of their common action of looking together in the same direction: "We could pull back the leaves/& see grandmama ironing/At their wide window." They also saw how "Once/Her mother moved so close/To the yardman we thought they'd kiss." As children, we can conclude, the two watched the world together and understood it in the same terms, recognizing the presence of the black grandmama as much as the presence of the white mother. Neither of them was afraid or embarrassed to look and recognize what they saw for what they saw, even if it was something as unusual as the mother's intimacy with the yardman. Now, in her adult life, "Lisa" tries to deceive her own sight, and to manipulate and obstruct the sight of the speaker.

If we bear in mind the metaphor of seeing as understanding and knowledge, we might interpret the insistence of "Lisa" on not seeing the speaker, and on forcing his eyes away from her as an unwillingness to know and understand African American culture, and as a denial of knowledge of her own culture to the speaker. Interestingly enough, in spite of constant hinderings to his vision, the speaker continues to know. The account of what is known occupies as much space in the poem as what is seen.

> . . . Does *she know*
> *I know* her grandfather
> Rode a white horse
> Through Poplas Quarters
> Searching for black women,
> How he killed Indians
> & stole land with bribes
> & fake deeds ?
> . . . . . .
> What the children of housekeepers
> & handymen *knew* was enough
> To stop biological clocks,
> & it's hard now not to walk over
> & mention how her grandmother
> Killed her idiot son

& salted him down
In a wooden barrel. (my emphasis)

Although they are constantly not allowed to look, African American people *can* see, and they know about the crimes committed by white people. Consequently, "Lisa's" straining "to not see" her old friend seems to be caused not only by her determination to remain ignorant about African American culture, but also by her fear of learning some shameful truth about her own race. She impedes her own sight, and denies the speaker the right to see in order to eliminate any space of relationship between herself and her black playmate, in which he could "walk over/& mention" her grandmother's crime. The motive behind Lisa's behavior is "salt," the guilt of family crime, unconsciously transferred to her eyes to blind them for truth.

In "When in Rome--Apologia" seeing is also connected with knowing (*Neon Vernacular* 97-8). The final statement of the poem, "I apologize/for the eyes in my head," might be interpreted as an ironic apology for the speaker's involuntary awareness of insubstantial racial prejudices of the white people. Aubert is right in saying that all the excuses, which the speaker of "When in Rome" finds to explain his attention for the "sir's" wife, can be ascribed to the natural attributes of being human. As a matter of fact, the speaker's first excuse is exactly his "being human": "it's my innate weakness/for the cello: so human." His next excuse deals partly with human anatomy: "I was . . . / enchanted by a piano/ riff in the *cortex*" (my emphasis); the next excuse is alcoholic intoxication: after all a state, which is consciously brought about only by humans. Towards the end of the poem the speaker stresses his physicality by referring to hormones. He cannot promise that he will not "return to the matter," because his physical reactions are "as if hormonal," as much independent of his will as the fact that he has "eyes in his head." Thus apologizing for his mere existence, the speaker proves the absurdity and the prejudicial character of the husband's accusation.

Although entangled in an intricate language game of ironies, in which we can see Gates's "Signification" (saying "I apologize" the speaker does not really apologize for anything), the speaker of "When in Rome" seems to be less resistant to the white people's attempt to deny him the right to see than the speaker of "Salt." The phrasing of the lines "I apologize for/ the eyes in my head" stresses the speaker's passivity. He does not look; he does not see; he merely has eyes in his head. Thus, the eyes, the traditional organ of outward sight, become divorced from seeing. This emphasis on dysfunctionality of eyes points to the speaker's alienation from outward sight, caused by his relationship with the world of white people. Here, another contradiction of the poem enters the picture: the speaker becomes alienated from what, as he argued before, made him human--his body. In the conclusion of the poem the speaker of "When in Rome" seems to come close to the self, which Komunyakaa defines in "Unnatural State of Unicorn": "Inside my skin,/loving you, I am this space/ my body believes in" (*Neon Vernacular* 87). The human identity of the speaker of "When in Rome" turns out to be "inside" and "insight." His eyes, the most tangible connection to the outside world, live independently "up there" in his head.

The speaker of "I Apologize" exhibits similar alienation from his sight (*Neon Vernacular* 108). Throughout the whole course of his apology the speaker emphasizes the separation of his "being" from his "seeing." He says:

> My mind wasn't even there.
> Mirage, sir. I didn't see
> what I thought I saw.
> . . . . . .
> I was in my woman's bedroom
> removing her red shoes & dress
> . . . . . .
> I was miles away, I saw nothing!
>
> Did I say their diamond rings
> blinded me & I nearly lost my head ?

Unlike the speaker of "When in Rome," the speaker of "I Apologize" does not withdraw inward to escape the sense of sight. Instead he removes himself from both his body and his sight--he is "miles away." His "mind," his "head" are not where the looking takes place. Thus although the speaker's eyes look, their action has no effect on his knowledge: the connection between eyes and mind, which transforms looking into seeing, and then into knowing, is broken. This passive, dysfunctional character of sight is stressed in the poem through the imagery of illusion and blindness. The speaker tells his addressee that what he saw was a "mirage," that he was blinded by diamond rings, and later by "the North/ Star, [which] fell through plate glass." Finally, he attributes the obscurity of his vision to the "bad light," which made him take "shadows of overcoats/ stooped in the doorway" for people. In this poem, Komunyakaa's speaker again seems to apologize for the eyes in his head, this time treating them as tricky and misleading.

I do not agree with Aubert, when he merges "I Apologize" with "When in Rome," making no distinction between the situations of the speakers of the two poems. Although the confession of losing his head for diamonds might indicate that the speaker of "I Apologize" is also accused of looking too long at white women, the development of his argument leads us elsewhere. The speaker's denial, "I heard no names. There were no/ distinguishing marks or other clues," implies that "last night" he happened to be an involuntary eye-witness of a crime. His statement, "No, no one roughed me up last night," suggests the opposite of what it claims: the speaker has already received his "punishment" for seeing, and now it is fear that makes him deny all of his experience to a person of authority or power. It is also fear that makes the speaker deny the experience to himself. The plea, which forms the argument of "I Apologize," although it might be another instance of "Signifyin(g)" or, in Baker's terms, another discursive "mask" of humility, at least on the surface seems to be the speaker's desperate attempt to convince himself that he saw nothing, and thus knows nothing. As a result, the speaker willingly impedes his senses,

and alienates himself both from them and from his mind. In consequence, the speaker appears to lose his identity, as he expresses in the conclusion of the poem: "This morning/ I can't even remember who I am." The speaker's interaction with the corrupt, violent and prejudiced world results in a type of schizophrenia, in which his senses, his mind and his self are separated, dispersed and unable to cooperate with one another.

In the poem "Work" the speaker's alienation from seeing takes the form of an almost complete severance of the sense of sight from the speaker's system of experiencing the world (*Neon Vernacular* 11-12). However, unlike in the three poems discussed above, this severance is not so much imposed by the speaker's immediate circumstances, as by his inner belief in the harmfulness of looking. The speaker actually feels sexual attraction for his employer's wife, who is having a nude sunbath on a hammock, while he is mowing the house's lawns. The imagery of honeysuckle's "black sap sang through mystery," and the reference to "taboo, law, creed" implies that the speaker is African American, and the employer's wife is white. There is no one around to stop the speaker from looking--the husband, children, the cook are all gone. However, it is the speaker's inner sense of "taboo, law, creed," the society's moral and race codes, that is responsible for his firm decision not to look at the woman. The speaker of "Work" represents a step further from the desperate protagonists of "When in Rome" and "I Apologize": he has already internalized the white society's rules about looking. It is then not surprising that the poem's opening phrase "I won't look at her" returns throughout the whole text like a refrain. It seems to appear in the speaker's stream of consciousness each time he feels a temptation to go back on his decision. The visual form of the word "look" contained in the refrain, together with other "oo" words recurring in the text ("cook," "looms" "pool," "hook," "good," "taboo"), constantly remind us of the absent eyes of the poem. The echoing words of self-denial and the empty eye-sockets of "oo" prove to be the only substitute for the missing description of the speaker's visual sensations.

Indeed, the whole of the speaker's experience in his employer's garden is recounted almost entirely through reference to senses other than sight. The poem opens with lack of vision ("I won't look at her") only to proceed to senso-motor and aural perceptions:

> My body's been one
> Solid *motion* from sunrise,
> *Leaning* into the lawnmower's
> *Roar* . . . (my emphasis)

Although we get a short visual description of "tiger-colored/ Bumblebees" and "pale blossoms" in lines 6-7, the movement of the flowers is described in terms of hearing: "they sway like silent bells/ Calling." After another self-reminder not to look, the speaker retreats to his mind and memory, providing the reader with a lengthy explanation why other members of the house are not present. The visual description of the estate, which follows the explanation ("This antebellum house/ Looms behind oak & pine") is again cut by the familiar phrase: "I won't look at her," as if in self-admonition for making use of the sense of sight at all. Eventually, the nude figure of the woman on a hammock appears in the speaker's narrative, only to be immediately "covered" by a description of "elephant ears/& ferns" around her, and obliterated by the expression of the speaker's tactile sensations, "sweating skin" and "burning afternoon." These tactile sensations are in turn followed by aural ones ("I hear Johnny Mathis/ Beside her like a whisper"); while the ensuing reference to "the same unbroken rhythm" of work, and the engine that "pulls . . . like a dare" make us perceive the speaker's experience through the senso-motor system.

In the concluding part of the poem, the sense of smell becomes predominant. The speaker mentions the "scent of honeysuckle," the explosion of pollen, and the smell of gasoline and oil on his hands. Although he finally dares to give a visual description of the woman's breasts, the speaker disguises the image in the metaphor of flower buds. Paradoxically, he regards the presence of "buds/ tipped with cinnabar" as "an insinuation," at which again he "won't look"--an implication that the woman's body occupies now a

peripheral part of his vision. The longest, most direct and unrestrained look in the poem appears in the final lines:

> & [I] can't say why there's this bed
> Of crushed narcissus
> As if gods wrestled here.

The look at the bed of narcissus is a look after the deed. The speaker has kept his promise, and fulfilled the society's requirements. He never looked directly at the woman. As the imagery of the final lines of the poem implies, the sexual intercourse took place entirely without the participation of the speaker's sight. His other senses took him on to an outward odyssey "to some Lotus-eater." Now he is back "as if . . . [he] never left." Just like the readers, puzzled by the deliberately obscure language of the poem, the speaker cannot understand the result of his action ("bed/Of crushed narcissus"), because he had never *seen* the cause.

Such ending of the speaker's story points to the irony of the poem. On the one hand, the speaker still tries to hold to the social stereotype that what has not been seen has not really happened. On the other hand, his experience questions the central role which Western culture ascribes to the sense of sight. The poem is a direct reversal of biblical preaching: "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). Since the speaker of "Work" committed an adultery without looking, the poem suggests that sight is not as fundamental to human actions as Western culture believes. The conclusion we might draw from this poem is similar to the one emerging from other Komunyakaa's poems discussed so far: the eyes are in the head, but human identity is not defined by its relation to sight.

Following Aubert's suggestion that the denial of the right to see is an experience particularly familiar to African Americans, I have classified the above poems as Komunyakaa's poems of protest against the racial prejudices about seeing. Indeed, the mainstream view of an African American as a stereotypical peeping Tom is mockingly and

severely criticized in "Salt," "When in Rome," and "Work." Moreover, if we still bear in mind the traditional metaphor of knowing as seeing, all of the poems discussed so far can be interpreted as an ironic comment on the American history, in which access to knowledge and education has so long been denied to African American people. It is impossible to overlook, however, that in each of these poems Komunyakaa's reference to race is very subtle. In none of the poems is the speaker explicitly identified as African American. We guess at his identity from the clues: images of grandmother the housekeeper and a mansion in the South, use of black speech, indications of the taboo. The clues are hidden, because they are not necessarily of primary importance in the poems. Although the situations described in the poems most often mark the lives of African Americans, perhaps with the exception of "Salt," similar situations can be experienced by many people, regardless of race. Thus the line between those who do not let other people see, and those who are prey to this disallowance, apart from dividing races, on a more general level separates respectively all those who have power from all those who do not. Of the four poems discussed above, "I Apologize" with its crime/power/fear relations is the best illustration of this dichotomy.

Other poems in which Komunyakaa undermines the value of sight without relating to the racial issues depict situations similar to the one presented in "I Apologize." The speaker of "Touch-up Man" could be the speaker of "I Apologize" a couple of years later, when the not-seeing of crimes has already become a habit to him (*Neon Vernacular* 88). Touch-up Man works for Mr. Pain, who by virtue of his name and occupation can be paralleled with the central figure of *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*, the Thorn Merchant. This parallelism becomes even stronger in the light of Komunyakaa's most recent book, *Thieves of Paradise*, in which a poem entitled "Pain Merchant" deals with a character called Mr. Pain (21). Indeed, if we treat the Thorn Merchant's name metonymically, we can understand it exactly as "the merchant of pain." The Thorn

Merchant's job, it seems, is ordering murders of other people. Thus, the central figure of *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* is a man with the greatest power in our contemporary world--the power to buy and sell people's death.

Working for the merchant of pain, as the poem "Touch-up Man" suggests, requires not only impeding of sight, but also obstruction of all the senses, through which people commonly gain knowledge of their environment. In the opening of the poem the speaker says:

> I playact the three monkeys
> carved over the lintel of a Japanese shrine,
> mouthing my mantra: *I do*
> *what I'm told.*

As it is commonly known, the three monkeys of the shrine respectively cover eyes, ears and mouth, repeating the main principle of their lives: "I can't see anything. I can't hear anything. I can't say anything." Thus, identifying himself with the monkeys, Touch-up Man recognizes his position of what he later calls "the dumb-mill," the deliberately unconscious, unseeing follower of orders. Much like the speakers of the poems discussed before, Touch-up Man is also not allowed to look at his employer's woman, and he internalizes this rule, exercising conscientious control over his sight: "I'm careful not to look/ at his private secretary's legs." It is worth pointing out, however, that in the context of the African figure of Signifying Monkey, the "monkey" stance of Touch-up Man, like the stance of the speakers of "When in Rome" and "I Apologize," might be a mere mask.

The only place in which Touch-up Man is permitted to uncover his eyes is his work-area--the area of the enlarger and the light table. However, even here the senses of Touch-up Man seem to be muffled. He describes himself as "half-drunk," and the phrases "my tray of bright tools" and "the light table's chromatic glare" suggest that his vision is somewhat blinded by the intense light. If we still bear in mind the metaphor of knowing as seeing, and the related metaphor of knowledge/truth as light, the image of the dazzling

brightness of the touch-up equipment might be taken to express the shocking effect, which the truth has on the speaker, once he is finally allowed to *see*. Not only does the shock of knowledge blind the speaker's vision, making him retreat even from his uncovered eyes, but it also reminds him that his momentary freedom is limited. The phrase "the light table's chromatic *glare*" is ambiguous (my emphasis). It might mean both "intense light" and "a fierce angry stare." Thus even the equipment in Mr. Pain's office watches the Touch-up Man, making sure that he does not divert from the orders in his realm of unrestrained seeing.

Nevertheless, in spite of these limitations, the freedom of seeing makes the speaker powerful. Once at his enlarger and the light table, Touch-up Man calls himself "king." Still, like the power of Mr. Pain, the speaker's power is corrupt. It consists mainly in making other people *not see*. "Doctoring photographs,/ airbrushing away the corpses," Touch-up Man renders the proofs of crimes invisible. The world of Touch-up Man and Mr. Pain is governed by the same rule, which governs the society portrayed in the previous poems: what is not seen does not exist. Consequently, the speaker in his "kingdom," himself free to see, and at the same time not allowing others to see corpses in the photographs, mirrors the power of Mr. Pain, who is able to make people "disappear" from life.

Like Touch-up Man, all the characters who find themselves in close contact with the Thorn Merchant figure have to define their own relation to seeing. Thus the Thorn Merchant's Wife, through the constant effort not to see her husband's crimes, becomes forever fixed in the painting-like image of "the Madonna of Closed Eyes" (*Neon Vernacular* 99). Her suppressed vision is transferred from reality to dreams, which by virtue of their content assume the quality of nightmares. In an image which suggests both dressing of wounds and blindfolding, "nightmares bandaged each other/ with old alibis & surgical gauze," Komunyakaa expresses the protagonist's anguish in being both deprived of sight,

and forced to see and justify the nightmarish images of dreams. Since the Thorn Merchant's Wife accepts the atrophy of her eyes, she loses the most direct connection to the outside reality. Consequently, she becomes confined to the inner solitary life of nightmare. Paradoxically, however, if the pain of the inner life is to be born, it also requires closing of the "inner life eyes"--shutting off the inner consciousness:

> . . . solitaire began to steal
> her nights, stringing an opus
> of worry beads, . . . Morphine
> leaned into the gold frame.

The mechanical, senseless actions of playing solitaire and beading help the Thorn Merchant's wife pass her nights, while the pain-killing morphine, through the capitalization of the word and the image of the gold frame, assumes resemblance to the ancient god of sleep, Morpheus--the god who closes people's eyes.

Although the story of the Thorn Merchant's Mistress is not as complex as that of the Thorn Merchant's Wife, her relation to sight also changes as a result of her contact with the Thorn Merchant. In her heyday the Thorn Merchant's Mistress is always able "[to catch] the eye/ of some *deus ex/ machina"* (*Neon Vernacular* 100-101). Though the phrase means that she is able to make men look, and feel attracted to her, the literal treatment of this common metaphorical expression reveals that she has the power to take possession of and control the eyes of men. The Thorn Merchant encounters her at the time of life when she is in "a deep dance/ pulling the hidden/ strings of nude/ shadows." Being able to look in the eyes of men and then indulge deeply in the thought of controlling them like puppets in shadow theater, she is capable of both outward and inward look. The Thorn Merchant's eye however is not "caught"--his image is dynamic--he drives by in his car. It is the Thorn Merchant's Mistress who is being controlled now. Her heart is "caught/ like a fat moth/ in a spider web."

Another character from the Thorn Merchant's entourage, the Thorn Merchant's Right-Hand Man, as his "title" suggests, should be in a position of power (*Neon Vernacular* 91). As we have seen, the position of power is defined by a character's own freedom of seeing and the ability to control other people's eyes. The Thorn Merchant's Right-Hand Man, however, does not have these qualities, in spite of his belief otherwise. Although "lost faces *reappear*," when he enters the town, they are still invisible, because "*eclipsed*/ by fedoras in bulletproof/ limousines" (my emphasis). Thoughtlessly, and with limiting reliance on supernatural protection, which is suggested in the image of "looted brain case," and "a cage of prayers," Pretty Boy Emeritus is nonchalantly unfearful of death. He "throws a kiss/ to death," and the "paradoxical star in each eye," which accompanies his action, is indicative of his blindness. He is then naturally surprised when he is caught, and grotesquely beaten up. Failing to maintain his ability to see, the Thorn Merchant's Right-Hand Man loses his position of power. In the final scene of the poem he is placed at the very bottom of the power hierarchy--a humiliating position of pleading for mercy.

The only character related to the Thorn Merchant that manages to maintain his power is the Thorn Merchant's Son (*Neon Vernacular* 107). He seems to be a natural-born heir to his father's position. He is not only not afraid to look and see, but also has no difficulty in controlling the environment's capacity of visual perception. The very first image we have of the Thorn Merchant's Son is his action of placing "all six [darts] into the bull's eye." Again, if we treat this common idiom literally, we will see that the opening image emphasizes the protagonist's power of blinding others. When, amidst his various acts, the Thorn Merchant's Son "picks up a paperweight/ & shakes," he makes the black horse disappear, just as his father causes disappearance of people. Moreover, shaking the paperweight, the Thorn Merchant's Son brings "grey-eyed opacity, low cloud" over the room, which implies that he can make himself invisible whenever he chooses .

The protagonist's own looking proves to be just as dangerous as his manipulation of other people's vision. Staring "fifteen minutes/ at a tintype face," he almost causes the picture to disappear--it becomes "so blue it's hardly there." Unashamedly, he looks at the *Pretty Baby* poster on his father's desk, and watches his female neighbor's bedroom with his binoculars. Thus the Thorn Merchant's Son turns out to be the peeping Tom, whom the society seeks in the African American speakers of Komunyakaa's "racial issue" poems. Ironically, while the African American characters suffer dramatic schizophrenia, because of their society-imposed voyeuristic potential, the Thorn Merchant's Son is absolutely unscrupulous about his habit. He approaches the window in a relaxed manner "with a little dance step." Significantly, the wording of the lines "aiming/ his high-power binoculars/ at a woman's bedroom window" evokes the image of a rifle and shooting. Such conclusion of the poem suggests what Komunyakaa develops later in *Dien Cai Dau* --that the straight looking in the position of power is very often synonymous with killing.

The imagery of "The Thorn Merchant's Son" parallels the imagery of the final part of "Touch-up Man" in showing that unrestrained looking in the contemporary world means an automatic involvement in the world's corruption. In a poem earlier published in *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory* Komunyakaa suggests that a straight look at our reality is like "Looking a Mad Dog Dead in the Eyes" (*Neon Vernacular* 43):

> *Perception* can force you to crawl
> On God's great damn stone floor
> & scrape your knees to the bone,
> in love with the smooth round ass
> of death. (my emphasis)

The images of crawling, scraping knees to the bone, and the image of death in the above quotation suggest the necessity of "the perceiver's" strife to save his/her own life. Consequently, danger, proximity of death, and active involvement with fear and violence turn out to be the results of a person's decision to look at the world. Although the same elements of danger define a confrontation with a mad dog, evoked in the title,

Komunyakaa's use of the mad dog metaphor stresses yet another aspect of our vision of reality. Madness in the dog's eyes symbolizes the unnatural, pathological character of the horrors of modern life, enumerated in the poem--the "never-miss sniper on the rooftops," a dog fistbeaten to the ground by a dancing man, "the woman hanging naked/ by her hair in a picture window" of the news report.

The play of the word group "Mad Dog Dead," contained in the title, with the image of the fistbeaten dog later in the text allows us to see the mad dog of the poem as at once fierce and weak, dangerous and helpless, active and dead. This ambiguous image corresponds to the complexity of the picture of the world, which our perception gives us--the reality as we see it is marked by madness, death, violence, anger, but also by the pain of vulnerable living beings who are involved in the modern horrors. Ironically, the final image of "the young man, Christ," casually wearing a nail in his foot, and "using a thorn for a toothpick" points to the commonplace status which pain has gained in the modern world. To evoke the figure of the Thorn Merchant again, pain in the contemporary life has become a commodity. The most sacred image of pain in the Christian culture, the crucifixion, once a unique, highest sacrifice for the redemption of the world, is now no more impressive than shots from everyday news reports. Thus, the speaker of "Looking a Mad Dog Dead in the Eyes" seems to suggest that it is better not to look. It is better to "turn away" like "the newsreel faces" from line 9, or to look without perceiving like the protagonists of other poems discussed so far. Only by depriving our eyes of their function can we avoid exposure to madness and death.

The same belief in the merits of not seeing guides the speaker of "Boy Wearing a Dead Man's Clothes" (*Neon Vernacular* 94-95). In the final part of the poem the speaker finds the source of his problems in the visual perception:

Four weeks ago, that time

I saw him [Uncle Jimmy] & Mrs. Overstreet
kissing in the doorway,

& Mr. Overstreet drunk
with his head on the table. (my emphasis)

The scene from four weeks ago, which the boy recalls here, is a scene right before the crime. The clues in the boy's monologue, which the reader must put together like pieces of a puzzle in a detective story, suggest that Mr. Overstreet killed Uncle Jimmy ("no dark red map widening/ across my chest to recall/ that night"). The boy inherited the dead man's clothes, and although it is difficult for him to identify with Uncle Jimmy ("I never liked/ gabardine's wornout shine;" "Cold weather fills this coat;" "I don't belong here"), he still likes this identification more than the return to his former "seeing self." He desperately does not want to be taken back "by their place," and be an eye-witness to the crime again. Instead, the boy tries to see the reality from his dead uncle's point of view. Putting on Uncle Jimmy's "blue denim cap," he says:

I wear it the same angle
he did . . .

If I tilt it over my eyes,
a bit to the left this way,

cut the sky in half,
can I see the world

through his eyes? . . .

The image of the uncle's tilted cap, which the boy later calls "a cloud-cap," and which cuts the sky in half, implies that the dead man's vision limits the speaker's sight, concealing some part of reality for him. It is perhaps this limited vision that made Uncle Jimmy unaware of the proximity of death during his lifetime, and similar ignorance of the closeness of danger and pain seems to be the goal of the speaker.

As all of the poems discussed so far shows us, in the world of Komunyakaa's poetry outward sight loses the value which Western culture traditionally ascribes to it. People are either not allowed to see, afraid to see, or so horrified with the ugliness of the objects of their perception that they decide to impede their visions themselves. Thus, through constant disuse or misuse, the sight of the majority of human beings becomes completely dysfunctional and misleading. On the other hand, those who decide to continue looking without restrictions must agree to active participation in the world's corruption. The condition of survival for those who persist in looking at the outside world in Komunyakaa's diagesis is appropriation of the corrupt power of controlling other people's eyes.

"Wings Over Bruised Eyes:" The Saving and Liberating Function of Insight

As I have already pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, Komunyakaa does not reject the value of traditional means of reaching for knowledge and truth to leave the reader with no alternative. Giving up their outward sight, the characters discussed in the above section, like Touch-up Man, merely "playact" trickstery "monkeys." To refer to Gates's term again, the characters of Komunyakaa's poems Signify on the world of power: although they agree not to see the outside world, and assume a mask of apology every time they "misbehave," in fact they find other, better ways of seeing. In the world in which freedom of outward seeing entails loss of dignity and confusion of values, sight becomes replaced by insight, understood here literally as "inner sight." The protagonists of Komunyakaa's poems turn inward, towards the darkness inside themselves, where the freedom of seeing is not gained at the price of their lives or their moral systems. When the outside is marked by madness and corruption, it is on the inside where the truth is found.

In the group of poems discussed in the previous section, we have already seen the speaker of "When in Rome " alienated from "the eyes in his head," and searching for his true identity in the space inside his body. We have also seen the Thorn Merchant's Wife, confined to her inner solitary life, as a result of her inability to participate in the Thorn Merchant's actions with her eyes open. Although the final apology of "When in Rome" marks the separation of the speaker's eyes from his self, in a trickstery way, it also suggests the existence of eyes *inside* his head. Thus the speaker of the poem, and, consequently, the subject of the whole book entitled *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* defines himself as a person of inner sight. However, in Komunyakaa's poetic portrait of a woman in the midst of a violent world, the Thorn Merchant's Wife is deprived even of her insight. Her inner life is a nightmare as much repulsive to perception as the outside reality, and this is why she decides to close also her mind's eyes. Surprisingly, in contrast to his wife's vegetating existence, the Thorn Merchant himself is portrayed as looking inward rather than outward in the poem to which his name gives the title. The second stanza of "The Thorn Merchant," as its opening line suggests, describes the images appearing successively inside the protagonist's mind:

> In the brain's shooting gallery
> he goes down real slow.
> His heart suspended in a mirror,
> shadow of a crow over a lake.
> With his fingers around his throat
> he moans like a statue
> of straw on a hillside.
> . . . . . .
> he knows how death waits
> in us like a light switch.
> (*Neon Vernacular* 90)

All the surreal images presented in the above lines--shooting gallery, suspended heart, strangling--imply various ways of dying. Consequently, the Thorn Merchant, the central, powerful persona of the diagesis of Komunyakaa's *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* emerges as a paradoxical figure. As references in "The Thorn Merchant's Wife," "The

Thorn Merchant's Mistress," and even "Touch-up Man" show us, by virtue of his power the Thorn Merchant is free to see, and thus has access to the outside truth. Yet, in the poem which defines his identity, the Thorn Merchant seems to be little concerned with outside life. The images of the first stanza, which refer to the outside reality, deal almost exclusively with other people's reactions to the Thorn Merchant. Amidst all the alarm and violence, caused by his presence, he himself is quite inattentive--in an absent-minded manner "his hands dally/ at the hem of his daughter's skirt." Thus the Thorn Merchant appears to live inside rather than on the outside, and it is inside that he finds the true knowledge. The visions of dying, which he experiences inside his mind, show him that death is the only truth. No matter how powerful he is in the world of the living, he is constantly aware that death is always just an inch away. Dying can happen as instantly as an act of switching the light, and in a split second it can wipe out completely the whole of the Thorn Merchant's power.

In a very different poem from *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*, "How I See Things," the protagonist also finds truth, looking at images inside his head (*Neon Vernacular* 89). The poem opens with an ironic comment on the hypocrisy of newspaper photographs:

> you were
> sprawled on the cover of *Newsweek*
> with freedom marchers, those years
> when blood tinted the photographs,
> when fire leaped into the trees.

Like all the images perceived in the outside world, the *Newsweek* pictures are false. The true pictures, as the speaker argues throughout the whole poem, are kept inside his mind. Continuing the imagery of photography, the speaker starts to recall the memories of lynchings performed on African Americans: "Negatives of nightriders/ develop in the brain." Soon, other similar photographs appear in the darkroom of the speaker's mind: men with bellropes, "charred Johnson grass," "ropes . . . holding to moonstruck

branches." In the third stanza, referring to "ignis fatuus," the illusive (or, in direct translation from Latin, "foolish") fire which appears at night over swamps, the speaker emphasizes the contrast between outward and inward vision. People's sight can be fooled by illusions or threats, but insight will always show the true cause of the state of Johnson grass, however shocking or discomforting it may be.

In the final stanzas sounds become united with images in the development of the true vision in the speaker's mind. The "stolen whispers" tell stories so horrifying that nature cannot bear listening to them (". . . leaves [turn] scarlet./ Hush shakes the monkeypod/ till pink petal-tongues fall"). The singing of a mockingbird reminds the speaker of black people's desperate begging for mercy in face of lynching. Finally, in the synaesthesia "a beaten song/ threaded through skull/ by cross hair," the speaker enriches the visual and aural dimensions of his insight with tactile sensations. The speaker's inner vision of a terrified, lamenting man with a gun at his head becomes multi-dimensional and multi-sensory. The extreme pain and misery of the oppressed man is almost physically perceptible to the reader. There is no doubt that this multi-sensory vision, which the speaker imparts to the reader, tells more truth about the experience of the oppressed people in America than the flat photographs of freedom marchers from *Newsweek* of "those years." In the final lines of the poem, however, the speaker contrasts the "negatives in his brain" with "this year's" photographs: "Black hands still turn blood red/ working the strawberry fields." In spite of the propaganda to the contrary, United States is still a country of racial prejudice. This is the truth, and this is how the speaker "sees things." Not trusting the illusions imposed on his outward sight by the world, the speaker "sees things" through the freedom of insight.

In "Jonestown: More Eyes for *Jadwiga's Dream*," a rich surreal transposition of the tragic events which occurred in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978, insight is indicated as a redemptive faculty, which might have saved the lives of the victims of Jonestown Massacre

(*Neon Vernacular* 115). On November 18, 1978, 913 members of the People's Temple settlement in Guyana (including 276 children) committed a mass suicide commanded by their leader and messiah Jim Jones. This unbelievable instance of power exerted to the extreme seems almost like an embodiment of the abstract world of violence and control created by Komunyakaa in his Thorn Merchant poems. Choosing to embrace the "unreal" reality of the event in his poem, Komunyakaa associates the Jonestown Massacre with a painting by Henri Rousseau, commonly known as *The Dream.* The only obvious connection between the massacre and Rousseau's painting is the common jungle setting. However, Komunyakaa's surrealistic imagination expands and animates the painting, transforming the apparent idyllic world of *The Dream* into the nightmare of Jonestown, 1978.

In Rousseau's painting, among exotic rich flora of variously shaped leaves and multi-colored flowers, a naked white woman rests on a couch in an attitude of superiority. She is surrounded by animals--elephants, lions, birds, monkeys--and entertained by a black flute-player of unidentifiable sex, who seems to be a part of the animals' world. However, the most conspicuous element of the whole painting is eyes. Hidden among the leaves, emerging from the depths of the forest, shining ominously against the darkness of the musician's face and the jungle behind, the eyes seem ghostly, almost separated from their "owners." As Komunyakaa's title suggests, his poem adds even more eyes to the dream-world of Rousseau's painting. If we connect the ghostliness of the painting's eyes and their concentration around the white figure of authority, with the circumstances of the People's Temple massacre, we might presume that the extra eyes Komunyakaa is adding to *The Dream* are the eyes of the dead people from Jonestown. Thus birds, monkeys, lions, the flute-player, and the Jonestown people all become unified by the common image of isolated, mysterious eyes. Consequently, the image of birds, omnipresent in the poem, can be seen as an expression of the human element in Komunyakaa's dream world.

Significantly, at times the birds are described in terms of human attributes: "nervous," "weary," "bruised eyes."

As in Komunyakaa's other "poems of seeing," the discourse of "Jonestown" is one of power and oppression. The wings of birds, a traditional Western symbol of freedom, are portrayed through the greater part of the poem as weak, passive and manipulated by external forces. Thus, the wings are unfolded "into nervous fans,/ adrift like breath-drawn kites." They also "float to tree limbs/ like weary scarves." They are constantly presented as made of material that is easily destructible: paper ("crisp new money," "fans," "kites," "crepe paper") or cloth ("silk," "scarves"). The "hidden eyes" in the opening of the second stanza refer both to insight and Rousseau's painting, but also to the necessity of hiding one's sight and judgment, possibly out of fear. In the last stanza the image of "some unspoken voice, small as a lizard's," which is "trying to obey the trees" again indicates a suppression of protest and psychological effort at compliance with the demands of the leaders. The leaders themselves are referred to in the second stanza as "presiding over this end of songs." Since in Jonestown, Jim Jones and the circle of his high-rank followers actually presided over the meeting, during which the suicide was administered, we might interpret the expression "this end of songs" to be a metaphor of death as this end of life, as opposed to the other end, birth. Portrayal of the leaders as "the pale soothsayers" implies Jim Jones's alleged gift of prophecy, which played a crucial role in establishing authority over his people. The mention of "pine-box builders," on the other hand, might be read as an allusion to the makers of coffins, which evoke the actual physical punishment of confining people in coffin-like boxes, used by Jones against disobedient members of the community (Wessinger), and also carries references to death.

This almost unreal physical and psychological manipulation of people stupefies the speaker of the poem, who in a distant journalist-like manner describes his reaction to the tragedy in the second stanza: "we're unable to tell where/ fiction bleeds into the real."

However, in the same stanza the speaker points to the means by which the Jonestown people might have been freed from Jones's power: "Hidden eyes deepen the memory/ between sunrise & nightmare." If we treat sunrise as a metonymy of day, and nightmare as the metonymy of night, we might identify the point "between sunrise and nightmare" as reference to the period of wakefulness, and perhaps to the moment of awakening--a traditional symbol of self-liberation. Thus, the hidden eyes of insight are the only part of the oppressed human beings which remind them of the possibility of self-liberation. Insight is the only space of freedom between the nightmare of night and the nightmare of day in the everyday existence of the Jonestown community. Indeed, the only place where "the wings" of the poem are strong and active is in the inner vision described in the final stanza: "Green birds flare up behind church bells/ against the heartscape." "Green," according to the color-symbolism of our culture, stands for hope; the image of flaring up suggests unrestrained freedom and intense self-power; the phrase "behind church bells" intimates independence from the church community; finally the blend "heartscape" locate all these images of freedom within the inner landscape. The poem concludes with an explicit praise of the inward look:

> if only
> they'd fold their crepe-paper wings
> over bruised eyes & see nothing
> but the night in their brains.

If only the Jonestown people had covered their abused, manipulated eyes, and stopped perceiving the world according to the vision Jim Jones created for them, they would have been able to see the truth in the darkness of their minds.

The imagery of the inward look in "The Thorn Merchant," "How I See Things," and "Jonestown" shows us that insight in Komunyakaa's poetry prevails over delusive and dysfunctional sight as a means of self-liberation and attainment of true knowledge. The most important of Komunyakaa's "insight poems" in *Neon Vernacular*, "Beg Song"

extends the concept of self-liberation and true knowledge from everyday existence to the art of poetry (48). Elaborating on the discourse of power and oppression, used in other Komunyakaa's poems, "Beg Song" stresses the importance of insight as a way of liberation from intellectual poetry, and a means to posses creative poetic power based on authentic emotions. "Beg Song" opens with a quotation from Federico Garcia Lorca: ". . . where geometry borders on dream, and where the duende wears a muse's mask for the eternal punishment of the great king." Using the above lines as the motto for "Beg Song," Komunyakaa marks Lorca's distinction between duende and geometry as the leitmotif of his poem. In his essay on "Theory and Function of the *Duende* " Lorca quotes Manuel Torres's definition of the popular Hispanic concept of *duende*: "a mysterious power that everyone feels but no philosopher has explained" (91). In the next paragraph Lorca expands Torres's definition with his own observations: ". . . *duende* is a power and not a behavior, it is a struggle and not a concept . . . it is a matter of ability, but of real live form; of blood; of ancient culture; of creative action" (92). In Lorca's view of art this mysterious, formless power is the opposite of "the angel and the muse," which stand for intellect. While the presence of *duende* in a poem or a song marks the highest creative achievement of an artist, the intellect often harms poetry, informing art with geometry of "colonnaded landscapes" (93). "Very often," says Lorca, "intellect is poetry's enemy because it is too much given to imitation, because it lifts the poet to a throne of sharp edges and makes him oblivious of the fact that he may suddenly be devoured by ants, or a great arsenic lobster may fall on his head" (93). Thus to make poetry an authentic creation rather than an artificial imitation, "we must repel the angel, and kick out the muse" (93). Significantly, Lorca defines the angel and the muse (hence intellect) as coming "from without," while the origins of *duende* are placed within: "the duende has to be roused in the very cells of the blood" (93). Consequently, in Lorca's theory of *duende*, what comes

from the outside impairs creation. On the other hand, what comes from the inside enables creation to reach its highest value.

A similar attitude towards the function of intellect and emotions in creativity is exhibited by the artistic movement of surrealism, which directly influenced Komunyakaa's poetry. According to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* in surrealist poetry "thought is liberated from the dictates of reason and from moral and aesthetic structures," and it achieves a new artistic expression, relying on the unconscious, which reveals itself in dream states, sexual attractions, intense emotions, the free play of thought, and insanity. Aimé Césaire, a surrealist Caribbean French poet of the Negritude Movement, whom Komunyakaa often quotes as the figure most influential to his poetry, in his works advocates de-scientification of poetry. Césaire opens his poetic manifesto "Poetry and Knowledge" with a statement: "Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of the scientific knowledge" (xlii). According to him, scientific knowledge, which dominated French poetry until the end of the nineteenth century, offers a prose-like "summary, superficial view of the world" (Césaire xlii). With the appearance of Charles Baudelaire, and "the revenge of Dionysus upon Apollo," however, French poetry moved closer to the authentic truth (Césaire xliv). Poetry after Baudelaire, in Césaire's view resembles more the primitive science of the first days of humanity, when "mankind discovered with emotion the first sun, the first rain, the first breath, the first moon . . . when mankind discovered in fear and rapture the throbbing newness of the world" (xliii). Consequently, just as in Lorca's theory true poetry is accompanied by *duende,* which arises from human physicality and emotions (cells of the blood), so in Césaire's theory true poetry is created in the climate of "attraction and terror; trembling and wonderment; strangement and intimacy," or in other words "the state of fear and love" (xliii). Moreover, also in accord with Lorca's concepts, Césaire identifies scientific knowledge and intellect with (limited) outward sight, while the poetic power for him entails clairvoyance--a mysterious intuitive insight (xliv).

Combining Lorca's poetics with the principles of surrealism and Césaire's poetics, in "Beg Song" Komunyakaa formulates his own poetic manifesto, and defines his own conditions of artistic liberation and poetic power. As we may assume from the poem's motto, the speaker of "Beg Song" addresses Lorca as the master, who can teach other poets how to find their own means of expression and create true poetry. This teaching requested, or, as the title suggests, "begged," from Lorca is expressed in consistent images of inward turning throughout the whole poem. In the opening line Lorca himself is called a "mindreader," someone who is able to look inside people's minds, and know their thoughts--a clairvoyant. In the lines that follow "the mindreader" is asked to impart his ability of insight on others: "help us see how/ the heart begs." The speaker wants Lorca to teach the readers how to find truth and creative power within the realm of the heart--in the emotions so intense and pestering that they beg for expression. This learning to look inside the heart immediately entails gaining awareness of one's outer blindness. In lines 4-5 Lorca is asked to help people see "how fangs of opprobrium/ posses our eyes." Like in Komunyakaa's other "poems of seeing" discussed in this chapter, the outer sight of the "collective" speaker of "Beg Song" is impaired by the world's corruption (this time the speakers' own corruption). However, "Beg Song" is the first of Komunyakaa's poems, which points to poetry as a means of gaining self-consciousness, and attaining the truth through the liberating inner look. Thus in "Beg Song" poetry functions as a kind of "truth serum:" it unmasks falsity, and helps to discover the truth, which is inside. Images which develop the metaphor of "truth serum" in lines 5-6 continue the theme of inward turning. The ambiguous sexual image of "the index finger" working "up into love" is immediately followed by another image of reaching inside--the image of birth--". . . the greased hand/ slides up the wombholler of madness/ & rebirth." Significantly, the phrase "the index finger works/ up into love" evokes also the imagery of pointing, and thus, in compliance with the poetics of Lorca and Césaire, stresses the importance of love (found inside) to the

poetic creation. On the other hand, the image of the "greased hand" sliding "up the wombholler of madness" defines the realm of insanity, the surrealists' main source of inspiration, as the cradle of truth and poetic power. Finally the word "rebirth" implies both a poet's self-liberation, and a creation of new poetic worlds, which in surrealism constitute the rebirth of the outside reality.

The importance of the inward look in art is clearly emphasized in "Beg Song" by Komunyakaa's decision to place the command: "Look, back of the eyes" almost in the middle of the poem. Lines 11-12, which immediately follow the command, ". . . Each/ gazes into its fish heart, final mirror/ of beauty & monkeyshine" present the eyes as alienated from each other, each eye separately looking into itself. This vision of an alienated solitary eye with a "fish heart" evokes the most memorable image from the famous surrealist film, Bunuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andulou*--the scene of an eye cut open with a razor. Since in surrealism the eye is no longer the central medium of perceiving the world, it becomes manifestly destroyed on the screen, and its fish-like insides are exposed to the audience as a symbol of insight and imagination. Likewise, in Komunyakaa's poem we are presented with the back of the eyes and their "fish hearts," as the origin of truth and poetic power. It is worth noticing that the word "heart," although used in line 11 in a slightly different context than at the beginning of the poem, still points to emotions as the appropriate climate for the growth of poetry. Moreover, since the poetic insight/ emotions are depicted in line 12 as "final mirror/ of beauty & monkeyshine," poetry emerges here as the ultimate meeting place of unrelated images--yet another concept central to surrealism, which is best illustrated by the standard example from writings of Comte de Lautréamont: "a chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table" (Matthews 212).

The image of alienated introspective eyes, which within themselves find a new reality of poetry, is followed by another image of reaching inside--a surreal metaphor of

soothing the fear within one's mind: "Run your tongue along/ fear in the frontal lobe." The subsequent request, on the other hand, "Introduce us to that crazy man/ with his face buried/ in your hands," again indicates the speaker's desire to be taught how to explore creatively the inner realms of insanity and the unconscious. The lines, which immediately and with no apparent connection succeed the above request, "In the slack bed, meat/ falls through the door/ of itself," although unclear as a metaphor, continue the imagery of turning within oneself, and within the flesh, to find truth and creative power. Similarly, the next phrase, "soul of lamp" refers to the inside of light, and thus perhaps to the hidden faculties of consciousness, valued both by Lorca and the surrealists.

In the concluding lines, the introspection, desired by the speaker, seems to be multi-layered and far-reaching:

> Slipshod genius, show us
> the cutworm's silly heart,
> how the telescopic love-eye
> probes back to its genesis.

Movement towards "the cutworm's silly heart" is the movement inside the inside--inside the cutworm, which lives inside the grain. Likewise, the movement of "the telescopic love-eye" reaching for its origins implies a gradual unfolding of deeper levels of vision. It is important to notice that this deepest and most complex inner turning in the conclusion of "Beg Song" with double strength emphasizes the concept presented at the poem's beginning--heart, love, emotions as the true source of poetry. Moreover, the reference to nature, "cutworm's silly heart," evokes Césaire's idea of primitive science, which makes its discoveries in "the state of fear and love" (xliii). Since in traditional view primitive science is perceived as "silly," Lorca, who as a poet is closer to primitive science than to mathematical science, closer to emotions than to intellect, is addressed in the poem as "foolhearted mindreader" and "slipshod genius." Rather than being a "mindreader" or "genius," who draws inspiration from the outside angel and muse, Lorca possesses *duende*

--scientifically unexplainable, and thus "silly," inner power, which enables him to create poetry of unsurpassed value.

Reading Lorca's "Theory and Function of the *Duende,*" we realize that the final image of the telescope in Komunyakaa's "Beg Song," like the poem's motto, refers directly to Lorca's theory of *duende*. Calling for the rejection of the angel and "kicking out" the muse, Lorca states: "we must lose our fear of the violet fragrance irradiating from the eighteenth-century poetry, and of the great telescope in whose lenses sleeps the confining, ailing muse. The real struggle is with the *duende*" (93). Thus in Lorca's symbolism the telescope stands for the opposite of *duende*: intellectual, geometrical poetry, which limits and intimidates the artist. In like manner, in Komunyakaa's "Beg Song" the love-eye of poetry is entrapped in the telescope of science and intellect. The liberation of poetry from science can be achieved only by changing the direction of the telescopic looking from outward to inward. This is why in his final request the speaker of "Beg Song" asks Lorca to show him how to turn poetry's eyes inside towards its own genesis, already defined in my discussion: primitive science, intense emotions, and inexplicable powers, all of which is *duende.*

It seems that Komunyakaa's praise of the inner look in the poems discussed in this chapter, and especially the emphasis on the poetic value of insight in "Beg Song," indicates that Komunyakaa's own poetic language would rely mainly on images perceived inside--in the realm of imagination. The imagery of "Beg Song" is a perfect example of an invented dream-like poetic world. Such hybrids as "fangs of opprobrium," "wombholler of madness/ & rebirth," "tongue [run] along/ fear in the frontal lobe," the door of meat, "telescopic love-eye," and so on, are clearly internal products of the poet's imagination. However, we cannot say that they are completely divorced from reality. The concrete images of fangs, wombholler, tongue, meat, telescope, eye must first be perceived by sight in the outside world in order to be transformed inside into surreal products of imagination.

Thus the unique imagery of "Beg Song" arises from the merging of reality with imagination. The same can be said of the totality of Komunyakaa's poems of seeing discussed in this chapter. Poems such as "Salt," "Work," "I Apologize," "When in Rome," "Boy Wearing a Dead Man's Clothes" are fairly mimetic in their representation of real life situations. The Thorn Merchant poems, on the other hand, mostly balance mimesis and imagination. Finally, "Jonestown " and "Beg Song" seem to be immersed deeply in their own poetically created world. However, within each individual poem the reality and imagination are combined. In relatively mimetic "Work" the speaker describes his dream-like action of working "all the quick hooks of light" (11). In "The Thorn Merchant's Right-Hand Man" a mimetic image of people in bulletproof limousines is juxtaposed with a surreal image of "a looted brain case" (91). Extremely surreal "Jonestown" is based on the reality more tangible than any other poem by Komunyakaa discussed in this chapter--a historical event. To quote a line from "Jonestown" once again, in Komunyakaa's poetry "we are unable to tell where/ the fiction bleeds into the real" (115).

Thus it is legitimate to apply to Komunyakaa's poetry the proposition formulated by Césaire at the end of his poetic manifesto: "Marvelous discoveries occur at the equally marvelous contact of *inner* and *outer* totality perceived imaginatively and conjointly by, or more precisely *within* the poet" (lv, my emphasis). Although in his poems Komunyakaa undermines values traditionally ascribed to seeing, and raises insight above sight , advocating the inward turn as a means of achieving the truth, his inner faculty of poetic imagination reconciles both "in" and "out." Thus Komunyakaa's vernacular does not reverse the dichotomy of sight vs. insight, and consequently, the dichotomy of all the concepts sight and insight metaphorically stands for: knowledge vs. intuition, reason vs. emotions. Accordingly, he does not reverse the dichotomy of light vs. darkness. Instead he points to the ambiguity of values, which Western culture attributes to the constituents of the pair.

In the quotation from Lorca, which opens "Beg Song," the two opposites *duende* and geometry, although apparently distinguished from one another, are in fact fused, and disguised one for the other. Geometry "borders on dream," and "the *duende* wears a muse's mask" (48). We are unable to tell where one "bleeds" into another. As we have seen in this chapter, the same confusion and communion of opposites is characteristic of Komunyakaa's treatment of sight and insight, and hence of light and darkness in his poetry. The union of outside and inside, which still takes place *within* the imagination, is Komunyakaa's first step towards his poetic expression of black identity as the union of light and darkness.

CHAPTER 3

RESHAPING THE LANDSCAPE OF LANGUAGE: METAPHORS OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS IN *NEON VERNACULAR*

It is almost a truism to say that in Western culture light is generally conceptualized as positive, and darkness as negative. In the previous chapter we have already noticed the positive attributes ascribed to light through the conceptual metaphors KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT and IDEAS ARE LIGHT SOURCES, related to the UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING metaphor. We have also seen how Komunyakaa questions these metaphors, undermining the value of outward sight, emphasizing the importance of insight, and finally advocating the communion of both sight and insight in the creation of poetry. Needless to say, questioning positive attributes of light, inherent in the KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT metaphor, Komunyakaa at the same time questions the negative attributes of darkness inherent in the related metaphor IGNORANCE IS DARKNESS.

Obviously, "knowledge" and "ignorance" are only one of many pairs of concepts which represent the positive/negative pattern imposed on the concepts of light and darkness by Western culture. Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*, and, more thoroughly, Lakoff and Turner in *More Than Cool Reason* discuss instances of common and literary expressions, in which light stands for life, and darkness stands for death. Moreover, they point to a series of metaphors related to and coherent with LIFE IS LIGHT and DEATH IS DARKNESS metaphors: LIFETIME IS A DAY, LIFE IS FIRE/FLAME, DEATH IS NIGHT. Thus, according to them, such literary metaphors as Marvell's "Now therefore, while the youthful hue/ Sits on thy skin like morning dew," or Shakespeare's "Out, out, brief candle" draw on common conceptual metaphors visible in such more common linguistic expressions as: "the dawn of her life; she looks so burnt-out." Although Lakoff, Johnson, and Turner do not include the GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARKNESS metaphors

in their examples of ontological metaphors, it is common knowledge that we use these metaphors in everyday communication. We can say about someone who is in a good position in life that "his future looks *bright*," and we can also say about people who try to prevent his success as "having a *dark* purpose." Especially in Christian symbolism, light is usually associated with God, saints, and righteousness, while darkness is clearly assigned to the realm of Satan, sin, and sinners. The Bible abounds in such expressions as "God is *light*, and in him is *no darkness* at all" (1 Jo 1:5), "the path of the just is as the shining *light*"(Pro 4:18), "the *light* of the righteous rejoiceth, but the lamp of the wicked *shall be put out*" (Pro 13:9), "wisdom excelleth folly, as far as *light* excelleth *darkness*" (Ecc 2:13), "the way of the wicked is as *darkness*" (Pro 4:19), "cast ye the unprofitable servant into. . . *darkness*: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mat 25:30, all emphases in this paragraph added).

Similar associations, also visible in the religious context, are imposed by Western culture on the concepts of white and black, directly related to the concepts of light and darkness (the Greek word *leukos* translated in the New Testament as "white" contains the Indo-European root *leuk-* "light"). Particularly in religious ceremonies, such a marriage, baptism etc., white is treated as a symbol of purity and innocence. Black, on the other hand, is associated with earthliness and sin. *The Third Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language* lists the following meanings of "white," which contain clearly positive connotations: "**3 a:** free from moral stain or impurity : outstandingly righteous : innocent <a white spirit> <seeing everything as spiritually black or white> . . . **c**: not marked with malignant influences or intent : not intended to cause harm <a white lie> <white magic> . . . **e** notably pleasing or auspicious." The same dictionary lists numerous meanings of "black," which contain negative connotations:

> **6 a:** outrageously wicked: deserving unmitigated condemnation <a black deed> <a black heart> <a black villain>. . . *sometimes* : dishonorable . . . **7.** connected with some baneful aspect of the supernatural esp. the devil <a black curse> <black

> magic> . . . **8 a:** unrelievedly sad, gloomy or calamitous <black despair> <things are looking black> **b** . . . : marked by occurrence of a disaster <Black Friday> **9** : expressing or characterized by menace or angry discontent : sullen, hostile <a black look> . . . **11** . . . illicit, illegal <the black market>

Moreover, English language uses the whole range of pejorative compounds which start with the word "black": "blacklist," "blackmail," "black-hearted," "black sheep." Even when "darkness" is referred to in the English language in a relatively positive context of mysticism or lyricism ("dark, rich imagination," "dark musical notes"), its meaning is still tinged with connotations of fear and grief. It is impossible to overlook that such negative connotations of blackness, visible in Western languages and traditions, are partially responsible for racism against black people in the American society.

"Atrocities of Brightness:" Criticizing Light

In an interview for *New England Review*, to which I referred in the first chapter, Muna Asali questions Komunyakaa about his attitude as a poet towards the traditional metaphors of light and darkness. Quoting the poem "In Praise of Dark Places," Asali interprets it as "an effort to create [Komunyakaa's] own metaphors for the significance of darkness as a person whose identity is called into question by the standard connotations of darkness" (145). Komunyakaa's answer to Asali's inquiry is worth quoting in full here:

> That's where life accumulates its energy, its essence--out of darkness. That's probably where all life comes from. For some reason, built into the Western psyches is this great fear of darkness, of the unknown. Darkness is negative. In the dictionary all the words that begin with *black* have connotations of death. So, for myself, I've been forced to turn around the definitions that we accept, to reverse them and turn them back on themselves, and also to turn language back on itself. (145)

As Komunyakaa's words imply, the aim of his poetry is to reverse the traditional metaphors and create his own poetic vernacular in which darkness is positive and light is negative. Indeed, in many of Komunyakaa's poems we are presented with the images of

"evil light." In "Newport Beach, 1979" light appears as an instrument of entrapment and pain-infliction (*Neon Vernacular* 75). The speaker of the poem finds himself in a situation which we have already seen in numerous poems discussed in the previous chapter. He is caught looking too long at "Miss Baby Blue Bikini," and, because of his blackness, is immediately perceived as "Redlight Bandit, . . . Mack the Knife, or Legs Diamond." Trying to explain his position and identity to the woman, the speaker says in the opening of the poem:

> To them I'm just a crazy nigger
> out watching the ocean
> drag in silvery nets of sunfish,
> dancing against God's spine--

Thus, playing on the words "sun" and "sunfish," Komunyakaa begins his poem with an impressionistic image of sunlight reflected in the surface of the ocean spread out against the sky. However, the apparent blissfulness of the image is negated by the offensive phrase "crazy nigger" in the first line. Since the structure of the phrase "silvery nets of sunfish" allows us to interpret the nets as both full of sunfish and made out of sunfish (sun), the speaker appears not only as an observer of light on the water, but also as an object entrapped and entangled in the nets of light.

The image of entrapment is developed further in the final stanza of the poem. Using the preposition "in," which implies confinement, the speaker describes his days as "hang[ing] open/ in *hurting light* . . . " (my emphasis). In his entrapment the speaker is controlled by hostile "eyes/ [which] look at [him] like loaded dice." The eyes' position of power, as opposed to the speaker's bondage, is emphasized by the qualifier "first-degree," which precedes the noun "eyes." Also, as we know from our discussion in the previous chapter, the eyes' ability to look straight without any hindrances to vision establishes them as the oppressive force in the poem. Thus, negating the stereotypical image of an African-American as "the Redlight Bandit," the speaker shows "Miss Baby Blue Bikini" his

position as a victim rather than an assassin in the American society. The speaker is oppressed by "hurting light," which symbolizes the white society in general, and lives under constant threat of hostility from "first-degree eyes," representative of individual members of this society.

To provide an example of the "hurting" activity of light, the speaker refers to the traditional punishment for looking at a white woman inflicted in the past on African Americans--castration. In a surreal and gloomily humorous metaphor the speaker describes his days as "hang[ing] open/ . . . like [his] sex/ cut away & tied to stalks/ of lilies, with nothing else/ left to do for fun." Since the word "lily" appears here without any qualifier, it evokes the most typical in the Christian world type of lily--*lilia candidum*--the white lily, a traditional emblem of purest whiteness and chastity. However, "profaned" with literal ties to a castrated penis, the whiteness of the lily, like the image of light, acquires negative connotations in the poem. The flower's traditional symbolism of purity and nobility (knighthood) when put in the context of castration transforms the image of the lily into a metaphor of Ku Klux Klan--the bearers of murderous light and terrorizing whiteness.

There is one more point in the poem, in which a metaphor of light appears. Enumerating stereotypical hostile representatives of the black race, the speaker describes them as "risen from the dead/ in . . . *magenta sunsets* perpetually/ overshadowing nervous breakdowns" (my emphasis). The image of the setting sun in the above lines implies a faint light, just about to go out. Unlike at other points in the poem, this time the light is not white. It is "magenta," a strong purplish red color, produced by a dye, which, as *The Webster's Dictionary* informs, "was discovered in the year of the battle of Magenta, and [was] named for its bloodiness." Paradoxically, the red light of the setting sun produces darkness, shadows: it "*overshadow[s]* nervous breakdowns" (my emphasis). Thus, the bloodiness of crimes of African American "*Redlight* Bandit[s]" (my emphasis) blinds the society to the true source of these crimes: bad psychological condition of black men, caused

by oppression and violence of the white society. As it turns out, light acquires negative connotations once again--light is not knowledge--magenta sunsets cause only illusion and misunderstanding.

It is interesting that the image of rising from the dead, traditionally symbolized by sunrise, appears in the poem in the context of sunset. Such reversal of symbols questions the conventional LIFE IS DAY and DEATH IS NIGHT metaphors, and replaces them with the opposite poetic metaphors "life is night" and "death is day." If "the Redlight Bandit," "Mack the Knife" and "Legs Diamond" ever rise from the dead, they will rise into the world of changed concepts: the night without racism and prejudice.

Similar contrast between bad light and good darkness is present in the poem "Rocks Push" published earlier in *February in Sidney* part of *Neon Vernacular* (167-68). Slowly putting together his memories, the speaker recounts how he was attacked by a razor gang. Significantly, the world of the assassins is the world of light and whiteness:

> They ease up from the emulsion
> of *silver halides*, with faith
> in what lives under the *whitewash*
> (my emphasis)

The assassins' yearning for light is the direct cause of their violence:

> need[ing] to prove something to
> women with corsets thrown on beds
> *lit by oil lamps*, they bring back
> trophies & stories of another's fear.
> (my emphasis)

In order to escape the approaching pain and fear of the attack, the speaker withdraws inside himself, to his imagination which is clearly marked by blackness. The speaker refers to his imagination as "fir[ing] up/ its black engine," and making the terrifying world outside non-existent. Later, trying to delay the moment of assassination as long as possible, the speaker watches faces appear and disappear in his "heart's rainy darkness." Although, returning to the outside world, the speaker still finds himself in darkness, he realizes that

the outside darkness is contaminated with hostile light. In an image which suggests neon lights, the speaker describes the outside night as "festooned with play things/ that swallow a man's spirit." Moreover, playing on the name of an infamous neighborhood in New York, the speaker endows the image of streetlights with devilish connotations: they "burn gauzy/ & dim as Hell's Kitchen." Although throughout the whole poem the terrifying character of light comes partly from the light's faintness and dimness, the most violent point of the poem is recounted in terms of strong, bright light. The moment of the attack is rendered as "the flash of butterfly/ knives in the hands of skinheads." Like in "Newport Beach," in "Rock Push" light is presented as an instrument with which white people, this time Australian skinheads "with Cockney accents," inflict pain on the speaker.

In a poem from the same section of *Neon Vernacular*, "The Man Who Carries Desert Around Inside Himself: For Wally" the image of light is more impersonal (165-66). Without any concrete reference to people who use light as an instrument of violence, light and whiteness in the poem create a landscape of a modern Wasteland. In the opening lines of "The Man Who Carries Desert" the addressee of the poem is contrasted with his grandfather, whose true vision consists in seeing "this grog-scented night." Although, as the speaker implies, the addressee is also able to perceive the night, his vision is "less true;" the preposition "in" indicates the addressee's confinement in whiteness: he "remain[s] in . . . skull-white landscape." The modifier "skull" endows whiteness with connotations of death. Moreover, the cruelty of whiteness of the landscape and the desert sunlight is emphasized in the subsequent line, in which the addressee is compared to "a figure burned into volcanic rock." The addressee's resemblance to an imprint in the rock again points to his confinement and restriction of movements. Further in the poem, cruelty of the desert sunlight is described directly:

> Atrocities of brightness
> grow into a map of deaths
> spread out like stars

as you read the debris
left by the sun and crows

In spite of living within the realm of light's violence, the addressee seems to possess good knowledge of how to survive in the desert landscape. Being confined by light, he is at the same time able to exercise control over light and protect it from wind. In face of "a cutting wind," the addressee knows "how to wrap [his] arms around/ an anthill," and "hold the midday"--the time of the sun's greatest brightness--"inside." Moreover, as the title of the poem implies, the addressee is able to confine the desert and carry it *within* himself. What seems far more dangerous to the addressee than the natural light of the desert is the artificial light of the city. Being able to light up during nighttime, "the city's skyline" is an extension of "lifetime," which implies day, "into night." On the one hand, such description of the city implies the city's positive ability of extending the time of activity (day, life) into the time of inactivity (night, death). On the other hand, however, by extending day into night, the city prolongs "atrocities" of daylight into the comforts of night. In the final lines of the poem the city's lit-up buildings are seen as flowers, which although full of life, act in a destructive, war-like manner. The abrupt appearance of the buildings-flowers on the desert is compared to "spontaneous combustion" and "wildfire." Moreover, in an image evoking a military action, the buildings are depicted as "march[ing] over the sand."

Many images in the poem imply that the addressee of "The Man Who Carries Desert" is a descendant of Australian Aboriginal cultures. Description of the addressee's grandfather as "desert dreamer, telepathic/ sleepwalker over shifting sand" evokes the concept of dreaming central to Aboriginal lifestyle and beliefs. Moreover, as a contemporary Australian curio, the addressee's grandfather is placed on a postcard, which tourists, like the speaker, "airmail" to their families. Like his grandfather, the addressee is endowed with spiritual insight and feeling of kinship with the whole nature. He is able to

"walk/ out of [his] body;" he can hear "gods/ speak through blue-tongue lizards;" he can communicate with "lost people," locate "secret campsites," and hear the rain "whispering to ghosts." Even the remains of animals form a map which the addressee can read, and the intricate "labyrinth" of the landscape "takes [him] home." Only the elements of white "civilization" seem to disturb the addressee's balanced existence within the nature of the desert. Apart from the image of the destructive city, in "The Man Who Carries Desert" we find a disturbing image of "some explorer's/ sluggish boots," which turn the addressee into "a slowmotion machine," when he tries to follow their imprints. Moreover, the cruel "cutting wind [which] rides [the addressee] down," evokes in him a memory of "bushrangers."

Thus, if we remember Western culture's insistence on treating colonization as "enlightenment" of non-European cultures, we can interpret the images of light in "The Man Who Carries the Desert"--in particular the city light--as the metaphor of influence of Western culture on the native Australian life. "Atrocities of brightness" of Western civilization have changed the balanced, familiar desert, inhabited by Aborigines into the Wasteland. The Aborigine addressee of the poem is left in the deathly "skull-white landscape" to wander among the remains of his culture with no place safe enough "to cry away anger."

While in the three poems discussed above images of "evil light" represent negative effects of white people's civilization on lives of other races, in a long poem from *I Apologize*, called "1984," "evil light" points to Western culture's self-destruction (*Neon Vernacular* 109-12). "1984" is an apocalyptic view of the contemporary world at the end of its days, marked by "the sign of the beast." The associations, which Vince Gotera finds in the phrase "lip-sync Cobol" in the opening stanza of "1984" can be applied to the whole poem: "the mentality of MTV and game-shows, alienation via technology, and our own complicity in contemporary senselessness" (303). Moreover, in Gotera's words, the poem

portrays those aspects of our times which make people "abrogate the human and identify with or idolize the machine" (303). Consequently, like in the images of the city in "Rock Push," in "1984" light appears mostly as an artificial, delusive man-made product--it is either emitted by or reflected in the machines.

The first line of "1984," however, opens the poem with an image of genuine fire: "The year burns an icon/ into the blood." Through George Orwell's book, the year 1984 has become an icon of dystopia and catastrophic view of the future. Now, in the actual year 1984 the icon becomes a painful reality: it is burnt "into the blood;" light evoked in this image of burning is injurious but truthful. The next image of light in the first stanza does not portray light as truthful. The image is an ironic reversal of the beginning of times as described in the Book of Genesis: "Purple oxide gas lamps light/ the way out of this paradise." Like biblical Adam and Eve, the speaker leaves paradise. However, "this paradise" is hardly a paradise at all. It is "a paradise" of "the glass domes," discolored by "birdlime," and "roof beams . . . shaky as old men/ in the lobby of the Heartbreak Hotel." Similarly, the light which shows the way out hardly resembles the light created by the Christian God with words: "Let there be light." The modifiers "purple," "oxide," "gas" stress the artificial, unnatural character of the 1984 light. The god of the modern light also appears in the poem, at the end of the second stanza: it is "the drunk radiologist," for whom "we wait/ on the edge of our chairs," probably in expectation of a diagnosis, which might reveal a fatal disease. In the context of "the drunk radiologist," the image of "millstones," which closes the second stanza, can be seen as the hidden burden/ symptom of the disease. Consequently the following lines might be interpreted as a surreal metaphor of x-rays and x-ray photographs:

> Such a lovely view--
> Big Brother to shadows
> slipping under the door
> where the millstones are stored

Evocation of Orwellian "Big Brother" establishes light--in this case the light of x-rays, which symbolizes the achievements of science--as a corrupt power over human beings, who are reduced to "shadows" in x-ray photographs. The image of artificial, man-generated light as "Big Brother" becomes even more powerful, if we remember that in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Big Brother is actually "made-out of light." Never presented as a tangible human being, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Big Brother appears to Winston Smith only as a face on the telescreen.

Apart from "the drunk radiologist" keeper of light, further in the poem we encounter traditional Christian holy figures depicted in the context of light: "Angels playing with trick mirrors." Using reflections of light to play bad jokes on the world, angels appear rather as mischievous devils than as traditional emblems of holiness. Like naughty children, the angels trick human sight with mirrors, in this way changing the light of knowledge into the light of delusion. In the subsequent lines, describing the angels as "sweet on Minotaur in the dark/ muscular air," Komunyakaa does not only merge Christian religion with mythology, but also questions the traditional Christian image of angels as sex-less, pure beings. The light of angels again loses its "holy" connotations: chastity is replaced with sensuality.

Another "holy figure" whose light loses its meaning in "1984" is the mythological Zeus--the prototype of the Christian God the Father. Although in Greek mythology the traditional light of Zeus--lightning--is often destructive, it serves at the same time as a truthful carrier of messages from gods to people. In "1984," however, Zeus is reduced to "the confused robot," who helplessly "punches a fist through a skylight," against a background of trivialized light--"fireworks." Zeus's wife, Hera, the traditional goddess of the household fire, is presented as a "mechanical bride," with whom Zeus "dances across the floor/ . . . doing a bionic two-step." Consequently, the image of fireworks as a

background light for the dance of robot-gods stresses the domination of mechanized science and popular culture over ritual and human relationships in the contemporary world.

Also, at the end of "1984" the image of light points to the overthrow of real life by mechanized science. In the first lines of the final stanza we are presented with "Dr. Strangelove" who "tracks/ the titanium gods." Since "titanium" is a white metallic element used widely in production of aircrafts, we can easily understand the phrase "titanium gods" as a metaphor of airplanes. However, the etymology of the word "titanium," and its combination with the word "god," inevitably brings to mind mythological Titans (primordial gods overthrown by the Olympian gods), whose name in Greek (a Titan) originally denoted "god of the sun," and is derived from *tito*, "sun, day," probably a loan word from Asia Minor (*A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*). Changing Titans into titanium airplanes, over the centuries Western civilization has changed sunlight into metal, and replaced nature with a destructive machine.

However, it is not only gods who are stripped of their traditional power and function by the images of artificial, mechanical light in "1984." At many points in the poem mechanical light appears as an emblem of de-humanization of the human being itself. The light of "hammered silver" of the "badges we wear" blurs out the distinction between man and machine:

> U-235 UTOPIA.
> Made in America.
> "Give us enough time,
> we'll make the damn thing.
> Let's look at the manual.
> OK, here's *human breath*
> on page 319."

Another image of light--"Brass knuckles flash"--shows light as an emblem of contemporary urban violence and, at the same time, still emphasizes human transformation into machine. The rhyme of the word "flash" with the word "flesh" in the subsequent line indicates that in our times human "flesh" has changed into metallic "flash." Consequently,

the position of highest admiration, the peak of "lovers wish[es]," has been occupied by semi-human "astronauts," who are "flashier than rock stars." The only use the contemporary world can find for sunlight is to trigger "'E.T.' dolls" through "interstellar sundials." In such context the attribute of light as a giver of life acquires an ironic meaning.

The features of unnaturality and mechanization, which are characteristic of light in "1984," are also inherent in the images of whiteness in the poem. In the first stanza we find a description of "rockets hum[ing] in *white silos*"(my emphasis). The preceding reference to "stockyards," and the subsequent reference to wheat fields in the context of the phrase remind us of the primary meaning of the word "silo:" a storage for grain or animal feed. With the development of Western civilization, however, the word acquired additional meaning: a keeper of rockets or missiles before they are launched. Thus, the whiteness of silos, which formerly symbolized peaceful balanced existence, in the contemporary world has become a sign of war.

Another image of whiteness extends the confusion of the contemporary world into the future: even after the end of times. The image of "White Angel" in the sixth stanza is combined with the image of light of "vigil candles." Since "vigil candles" imply a state of waiting and preparation, the White Angel clearly symbolizes the angel of the righteous on the Judgment Day of the Second Coming of Christ. Although the fact of lighting vigil candles seems to imply that humanity is prepared for the Second Coming, the mentioning of "camera obscuras" in the preceding line questions the value of this preparation. The literal Latin translation of "camera obscura" is "a dark chamber." Moreover, as an ancestor of modern photography, camera obscura appears in the poem as a representative of photographic cameras. Thus, the light of "vigil candles" in the contemporary world is not a genuine light at all; it is the flashlight of cameras, which are "guardians of . . . things to come," and are ready to turn even Judgment Day into a news report. Consequently, such

false light of "vigil candles" leaves the world "a dark chamber," morally unprepared for the Second Coming. Apart from the image of watchful cameras, in "1984" we find another image of ludicrous preparations for the Second Coming: "work[ing] [of] the White Angel/ bread line." The formation of bread line suggests that the distribution of "rewards" on the Judgment Day will take place according to the rules of the modern consumer's society: on the first come, first serve basis. Thus, the whiteness of the White Angel loses its connotations of justice and righteousness. Instead, the whiteness comes to symbolize authority of the indifferent agent of God who will come to give "rewards" to those who know how to get their own.

Although the connotations of light and whiteness are definitely negative in "1984," as we have seen through references to the images of "shadows," "dark air," and "cameras obscuras," the connotations of darkness are not necessarily positive. In many points of the poem, blackness appears ominous. In the third stanza "waves/ of locusts fall like black snow/ in our sleep," and black birds, "grackles/ foresee ruins and battlements." Also, in the final stanza people are described as "sleepwalk[ing] among black roses." In its ominous character, however, darkness at least allows people some insight into the future. In contrast to this revealing function of darkness, the artificial light of the machines blinds and desensitizes people, trying to "erase the sign of the beast" and make the world unaware of its approaching fatal end. Gradually changing natural light into mechanical light, Western culture has brought itself to the verge of destruction. Nevertheless, even at the end of its days the "enlightened" Western world does not want to recognize its mistakes.

In a very different poem from *Copacetic*, "Gloria's Clues," Komunyakaa concentrates particularly on questioning the purity-and-innocence connotations of light/white, signaled also in "1984" (*Neon Vernacular* 76). Although it is not clearly determined whether the light in the poem is decidedly impure and evil, the light, represented by Gloria, is at least ambiguous. The very name of the central figure of the

poem evokes the image of light. The primary English meaning of the common word "gloria" is "a halo, aureole or dazzling light bursting from open heaven." Also, through its Latin etymology, "gloria" implies holiness of the glory of God. Moreover, as we learn from the descriptions of playing in the poem, Gloria from "Gloria's Clues" is a small child --traditional emblem of innocence in our culture.

However, when Gloria's parents are not present, the speaker seems to see the child behave in a way which is hardly innocent. She "performs" for him in a clearly sensual way: "Sucking on a lemon-yellow lollipop, she goes for the/ heart . . . Some dance/ propels her across the floor." "When she pulls her panties down," the speaker, in an ironic gesture of embarrassment, turns his eyes to the other source of light and holiness in the room: "the blond Jesus glowing on the wall." To make matters worse, sensuality is not Gloria's only "sin." The speaker notices indications of the child's cruelty. When "Gloria plays with her life-size doll . . . With peripheral vision [the speaker] see[s] her sneak a cigarette from the clamshell ashtray--/ a slow kiss of burn bubbles around the doll's belly-/ button." Moreover, referring to the game of dominoes which the speaker plays with Gloria, the speaker uses the slang term "bones" to suggest the child's affinity with violence and death: "we shuffle the bones, we slap'em down: blank/ to blank, five to five," "the bones rain down/ like blows against the oak tabletop." Also, through more subtle implications, reminiscent of the power of the Thorn Merchant discussed in the previous chapter, Gloria appears as a keeper of corrupt power in the poem. She is able to make her doll close her eyes; and she follows the speaker "out the door to the street" with her eyes, while the speaker himself experiences "an induced schizophrenia," and has to "look . . . without looking."

Since the speaker constantly questions the reliability of his vision, wondering "if it's all in [his] head" and hinting at his intoxication with "Tequila Sunrises & San Miguels," the improbable "Gloria's clues" are likely to be just illusions. However, while

leaving his friends' house, the speaker encounters yet another instance of impure, sensuous light and whiteness. Gloria's mother, Annabelle, "stands where the/ doorway's heavy light falls through her white muslin/ dress like sad wisdom." Revealing the woman's body under her white dress, the light is stripped of its connotations of purity, but at the same time preserves its symbolism of knowledge. The "heavy light" makes the speaker realize that there *is* some truth in his drunken vision of cruel, lascivious Gloria: there exists no pure light; even the society's emblems of purity, like an innocent little child, bear marks of the society's corruption.

In a poem "A Quality of Light" from *February in Sidney*, Komunyakaa also questions light/whiteness as a symbol of purity and innocence (*Neon Vernacular* 170). Although not definitely impure or evil, light/whiteness is again presented as ambiguous in the poem. As in "Gloria's Clues," and some parts of "1984," in "A Quality of Light" images of light are placed in the context of religion. The speaker's observations of light revolve around two young women, one dressed in black, the other one in white, who have come to see the Pope visiting the city. The poem has an unusual graphic structure: it is divided into two parallel columns. The left-hand column opens with a description of a black dress, worn by one of the women, and proceeds to images which depict a relative variety of colors and types of light. The right-hand column, however, is devoted almost entirely to images of various kinds of whiteness. If we read the poem in a conventional way, starting at the top of the left-hand column, going down, and proceeding to the right-hand column "A Quality of Light" begins with an image of light reflected in the surface of a black cloth. The woman's black dress is described as "opalescent under/ the afternoon's ultraviolet." Significantly, "opalescence" implies both rainbowy multiplicity of colors and milky whiteness of an opal. Moreover, the word "ultraviolet" evokes associations even with those colors which are invisible to a human eye. Thus "blackness" in the poem appears to embrace the whole spectrum of colors, including the opposite of black--white.

In contrast to this versatility of blackness, whiteness in "A Quality of Light" emerges as "colorless" and monotonous: the other woman's dress, clearly defined as white in the right-hand column, in the left-hand column is described as transparent, "a see-through."

Shown in the opening images as iridescent and flexible, light continues to reveal its mutli-colored, ambiguous nature throughout the poem. Halfway through the left-hand column we encounter an image of "four motorcycle cops," reminiscent of the cold, mechanical quality of light in "1984:" the cops "speed to a halt in *shiny/ leather and chrome glare*" (my emphasis). On the other hand, however, the subsequent description of the city on the day of the Pope's visit presents light through its positive attributes. The image of "sky/ gleam[ing] off pails filled/ with fresh-cut flowers" evokes light's traditional connotations of holiness and heaven. Moreover, if we change our conventional way of reading, and combine the penultimate line of the left-hand column with the parallel line in the right-hand one, we receive an image in which light, reflected in colorful surfaces of fruit, appears as a carrier of life: "apples & uncrated pears held up to sunlight to ripen in their sweet skins."

Although at the beginning of the poem in the left-hand column blackness seems to be more interesting than whiteness, the relationship between the two colors gradually becomes ambiguous. The woman in black dress is described as "shadowing" her friend in white dress "like a half-/ forgotten thought." Implying shading, protection or even overshadowing, the verb "to shadow" points to the privileged position of the "black-dress woman" over her friend. At the same time, however, another meaning of "to shadow"--to follow like a shadow--suggests the woman's inferiority. Comparison to "a half-forgotten thought" stresses the second meaning of the verb. Moreover, the speaker seems to be more attracted to the woman in white dress than to the one in black. Towards the end of the left-hand column the speaker notices the sensuality of the woman in the white dress, watching the way "she moves to a music/ we touch in ourselves/ sometimes."

In the right-hand column, the woman's sensuality is further emphasized, and the clash between her see-through white dress and traditional Catholic connotations of whiteness is directly pointed out:

> Her white dress
> sways in the heat,
> merging with the Pope's
> robe like metaphysics
> & flesh. Innocence,
> vulgarity, temptation,
> spectacle, or what?

It is important to notice that although in traditional Christian view sensuality of the woman's dress stands in opposition to the Pope's spirituality, Komunyakaa suggests a communion of the two when he describes the meeting of "metaphysics & flesh" as "merging." The concept of communion of sensual and spiritual is further elaborated when again we combine parallel lines of the two columns. "The weak cloth merging with the Pope's/ robe" contrasts (and merges) the common word "cloth" with the high register word "robe," suggesting that even the Pope's dress might be "weak"--sinful. Thus, the speaker's wonderings about "innocence, vulgarity, temptation" etc. apply both to the whiteness of the woman's and the Pope's "cloth." Again, reading lines across the columns we discover the concealed question of the poem: "Oh is the Pope robe like metaphysics [?]" Moreover, the "glare" of "shiny leather and chrome" turns out to be a part of the Pope's light too. Combining the parallel lines of the columns we read:

> Four motorcycle cops vulgarity, temptation,
> speed to a halt in shiny spectacle, or what?

Since the arrangement of the columns might represent simultaneity of the speaker's visual perceptions (left) and the speaker's thoughts (right), seeing "the four cops," the speaker wonders at the meaning of this quasi-military entourage in the context of the Pope's mission in the world. Reflections on the Pope's role come to the speaker also "hours later in bed," when he "strain[s] to hear [the Pope]/ say the word *Peace*." However, just as the

image of peace contrasts with the image of "motorcycle cops," the word *Peace* seems ironic when uttered from a "bulletproof/ Popemobil." Since peace in our culture is symbolized by white color, failing to connect "peace" with the Pope's white robe, the speaker questions another positive attribute of whiteness. The vision of whiteness and light, which the speaker experiences instead, in the conclusion of the poem, is a view of:

> the moon [which] peers around
> a corner of the window-
> shade, transparent
> as the dress, like a page
> held up to sunlight
> till it burns.

The images of the moon--the traditional light of lovers--and the transparent dress in the above lines evoke the sensual quality of light/whiteness, emphasized earlier in the poem. However, the image of a burning page in the context of the whole poem implies destruction, especially destruction brought by the Catholic church on those individuals who did not agree with the church's teaching--Inquisition. Significantly, the description of "the moon peer[ing]," as if slyly, "around a corner" in the right-hand column runs simultaneously with the image of the heavenly light of "the gleaming sky" in the left-hand column. Moreover, through the arrangement of the columns the image of ripening fruit is paralleled with the image of burning. Such pairing of contrasting elements obviously contributes to the ambiguity of light, already well represented in the poem.

Considering the imagery of the poem, and the potential for expansion of this imagery, which the poem's unusual structure gives us, we come to the conclusion that questioning the qualities of purity, innocence, peacefulness, holiness, and life, attributed to light and/or whiteness, Komunyakaa generally questions the symbolism of light as knowledge. The structure of the poem is in fact iconic of "quality of light." We can "read" light in a traditional top-to-bottom, left-to-right way, searching for *the* one true light of knowledge, which is always righteous--undoubtedly white. However, we can also see

light in its multiplicity of colors: reading on many levels across the columns, allowing for contrasting interpretations, and combining apparently clashing images. It is important to notice that while a belief in one true light of knowledge is usually responsible for intolerance, prejudice and violence, acceptance of the ambiguity of light enables "ripening" of many differing views and cultures in a peaceful co-existence. Thus, advocating such co-existence, in "A Quality of Light" Komunyakaa in every possible way exploits the medium of poetry to prove that the light of knowledge *is* ambiguous. There exist no metaphors which can define "the quality of light;" every connotation assigned to light in Western culture makes us see only "a quality of light"--one out of many, often contradictory, qualities.

The six poems discussed above show us Komunyakaa's attempts to "turn around the definitions [of light and darkness] we accept" by "turn[ing] language back on itself" (*New England Review* 145). "Newport Beach, 1979," "Rocks Push," "The Man Who Carries," and "1984" depict light as definitely cruel and destructive. "Gloria's Clues" and "Quality of Light," on the other hand, focus on the ambiguity of light, uniting positive and negative images of light, rather than presenting light as decidedly evil. In view of Komunyakaa's aiming at "reversal of the definitions," however, it is surprising that light receives much more attention in the above poems than darkness. In "Newport Beach" and "Rocks Push" darkness appears as a safe, comforting escape from "hurting light;" in "1984" black locusts, birds and roses provide truthful insight into the future; in "A Quality of Light" blackness seems more versatile than whiteness. However, in none of these poems is the praise of darkness as strong as the criticism of light. In fact, the line of conflict in the above poems often does not run between light and darkness, but between two kinds of light: natural and artificial. Thus, to refer again to Asali's interview, the poems discussed in this section point to the weakness of the standards of the society whose values throughout the history have been based on the worship of light and whiteness.

Consequently, the poems prove that the society's power "to call into question" the identity of African Americans is built on fragile foundations (*New England Review* 145). However, in spite of his criticism of the mainstream American values, in the above poems Komunyakaa does not provide a well-developed alternative set of values, in reference to which the black identity could be defined better.

"First Thing Tied to Last:" Identity as Double-Consciousness of Light and Darkness

One explanation of the strength of the images of light and whiteness in the poems discussed in the above section might be provided by W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness. If we see Komunyakaa as Du Bois's African-American artist "born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world," we will come to the conclusion that Komunyakaa's excessive focus on criticism of light in the above poems is indicative of his simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from "the other world," and "the other" part of himself (Du Bois 214-15). Since, as Du Bois suggests, the less familiar part of consciousness is usually the more attractive one, in the above poems Komunyakaa devotes most of his attention to cruel light and whiteness, just as the speaker of "A Quality of Light" devotes most of his attention to the sensual woman in white.

However, in Du Bois's words, to be endowed with "the gift" of double-consciousness means also to long for unified consciousness, to strive "to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge . . . double self into a better and truer self" (215). In Komunyakaa's case, we have already seen this struggle in the previous chapter, while discussing the imagery of outer and inner sight. Significantly, in Du Bois's definition, double-consciousness involves exactly a conflict between outer and inner seeing. Seeing himself as himself from the inside, an African American is also forced to see himself from the outside, "through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 215). Du Bois notices:

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always *looking at one's self through the eyes of others*" (215, my emphasis). Later, discussing the influence of literature on an African American struggle for self-consciousness, Du Bois describes a black person's experience of reading: ". . . his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,--darkly as *through* a veil; and yet he saw *in* himself some faint revelation of his power" (218, my emphasis). Thus, Du Bois's main symbol of double-consciousness, the Veil, implies simultaneity of both outer and inner vision of oneself, though with the two being separated.

It is impossible to overlook that this simultaneity of the two visions is paralleled in Komunyakaa's insistence on using both sight and insight in poetic creation. In "Beg Song," Komunyakaa's poetic manifesto, discussed in the previous chapter, images of burdensome racial double-consciousness mix with the images of beneficial poetic double-consciousness: "crazy man/ with *his* face buried/ in *your* hands;" "fangs of opprobrium [which] possess . . . eyes;" finally an image of heart which serves only as a mirror to the outside things (*Neon Vernacular* 48, my emphasis). Thus, Komunyakaa's poetic formula to combine "inner and outer totality perceived imaginatively and conjointly by, or more precisely within the poet" (Césaire lv) reflects the struggle of Du Bois's artist to merge "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (215).

Just as the images of sight and insight combined within the imagination of the poet suggest the double-consciousness of the African American artist in Komunyakaa's poems, the images of struggle and eventual communion of light and darkness are even more indicative of Du Bois's concept. There are a few poems in *Neon Vernacular,* which, unlike the poems discussed in the previous section, devote equal attention to the concepts of light and darkness, while questioning the traditional connotations of the two. Emphasizing ambiguity, but at the same time reciprocity of light and darkness, these poems aim at

definition of African American identity, the precarious position of which in the world of light has been shown in the poems discussed in the previous section. One of the "identity" poems is, naturally, "Praising Dark Places," one of the "New Poems" in *Neon Vernacular*, which triggered the discussion of light and darkness between Asali and Komunyakaa (13). Although the title labels the poem as an acclamation of darkness, both light and darkness in the poem appear as ambiguous, although equally important constituent parts of the speaker's identity.

The search for identity in "Praising Dark Places" is rendered through a metaphor of exploring a dark world of small animals and "unnameable insects," living under "an old board laid out in a field/ Or backyard." As the poem's use of past tense, and presence of motifs common to most of the "New Poems," indicate, the act of "lift[ing] [an old board] up with a finger,/ [or] A tip of a stick" was a common occupation of the speaker during his boyhood days. One day, however, the usual course of the boy's play was broken by the discovery of a beautiful scorpion, and the consequent revelation that "Beauty can bite." Years later, reflecting on his experience the speaker talks about his fascination with the scorpion:

> I wanted
> To touch scarlet pincers--
> Warriors that never zapped
> Their own kind, crowded into
> A city cut off from the penalty
> Of sunlight. The whole rotting
> Determinism just an inch beneath
> The soil.

It is significant that in the lines which precede the above excerpt, the speaker's first perception of the scorpion likens the animal to "a rainbow" which is "as if . . . edged underneath." Rainbow is split light, light revealed in its variety of colors. Thus, the scorpion seems to be its own source of light in the world of darkness: light which is flexible and open for changes--the one of rainbow-like quality depicted earlier in "A Quality

of Light." Consequently, the scorpion seems to be its own master: it has its own "warriors"--"scarlet pincers"--which never "zap their own kind;" it is independent from "the penalty" of the outside light. However, the image of being "cut off" from light, especially in the context of the city, which appears in the same line, does not support the implications of the scorpion's independence. Moreover, although the phrase "penalty of sunlight" implies autocracy, it signifies the kind of oppression of which the subjects are aware. In contrast to this open tyranny of outside light, "the rotting determinism . . . beneath the soil," again, especially in the context of the modern city, suggests contriving social and economic forces, which negate individual will without the individual's awareness of it. In a like manner, the passive form of the verbs "crowd" and "cut" points to the influence of external forces upon the scorpion's "warriors." Moreover, the remark that "the warriors" never kill "their own kind" implies that sometimes they do "zap other kind." Although it is ambiguous whether the "zapping" is done in attack or self-defense, it is clear that the fighting occurs between "kinds," which in the modern context indicates racial or ethnic struggles. Thus, Komunyakaa's darkness, although apparently autonomous and good, appears to be a "beauty that bites:" combining both independence and oppression, the dark place "beneath the soil" is full of contradictions.

The image of darkness as the merging of opposites is developed in the further part of the poem. Concentrating more on the present situation of the speaker than on the account of his boyhood experience, the following lines draw open connections between the dark places beneath old boards and the speaker's identity:

> Into the darkness
> Of opposites, like those racial
> Fears of the night, I am drawn again,
> To conception & birth. Roots of ivy
> & farkleberry can hold a board down
> To the ground. In this cellular dirt
> & calligraphy of excrement,
> Light is a god-headed
> Law & weapon.

The above lines portray the speaker's journey into the darkness, reminiscent of the inner journeys in search of the true vision which we have seen in many poems in the previous chapter. This time, however, the aim of the journey is the speaker's true identity. The imagery of this part of the poem is the imagery of the rites of passage of the so-called "primitive people," who according to Joseph Campbell perceive the process of growing up as a rebirth (65-66). Thus, Campbell notes, the threshold rites of "the primitive man" make use of "a constellation of images denoting the plunge and dissolution in the darkness of non-being . . . represent[ative] . . . of the mystery of entry of the child into the womb for birth" (65). The speaker of "Praising Dark Places," who in the poem progresses from a playful boy to a self-conscious subject, enters the ritual darkness to discover the meaning of the concepts of light and darkness, which dramatically influence his identity.

Komunyakaa's choice of images and vocabulary at this part of the poem is clearly indicative of the speaker's double-consciousness. Darkness is defined both from the Western and non-Western points of view. On the one hand, darkness is negative, threatening ("racial fears of night"). On the other hand, it is positive: it is an emblem of fertility and life ("conception and birth"). Moreover, use of the adverb "again" in description of the speaker's attraction to darkness suggests that the speaker's identity is not wholly defined by darkness: since he is "drawn *again,*" sometimes he stays in the light. The image of dark plants, "roots of ivy and farkleberry," fastening a board to the ground, suggests the existence of dark "guardians," protecting the speaker's inner self from the influence of light. However, we have to remember that at the beginning of the poem it is the speaker himself who lifts the board up, and lets the light in. In the final lines of the poem both light and darkness are depicted as ambiguous. The phrase "cellular dirt" evokes negative connotations of darkness: uncleanliness and confinement. The next phrase, however, "calligraphy of excrement," literally merges positive and negative images of darkness: the black color of ink used in the art of calligraphy becomes the black color of

feces. Finally, the portrayal of light as "a god-headed/ Law & weapon" again suggests light's position of power, however without evaluating this power as either good or bad. Although a god's law, as the American history shows, might be misused to oppress "unenlightened" people, and weapon might serve as means of ruthless destruction, there exist laws which truly ensure justice and order, and weapon's primary function is to provide food and defense. Moreover, as Komunyakaa's use of articles shows, light in the poem is only "*a* . . . law & weapon:" in the realm of the speaker's identity there exist other laws and weapons, probably also those of darkness.

As the above discussion shows us, throughout the whole poem images of light and darkness represent respectively Western and non-Western points of view, which form ambiguous, but inseparable and irreplaceable constituents of the speaker's African American identity. It is difficult to ignore affinities between the identity of the speaker of "Praising Dark Places," and the identity of the poet of Komunyakaa's poetic manifesto, "Beg Song," which we discussed thoroughly in the previous chapter. Apart from the images of double-consciousness, which I enumerated before, "Beg Song" shares with "Praising Dark Places" the imagery of the rites of passage: the poet's journey within is depicted through the images of "the greased hand/ slid[ing] up the wombholler of madness/ & rebirth" and "the telescopic love-eye/ prob[ing] back to its genesis" (*Neon Vernacular* 48). Consequently, just as the speaker of "Beg Song" goes through the ritual of darkness to discover that his identity as a poet relies on combining both the outer and inner sight, but both *within* himself, thus the speaker of "Praising Dark Places" is reborn into knowledge that his identity as an African American is based on both light and darkness, but both combined *within darkness*. It is in this sense that "dark places" are praised in the poem. Through Komunyakaa's metaphors "dark places" emerge as Du Bois's "dark bodies," which although cursed with schizophrenia of consciousness, at the same time surpass

"white bodies" in their ability to unite both light and darkness--both white and black points of view--inside.

Although the speaker of "Safe Subjects," a poem published earlier in *Copacetic* is also endowed with double-consciousness, the speaker's "twoness" is caused by different factors than the ones implied in "Praising Dark Places" (*Neon Vernacular* 67-68). In "Safe Subjects" the speaker's identity is called into question not so much by racial prejudices as by general confusion of the contemporary world. The world of "Safe Subjects" is described as the world of loneliness and violence, "where my brothers kill each other,/ each other's daughters and guardian angels/ in the opera of dead on arrival." Trying to escape "the second skin of loneliness," the speaker searches for his identity through his lover. Significantly, the search for identity is also the search for truth. The whole poem is an appeal to the speaker's lover to "say something worth breath," "say something about real love" in acknowledgment that "it's truth we're after here." Like in most of Komunyakaa's poems, in "Safe Subjects" truth can be found inside. The poem begins with the images of impaired outer senses: "mouth shut this way," "fat leeches press[ing] down on a sex goddess's eyelids." The inside, on the other hand, seems intact. The speaker encourages his lover:

> *--pull [the truth] out*,
> bringing with it hard facts,
> knowledge that the fine underbone
> of hope is also attached
> *to inner self, underneath it all.*
> . . . . . .
> Let the brain stumble
> *from its hidingplace*
> (my emphasis)

Like "Praising Dark Places," the poem contains also the imagery of the rites of passage, which have to be completed on the way to self-discovery:

> acknowledgment of thorns:
> meaning there's madness

in the sperm, in the egg,
fear breathing in its blood sac

In the context of the poem's central theme--love--the above lines imply sexual intercourse and "madness" of sexual attraction. At the same time, however, they evoke the familiar image of "darkness of conception and birth," and consequent "madness" of the rebirth into self-consciousness. Thus, although in contrast to traditional metaphors, darkness in the poem appears as the abode of truth, at the same time it preserves the traditional connotations of madness, pain ("thorns"), and fear.

In further parts of the poem, darkness continues to carry its negative connotations. Meaningless sexual intercourses take place in "sorrow's darkrooms," and nights are marked by "loveless beds & second skin of loneliness." Moreover, in the middle of the third stanza we find the traditional metaphor of death as darkness in the image of "shadows" which look "like blueprints of graves." Significantly, however, the deathly shadows are produced by light: they are "cast down" by "bowed lamps." Thus, although the image of "bowed lamps/ cast[ing] down shadows like blueprints of graves" preserves the negative connotations of darkness, at the same time it undermines the positive connotations of light. In this way light and darkness become inseparably united. They form two sides of the same concept of death-like modern existence. In an earlier image of reality of "loveless beds" in the poem, light and darkness are also inseparable. The speaker describes modern people as "stumbl[ing] off into neon nights:" people's loneliness and misery is intensified as much by depressing darkness as by the mechanical, artificial, inhuman neon light.

Up to this point, the treatment of light and darkness in "Safe Subjects" resembles the first group of poems discussed in the first section of this chapter. The speaker questions the standards of the society, providing hardly any alternative values for the development of his identity. In the closing part of the poem, however, we find clear

indications of the speaker's double-consciousness as the basis of his identity. The speaker suggests that there is hope within darkness: "in the creed of nightshade." Although he admits that he does not believe in this creed, at the same time he describes himself, and those like him, as "dreamers," which suggests their affinity with darkness rather than light. In an image which distinctly evokes "cellular dirt/ & calligraphy of excrement" from "Praising Dark Places," "the dreamers/. . . decode the message of dirt / between ancient floorboards." Thus, darkness again appears to be the carrier of knowledge. This time, however, it is a multi-layered darkness: "the message" can be found *in* dirt *within* darkness *between* floorboards *within* darkness of nightshades. Like in "Praising Dark Places," in the final lines of "Safe Subjects" the multilayered darkness is a place within which light and darkness merge. The "message of dirt" reads as follows:

> black widow spiders
> lay translucent eggs
> in the skull of a dead mole
> under a dogwood in full bloom

Although in the above lines light and darkness preserve their traditional connotations of life and death respectively, the two are inseparable from each other. "*Black widow* spiders" (darkness, death) produce "translucent eggs" (light, life), placing them in the skull of a dead black animal under a blooming (thus at the peak of life) plant with light-colored flowers. Like in the image of "bowed lamps," light and darkness, which are constituent parts of the speaker's identity, form two sides of the same concept--death. Thus, the speaker's double-consciousness consists in recognition of death in life and life in death within the darkness of his own identity. There are no other subjects which can be safely recognized as true than that death follows life, new life follows death, then there is death again, and life again, and so on--the border between the two cannot be clearly delineated. Awareness of the cycle of life and death, light and darkness is also the only truth that the speaker can find about himself. In this respect, the speaker of "Safe Subjects" resembles

the Thorn Merchant, who, as we noticed in the previous chapter, despite all his external power, always concentrates on his inner knowing "how death waits/ in us like a light switch" (90). Significantly, despite our immediate associations of death with darkness, the speaker of "The Thorn Merchant" never mentions explicitly whether the moment of death means turning the light on or off. Both in "The Thorn Merchant," and in "Safe Subjects" light and darkness are equally life and death.

In the poem cycle "Dreambook Bestiary" the images of co-existence of light and darkness also represent the double-consciousness of life and death (*Neon Vernacular* 113-114). This time, however, life and death acquire a special meaning. Double-consciousness in "Dreambook Bestiary" is the double-consciousness depicted in Du Bois's "On the Passing of the First Born," one of the chapters of his *Souls of Black Folk.* In this chapter, Du Bois's Veil carries its biblical meaning of "the Valley of the Shadow of Death," and together with the account of death of the author's son, symbolizes the spiritual death of black people in America: death in life of constant humiliations and hindrances to opportunity. In "Dreambook Bestiary" Komunyakaa employs the medieval form of the bestiary to depict this spiritual death of his race. Just as in medieval writings habits of various, mostly fabulous, animals were used as allegory of human behavior, so in "Dreambook Bestiary" Komunyakaa uses images of actual animals--armadillo, possum, ants, hermit crab, and centipede--to make a collective portrait of African American identity.

As the title of the poem suggests, the animals from Komunyakaa's bestiary originate in dreams rather than reality. Such connection between the beasts and dreams evokes striking associations with a work of another African American author, John Edgar Wideman's *Sent For You Yesterday.* In the opening of Wideman's novel Carl French, an African American, relates his dream of "a big greasy-assed elephant chewing his cud in the backyard .. scary motherfucker" (11). In response, Carl's friend, Brother Tate connects "the elephant dream" with his own nightmares and feelings: "Yeah. That's what I'm

talking about. The elephant. . . . The one made you stop. Made you hold your breath cause you know if you make a sound you're gone. . . . Couldn't scream. Had to hold it in for sixteen years. Fraid to open my mouth for sixteen years cause I knowed I'd hear that scream" (11). Wideman's elephant is a nightmare which makes African Americans acutely aware of their lives of oppression and self-restraint. In a like manner, armadillo, possum, ants, crab, and centipede of Komunyakaa's "Dreambook Bestiary" appear in nightmares to reveal to African Americans the hidden forces of fear, grief and self-suppression which determine their lives, and lead to their spiritual death.

In the first poem of the cycle, "Fear's Understudy," armadillo--the beast which, as the title suggests, plays the role of fear in the speaker's nightmares--is described as "merg[ing] with night." Although such metaphor, in a traditional way, connects darkness and fear, it also suggests a merging of the attributes of armadillo with the darkness of African American identity. The subsequent lines of the poem depict the armadillo merging also with yet another kind of darkness--the darkness of the soil--in an act of fear and escape from danger. As the imagery of the lines suggests, the armadillo consciously accepts inferior position in the world: it is placed "ground level," it gives up straight looking, and chooses instead mere "peer[ing] out from under coral helmet." Significantly, the helmet is described as "color of fossil," indistinguishable from the elements of the earth. Later, the armadillo's dwelling is described as living:

> encased in an asbestos hull
> at the edge of a kingdom
> of blackberries in quagmire,
> in a grassy daydream,
> sucked into its shield
> by logic of flesh.

The above lines bring to mind metaphors of self we found in other poems by Komunyakaa. The armadillo--fear--is portrayed as living inside the inside, within multiple layers of identity. The elements of identity again comprise light and darkness representative of

double-consciousness. Being confined within "an asbestos hull," which is usually of a light color, but, significantly, resistant to fire, armadillo is at the same time placed on the edge of blackness: "kingdom of blackberries," reminiscent of the dark floral guardians present in "Praising Dark Places." However, "the kingdom of blackberries" is in turn placed "*in* quagmire," another image which suggests confinement and entrapment, this time by darkness. Finally, the whole Russian doll structure of the armadillo's dwelling is placed "in a . . . daydream," which again implies merging of the attributes of light (day) and darkness (dream). In the concluding lines of the poem we learn that the armadillo itself lives within itself: its search for protection places the armadillo inside "its shield." The immediate cause of armadillo's withdrawal inside--"logic of flesh"--suggests physicality, and hence, color of skin and "logic of racism." Thus, the "logic of flesh" that concludes "Fear's Understudy" emerges as the primary cause of fear for an African American, and consequently, a cause of a black person's withdrawal within the inner self of double-consciousness. Since the images of multilayered inner journey in the poem evoke also burial ("encasement," "quagmire"), the "logic of flesh" is at the same time responsible for the sense of death in life of African Americans.

In the second poem of the cycle, "The Art of Atrophy," the images of death are even more powerful. The central theme of the poem is the mastery of self-suppression. Like Wideman's elephant, which prevented the dreamer from screaming, the poem's "beast"--possum--is a symbol of restraining from vocalization of emotions such as anger or sorrow, and subduing them until they completely disappear. Throughout the whole poem, possum is compared to an actor: he "plays dead . . . like a seasoned actor," his performance is called "a dumb show," which emphasizes his self-suppression of emotions. He does not express his needs even when, while dreaming of "ripe persimmons," he receives instead "a dried stick." Significantly, "the dried stick" is described in the poem as placed beside "a white thunderstone." Because of thunderstone's connotations with light

(it was once conceived to be a thunderbolt), as in many other poems of Komunyakaa, we encounter here an image of powerful white light. However, the power of the thunderstone's light, possibly symbolic of the power of the white society, is corrupt. The thunderstone does not fulfill the possum's dream, and offers him only a ridiculously poor substitute for the real object of his desire.

However, the possum continues to act out his acceptance of the situation. He willingly suppresses his sight: his "one eye" is "half open." Moreover, the pretended character of the possum's behavior is emphasized through the comparison of "his grin" to the night light, "silver moon playing tricks again." In the middle of the poem, the speaker wonders:

> How long
> can he play this waiting game,
> till the season collapses,
> till blowflies, worms, & ants
> crawl into his dull coat
> & sneak him away under
> the evening star?

Waiting for the dream to come true, but doing nothing to hasten its fulfillment, and pretending to be dead, the possum might one day "slip" into actual death even without realizing it. Death in the above quotation is represented by the inhabitants of "dark places," which we met before: "blowflies, worms, & ants." However, although death here is, in a traditional way, connected to darkness, the act of dying itself is depicted as journey from the darkness of inner self (the inside of the "dull coat") towards the night light ("evening star"). Thus, the poem suggests that the actual death might provide a relief from the state of spiritual death in life, which African American people experience.

The concluding lines of "The Art of Atrophy" continue the theme of double-consciousness, present in the whole cycle. The possum's constant switches between life and death are emphasized through the likening of the animal to "a master escape artist" and "Lazarus." Moreover, the possum's identity is described as neither white nor black,

neither belonging to life nor to death: it is the identity in between--"dull" and "gray." The possum is described as an insignificant "gray/ lining from a workman's glove/ lost in frost-colored leaves." The reference to frost in the above lines, and the close connection between frost and the image of loss, strengthened by the rhyme lost/frost, evokes again the cruel, destructive whiteness of the society.

The next poem in the cycle "Heart of the Rose Garden" concentrates exclusively on the "agents of darkness"--ants--which in "The Art of Atrophy" are able to transport a living creature from life into death. In the "Heart of the Rose Garden" the function of ants is the same as in the previous poem. The ants act only under the night light--"moonlight"--waiting until "grief tracks/ someone down," and "a man's soul/ slips behind a headstone," to perform their "instinctual autopsy." They undermine "the base of the skull," in this way improving the darkness of the soil. They are also described as "subsist[ing] on fear," which lives inside the man. Thus, like in the two previous poems from the cycle, in the "Heart of the Rose Garden" darkness preserves its negative connotations: it represents fear, grief, death, and decay. However, since the work of the ants takes place in the "heart of the rose garden," darkness is again established as a constituent part of double-consciousness, and represents death within life. Ants, "microscopic mouths/ all working at once," represent those forces in African American life that undermine beliefs and hopes in the realization of dreams and bring about the spiritual death.

The fourth poem of the "Dreambook Bestiary," "Glimpse," differs from all other poems included in the cycle. Although the poem's central figure--the hermit crab--is affiliated to darkness through its resemblance to "the shadow of a bone," "Glimpse" does not make use of the imagery of light and darkness to represent the concept of double-consciousness. Nevertheless, the traditional attributes of light and darkness--life and death --and their inseparable nature are still central to the poem. The burden of double-consciousness in African American life is represented through the image of the crab's

shell. At the end of the poem the shell is described through a compound of words taken from two different registers: "a dome-shack." Because "dome" implies a stately sacral building, and "shack" a crude small house, the two stand respectively for the qualities of magnitude and obscurity. At the same time, however, since domes of churches often serve as roofs over tombs, "dome" can be associated with death, while "shack" is clearly a place of living. Thus, the crab's attempts to abandon the "dome-shack" on the sand are indicative of African American struggles to get rid of the double-consciousness of life and death. Significantly, in the light of the "dome-shack" metaphor: to get rid of this burden means also to get rid of the consciousness, in which death seems magnificent, and life shabby.

It is worth pointing out that the crab's abandonment of "the dome-shack" entails the crab's emergence from *the inside* of the shell. The crab's action is the exact reverse of the behavior of the first "beast" in the cycle: the armadillo "sucked into its shell." Thus, in contrast to other animals in the bestiary, the crab clearly defies "the logic of flesh;" its path leads away from the inner darkness of opposites towards the unambiguous self-conscious identity. It is also significant that, unlike all other poems in the cycle, the imagery of "Glimpse" is clearly the imagery of day--bright morning on the beach--indicative of the approach towards single-consciousness of light. However, as the final lines show, just as the crab manages to get rid of "the dome-shack," it immediately realizes the value of its burden: the crab "backs off/ surveying for the first tremor of loss." If we bear in mind the traditional metaphor of knowing as seeing, which we discussed in the previous chapter, the poem's title, "Glimpse" might be metaphorically interpreted as "sudden comprehension." Thus the whole poem might be treated as a discovery (through loss) of the importance of double-consciousness in African American life.

If we proceed from "Glimpse" to the cycle's concluding poem "Underside of Light," we realize that the theme of "Dreambook Bestiary" progresses from the recognition

of the burden of double-consciousness in the first three poems, through the attempt to get rid of this burden in the fourth poem, to reclamation of the double-consciousness as a pivotal part of the self in the final poem. As a poem of acceptance of double-consciousness, "Underside of Light," employs the imagery of light and darkness more extensively than other poems in the cycle. Reclamation and integration of double-consciousness into identity is emphasized in the poem through very tight connections between the images of light and darkness, and between the related images of life and death. The very title of "Underside of Light" suggests darkness, which is only the other side of light, and death, which is only the other side of life. However, it is ambiguous in the poem whether it is light or darkness that stands for death.

The opening stanza of the poem is devoted almost entirely to a single image of a centipede trailing its "egg sac" out of "compost," which, as the images of "lightning" and "dampness" suggest, has probably been saturated with water during the storm. Since the centipede's "egg sac," an obvious symbol of a new life, is described as "bright," in this opening image light is clearly identified with life. At the same time, however, life and light are described as originating in "the damp compost: biological soil, miasma," which do not only evoke associations with darkness of the earth, but also with death and decay. The close connection between the bright eggs of life and the dark compost of decay is further emphasized by the structure of the stanza. Starting in the middle of the first line, the five lines of the first stanza form one long sentence, which, thanks to the extensive use of enjambments, trails through the poem like a centipede:

> Tubular bright egg sac
> trailing like a lodestone (unable to say
> which is dragging which) out of damp compost:
> biological soil, miasma, where lightning
> starts like a sharp pain in god's spine.

Even the punctuation of the sentence serves as an iconic device: the parenthesized phrase imitates segments in the centipede's body, while the colon marks a point of connection

between the centipede and the sac attached to it. Thus, being placed in one sentence, "bright egg sac" and "damp compost" form two integral, though contrasting, parts of centipede's body. Moreover, the deliberately complicated structure of the sentence, and the position of the phrase "biological soil, miasma" after the colon--as an "attached matter"--allows for an interpretation of the stanza, in which "biological soil" is dragged by "the tubular egg sac." In this context, the parenthetical remark "unable to say which is dragging which" points to the ambiguity of power relations between light and darkness, life and decay. The border between light and darkness is further blurred when the darkness of "biological soil, miasma" is described as a place "where lightning starts." This "light in the darkness," however, is cruel: it is compared to a "sharp pain in god's spine," and as a metonymy of the storm, it is the immediate cause of the centipede's abandonment of its dark habitat.

In the second and final stanza of the poem the centipede's emergence from the soil is described through the imagery of resurrection:

> In its armor, this sentinel rises
> from a vault of double blackness.

The phrase "double blackness" evokes again Komunyakaa's common metaphor of African American double-consciousness as light and darkness combined within darkness, most conspicuous in "Praising Dark Places," "Safe Subjects" and the "poems of seeing." The above lines suggest that the centipede, like the hermit crab from the previous poem, abandons both layers of darkness, and moves towards the new life, which is composed only of light, and symbolic of unified consciousness. The subsequent images, however, show the centipede's resurrection to the light of life as ambiguous. In the penultimate line of the poem, light is strongly identified as death-bearing: "murdering light." Moreover, the centipede's movement with the egg sac is described as "this vegetal love forecasting April."

In modern poetry it is no longer possible to mention April without evoking T. S. Eliot's definition of the month in the opening of *The Waste Land* :

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain. (29)

April is the month of contradictions: the constant tease of resurrections and returns of death. "Forecasting April," the centipede with its egg sac represents merging of life and death, light and darkness. Emerging from the compost to avoid death in the damp soil, the centipede is going to die in light, devoid of its natural habitat of darkness. Being thus "sentenced" to death, the centipede drags closely behind itself a new life in the "egg sac." Moreover, the centipede nourishes itself and the eggs with the decayed matter of the compost, thus changing death into life. Finally, when the centipede dies it will itself become the biological soil, which will perhaps enable the larvae to survive. Thus, as the final line of the poem suggests, centipede is truly "first thing tied to the last"--not only with a single knot. However, since we are "unable to say which is dragging which," it is impossible to define in the poem which is "the first thing," and which is "the last." Light causes the centipede's exile from darkness, but simultaneously resurrects it. Darkness forms the vault of death, but it is also a nourishing and protective force. In the context of the poem's ambiguities it is even difficult to say whether the title "Underside of Light" appears here in the traditional meaning of "under" as inferior in hierarchy.

Thus, the centipede in Komunyakaa's bestiary clearly shows qualities of double-consciousness, represented by armadillo, possum and ants in the first three "entries of the dreambook." Significantly, however, carried outside of "double blackness," double-consciousness represented by centipede is of a different kind than that represented by other "beasts." Rejected in "Glimpse," double-consciousness of "Underside of Light" is the double-consciousness reclaimed no longer within self, but outside, in open defiance of "the

murdering light" of the society. It is double-consciousness of African American identity which transformed its curse into a blessing: perhaps a blessing of the poetic craft. Thus, it is also the blessful double-consciousness of Komunyakaa's surreal technique, which, as Gotera says, "balancing opposites and the incongruous" (308), enables creation of poems of such beautiful and nightmarish quality as "Dreambook Bestiary."

"Underside of Light" shows us that Komunyakaa does not limit the list of meeting points between inside and outside and light and darkness only to the inner darkness. Sometimes, he suggests, the outside light can also be a place in which the confrontation of opposites takes place. In this way, Komunyakaa once again rejects any hierarchy between light and darkness. Consequently, "Dreambook Bestiary," stronger than any other poem we have discussed so far, points to the aim of Komunyakaa's questioning of metaphors governing the English language. Contrary to what we expected at the beginning of this chapter, Komunyakaa's wish "to reverse [definitions] and turn them back on themselves, and also turn language back on itself" (*New England Review* 145) means not so much reversal of dichotomies present in Western language and thought, but rejection of dichotomies and hierarchies in general. Although in the first group of poems analyzed in this chapter Komunyakaa uses light as a metaphor for bad outcomes of the "enlightened" Western civilization, he does not employ darkness as a parallel metaphor of good non-Western traditions in the American society. Moreover, in his identity poems, "praising dark places," Komunyakaa does not elevate darkness over light, but praises the equal treatment of the concepts of light and darkness, naturally inscribed in African American consciousness. It is worth pointing out that the language of "Praising Dark Places," "Safe Subjects," and "Dreambook Bestiary" allows us to read the poems' descriptions of double-consciousness not only in reference to specifically African American identity. Thus, praising the union of light and darkness in the three poems, Komunyakaa presents African American double-consciousness as a general model of thinking, through which true

knowledge can be found. Only combining opposite points of view, and thus allowing for many interpretations of a single concept, can we be just and true. Only in a society which has accepted double-consciousness as the basis of its thought, and perceives light and darkness/ whiteness and blackness as equal concepts--neither negative nor positive--can individual black identity be defined.

It is to this purpose that Komunyakaa employs what he calls his "neon vernacular," poetic language of opposites: to set double-consciousness at the basis of American thinking. In his essay "Staying Human," Michael Collins describes Komunyakaa's poetic idiom as "what [Komunyakaa] himself calls a "neon vernacular" in which argots and the forms of life blink on and off like those neon signs with which a cityscape expands and contracts, caressing and reshaping the night" (135). Indeed, if we look at the graphic form of the title *Neon Vernacular*, we realize that being "on and off "--interchangeably light and darkness--is the underlining feature of a neon. The word "neon" on the front cover of Komunyakaa's book consists of intermittent spots of whiteness on a dark background, which are significantly changed into dark spots on a white background on the pages inside the book. It is also important to notice that in the phrase "neon vernacular" the word "neon," which denotes light, is combined with the word vernacular, which commonly denotes black speech. Thus, Komunyakaa's metaphoric title imposes itself strongly on imagination; his poems are actually *written* in the language of opposites: light and darkness, blackness and whiteness, outer and inner totalities. Komunyakaa's poetic vernacular blinks on and off with alternately light and darkness, which, are no longer classified according to "rank," like in the "standard" English, but treated equally. Under the influence of Komunyakaa's poetics, the "conventional" English language contracts and expands to represent not only Euro-American point of view. Thus, using its own

idiosyncratic metaphors of light and darkness, Komunyakaa's poetic idiom, better than any political idiom of open protest or revolution, reshapes the conceptual landscape of the English language.

CHAPTER 4

READING THE "NEON VERNACULAR" OF *DIEN CAI DAU*

In the previous chapters we have seen how, questioning conventional conceptual metaphors of the English language, Komunyakaa creates his idiosyncratic poetic idiom--what he calls "neon vernacular"--a language which, in defiance of the "standard" English rejects positive/negative labels imposed on pairs of opposites. Komunyakaa's "neon vernacular" embraces equally light and darkness, blackness and darkness, outer and inner realities, showing that the connotations we conventionally attach to these concepts are never finite, and invite ambiguities. In the same manner "neon vernacular" combines incongruous dictions and images, suggesting that the line of the "unacceptable" or "inappropriate" in language, especially when used in poetry, does not exist. Thus, as we have seen, discarding traditional classification, Komunyakaa's "neon vernacular" surpasses the "standard" English as a means of expression of black identity and even, since human self always resists clear-cut definitions, human identity in general.

Although selected poems from *Dien Cai Dau* are included in *Neon Vernacular*, and thus already marked as written in "neon vernacular," Komunyakaa's Vietnam-war collection deserves a separate treatment. *Dien Cai Dau* is a book which, to an extreme unsurpassed by any other of Komunyakaa's books, makes use of Komunyakaa's idiosyncratic metaphors of light and darkness and the related metaphors of outer and inner sight. It is not an overstatement to say that each poem in *Dien Cai Dau,* if only marginally, depicts some "quality of light," and contains images of looking at scenes either outside or inside the speaker's head. In fact, the process of looking inside lies at the very origins of *Dien Cai Dau.* Komunyakaa himself has said in a radio interview that writing the Vietnam-war poems was for him "a way of dealing with the images inside [his] head" (quoted in Stein 541). Later, in a recent interview for *Kenyon Review*, Komunyakaa reiterated this

statement, saying that in *Dien Cai Dau* he wanted to "deal with images instead of outright statements . . . imagery that we sort of internalized, that was informed by the whole vibrations of the body" ("Still Negotiating" 7).

It is important to point out that the abundance of images of light and darkness and outer and inner sight in *Dien Cai Dau* is commensurate with the extremity of the situation the book depicts. Although in his other poems Komunyakaa often describes scenes of violence, *Dien Cai Dau* is the first book in which Komunyakaa uses his "neon vernacular" to write about war. In the previous chapters we have discussed poems, in which the speaker withdraws inside himself, going through the rites of passage to discover the meanings of light and darkness, and consequently the true shape of his identity. In *Dien Cai Dau*, however, the ritual situation is already provided by the historical context of the book. Both for an individual and a society the experience of war is always a rite of passage. War is a situation of revision and reshaping of social and individual value systems: traditional moral codes get suspended and are replaced by new kinds of ethics. The conventionally wrong acts of killing people are justified, if not elevated, by virtue of being committed for the good of the country. Basic instincts of survival take precedence over "higher" aspirations of human life. Thus, in warfare borders between opposite values become blurred. Light and darkness in their traditional connotation of good and evil, as well as sight and the lack of sight understood as symbols of knowledge and ignorance, have to be redefined. Such confusion of values, characteristic of warfare in general, is even more perceptible in case of the Vietnam war, in which the discrepancy between the government "ethics" and opinions of individual members of the American society was greater than at any other time in the history of the United States.

Another factor which emphasizes the rite-of-passage quality of the experience depicted in *Dien Cai Dau* is the time lapse between the actual war and Komunyakaa's poetic rendering of it. As critics often marvel, Komunyakaa returns to the "images inside his

head" after fourteen years of complete silence about his Vietnam war experience. Since many poems in *Dien Cai Dau* describe images of war perceived still "years after this scene," we can say that the poetic persona of the book experiences a double rite of passage (8). Many years after the end of the Vietnam conflict the subject of *Dien Cai Dau* goes back within himself, towards his war experience, which was in itself liminal, to "deal" with the trauma of the war, and become a new person at peace with his past.

In the context of such multi-leveled personal and global shatterings and reshapings of value systems, in *Dien Cai Dau* Komunyakaa has all the more reasons to question traditional conceptual metaphors of the English language. If during peacetime the traditional connotations of LIGHT and DARKNESS as respectively KNOWLEDGE/ IGNORANCE, LIFE/DEATH, GOOD/BAD prove inadequate, even more will they be ambiguous during wartime, when all values are being re-evaluated. In his book on Vietnam war poetry, Don Ringnalda extensively discusses Komunyakaa's departure from the traditional Western view of light in *Dien Cai Dau*:

> Komunyakaa seeks truth precisely where Plato and Western "enlightened" cultures find falsehood and illusion: in shadows, "invisible ropes to nowhere" (10), "titanic darkness" (19), "half-lit rooms" (33), the "indigo mystery" in the "labyrinth of violet" (37), . . . and the "black mirror" (63) of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial. . . . Perhaps more consistently than any other poet of the war, Komunyakaa embraces dark spaces in search for truths that transcend the willful "clear images" of mapmakers. Everywhere in his Vietnam poems we find images "disappearing," "blurred," . . . and "shattered" in "shadows," "darkness," "mist," "dust," "dusk," and "smoke." (158)

In the next paragraph, asking a rhetorical question--"what was the Vietnam War if not the American imperialistic insistence upon LET THERE BE LIGHT?!"--Ringnalda identifies light in *Dien Cai Dau* as a metaphor of the policy of the American government (158). Thus, pointing to Komunyakaa's (and his speaker's) preference for dark places, describing the Viet Cong as "ever at one with darkness," and at the same time pointing to the American imperialistic love of light, Ringnalda marks the discrepancy between personal and "national" value systems, characteristic of the Vietnam war.

Although not all images of light in *Dien Cai Dau* stand for imperialistic America, in most of the poems light represents the general, the impersonal, or, as Kevin Stein puts it, "the public history" part of the Vietnam war. Throughout the whole *Dien Cai Dau* light takes on cold, impersonal shapes of distant sun or moon, flames, searchlights, flashlights, and other mechanical devices enhancing the efficiency of weapons. Darkness, on the other hand, is usually connected with the individual experience of war: with people. The American soldiers are called "a platoon of shadows" (32), a "way station of shadows" (3), their dead bodies are "shadows [propped] against trees" (59). Significantly, the Viet Cong are described in the same way: they are "shadows lift[ing]/ shadows onto an oxcart" (8), "shadows mov[ing] about blindly" (57), "the shapes" in the night "ten meters/ out front" (7). Thus, darkness proves to be a real equalizer: it defies the traditional war classifications into "us" and the enemy. It is interesting that in *Dien Cai Dau* the image of "shadows" is very closely connected with the image of "ghosts." Thinking of their loved ones left at home, the American soldiers feel "a breeze . . . slow-dragging with ghosts" (3), they see "ghost pictures" (28), and realize that "ghosts share us with the past & future" (37). On the other hand, the soldiers also "try reading ghost talk" on the lips of "the enemy." Since in popular iconography "ghosts" are usually depicted as white, the affinity between "ghosts" and "shadows" in *Dien Cai Dau* might be indicative of the unity of whiteness and blackness, light and darkness, characteristic of Komunyakaa's "neon vernacular."

Indeed, like in most of the poems in the "peacetime" sections of *Neon Vernacular*, questioning the conceptual metaphors of light and darkness in *Dien Cai Dau*, Komunyakaa does not decidedly praise darkness and condemn light. Instead, again like in his other poems, Komunyakaa shows the fragility of Western standards--and thus standards which lie at the origins of the Vietnam war--by emphasizing the ambiguous character of light and darkness. In "Facing It" (*Dien Cai Dau* 63), a poem which William Baer in his interview with Komunyakaa calls "the 'standard' for the rest of [Komunyakaa's] much-praised

collection" (6) all the elements which we discussed in the previous chapters come together: ambiguity of light, ambiguity of darkness, clash and re-union of inner and outer seeing. Although "Facing It" closes *Dien Cai Dau*, Komunyakaa tells Baer that it was the second poem he wrote, and that "it informed other poems" (6). Thus, perfectly demonstrating the "neon vernacular," which we have defined through Komunyakaa's "peace poems," "Facing It" serves also as a paradigm for the whole *Dien Cai Dau*.

The recurrent motif of "Facing It" is the motif of reflections, and consequent illusions of outer sight. The title of the poem implies a straight look, but like in many other poems by Komunyakaa, the speaker's sight proves unreliable and confusing. His act of looking at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial resembles hallucination. The speaker's face alternatively appears and disappears reflected in the surface of the stone; the "letters like smoke" change suddenly into the "booby trap's white flash;" names of veterans seem to move with a woman's blouse, but eventually they "stay on the wall;" what looks like "brushstrokes" at first soon turns out to be a bird's wings; a white vet approaching the speaker appears as a "floating image," and his "pale eyes" seem to be separated from his body; finally, a woman's act of "erasing names" turns out to be a simple gesture of "brushing a boy's hair." Since it is light that produces reflections, the "tricks" which reflections play on the sight of the speaker of "Facing It" might be indicative of Komunyakaa's criticism of light as the carrier of true knowledge. Indeed, towards the middle of the poem the speaker remarks that his position towards the light determines his reflection in the Vietnam Veteran Memorial:

> I turn
> this way--the stone lets me go.
> I turn that way--I'm inside
> the Vietnam Veteran Memorial
> again, depending on the light
> to make a difference.

If we remember Ringnalda's interpretation of light in *Dien Cai Dau* as the policy of the American government, and if we treat the Vietnam Veteran Memorial as the symbol of war, we can come to the conclusion that in the above lines light represents the cold, indifferent imperialistic America, which at a whim lets the soldiers go or stay in warfare. Another image of bad light appears a few lines later: it is the light of "the booby trap's white flash," the cruel, destructive light of the war weapons. However, the Vietnam Veteran Memorial embraces also images of positive light. Soon after the white flash of the explosive, the speaker notices a peaceful "flash" of a red bird's wings, and calm "shimmering" of letters on a woman's blouse. Moreover, at the beginning of the poem we find an image of "morning," which, juxtaposed with a threatening image of "the profile of night" likened to "a bird of prey," seems to represent goodness.

The fact that in "Facing It" Komunyakaa avoids evaluation of either light or its agent, outer sight, but stresses their ambiguity becomes even more evident when we realize that the illusive scenes which the speaker of the poem perceives with his outer sight are at the same time visions perceived inside. The black face, the white vet, the bird, the woman and the boy are all images located *inside* "the black mirror" or "the black granite" of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Thus, if we treat the situation metaphorically, facing the Memorial, the speaker withdraws inside himself, within the darkness of his identity, to deal with the images he internalized in Vietnam and with his own *reflections* about the war.

Significantly, although illusory to the outer sight, perceived with insight, the reflected images appear revealing. The "black face fad[ing] . . . inside the black granite" hints at the speaker's participation in the war and his unification as a soldier with the American nation, which during peacetime rejects him on racist grounds. The names alternately moving with a woman and staying on the wall suggest that the names of the dead soldiers are still alive within people, even though they remain forever immobilized in the stone, never leaving the Vietnam war. The image of the white vet's "pale eyes,"

floating in a ghost-like manner, and looking through the eyes of the black speaker's reflection evokes the union between ghosts and shadows depicted in many other poems in *Dien Cai Dau*, and implies obliteration of race differences in the context of the common experience of war. However, as Stein notices, the message of this particular image is ambiguous: "Komunyakaa problematizes this scene of racial unity by following it immediately with the realization, 'I'm a window'" (557). Since the phrase might mean that "the white vet . . . 'looks through' the black speaker as if he were merely a window, an inhuman object hardly worth noticing" (Stein 557), the poem's reflection on (of) the white and black veterans simply points to the complexity of racial relations in the Vietnam war. Finally, the image of a woman who by brushing a boy's hair erases names on the wall tells us that only by going on with life, performing simple everyday rituals of love and peace, can a nation get over the experience of a terrible war. Thus, translating the reflected images perceived with outer sight into inner reflections, Komunyakaa uses outer sight as a metaphor for inner sight, and moves outside light into the realm of the inner darkness of self. It is worth pointing out that the image of the face of the white vet united with the black face of the speaker in "the black mirror," and the image of the speaker's black profile "slanted against the morning" within "the black granite" clearly evoke images of double-consciousness seen as union of light and darkness within darkness, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Importantly, just like light, darkness in "Facing It" is not definitely evaluated. In accordance with the imagery of the whole book, darkness is clearly connected with the individual, and thus more human, level of the war: it defines the speaker in his physicality ("my black face") and in his inner self--"the black mirror" which comprises memories and reflections on war. On the other hand, however, as "the black granite" of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial, darkness represents the horrible war in general. Moreover, despite its "humanity," the darkness of the speaker's memory of the war--"my clouded reflection . . .

I like a bird of prey, the profile of night/ slanted against morning"--seems terrifying (my emphasis). The meaning of darkness becomes further complicated when describing his emotional reaction in face of the memorial, the speaker identifies himself alternately with the general and the individual kind of blackness. Saying "I'm stone," he points at his affinity with "the black granite;" saying "I'm flesh" he returns to the blackness of his own body. Significantly, the word "flesh" finds an echo in the word "flash," which appears twice in the subsequent part of the poem. Thus, the speaker's double-consciousness is again accentuated: he is not only divided between black stone and black flesh, but also between black flesh and white flash.

Portrayal of light and darkness in "Facing It" makes it clear that in *Dien Cai Dau,* like in the "peacetime" sections of Komunyakaa's biggest collection of poetry, Komunyakaa's "neon vernacular" again writes itself in "letters of smoke" which now and then "flash" with "white light" like neon lights, combining opposites. The English language, which through its metaphors favors light over darkness, becomes "turned back on itself" (*New England Review* 145). The imagery of "Facing It," like the black mirror of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, reflects the "internalized" imagery of the whole book. In many other poems in *Dien Cai Dau* light and darkness lose their traditional attributes: light often appears overtly hostile and destructive, and the sight located within darkness of the inner self proves more revealing than outer sight. Moreover, frequent contrasting of those opposites--light and darkness, outer and inner sight--point to what Komunyakaa called the soldiers' "relentless . . . going back and forth between [the] internal space and the external world"("Still Negotiating" 9). Thus, like in the "peacetime" section of *Neon Vernacular*, in *Dien Cai Dau* questioning traditional metaphors of light and darkness, Komunyakaa shows identity of the individuals as marked by double-consciousness. However, since the constant transition between inner darkness and outside light is an experience shared by all Vietnam soldiers, regardless of race, double-consciousness depicted in *Dien Cai Dau* is not

limited to black people. It seems to extend on the whole American nation which goes through a confusion of values to achieve a new, perhaps better, identity: an identity capable of balancing many contradictory points of view. As we and the introspective subject of *Dien Cai Dau* know, however, although the progress towards such an identity was indeed started during the Vietnam war, this new identity of the American nation has not yet been developed.

"White Fists" and "Intrepid Sun:" Ambiguity of Light

In those poems in *Dien Cai Dau* which focus more on the images of light and darkness than on discussion of outer and inner sight, the double-consciousness of war is represented either through contrast between evil light and good darkness, union of light and darkness which both appear threatening, or, finally, juxtaposition of many ambiguous kinds of light. "The Edge" belongs to the first group (*Dien Cai Dau* 32-33). In this poem, the soldiers' double-consciousness is depicted as their "going back and forth" between the cruel light of war and the comforting darkness of sex with Vietnamese prostitutes. When the heat of shooting stops for some time, the soldiers withdraw to "half-lit rooms" to approach "faces" of women ready to converse with "a platoon of shadows." Although, knowing the soldiers' mechanical attraction to the light of war, the women take on the masks of light and wear "*bright* dresses" (my emphasis) to allure "a crowd" of men like a swarm of night moths, the women's true identity is defined by night: "in . . . dreams." Their dreams, however, are "ragged" by the war light. In another of Komunyakaa's idiosyncratic images which depict darkness inseparably merging with light, the prostitute's moments of truth are described as "dreams/ fire has singed the edges of." Thus, the relatively calm dark hours of sex between the dream-women and the shadow-soldiers in

"half-lit rooms" are constantly being interrupted by the light of combat. This act of interruption is vividly depicted as a violent attack of light against darkness:

> The next moment
> a rocket pushes a white fist
> through night sky, & they scatter like birds

Significantly, after such an attack even the quality of darkness is changed. It is no longer the personal darkness of dreams, good or bad feelings, and sexual excitement. Instead it is the darkness of death, coal-black darkness of burnt-out matter: "burning flesh" and "charred air." Being a cause of such dramatic change, light in "The Edge" definitely appears as a cruel, impersonal force, which repeatedly and pitilessly destroys darkness of personal space of people immediately affected by the Vietnam war. Both the American soldiers and the Vietnamese prostitutes live constantly "on the Edge" between this destructive outside light and personal darkness--the point of separation and meeting of two opposites, reminiscent of Du Bois's Veil.

In "A Greenness Taller Than Gods" (*Dien Cai Dau* 11) the duality of light and darkness is similar to that depicted in "The Edge." Light is again identified with the destructiveness of war: the burning flames of the battle. Darkness, however, is connected with Vietnamese nature: it is "the dark-green day" of the jungle, the living space of "a green snake," "spiders," and "monkeys." The insistence on life present in the darkness of nature is strongly contrasted with the ruinous character of light. All the inhabitants of the jungle immediately repair what has been destroyed by war:

> When we stop,
> a green snake starts again
> through deep branches.
> Spiders mend webs we marched into.

Moreover, in its determination to go on with life, the jungle tries to diminish the monstrosity of light, and look at it only as at another dangerous animal or plant that has to be dealt with. Assuming the point of view of the jungle, the speaker shows the combat fire

as "flame trees," the branches of which are shaken by monkeys in order to "make fire-colored petals fall." In the subsequent line the death-bearing fire is portrayed as mere "torch birds" which "burn through the dark-green day."

The lieutenant who supervises the speaker's platoon tries to "trick" the jungle: he "puts on sunglasses," thus, feigning his affinity with darkness and separation from destructive light. The lieutenant's act of putting on sunglasses is also symbolic of his rejection of responsibility for the appearance of "flame trees" in the "dark-greenness" of the jungle. In a manner resembling the behavior of the "Touch-up Man" from *I Apologize*, the lieutenant covers his eyes and points to the representation of atrocities--"an *X* circled/ on his map"--instead of acknowledging the actual situation around him. Thus, although the soldiers seem to rely on the lieutenant for directions ("the lieutenant's right hand says what to do"), when they find themselves out of the darkness of the jungle, they feel suddenly lost. The space outside the jungle is rendered as light, which does not bring knowledge, but ignorance and confusion: it is "a clearing that blinds." The speaker realizes that following the lieutenant, the soldiers have lost connection not only with the incessant life of the dark-greenness of the jungle, but also with the darkness of their own personal space. They have been "unaware [that] our *shadows* have untied/ from us, wandered off/ & gotten lost" (my emphasis). Like in "The Edge," in "Greenness Taller than Gods" the light of war robs individuals of their personal feelings and opinions and places the "natural" parts of life--growth, work, love--in the state of imbalance.

Darkness is not always as overtly elevated in Komunyakaa's Vietnam war poems as in the two poems discussed above. Although in "Boat People" light again appears as an impersonal and threatening force of war (*Dien Cai Dau* 57), darkness does not mend shattered spaces the way the jungle does in "Greenness." The Vietnamese in "Boat People," themselves described as "a hundred shadows," find refuge in night, "mist," and "dusk," escaping from the devastating light of the American military forces. Now and

again the speaker emphasizes how fortunate the "boat people" are to have passed out of light into darkness:

> *After midnight* they load up.
> . . . . . .
> . . . *Tonight's*
> *a black string* . . . --
> this boat's headed somewhere.
> *Lucky* to have gotten *past*
> *searchlights* low-crawling the sea,
> . . . . . .
> Twelve times in three days
> they've been *lucky*,
> clinging to each other in *gray mist*.
> (my emphasis)

The fortune of the "boat people," however, towards the end of the poem turns out to be ironic. Having escaped "searchlights," the "boat people" soon encounter the light of the sun, which assumes an ominous character: it "burns blood-orange." The darkness which follows this threatening sunset--dusk--is described in an equally ominous way "hang[ing] over the water." In the context of the "storm warnings . . . on a radio," insufficient water supplies, and seasickness, the dusk into which the "shadow-people" escaped from "searchlights" suggests rather "the dimness" of Dante's entrance to Inferno, where souls loaded on Charon's boat are taken across the river Acheron into Hell (Dante 16-17). Thus, forces of war and nature in "Boat People," like forces of war and love we discussed before, put the Vietnamese refugees "on the edge." This time, however, it is not an edge between hostile light and comforting darkness. Both forces pressing on the "boat people" are equally unwelcome: both light of war and darkness of nature are cruel, destructive, and disregardful of human individuals.

Although in "Somewhere Near Phu Bai" (*Dien Cai Dau* 7) darkness is not explicitly mentioned, the imagery of the poem suggests that, like in "Boat People," both light and darkness conspire against the Viet Cong. The poem opens with a violent image of "the moon cut[ting] through/ night trees like a circular saw/ white hot." Comparison of the

natural night light to a "white hot circular saw" evokes connotations with the destructive light of war weapons, which are further strengthened when in the subsequent part of the poem the light of shrapnel is likened to the stars:

> Hundreds of blue-steel stars
> cut a path, fanning out
> silver for a second.

Moreover, in the next stanza the image of the white light of the moon appears again in connection with deathly war tools:

> The white-painted backs
> of the Claymore mines
> like quarter-moons.

Thus, like the "searchlights" and "blood-orange sunlight" in "Boat People," the moon, the stars, and the light of explosions of "Somewhere Near Phu Bai" suggest that during the war distinctions between the man-generated and natural light, significant in some of Komunyakaa's "peacetime" poems, are abolished. The light of the moon is only an ominous sign of destruction which is to be brought about by the light of weapons.

The speaker of "Somewhere Near Phu Bai" is a soldier who, hiding "in the guard shack," shoots at the Viet Cong. However, suggesting low visibility, the speaker rejects responsibility for the destruction he might cause with his weapon. He describes his actions as "taking aim at whatever," and he states at the end of the first stanza: "If anyone's/ there, don't blame me." Since the latter comment immediately follows the image of the "silver fan" of "blue-steel stars," the speaker seems to blame the blinding light for the direction of his bullet. Nevertheless, since the images of moon, stars, and "night trees" put the poem in the context of night, the speaker suggests that his vision is obstructed also by darkness. Thus, in a manner which reminds us of Komunyakaa's characters discussed in chapter two, the speaker of "Somewhere Near Phu Bai" deceives himself into belief that what is not clearly seen does not really happen. The space hidden behind "a fan" of light and obscured by darkness ceases to be a field of killing. The Viet Cong blurred by both light

and darkness become de-personalized and abstract, and therefore their death does not affect the speaker emotionally.

However, choosing to hide himself behind light and darkness as the real forces determining war, the speaker falls into a trap. Getting the Claymore mines ready for the approach of Viet Cong (which, significantly, the speaker will recognize by "noise," not by sight), the speaker realizes that he himself can trust neither light nor darkness. Although the white-painted sides of the mines are supposed to inform the soldier that the position of the explosives is safe for him, the speaker knows that the color-code of the mines might be elusive. The Viet Cong can paint the dark sides white in order to trick the American soldiers, and "turn/ the blast toward [them]." Consequently, the final image of light in the last stanza of the poem again appears ominous. "The moon graz[ing] treetops" foreshadows the moon-shape of the unfortunate Claymore mine which in a few minutes might end the speaker's life. In this context, the moon's gentle "grazing" of trees seems even more unbearable than the moon's overt violence at the beginning of the poem. Nevertheless, the speaker knows that turning the mines from the light sides to the dark ones will not relieve the tension, and abolish the possibility of death. Forces of both light and darkness are cruel and indifferent to individual life: in a war dominated by them all warrants of safety become ambiguous. The American soldiers can easily meet the fate designed for the Viet Cong (significantly, in accordance with the phonetic code, "Americanized" in the poem as "Victor Charlie"), regardless of whether they have always been on the side of light or darkness.

In the four poems discussed above, Komunyakaa reverses the traditional definitions of light by showing light as definitely evil and destructive. "The Edge," "A Greenness," "Boat People," and "Somewhere Near Phu Bai" depict light as the always hostile force of war or American imperialism. The "white fists of rockets" (32), "flame trees" (11), "searchlights," "blood-orange sunlight" (57), "blue-steel stars" (7) and dangerous moons

are the cruel, impersonal light on which the speaker of "Facing It" depends "to make a difference," or which he sees "flashing white," while he touches "the letters of smoke" (63). As we remember, however, the "black mirror" of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial reflects also the "good light" of morning, and the flashes of a bird's wings. Accordingly, in the whole *Dien Cai Dau* we find poems which, although never praising light, show tensions between light's various, good or bad, embodiments.

One such poem is "2527th Birthday of the Buddha" (*Dien Cai Dau* 18). In this poem the light of war, depicted in the image of the imperialistic "morning sun," shining through "the air" and the "high wind started in California," is juxtaposed with the light of the self-inflicted burning of the Buddhist monk, "Quang Duc." Although apparently destructive, the flames consuming the monk constitute in fact "a challenge" and "a debate" against the light of war. Through the imagery of the poem the "fanned flames" of the monk emerge rather as a purifying light than as a light of damnation. Asking the rhetorical question--"Could his eyes burn the devil out of men?"--the speaker suggests that the monk's internal flames of desire for justice and external flames of self-offering are probably able to expel evil from the world. In the subsequent lines the monk's burning is openly compared to religious offering: Quang Duc burns like "a bundle of black joss sticks," incense burnt at the altars of Buddha. Significantly, in this image, the light of flames and the blackness of incense sticks are combined--the monk's offering burns them into a union. In the final lines of the poem the purifying quality of the monk's light is emphasized through the image of distillation. The fire consumes the monk's body, but leaves, literally, "his heart" (as the popular account of the event states) and, metaphorically, his essence "intact." This image of the heart, the core of the monk, not destroyed, but refined by fire, on the metaphorical level suggests that the light of Quang Duc has succeeded in its act of challenging the morning sun. The "heart" of the monk's burning--the message of protest against the "enlightening," Christianizing policy of Diem, and thus

against oppression in general--remains intact in spite of the destruction of the body, and is going to spread around the world. The ultimate line of the poem contrasts "waves of saffron robes," a phrase which visually evokes an image of heatless flames, with the immediate cause of fire, "the gasoline can." The portrayal of the robes as "bowing" to "the gasoline can" suggests, as Gotera rightly noticed in his discussion of the poem, that in the Vietnam war "'the gasoline can,' a harbinger of technology which emblemizes violence and death, becomes a new deity" (Gotera 309). However, in the context of the monk's sacrifice and the "cloth-quality" of flames made by Buddhist robes, "the gasoline can" does not have to be a deity whose light is destructive. If used properly and for a good cause, the light generated by the gasoline can be turned into a force which purifies the deathly "sun" and "wind" of war.

Similar ambiguity between the traditional connotation of light as "holy" and "good" and the destructive quality of light in the universe of the Vietnam war can be found in the poem "Prisoners" (*Dien Cai Dau* 35). Early in the poem, like in the majority of poems in *Dien Cai Dau*, light is shown as the violent and oppressive force of war. The Vietnamese prisoners, walking through the sun-burnt, and therefore unpleasantly "hot," asphalt, are described as "half-broken figures/ bent under the sky's brightness," an image which clearly suggests the prisoners' oppression by the American imperialism. Later, the image of light is again rendered through a metaphor of a destructive threatening instrument: "Sunlight throws/ scythes against the afternoon." Moreover, in the situation described in "Prisoners" light seems to be a cause of visual illusions: as the speaker informs us, everything that happens is " a heat mirage." One of these illusions, however, reveals to us another quality of light, quite contrary to the one depicted so far in the poem. Talking about his reaction toward the Vietnamese prisoners, the speaker says:

> I remember how one day
> I almost bowed to such figures
> walking toward me . . .

. . . . . .
I can't say why.
From a half-mile away
. . . . . .
. . . the prisoners look like
marionettes hooked to strings of light.

The visual image of "strings of light" attached to the prisoners, reminiscent of the Christian iconography of saints, and the speaker's impulse to bow at such a view evoke traditional Western connotations of light as holy. At the same time, however, the "holiness" of the light of the prisoners is contradicted by the word "marionettes." As marionettes attached to strings, the prisoners are no longer holy figures, but passive and thoughtless creatures who let themselves be manipulated by the light of war and imperialistic America. Thus, the double-vision of the prisoners' light at the end of the poem suggests the speaker's confusion between admiration and the feeling of pity towards the captured Viet Cong. Since earlier the speaker talks with open admiration about the prisoners' "toughness" and their ability to communicate with ancestors, "the prisoners," like the Buddhist monks in "2527th Birthday," seem to posses a spiritual light which can confront the light of war. The ambiguity of the poem's ending, however, suggests that the prisoners' spiritual force is still too weak to overthrow the power of American imperialism.

In another poem, "Communiqué," the light which opposes the destructive "flashes" of war is not a spiritual light, but the light of an entertainment which for some time distracts the soldiers from the hardships of combat (*Dien Cai Dau* 30-31). The show of a troupe of dancers, the Gold Diggers, is characterized by "a *flash* of legs" and "white legs *shimmering like strobes*"(my emphasis). While the cruel light of war continues its actions--"Cobras . . . swing searchlights/ through the trees" and "the assault & battery of hot pink glitter erupts"--the performers are "caught/ in a safety net/ of brightness," probably that of the stagelights. The metaphor of "a safety net" in the midst of the destructive military light points to the dancers' exclusion from the events of war. However, unlike "the silvery nets

of sunfish" (*Neon Vernacular* 75), which oppressed and excluded the speaker of "Newport Beach" from the American society, "the safety net of brightness" gives the troupe an immunity from the surrounding atrocities. The "net of brightness" and "the shimmering" of legs for the time of the show seem also to protect the soldiers, if not physically, then at least emotionally. Describing the bright red light of the stage as "the hemorrhage of vermilion, giving us/ something to kill for," the speaker indicates that participation in the Gold Diggers' show becomes for the soldiers almost an epitome of patriotism. Taking them briefly back to the peaceful times at home, the light of the show gives the soldiers hope and motivation to fight.

Unfortunately, during the performance, the light of nature joins the light of war in an attempt to destroy "the safety net of brightness" enveloping the soldiers. In the context of the approaching storm "the sky," no longer lit up, but "blurred" by airborne "magnesium flares over the fishing boats" seems threatening. "A *flash* of rain," which strikes "the mountain of amplifiers" makes the show "pack up" and leave (my emphasis). After the lights of the stage are gone, the speaker seems to realize that both the soldiers and the troupe have merely been "*caught* in a . . . net of brightness"--oppressed and manipulated by the light of war. The show's "flash of legs" has turned out to be another instrument of war. The hope and motivation it seemed to give was illusive. The brightness of the Gold Diggers has not changed the soldiers' situation; "after the music & colors have died," all that is left is the usual awareness of death: the soldiers sit in the rain "holding [their] helmets like rain-polished skulls."

In contrast to the sad conclusion of "Communiqué," in "Thanks" light assumes an unexpected quality of life-saving force in the war (*Dien Cai Dau* 44-45). Expressing his gratitude to "the something" that turned away the bullet directed towards his body, the speaker mentions light as one of the elements in the chain of "saving signs:"

Thanks
for the vague *white* flower
that pointed to the *gleaming metal*
reflecting how it is to be broken
like mist over the grass. . . (my emphasis)

Although earlier in the poem "daylight" is described as the force which suddenly "shattered" the speaker's dream about "a woman in San Francisco" and "some dark bird's love call ," it is clear that this time the light's act of "shattering" was positive. Bringing him from dreams back to reality, "daylight" made the speaker aware of the immediate danger of the bullet, and thus helped him to avoid death. At the end of the poem the speaker praises the light of the sun as "intrepid" in its act of "touching the bayonet" and pointing to the danger of death. In spite of light's "acts of grace," however, the quality of light in "Thanks" is not clearly defined as positive. The speaker throws a shadow of ambiguity on the meaning of light in the poem, saying: "I *don't know why* the intrepid/ sun touched the bayonet," thus suggesting that bringing a saving knowledge to soldiers is not the light's common "practice." Accordingly, in its overall image, light in "Thanks" evokes the impersonal, powerful force from "Facing It," on which the speaker "depends to make a difference" (63). This time "the sun," "daylight," "gleaming metal" have decided to save the life of the speaker, and take his "profile" from inside the "black wall" of death. It is never certain, however, what the light's next decision might be.

In the poem "Missing in Action," for example (*Dien Cai Dau* 59-60), which depicts a situation opposite to the one presented in "Thanks," the light's decision has been to add "new names/ into polished black stone." Soldiers have been killed and "nothing can make that C-130/ over Hanoi come out of its spin,/ spiraling *like a flare* in green sky" (my emphasis). In the lines which immediately precede the above image, however, the deathly "flare" is opposed by a light of quite different quality. In a metaphor suggestive of the traditional conceptual KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT metaphor, "sunlight" is depicted as "press[ing] down for an answer." Significantly, however, in this image "sunlight" is not a

carrier of knowledge: it does not *provide* solution to the problem of death, but merely searches for an answer and, in spite of its determination, does not find any. Neither is "sunlight" a life-giving, resurrecting force: it cannot "help us bring ghosts/ across the sea." Thus, although apparently positive, the meaning of "sunlight" in "Thanks," like all the meanings of light in *Dien Cai Dau,* is questioned. The "sunlight" might be admirable in its insistence on finding an answer to death, but it is too weak to counterbalance the "spiraling flare" of an exploding plane.

As the above discussion shows us, like in Komunyakaa's "peacetime" poems, in *Dien Cai Dau* traditional connotations of light as knowledge, holiness, goodness are questioned even in the poems which point to the existence of positive qualities of light. In spite of the purifying light of Buddhist monks, the spiritual light of the Viet Cong prisoners, and the glitters and reflections which saved the speaker of "Thanks," light in *Dien Cai Dau* continues to serve predominantly as a metaphor of atrocities of war and American imperialism against both the Viet Cong and individual American soldiers. Thus, Komunyakaa's attitude towards light in his Vietnam war poems is much the same as in his "peacetime" poems, where light represents mainly the destructive influence of the white American "enlightened" civilization on other cultures, racial prejudices, and finally the "enlightened" society's self-destruction. Significantly, while in Komunyakaa's "peacetime" poems the speaker is very often excluded from the dominant culture, because of his black identity, in many poems of *Dien Cai Dau* he becomes a part of the "enlightened" culture opposed to the "unenlightened" Viet Cong. From the group of poems discussed in this section, only in "Communiqué" is the speaker's black identity clearly indicated in his love for black music: desire to hear Aretha and disappointment with the singer "Lola," who "shit, man, . . . looks awful white to me" (30). Even in "Communiqué," however, the main drama of the poem--transfer from "the safety net of

brightness" to "rain-polished skulls"--is an experience shared equally by black and white soldiers.

Thus, the act of questioning the traditional metaphors of light and darkness in *Dien Cai Dau* happens not only because the speaker of the poems is African American and his identity is "called into question by standard connotations of darkness" (*New England Review* 145), but simply because he is human, and as a human being refuses to accept metaphors and hierarchies which cause wars and prejudices among people. Interestingly, however, just like in Komunyakaa's "peacetime" poems, in *Dien Cai Dau* the criticism of light is not counterbalanced by the praise of darkness. Elevated in "The Edge" and "Greenness," in "Boat People" and "Somewhere Near Phu Bai" darkness is as ambiguous as light, while in all other poems discussed in this section darkness does not make a significant appearance at all. Moreover the speaker's attraction toward light is again emphasized through frequent images of "sensual light," direct reversals of the PURITY IS LIGHT/WHITENESS metaphor, which we have noticed before in "Gloria's Clues" and "A Quality of Light." At many points in *Dien Cai Dau*, eroticism is portrayed through images of light and whiteness. In "Seeing in the Dark" women from the pornographic movie watched by soldiers are called "washed-out images" and "ghost pictures" (28). In "Donut Dollies" women from the Red Cross, who visit the platoon with "donuts and coffee" and become objects of desire for worn-out infantrymen, stand in "the midday sun/ [which falls] through their sky-/ blue dresses with Red Cross/ insignia over their breasts" (34). In "A Night Muse," the muse which "shows up in every war" to turn soldiers from their way to death is wearing a "flowing white gown," described as "a little less erotic," but nevertheless "erotic"(21). Finally, in "Sunset Threnody," "the Army nurse, now working/ the graveyard shift at St. Luke's/ emergency ward, sweet thing/ for every Vietnam vet" is seen by the speaker in the context of light (51-51). In the opening of the poem she is "leaning against the basement/ window where the sun/ crouches like a tiger," and in the

final lines of the poem she appears as the conqueror of the tiger-sun, "holding the sun/ in her icy glass."

Thus, again like in Komunyakaa's "peacetime" poems, in *Dien Cai Dau* the speaker's excessive preoccupation with light implies that, in spite of the criticism of light and, thus, the values of Western "enlightened" culture (which include "the values" of war), the speaker does not offer any alternative set of values. He does not suggest what the American nation's new identity could be. Indeed, if we refer again to the collection's "standard poem" ("Still Negotiating 6), "Facing It," we remember that it is not in ambiguous images of light or even in images of unity between light and darkness (black face and white face, "profile of night" and morning) that we can find reflections on how to go on after the war. A reality alternative to the reality of war can be found only when we translate the illusive images perceived externally in light into the revealing images perceived internally in darkness. If the purpose of Komunyakaa's poetic vernacular is to unite light and darkness, in *Dien Cai Dau* this purpose is truly achieved in the poems which depict the reciprocal existence of outer and inner sight.

"Worlds Under Eyelids:" Seeing During and After the War

The complexity of the images of seeing in "Facing It," where *outer* reality is reflected *inside* the Vietnam Veteran Memorial, but then perceived with *outer* sight, which becomes a metaphor for *inner* sight, finds its counterpart in the complexity of the images of seeing in the whole *Dien Cai Dau*. Because, as we know, the whole collection was for Komunyakaa "a way of dealing with images inside [his] head" (Stein 541), all the poems in the book can be treated as visions perceived inside "the black mirror" of memory. At the same time, however, since many of the poems deal with outside perceptions, they become examples of the outside located *inside*. Moreover, a great number of Komunyakaa's

Vietnam war poems talk about images which are either carried *within* the soldiers during combat or internally reviewed by Vietnam veterans "years after" the war (8). Thus, once again, in Komunyakaa's poetry we encounter images which are placed inside the inside. Accordingly, Césaire's poetic proposition to strive for "marvelous contact of *inner* and *outer* totality perceived imaginatively and conjointly by, or more precisely *within,* the poet" (lv), applies also to *Dien Cai Dau*, even though, as Gotera has noticed, the book moves Komunyakaa's diction "away from the surreal" and "toward the more concrete" (306). Although, like in the "peacetime" poems, in *Dien Cai Dau* the space inside often proves more truthful, comforting, or welcoming than the outer reality, the identity of the American soldiers and the identity of the whole nation at war depends on co-existence of outer and inner sight.

Significantly, despite the importance of outer and inner sight for all the soldiers, regardless of race, Komunyakaa's "poems of seeing" in *Dien Cai Dau* deal with racial issues more extensively than the poems discussed in the previous section. In some of these poems, the black subject, turning inside, discovers that, regardless of his identity as "an American soldier, his reality is separate from the reality of the white world for which he fights. One such poem is "The One-legged Stool" (40-42), a poem which stands out from all other poems in the collection, because of its form. In the whole *Dien Cai Dau* "The One-legged Stool" is the only prose-poem and a dramatic monologue, which clearly foreshadows the Vietnam war section in Komunyakaa's most recent book, *Thieves of Paradise*, "Debriefing Ghosts." The poem opens with italicized "stage directions," which define the speaker of the poem as "a black POW" and place him in "semidarkness," "seated on a one-legged stool." After a while, we are told, "He looks all around, slowly stands, then lets the stool hit the dirt floor." We learn that the prisoner's vision is impaired, since he is "in a state of delirium, partly hallucinating." Moreover, at the same time he is watched by a Viet Cong guard, whose "shadow of a face appears at the peephole in the

door." The whole poem is a record of the black POW's attempt to convince the guard that he never left his stool. Surprisingly, the POW's monologue addressed to the guard strikingly resembles the protestations of the black speaker of "I Apologize," discussed in chapter two. In "I Apologize" the speaker, probably a witness of a crime, tries to convince a powerful "sir:"

> My mind wasn't even there.
> Mirage, sir. I didn't see
> what I thought I saw.
> . . . . . .
> I was miles away, I saw nothing!
> (*Neon Vernacular* 108)

The only major difference between the above and the black POW's monologue is the change of "I" into "you:" "You didn't see that. My stool never touched the floor, guard. I'm still sitting on my stool. It's all in your head." The POW reiterates the above statement twice later in the poem: "You didn't see that. The hand's quicker than the eye. You didn't see that. I'm still sitting on my stool. I sleep, I live here on my damn stool;" and after some time--"You didn't see that I'm still sitting here on my stool." As we can conclude from the argument of the poem, the speaker's determination to make the guard "not see" is caused not so much by his fear of death--the guard's ability to "drag [the POW] out into the compound, then put a bullet through [his] brain"--as by the speaker's sense of honor. Now and then, the speaker assures the guard proudly: "You can't break me," and refuses to be pitied. However, the speaker's most sensitive spot becomes revealed when the guard pities him "against them . . . against those white troops over there behind those trees." When racial issues come into consideration, the speaker with great determination tries to undermine not only the value of the guard's perception, but also the truthfulness of his words: "You're lying. Those white prisoners didn't say what you say they said. They ain't laughing. Ain't cooperating. They ain't putting me down, calling me names like you say. Lies. Lies. It ain't the way you say it is! I'm American."

The above lines suggest with sad irony that the speaker is painfully aware of the discrimination he encounters among the white Americans even in the situation of war. In such context his desperate address to the Viet Cong guard appears to be his way of dealing with his inferiority complex. Trying to brainwash the guard the way the powerful white "sirs" brainwash him during "peacetime," the black POW identifies himself fully with the "enlightened" Western culture and hopes to put himself in a position of power: if not physical, then at least emotional. Like the "Thorn Merchant" and his agents, the POW wants to be able to look and see without obstructions and make other people not see. He wants to belong to the world of outer sight--light--and not be limited to inner darkness. In imitation of white "American-ness," the speaker even abuses the guard on racial grounds: "You gook, dink, slant-eyed sloe!"

In the middle of the poem, however, the speaker starts losing his mask of "the agent" of light. He admits that in the face of abusive actions the only space he can withdraw to is his inner darkness: "When you kicked me awake . . . maybe I slipped back a few feet deeper into the darkness . . . Maybe I pulled back into myself. Pulled back till there's nowhere to go." He also enumerates the "hardships" he went through before Vietnam, significantly, connected with an everyday life of a black person in American South: "I've been through Georgia. Yeah, been through 'Bama too. Mississippi, yeah." Finally, with a tone of resignation the speaker admits that whether in war or in peace it is always his position to be "eyed," "to be look[ed] at . . . in [his] uniform like [he] didn't belong in it." Captured, and thus oppressed, by the Viet Cong, the speaker is not in a position to make the guard not look and not see. Worse than that, however, is the speaker's awareness that his release from the military prison will not improve his situation. "You're everywhere," he addresses the guard in his final line, "All I have to go back to are faces just like yours at the door." Whether "at liberty" in his "home" America or in the Viet Cong captivity, the black soldier's situation will always be that of imprisonment. His

place is always inside, in "semidarkness," with faces at the door watching. He himself, on the other hand, like many African American speakers in Komunyakaa's "peacetime" poems, is not allowed to see: he is forced into constant hallucinations. Thus, for the speaker of "The One-legged Stool" outer sight, and thus light, is not a source of knowledge. Darkness, into which he "pulls himself," is his only true space. However, the speaker's desire for participation in light changes "darkness" into "semidarkness," and endows the speaker with double-consciousness.

Although "The One-legged Stool" deals with both outer and inner seeing, the dramatic form gives the whole scene portrayed in the poem a quality of being perceived outside, at the present moment. In another poem which talks about the situation of black soldiers in Vietnam, "Report from the Skull's Diorama," the central scene, as the title suggests, is composed entirely of images placed inside the speaker's head (*Dien Cai Dau* 47-48). References to the present moment, years after the war, enclose the scene from Vietnam in a frame. The poem opens with an image of "Dr. King's photograph," which triggers the speaker's memory and, in a manner resembling film flashback techniques, "dissolves into a scenario at Firebase San Juan Hill." At the end of the poem the images dissolve again to return to the present moment: to the speaker, who is "waved to across the years" by leaflets distributed by the Viet Cong.

The scene watched by the speaker in his "skull's diorama" is a situation of "psychological warfare" instigated by the Viet Cong. Coming back from the night patrol, "the platoon of black GIs" finds itself under "a whirl" of leaflets distributed by the Viet Cong, which say: "*VC didn't kill/ Dr. Martin Luther King.*" In this way, the Viet Cong try to undermine the black soldiers' sense of belonging to "their country" and their motivations for serving the United States. Like in a true "diorama," the whole scene is presented solely through almost static visual images. There is no sound; numerous times the speaker stresses the silent quality of his inner vision, saying: "These men have lost their tongues"

and "the silence [is] etched into their skin." Consequently, there is also no comment: the report from the "Firebase scenario" is a purely objective one. The unusual image of interaction between light and darkness--"a field of black trees/ stak[ing] down the morning sun"--may point to the black GIs' anger at and disappointment with the light of imperialistic America. However, no emotions are openly expressed and no actions are openly criticized. The speaker himself, in response to the message of the Viet Cong's leaflets, takes on the silence of figures from his "skull's diorama:" "the silence etched into their skins/ is also mine."

Thus, at first the speaker's inner vision does not seem to carry much more knowledge than his outer perception of "Dr. King's photograph." However, the time distance between the "Firebase incident" and the time of the speaker's narration points to the speaker's need of constant return to the "images inside his head." Like the black POW from "The One-legged Stool," who realizes that his place is always inside, the speaker of "Report" knows that he always has to look inside himself and rely on his internalized experience to form true judgments. The images provided by the outside world, like Dr. King's photograph, cannot be the only source of material for his perhaps poetic "report."

Another "poem of seeing" in *Dien Cai Dau*, "Starlight Scope Myopia" also deals with images located "inside the speaker's head" (8-9), which, however, do not concern racial differences among American soldiers. Moreover, unlike in "Report," where the Vietnam situation is clearly defined as "internal" at the beginning of the poem, the opening lines of "Starlight Scope Myopia" seem to place the images of "gray-blue shadows" outside, in the present moment. It is only in the middle of the poem that the speaker reveals to the readers the internal character of these images:

> Smoke-colored
>
> Viet Cong
> move under our eyelids,

lords over loneliness
. . . . . .
inside our lowered heads
years after this scene

ends.

Since, after this brief reference to the inner vision "years after," the speaker continues the initial narrative in an unchanged manner, "inside" and "outside," "past" and "present" emerge in "Starlight Scope Myopia" as simultaneous. Significantly, the main theme of the vision "under the speaker's eyelids" is tension between seeing and not seeing. This tension is signaled already in the poem's oxymoronic title, which juxtaposes a vision-enhancing instrument ("starlight scope") with a defect of vision ("myopia").

In the poem itself it is often difficult to determine what is really myopic: obscure vision in the dark or clear vision enhanced by the "infrared" light of the scope. The Viet Cong, who in the darkness are merely "gray-blue shadows lift[ing]/ shadows onto an oxcart," too blurred to be aimed at with a rifle, and as "shadows" not susceptible to death, with "help" of the starlight scope, turn into "men [brought] into killing range." Thus, clear vision achieved thanks to the scope becomes synonymous with killing. At the same time, however, the "starlight scope" reduces the distance between the American soldiers and the Viet Cong, making the speaker feel kinship with the VC. The speaker sees the Vietnamese faces so clearly that he is almost able to read words on their lips. Moreover, at one point the closeness produces in the speaker a clear feeling of compassion towards the "enemy:"

This one, old, bowlegged,
you feel you could reach out
& take him into your arms.

Thus, the "starlight scope myopia" in the poem seems twofold. On the one hand, bringing the speaker closer to the Viet Cong, and making him identify with "the enemy," the "starlight scope" enhances "myopia" in terms of the modern war code which leaves no room for compassion. On the other hand, in terms of a natural human moral code, making

the Viet Cong an easier, clearer target for shooting, the "starlight scope" forces individuals to participate in the "myopia" of war, and abandon true visions brought to them by their inner human feelings.

In the final scene of the poem, we find yet another ambiguous image, which makes us review our traditional attitude towards clear and obscure vision. The speaker takes his eyes off the "sights" attached to his "M-16," and looks in the darkness to see "the full moon/ loaded on an oxcart." This "illusion" caused by the night's "low visibility" proves more revealing than the clear vision achieved thanks to the "infrared" of the scope. Since the earlier "shadows on an oxcart" are transformed into "the full moon," the differences between light and darkness, which lie at the basis of the Vietnam war, become abolished. Moreover, through its traditional symbolism of life, the light of the moon "resurrects" the "shadows" of the dead Viet Cong, thus, abolishing the border between life and death. Finally, the transformation of the Viet Cong into the full moon makes the whole military operation senseless: there is no point in shooting at and killing the moon.

Holding all these ambiguous visions inside, "years after" they were perceived, the speaker of "Starlight Scope," moving between myopic and sharp seeing without clearly stating which one is better, unites seeing and not seeing, and thus light and darkness inside. Very much like in "Report," the images inside the speaker's head do not provide definite judgments on the war. Instead, they only point to the speaker's double-consciousness: his need of frequent withdrawals inside in order to verify the outside experience.

In "'You and I Are Disappearing,'" one of the most quoted poems from *Dien Cai Dau*, the speaker's look inside his head seems to be everlasting and allows no time for outside perceptions (17). The speaker's vision perceived inside is a memory of "a girl still burning/ inside [his] head." However, unlike in any other poem we have discussed so far, the speaker's inner vision is overwhelmingly dominated by light. The entire poem is an

attempt to convey the simultaneously beautiful and terrifying "quality of light" of the girl's burning. Although in some metaphors used in the poem, the light is depicted against the background of darkness ("a skirt of flames/ dances around her/ at dusk;" "a tiger under a rainbow/ at nightfall"), the images of light itself, "burning," "glowing," "rising" make darkness almost invisible. The poem's repetitions and accumulation of various images of burning, which with every line intensify the power of light, point to the speaker's obsession with the flames of the burning girl "inside his head." Moreover, the final line--"She burns like a burning bush/ driven by a godawful wind"--extends the image of light beyond the end of the poem. Like other war scenes in *Dien Cai Dau* which are seen "years after they end," the fire of "'You and I Are Disappearing'" remains to be forever "driven" even after the poem is finished.

The open ending of the poem imitates yet another process triggered by the girl's burning, implied already in the title. The intensity of light of the girl's burning extends the speaker's vision beyond "the inside of his head," and starts affecting his outside perceptions. Under the blinding light of "a skirt of flames," "you and I are disappearing:" the speaker can no longer perceive himself ("I") or the outside world ("you"). In the context of such clear sings of fascination with light, the speaker of "'You and I Are Disappearing'" emerges as an already familiar subject of Komunyakaa's poetry: a person endowed with double-consciousness and attracted to the light of the white society and/ or the light of war. This time, however, the "light" part of the speaker almost engulfs and destroys his "dark--individual--part, and makes him lose his "ego." The outside becomes burnt into union with the inside in the fire of the speaker's total absorption in the guilt, terror, but also admiration of a view of a Viet Cong girl killed by the light of imperialistic America.

As I mentioned earlier, apart from the poems which show the Vietnam veterans coping with "men under their eyelids" years after the end of the conflict, in *Dien Cai Dau*

there is a significant group of poems which show soldiers looking into their "skulls' dioramas" during combat. In "Camouflaging the Chimera" (3-4), the poem which opens *Dien Cai Dau*, the American soldiers during a military operation concentrate more on their inner perceptions than on the outer ones: while they wait in ambush, "a world revolve[s]/ under each man's eyelid." It is important to notice that "Camouflaging the Chimera" is one of the few poems in *Dien Cai Dau* which are written entirely in the past tense ("we tied," "we painted," "we wove," etc.). The past tense, more subtly than direct statements of "Report" or "Starlight Scope," locates the images of "Camouflaging the Chimera" inside the speaker's head. Consequently, the poem's closing image of soldiers holding "the world under their eyelids" is Komunyakaa's usual portrayal of self as "inside the inside."

Paradoxically, although the poem is another example of Komunyakaa's technique of combining inner and outer totality inside the speaker, the "outside" images of the poem deal with the soldiers' struggle "not to be seen." The speaker, who is in the position of an observer of nature, throughout the whole poem literally tries to take on nature's position--to become one with nature--and thus not to be perceived by the Viet Cong. The soldiers undergo gradual transformation into the landscape: they "weave themselves into the terrain," "chameleons crawl [their] spines," "the river [runs] through [their] bones," and "small animals [take] refuge/ against [their] bodies." Again, relying on the traditional Western belief that what is not seen does not exist, the speaker describes the soldiers' "camouflage" as procurance of their own non-being, saying: "We weren't there."

Significantly, the soldiers' integration with the environment results in their double-consciousness: "chameleons" which become an inseparable part of their bodies make the soldiers change "from day/ to night: green to gold,/ gold to black," and thus become parts of alternate light and darkness. Such double-consciousness of light and darkness is induced also by ambiguous relation between inside and outside caused by the soldiers' "camouflage." Having become one with their environment, the soldiers can no longer

perceive the outside world as the outside. This is why the outside world is moved inside, "under the soldiers' eyelids." We know, however, that the message of the poem is ironic: no matter how hard they try, the soldiers cannot completely blend themselves with the landscape; although they are not seen, they *are* there, at any time ready "to spring the L-shaped ambush," and separate themselves from nature again. Thus, the final image of "a world revolv[ing]/ under each man's eyelid" points also to the soldiers' distance from their environment. They are still watchers; they keep the world under their eyelids, instead of revolving with it. And even more than that: the soldiers are distanced also from one another. The final metaphor maps the image of the revolving earth onto the image of human spherical eyeball. Thus, in the moment of danger, each soldier perceives a different world in his inner consciousness. *The* world, which was supposed to be integrated in itself, welcoming the soldiers to "weave themselves into the terrain," turns out to be a collection of individual pieces: it is "*a* world" which revolves "under *each man's*" single "eyelid" (my emphasis).

Another poem, "Eyeball Television," focuses on "a world" under "an eyelid" of only one of American soldiers (*Dien Cai Dau* 39). The situation of this soldier, however, is quite different than the situation of GIs from "Camouflaging the Chimera." The protagonist of "Eyeball Television" is a POW, who "sits crouched in a hole/ covered with slats of bamboo." Since "Eyeball Television" immediately precedes "The One-legged Stool" in *Dien Cai Dau,* the protagonist of the poem might well be the same POW (although his race is not an issue here) who refuses to be broken by the forces outside his cell. Moreover, the protagonist of "Eyeball Television," just like the speaker of "The One-legged Stool," is guarded by light. In his "cell" there is "a pinhole of light [which] tells/ him when day comes." Thus, like in many other poems by Komunyakaa, the poem again depicts a situation in which the central character withdraws inside himself while being placed in some inner darkness--this time the inner darkness of a Vietnamese "prison."

Surprisingly, however, what the protagonist finds inside himself is not darkness; the space "under his eyelids" is dominated by light, and, considering the protagonist's situation, an unusual light too: the light of American television. In order to get away from his unfortunate outside reality, the POW immerses himself completely in the inner recollections of what Kevin Stein calls "a shared cultural heritage" of all American soldiers, regardless of race (553). In his "eyeball television" the POW watches "hundreds of faces" from American popular culture, from Marylin Monroe to Walter Cronkite, and a variety of shows such as "*I Love Lucy, Dragnet,/ I Spy, & The Ed Sullivan Show.*" Thus, the protagonist's inner life in the situation of imprisonment ironically imitates the "secure" everyday life of American consumer's society. However, like in "Camouflaging the Chimera," the soldier's attempt to "camouflage" his real condition proves to be self-deceptive. Although the POW tries to hold "the world in focus," the pictures inside his head constantly "explode," "dissolve," and "fade," showing that his seemingly integrated inner territory forms in fact "the disconnected landscape," which he cannot control "pushing vertical & horizontal buttons" the way conventional TV watchers can.

This clash between the protagonist's inner illusions of security and his true miserable condition forms another example of the Vietnam soldiers' double-consciousness. However, in a manner unusual for Komunyakaa's poems, in "Eyeball Television" the outside reality, though painful, is more truthful than the protagonist's inner perceptions. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the most tangible truth-bearing message in the poem, although coming from the outside, does not belong to the realm of vision, whether internal or external. Instead, it is brought by the sense of hearing: "the sound of urine/ dripping on [the POW's] forehead" in the most adequate way represents the extent of misery and humiliation inherent in the soldier's condition.

Although in "Seeing in the Dark" literally no act of watching "images inside the soldiers' head" is depicted (*Dien Cai Dau* 28), the situation of the poem in a way resembles

the situation of "Eyeball Television." In order to escape the dreariness of war, the soldiers retreat to the light of the "moving pictures:" this time pornographic movies projected on "a bedsheet." In a manner clearly suggestive of the soldier's double-consciousness in relation to war, the light of the "skin flicks" is shown as a relief from alternately the war's destructive light, significantly presented through the metaphor of white skin ("mortar fire colors the night/ *flesh tone*," my emphasis), and the war's depressing darkness ("we cuss the dark/ & the cicadas' heavy breath"). The phrase "seeing in the dark" is equally indicative of double-consciousness. As the title of the poem, at first, the phrase seems to refer to the act of watching the pornographic movies in the darkness. Towards the end of the first stanza, however, we encounter a description of "infantrymen" which puts the meaning of the title into question: "men who know/ more about dodging trip wires &/ *seeing in the dark* than they do/ about women"(my emphasis). In the context of "dodging trip wires," the titular phrase evokes the image of the mechanically enhanced night vision depicted in "Starlight Scope Myopia." Consequently, apparently standing for a vision of sex, and thus life, the phrase "seeing in the dark" turns out to be synonymous also with the techniques of war, and thus death.

In spite of representing two opposite sides of reality, both kinds of "seeing in the dark" in the poem result in illusions. As we remember from "Starlight Scope," the fatal seeing enhanced with infrared light causes "myopia." The visions provided by "skin flicks," on the other hand, are not adequate representations of women and love. Although the soldiers are excited about the "washed-out images"--"ready to be fused/ with ghost pictures"--they are careful to "keep the faces [they] love/ from getting shuffled/ with those on the wall." The soldier's readiness to enter the pictures points to their willingness to move inside the light of the film which is located inside the darkness. However, these inner images once again turn out to be a "disconnected landscape." Like the images "broadcasted" by the "eyeball television," the "ghost pictures" fade: at the end of the poem

"everything turns white as alabaster./ The picture flickers; the projector/ goes dead." The soldiers return to their real, distressing condition of war. Thus, in the final lines of "Seeing in the Dark" the "seeing" disappears, and only "the dark" remains. Cursed by the soldiers and filled with the ominous "heavy breath" of "cicadas," "the dark" seems threatening and overwhelming: in the conclusion of the poem this depressing darkness dominates both the internal and the external visions of the individuals.

In "Tu Do Street" (*Dien Cai Dau* 29), unlike in "Eyeball Television" and "Seeing in the Dark" the speaker's withdrawal inside is not a movement towards "pain-killing" images from popular culture. Quite to the contrary, it is rather a movement from pain to pain: from a situation of war to the memories of the speaker's childhood as a black person in the American South. In lines which clearly emphasize the dominance of the inner over the outer sight, the speaker says:

> *I close my eyes & can see*
> men drawing lines in the dust.
> America pushes through the membrane
> of mist & smoke, & I'm a small boy
> again in Bogalusa.*White Only*
> signs & Hank Snow.
> (initial emphasis mine)

Thus, the speaker's inner vision reminds him of American color prejudice and separation between races. "Lines of dust" is an obvious metaphor of southern color lines, while "the membrane of mist & smoke" vividly evokes the image of Du Bois's Veil which forcefully separates the black people from the mainstream American culture. However, following the description of the Veil and "the *White Only* signs" with a phrase, "But, tonight," the speaker implies that the present, outside moment provides more hopeful vision of reality than his internalized vision of the past. The conjunction "but" suggests America's advancement in the act of "pushing through" the Veil and abolishing segregation signs. Viewing the situation of war as a rite of passage, we expect that the American nation's new identity after Vietnam will be a society "without lines."

The subsequent images of the poem, however, point to the preservation of color lines also in war. The speaker describes the black soldiers' service for white America as "playing Judas," and in a sadly ironic comment remarks that "only machine-gun fire" brings the black and the white soldiers "together." After the fire ceases, the speaker continues, "black GIs hold to their turf." Yet, in spite of these racial divisions, the final part of the poem shows that the speaker's "but tonight" indeed marks a point of change. "But tonight" the speaker walks into a place on Tu Do Street, filled with "bar girls," who have a significant effect on the "development of the American nation." On Tu Do Street, the process of unification of black and white parts of the society indeed happens--gradually and quite without the soldiers' awareness. The speaker's final reflection echoes the beginning of the poem through its reference to the space inside the soldiers' selves:

> 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 underworld.

Thanks to the women from Tu Do Street, the selves of individual soldiers and the self of the whole American nation undergo a slow metamorphosis: the inner consciousness of light and darkness separated by the Veil changes into the consciousness of light and darkness which "run into each other" and merge.

The concluding image of "the underworld" further accentuates the rite-of-passage quality of the Tu Do Street experience, which transforms the whole American nation. In classic Western literature--*The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*--the protagonist always has to visit the underworld in order to be able to proceed with his journey, reach his destination, and/or achieve the full potential of development as a human being. Thus, with every visit of the rooms "leading to the underworld," the American soldiers, even without

realizing it, bring the nation closer to something "more" than it has been so far: a society at the stage of full development--devoid of racial prejudices.

Obviously, the image of the underworld in the poem does not refer only to the uniting space of the Tu Do Street bars. Asked about the concluding image of "Tu Do Street," Komunyakaa says in an interview for *The Kenyon Review*: "There were many symbolic underworlds in Vietnam--the underground tunnel system, some of the bars, and the whole psychic space of the GI--a kind of underworld populated by ghosts and indefinable images" ("Still Negotiating" 9). Consequently, the underworld of "Tu Do Street" is also a psychic space of individual soldiers, as well as the collective psychic space of American nation which has to be looked into in order for people to realize that racial differences are only superficial. Since, again, in classic Western literature "ghosts" encountered in the underworld are often important sources of truth (Teiresias for Odysseus, Anchises for Aeneas, Vergil for Dante), the soldiers' inner visions, which unite "black & white," emerge in the poem as more truthful than the speaker's outer perception of "black GIs hold[ing] to their turf." Moreover, because "the underworld" is traditionally associated with death, the image of the underworld which unites "black & white" implies that in fact the unifying force of "machine-gun fire" is stronger than the speaker suggests it to be. Thus, the inner "darknesses" and visions of the Vietnam war in "Tu Do Street" appear more revealing and redemptive than the war's outside manifestations. The imagery of "Tu Do Street" is another example of Komunyakaa's treatment of inner darkness as a place in which light and darkness are united in a vision of the world without hierarchies.

Another portrayal of a soldier's journey to "the underworld" of the inner psychic space can be found in "Jungle Surrender," a poem based on a painting by Don Cooper with the same title (*Dien Cai Dau* 37-38). In the poem, like in the painting, the soldier's withdrawal inside is a means of dealing with the hardships of the outside situation: the soldier's jungle ambush by the Viet Cong. As a result:

the prisoner goes deeper into himself, away

from how a man's heart divides him, deeper
into the jungle's indigo mystery & beauty,

with both hands raised into the air, only
surrendering halfway: the small man inside

waits like a photo in a shirt pocket, refusing
to raise his hands, silent & uncompromising

In Don Cooper's painting "the small man . . . like a photo in a shirt pocket " is placed both inside the surrendering man and inside the jungle. In fact, since the surrendering man is depicted as ghost--faceless and transparent--the jungle, which surrounds him, is at the same time within him. Consequently, "the small man," enclosed within the outline of the prisoner's body, appears to stand some distance behind him, representing a projection of the prisoner from a short time before the ambush. Thus, in the context of the painting, the prisoner's journey "deeper into himself" in the poem implies his withdrawal into the recent past--ironically, his last minutes of freedom. At the same time, however, the soldier's withdrawal to "the small man" inside the jungle--another of Komunyakaa's "selves" located inside the inside--is also a gesture of reaching towards the inner pride. "The small man inside" is "silent & uncompromising," and refuses to "raise his hands." In contrast to these noble, genuine qualities perceived inside, the prisoner's outside world is illusive, destructive and confusing. It is "a hallucination of blues/ & deep purples that set the day on fire" and "a labyrinth of violet," through which the prisoner "sleepwalks."

In the second part of the poem, the speaker departs from the painting and tries to imagine himself in the situation of the ambushed man. It is at this point in the poem that the speaker, in analogy to the prisoner's stance--uncompromising inside, hallucinating outside--openly admits that people's inner self is more truthful than what they show to the outside world. "The real interrogator is a voice within," says the speaker. The inner sight encompasses everything, both exalting and embarrassing memories: not only the speaker's

"daughter in Phoenix" and his "first woman," but also how he "helped ambush two Viet Cong/ while plugged into the Grateful Dead." The outer sight, on the other hand, is selective and manipulative. We can see, or present to others, only "parts of us we dared put into the picture." Ironically, only through such outer manipulation can the parts of the picture "come together." Otherwise, the man who "goes deeper into himself" is left with a vague feeling that "we're all somehow connected"--not knowing exactly the "how."

At the end of the poem, the speaker goes back from general reflections to the story of the man ambushed in the jungle. Adding the "happy ending" to Cooper's painting, the speaker suggests that the prisoner has managed to deceive the Viet Cong's outer sight, and has convinced them that those parts which he "dared put into the picture" are true. As a result, "the prisoner"--as seen from the outside--"goes away/ almost whole." However, the adverb "almost" points to the illusory character of the prisoner's success. The subsequent lines elaborate on the theme of the prisoner's deceptive wholeness:

> But he will always touch
> fraying edges of things, to feel hope break
>
> like a worm that rejoins itself
> under the soil . . . head to tail.

The image of an earthworm, tying its "first thing to the last" reverberates with references to Komunyakaa's metaphors of identity, discussed in the previous chapter. Consequently, we can interpret the space "under the soil," together with its "fragmented inhabitant," as another reference to the prisoner's inner self. Thus, in contrast to the outside "integrated reality," the prisoner's inner "underworld," like in "Eyeball Television" is marked by "disconnected landscape:" "fraying edges of things" and contrasting elements which refuse to merge. However, even though the "wholeness" of the inner self is never complete and the inner unity of opposite elements is always in danger of dissolving, the dark "jungle" inside is the only place where man can be truthful to himself: "refusing to raise his hands, silent & uncompromising."

A similar view of the inner self as the place of truth appears in "Tunnels," which on the literal level depicts the task of disarming Viet Cong "booby traps" performed by the platoon's "tunnel rat," who enters the Vietnam underground tunnel system (5-6). On the figurative level, however, the imagery of "Tunnels" vividly resembles Komunyakaa's "identity poems." What the "tunnel rat" finds underground are the usual inhabitants of Komunyakaa's "dark places:" "spiders and scorpions," "lice, shit, maggots & vapor of pestilence." The space of "the tunnels" is also marked by the constant clashing and merging of light and darkness, which, as we remember, is representative of double-consciousness: the dark "web of booby traps" is at any moment "ready to spring into broken stars;" the "tunnel rat" passes "shadows," but at the same time his "globe-shaped helmet/ follows the gold ring his flashlight/ casts into the void;" "bats," the inhabitants of darkness, resemble "gods," the inhabitants of light; finally, even lice glitter with "silver." Moreover, the image of the "globe-helmet" following the ring of light evokes the image of the earth revolving around the sun, and thus suggests an individual world revolving "under the soldier's eyelid."

Since in the beginning of the poem the speaker identifies himself with the man going underground--"I feel like I'm down there/ with him, moving ahead"--we can conclude that the "tunnel rat's" journey in search of "booby traps" is symbolic of the speaker's journey inside himself. Like the speaker of "Jungle Surrender," the speaker of "Tunnels" finds his underworld a space of redemption: "pushed by a river of darkness," he feels "blessed for each inch of the unknown." Moreover, the contrasting lights and shadows in "the mole's blackness" seem to draw the speaker towards knowledge: through the experience of the "tunnel rat," the speaker discovers "the pulse/ of mysteries & diversions/ like thoughts trapped in the ground." Surprisingly, the only true knowledge which the speaker of "Tunnels" discovers in his "underworld" in the final lines of the poem is the same knowledge which Komunyakaa's subject recognizes as the only "safe truth" in

the "peacetime" poems of *Neon Vernacular* the knowledge that "death waits/ in us like a light switch" (90). Going "past/ death sacked into a blind corner," the "tunnel rat" puts his love, and thus life, in an instrument which leads him *towards* death: "the shotgun/ that will someday dig his grave." Thus, co-existence of life and death in the underground tunnel system, symbolized through the co-existence of light and darkness, gods and bats, growth of roots and destruction of "booby traps," makes the speaker aware that life and death co-exist in the inner space of every person. As the resemblance of the imagery of "Tunnels" to the imagery of "peacetime" poems in *Neon Vernacular* shows us, such inner union of life and death is not only specific to war: to an equal extent, it marks our everyday lives.

The final message and the overall imagery of "Tunnels" points to the new identity which the American nation can achieve, having gone through the rite of passage of war. Turning death into an experience more feasible than during the time of peace, the war makes people face the "darkness" in themselves and focus on "the underworld" in its traditional symbolism of "the land of the dead." Since death is "a great equalizer," the nation's journey into the underworld of war mercilessly exposes the pettiness of their racial divisions, prejudices, and artificial hierarchies. Thus, the poem shows, war makes people find the revised values which counter the culture of light's dominance inside, in the darkness. As we have seen in this chapter, "Tunnels" is not the only poem in *Dien Cai Dau* in which the inner self appears as the space where individuals and the whole nation can perceive visions alternative to the outer reality which "depends on the light." In "Tu Do Street," the speaker's inner vision foreshadows transition from the nation's identity of "lines in dust" to the identity of "connected rooms." In "Jungle Surrender" the inner sight puts the value of pride into focus, stressing the importance of an "uncompromising" attitude: acknowledgment of one's own shortages and rejection of manipulation of other people's sight. In "Starlight Scope Myopia" and "'You and I are Disappearing" the "images inside the speakers' head" point to the necessity of compassion towards other

people, including "the enemy," and thus, empathy with the suffering "other" to the point of "disappearance" of one's own ego. In "Camouflaging the Chimera," "a world under each man's eyelid" emphasizes individual emotions and reflections in the midst of "camouflaging" environment of war, which makes individual soldiers invisible in the great "fighting-machine" of war, and, more broadly, in the whole "Chimera" of American policy against other nations. Finally, in "The One-legged Stool" and "Report from the Skull's Diorama" the inner space appears as the best point of reference for someone, not necessarily a black person, who truly wants to evaluate the American society. Even in "Eyeball Television" and "Seeing in the Dark," where the inner sight is a source of illusions, "the short-time pain-killer" character of the inner visions points to the similarly anesthetizing quality of culture on which these inner visions are based: the culture of TV and commercialization of the human body and emotions.

However, although it is the inner darkness in *Dien Cai Dau* that points to the new set of values which replace the old standards undermined by the criticism of light, the inner sight, when left by itself, can merely give us a view of "the disconnected landscape:" visions which cannot become reality. The new identity can only come into existence if an individual or a collective subject returns from "the underworld" to the external space--only when the inner and outer sight are combined. The inner vision of "a woman trying to erase names" does not mean anything if it is not followed by its equivalent in the outside reality-- "a woman brushing a boy's hair"--which points to the way a nation can continue after the experience of war.

Similarly, the subject's internal visions after the war--the "whirl of yellow leaflets," "the smoke-colored Viet Cong," "the burning girl"--are useless if they do not influence outside reality. The "leaflets" have to "wave" to the external photographs to make the world's reports true; the Viet Cong have to "weave" themselves through the outside reality to make the speaker "lower" his head with humility; the fire of "the burning girl" has to

engulf the world and the speaker (the "you" and the "I") to purify "the enlightened society." Also, the internal visions perceived during the war, only when clashed with the outside misery and confusion, show the nation's necessity and capability of change. Only the outside vision of "Tu Do Street" bars makes the black soldier aware that his inside memory of "lines in dust" does not have to last forever. Only blurred by "the urine dripping on the forehead" does the prisoner's "internal television"--a copy of his "peacetime" anesthetic--prove empty and "disconnected." Even in "Jungle Surrender," the prisoner, who by ambush changed the fortune of "two Viet Cong," while nonchalantly "plugged into Grateful Dead," finds the internal memory of the event shameful, only when himself faced with the reverse situation of ambush.

Thus, once again, questioning the traditional metaphors of light and darkness, and related metaphors of outer and inner sight, Komunyakaa creates metaphors which establish his poetic idiom as "neon vernacular:" a language without hierarchies that promotes a conceptual system in which light and darkness, outside and inside are complementary. Like in the "peacetime" sections of *Neon Vernacular,* in *Dien Cai Dau* letters of Komunyakaa's language alternately "shimmer" and "stay" inscribed in the black stone, while images taken from the outer and inner totality become united in the poet. *Dien Cai Dau* takes the readers on a journey through the underworlds of Vietnam war, past "bats" and "gods," past "blessedness" and "pestilence," to show us that equal acknowledgment of both "shadows" and "gold rings" is the only direction a nation can take to be able to "put into the picture" all parts of itself unembarrassed.

CONCLUSION

In the final chapter of *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson point to the function of metaphors in the most important aspects of our lives: interpersonal communication and mutual understanding, in which "metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill in creating rapport and communicating the nature of unshared experience," self-understanding, which in a large part consists in "the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives," and ritual, which preserves certain cultural metaphors from generation to generation (231-34). This study has shown how what Komunyakaa himself, independently from Lakoff and Johnson, calls "personal metaphors" of light and darkness (*New England Review* 146) enable Komunyakaa to express the black identity, describe a black person's rapport with the American society at large, define the identity of the American nation in general, as well as critically evaluate and revise cultural and personal rituals.

Indicating points in which, in Lakoff and Turner's terms, the conventional English metaphors of light and darkness "break down" (69), Komunyakaa makes use of our common experiential knowledge. Questioning the conventional metaphor KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT in his "poems of seeing," Komunyakaa reminds the readers that, in spite of enabling seeing, light can also blind and thus hinder people's access to knowledge. Showing weaknesses in the conventional metaphors GOOD IS LIGHT and LIFE IS LIGHT, Komunyakaa remarks that light is an attribute of fire, which, in addition to providing warmth and energy necessary to life, can also cause harm and death. On the other hand, negating the traditional view of DARKNESS as symbol of EVIL and DEATH, through his images of birth, re-birth, and reaching inside, Komunyakaa points out that darkness of the womb and darkness of the soil are places where life takes its origin. Moreover, undermining the value of outer sight, used in light, as the primary source of knowledge,

Komunyakaa makes use of metaphors already present in the English language. Stressing the importance of inner sight, Komunyakaa draws on our conceptualization of knowledge as inner entity: the word "insight" itself understood as "unexplained, but reliable, faculty of knowledge" indicates that apart from the UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING metaphor, the conceptual system of the English language includes also the metaphor KNOWLEDGE IS SEEING INSIDE.

Undermining the conventional English metaphors of light and darkness, however, Komunyakaa does not completely reject them. As an alternative to the "standard" English, Komunyakaa creates his "personal" poetic language--"neon vernacular"--based on a system of metaphors in which light and darkness, though often appearing in conflict, are treated as equally important elements of our existence. Thus, without actually *reversing* the definitions and showing that GOOD IS DARKNESS and BAD IS LIGHT, in his poems Komunyakaa makes us aware that traditional connotations which we ascribe to light and darkness are metaphorical, and thus relative. Like Ellison in *Invisible Man* and Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo*, who, in Gates's words, demonstrate that "blackness is produced in the text only through a complex process of signification" and "there can be no transcendent blackness, for it cannot and does not exist beyond manifestations of its specific figures" (237), Komunyakaa shows in his poetry that the concepts of light and darkness, blackness and whiteness literally correspond only to what we perceive experientially in the world; all evaluative "meanings" of these concepts are metaphorical, and cannot be treated as "truth."

Komunyakaa's equal treatment of the concepts of light and darkness in his "neon vernacular" is paralleled by his poetic reliance on both Western and African tradition. In Baker's use of the term "vernacular," Komunyakaa's "neon vernacular" embraces "the blues resources" of African American literature (*Blues* 31). Many poems discussed in this study--"I Apologize," "When in Rome," "Salt," "Newport Beach," "Gloria's Clues," "One-legged Stool," "Communiqué"--have a form of a dramatic monologue which makes

use of a colloquial, often black, speech, and not infrequently Signifies on the addressee. The blues aesthetic of Komunyakaa's poetry is visible also in his employment of jazz poetics, already indicated in the first chapter of this study. Although Komunyakaa's use of jazz is most obvious in poems which refer directly to jazz figures ("Elegy for Thelonius," "Copacetic Mingus"), in the poems discussed in this study we can also find elements of jazz, especially "repetition[s] with slight variations," mentioned by Komunyakaa himself in the conversation "Jazz and Poetry" (656). In "I Apologize" we encounter constant repetitions of what the speaker did not see and did not do: "I didn't see," "I was miles away, I saw nothing," "I don't remember," "I heard no names," and so on (*Neon Vernacular* 108). In "When in Rome" the phrase "Please forgive me" and other phrases of apology, only slightly varied structurally, return throughout the whole poem like a refrain (*Neon Vernacular* 97). In "One-legged Stool," as I remarked in my discussion of *Dien Cai Dau*, the speaker echoes the repetitions of "I Apologize," saying "You didn't see that. I'm still sitting on my stool." over and over again (40-41). Finally, in "You and I Are Disappearing," which, as Komunyakaa himself said, was inspired by the music of Monk ("Jazz and Poetry" 656), the whole poem is formed out of a single image of a burning girl, endlessly repeated and compared to various objects (*Dien Cai Dau* 17).

The jazz character of Komunyakaa's poetry is achieved also through what jazz poetics shares with surrealism: "strong visual images," the function of which, as Feinstein notices in the introduction to *Jazz Poetry* is "to approximate sound" (5). Later, discussing specifically Komunyakaa's poetry, Feinstein remarks that "like Monk's use of dissonance and silence, Komunyakaa offers imagery that seems too large to visualize while giving the reader the space to think, respond" (170). Almost every poem discussed in this study, including even the poems from the less surreal *Dien Cai Dau,* contains some images that are "too large to visualize." Extreme cases are perhaps the images of "a looted brain case/[which] succumbs & a cage of prayers/[which] sways in night air" from "The Thorn

Merchant's Right-Hand Man" (*Neon Vernacular* 91), as well as "the slack bed [in which] meat/ falls through the door/ of itself" from "Beg Song" (*Neon Vernacular* 48), which are virtually impossible to picture.

Komunyakaa's grounding in African tradition is also visible in his borrowings from the poetics of Aimé Césaire and the Negritude Movement. Apart from following Césaire's emphasis on poetic imagination which unites inner and outer totalities, and acknowledging priority of emotions over rationality in poetic creation--principles most conspicuous in Komunyakaa's "poem-manifesto" "Beg Song"--Komunyakaa's poetry exhibits also other values promoted by the Negritude Movement. The importance of "dark places" beneath the soil, where light and darkness are united, as symbols of identity, self-discovery, and re-birth in Komunyakaa's poetry echoes the importance which Césaire and the Negritude Movement ascribe to symbols, "*primordial images* . . . encrusted in the collective unconscious" to which "all images are reducible" (Césaire qtd. in Arnold 60). Moreover, criticizing violence mainly in his "Thorn Merchant" and Vietnam-war poems, but also in numerous poems from other collections, discussed in this study ("Looking Mad Dog," "The Man Who Carries," "Rocks Push" "Newport Beach" and so on), Komunyakaa continues the Negritude tradition, which openly condemns the widespread violence of Western culture against black people.

Finally, if we look at Komunyakaa's poetry through the lens of Gates's theory, we can say that Komunyakaa follows the African tradition by "Signifyin(g)." Not only do the speakers of Komunyakaa's poems Signify on their addressees, but Komunyakaa's poems themselves Signify on Western tradition. As this study has shown, Komunyakaa's idiosyncratic metaphors of light and darkness consistently Signify on traditional Western definitions of the concepts. Moreover, if we understand "Signifyin(g)" as, according to Abrahams's definition (qtd. in Gates 54), "direction through indirection" (which is, *significantly*, often a feature of poetry in general), we can say that Komunyakaa Signifies

on the readers through his use of symbol. The space beneath "an old board" (*Neon Vernacular* 13) indirectly means inner self, while animals from the "Dreambook Bestiary" indirectly represent various aspects of African American life. That critics sometimes let themselves be Signified on by Komunyakaa's poetry and treat the figurative images literally can be seen in such interpretations of Komunyakaa's poetry as the one by Philip D. Beidler, who treats "Dreambook Bestiary" as mere "contemplat[ion of] nature" (175).

It is important to notice that in "Dreambook Bestiary," in order to Signify on the readers, Komunyakaa employs the traditional Western form of bestiary, often used in medieval times to preach Christian doctrine. Consequently, just as the reciprocal existence of light and darkness in Komunyakaa's system of metaphors prevents us from drawing definite lines between the two concepts, thus it is difficult to clearly separate Western and African traditions in Komunyakaa's poetry. Komunyakaa's surrealism, although borrowed mainly from Césaire, was, after all, a Western creation, and in various interviews Komunyakaa often mentions André Breton, one of the French "founding fathers" of surrealism, as a significant influence on his poetry. In a recent interview with Baer, Komunyakaa points also to the Bible, especially the Old Testament, as a book which "brought [him] to a clearer understanding of surrealism" and first enabled him to "fire up [his] imagination" ("Still Negotiating" 15). Obviously, we can see elements of the Bible in Komunyakaa's poetry in such images as "a burning bush/ driven by a godawful wind" (*Dien Cai Dau* 17), the whole apocalyptic iconography of "1984," and even the image of "Light [as] a god-headed/ Law and weapon" from the conclusion of "Praising Dark Places" (*Neon Vernacular* 13). Another element of Western culture in Komunyakaa's poetry, the notion of "the underworld," discussed in the previous chapter, also cannot be treated in complete separation from African American tradition. In Komunyakaa's poetic universe the concept of "the underworld" is crucial to the definition of the black identity, and is inseparably connected with African American double-consciousness.

The motif of double-consciousness, expressed either through merging of Western and African traditions or recognition of both light and darkness as essential elements of life, visible in the poems gathered in *Neon Vernacular*, pervades also those books by Komunyakaa which are not included in his biggest collection: *Magic City* (1992) and *Thieves of Paradise* (1998). Both books continue Komunyakaa's imagery of turning towards the darkness inside. The autobiographical *Magic City* depicts Komunyakaa's journey towards the memory of his own childhood and adolescence in Bogalusa, Louisiana, a return to what in the conversation with Gotera Komunyakaa called "a hometown inside my head, . . . my own psychological territory," and later "experiences . . . forming the old landscape inside my head" ("Lines" 17, 18). The images found inside this personal memory are, again, dominated by metaphors of light and darkness which are crucial to the definition of the identity of the speaker, who, this time, clearly represents Komunyakaa himself. Depicting the development of the speaker from a five-year-old "wading out into deep/ sunny grass" (1) to a sixteen-year-old with "the prettiest woman/ in the room" in his arms (56), *Magic City* simultaneously portrays the speaker's changing attitude towards light and darkness.

The first group of poems in the book shows the young speaker's fascination with various, mostly violent, forms of light, which constitute his favorite "playthings:" "silver bullets" of a "Lone Ranger/ Six-shooter" (1), "a switchman's lantern" made out of a "Mason jar of lightning bugs" (6), "butcher knife [which]/ Caught the sunlight," used by "Daddy Red" to kill a goat (12), finally "a scorpion of sunlight crawl[ing]/ Each boy's arm," while the speaker and his friends dare one another who will "flinch" first under the heat of "the day slanted/ Through . . .magnifying glass" (14). Gradually, however, the speaker recognizes the destructive character of light. Light appears to him as hostile first in nature where a snake--the traditional Western symbol of sin--which attacks a nest of birds takes a form of "a constellation/ Of eyes [which] flickered in thicket" in "April's

Anarchy"(16). In another poem, "Omen," the snake's tongue "dart[s]" like "a candle flame," and "daylight" resembles the cruel snake when it "crawl[s] across the floor" (45). Later, the speaker learns about cruelty of light also in society. "The steel plate" in the head of the speaker's neighbor, "Mister Dan," which the speaker imagines as "reflect[ing] sunlight/ Like a preacher's collection plate" is a vivid reminder of the cruelty of the light of war, this time World War II (22-23). "The piece of blonde rope" in the "courthouse lawn," at which the speaker looks "squinting at . . . sunlight" in "History Lessons" directly represents lynching and thus atrocities committed by white people on African Americans (30). Boys who attack the speaker in "Sex, Magnolia and Speed," in a situation reminiscent of the one depicted in "Rocks Push" (*Neon Vernacular* 167), appear in the imagery of "windshield [which] glared like a helmet" and "chrome fins/ [which] Gutted the night" (53). Finally, the forces of light and darkness struggle with each other when Ku Klux Klan--"Knights of the White Camellia"--confront "Dark roses" of black people, first in the night light of "the guillotined/ Moon," and then in "the hard light" of day (54).

The speaker's growing awareness of the hostility of light in later poems in *Magic City* is accompanied by an increasing appreciation of darkness. In "Millpond" the speaker is attracted to the "dark world" of the pond and "gods [which] lived under . . . mud" (17-18); in "Poetics of Paperwood" he defines the period "before dawn" as, metaphorically, the happy time before full maturity and suffering (50); in "Blackberries" in a moment of revelation the speaker identifies the blackness of his fingers with the blackness of "berries," "burning with thorns . . . too ripe to touch" (27).

Still, like in *Neon Vernacular,* the predominant images of the poem are those of double-consciousness which combines concepts of light and darkness. The fascinating "millpond," although dominated by "black water" is also marked by "swamp orchids" which look like "bows tied/ . . . Shadow to light" (17). Gathering and selling blackberries, the speaker "limboe[s] between worlds" of "rich blackness" and "daylight" (27). Facing

the attackers with "chrome fins," the speaker "walk[s] straight ahead/ Into the biography of light/ & dark" (53). In the penultimate poem of the collection, "Nocturne," only a part of the speaker is "opening . . . into the Night," other parts of him are attracted to the "high beam light swung/ Through cypresses" and "the eyes of an Asian/ Woman under a flame tree" (55), probably a TV image from World War II, which, however, strongly echoes the imagery of "You and I Are Disappearing" (*Dien Cai Dau* 17). Finally, in a metaphor which most directly evokes Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness and the Veil, in "Sunday Afternoons" the speaker describes the growth of his awareness of self:

> . . . I knew life
> Began where I stood in the dark,
> Looking out into the light,
> & that sometimes I could see
>
> Everything through nothing. (24)

The other book by Komunyakaa not included in *Neon Vernacular*--his most recent collection, *Thieves of Paradise*--depicting Komunyakaa's usual inward turn, goes even further beyond the inner landscape of childhood memory represented in *Magic City*. *Thieves of Paradise* portrays turning towards Freudian collective memory--the unconscious based on symbol and myth--which is of primary importance in the poetics of Césaire and the Negritude Movement. The poem which opens *Thieves of Paradise* establishes the collection as "Memory Cave" (3), which the boy initiate, like the speaker of "Praising Dark Places" (*Neon Vernacular* 13), enters to become a man. Significantly, he is "pulled" into the darkness of the cave, by light--"the flambeau/ in his hands"--and discovers inside "sleeping gods" whose attributes come both from the Christian culture of light ("icons sunlight") and the so-called "primitive" or "dark" cultures ("Ibex carved/ on a throwing stick, reindeer/ worried into an ivory amulet,/ & a bear's head"). Such mixture of "gods" and thus myths of different traditions in Komunyakaa's symbolic "Memory Cave" mirrors the structure of the whole book. Although the imagery of light and darkness is not as

common in *Thieves of Paradise* as in Komunyakaa's other collections, the double-consciousness characteristic of Komunyakaa's work in *Thieves of Paradise* appears exactly through juxtaposition of cultures, not only Western and African ones, but also Asian and Native American. In this collection we find such archetypal Western figures as Odysseus (73), Helen (5), Medea (16), but also the African trickster god Legba (17), identified by Gates as the origin of the African American tradition of "Signifyin(g)," as well as the heritage which Europe draws from Africa: the ancient Egyptian culture, represented by King Ptolemy (5). A long poem in the center of the collection, "Quatrains for Ishi" (57-60) is devoted entirely to the "symbolic" figure in Native American history: the last survivor of the now vanished Yahi Yana Indians who inhabited territories in California, and were virtually exterminated after 1850 by white settlers. Moreover, the section devoted to Vietnam war, "Debriefing Ghosts," depicts the speaker's literal journey to Vietnam, years after the war, and thus apart from memories of combat, shows also "peacetime" images of Vietnamese culture: "the Hanoi market" (80), "the moviehouse" (78), everyday rituals of work on rice fields (81). Finally, *Thieves of Paradise* pictures also figures from "modern mythology," made international by popular culture: Lady Day (20), James Dean (30), Marylin Monroe (80).

However, establishing mythology of all continents as the "collective unconscious" (Césaire qtd. in Arnold 60) of the modern world, and opening *Thieves of Paradise* with an image of an interior landscape inhabited by gods of all origins, Komunyakaa ends his collection with a clear note of identification with blackness. "Anodyne" (127-28), the final poem in *Thieves of Paradise* Signifies on one of the most important texts in American poetry, Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." Here, Komunyakaa unites whiteness and blackness, confronting Whitman's classic praise of the white body with his jazzy acclamation of the dark body, at times described almost in stereotypical terms:

. . . . . .
I love my crooked feet
shaped by vanity and work
. . . . . .
. . . I love the lips,
salt & honeycomb on the tongue.
The hair holding off rain
& snow. The white moons
on my fingernails . . .
. . . . . .
I love this body
made to weather the storm
in brain . . .
. . . I love my big hands.
I love it clear down to the soft
quick motor of each breath,
. . . . . .
This skin, this sac of dung
& joy, this spleen floating
like a compass needle inside
nighttime, always divining
West Africa's dusty horizon
. . . . . .
I love this body, this
solo & ragtime jubilee

In spite of the poem's optimistic tone, however, the ironic title of "Anodyne" suggests that blackness in American society has not yet been recognized as a legitimate object of praise. A black "song of myself" can be merely an individual pain-reliever, not a song repeated by the whole nation like Whitman's poem. Harmful metaphors of blackness and whiteness, and light and darkness are still too firmly fixed within the American conceptual system.

Using his "personal metaphors" of light and darkness (*New England Review* 146), Komunyakaa tries to change this situation, and take American readers beyond the set concepts in their minds. The whole body of Komunyakaa's work constitutes a "telescopic love-eye" which incessantly "probes" towards the inside of inside and multi-layered darkness (*Neon Vernacular* 48): first, the inner darkness of imagination and identity in "peacetime" sections of *Neon Vernacular*, then, the "deeper" darkness of the traumatic memory of war in *Dien Cai Dau*, later still "deeper" darkness of individual childhood memory in *Magic City*, finally, yet further inner darkness of "the collective unconscious" in

Thieves of Paradise (Césaire qtd. in Arnold 60). As Komunyakaa's metaphors show us, the resources of inner darkness are inexhaustible. The "opalescence" of darkness (*Neon Vernacular* 170) embraces the multiplicity of colors, including white. As readers of Komunyakaa's poetry, we can expect that still many journeys inside the inside of darkness are ahead of us.

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