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American Southern Great Chain of Being in Yusef Komunyakaa's *Magic City*

Abstract. This paper reviews the various modes of racist, sexist, classist, ageist, and interspecific oppression as well as occasional transgressions in the city of Bogalusa, Louisiana, as they are dramatized in the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa, particularly in his 1992 memoirist volume *Magic City*. More than anything else, Komunyakaa remembers from his childhood days the discourses and practices of violence and control aimed at maintaining a rigid hierarchical structure regulating order between all forms of life and preserving the sense of identity of many. It is a realm of unrelenting terror in which all creatures must succumb to a regime bringing to mind the medieval great chain of being. Komunyakaa investigates thoroughly Southern morals to determine the extent of psychological and epistemic damage they cause.

Keywords: Yusef Komunyakaa, Louisiana, racism, existentialism, chain of being

1. Introduction

The Mississippi Delta is the largest marshland in the world.² South of the town of Bogalusa, Louisiana, where Yusef Komunyakaa (b. 1947) comes from, the land was wrenched by the local population from the enormous masses of water flowing from North America, diverging into hundreds of outlets and the Gulf of Mexico. Over the past 300 years, first the French and then Americans have systematically dredged the Mississippi and other smaller rivers of the delta, including the nearby Bogalusa Pearl River. Swamps were drained; embankments separated rivers and wetlands from inhabited areas.

Populated areas here are always in danger of lapsing back into their original state, which was powerfully brought home to the locals by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

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The hurricanes broke many embankments, flooding again huge tracts of land, including Bogalusa. The town's name comes from the expression *Bogue Lusa*, which in the language of the Choctaw tribe means "black waters" (Read 19). The inhabitants live in the vicinity of marshes, where everything is in chaos. Thousand-year-old cypress trees grow in water, and their roots climb upwards, looking like the trunks themselves. Creatures at different stages of evolutionary development wallow together in murky waters. The muds are as hot as air; the air is soupy. What is torn from nature quickly returns to it. In Komunyakaa's volume *Magic City* (1992) we see overgrown yards, car wrecks covered with vines (22, 46).³ Each hole in a deck board provides an opening for the flora to re-emerge. Everything is wrapped in a rich mix of the scent and stench of multiple flowers, excrement, and rapidly decaying matter.

Such conditions have shaped the imagination of the inhabitants of southern Louisiana—a mentality marked by an obsession with separating, differentiating, isolating, and hierarchizing. The continuity of matter and the unity of creation in the Mississippi Delta threaten everyone's sense of identity and dignity. The fear of dissipation has fed into the socially shared craving for distinctions, separations, and hierarchies imposed on all living things. Komunyakaa offers a rich record of the violence, both physical and epistemic, this culture inflicts on races, sexes, classes, age groups, and species to perpetuate traditional order and to protect identities.

2. Thesis: Bogalusa's Great Chain of Being

Komunyakaa's poetry shows Southerners, Black and white, constantly defining themselves by negating others. From the day-to-day interactions of the town community an entire classification system arises, a version of the medieval great chain of being or of the Linnaeus taxonomy. Plato and Aristotle wrote about such an order covering the whole of creation, but Christians perfected it and have cemented it in the Western discourse (the history of the concept was recalled, in the 1930s, by Arthur O. Lovejoy). Among its most memorable visualizations is a drawing from 1579 from Diego Valadés's book, *Rhetoric Christian*, resembling a Christmas tree (insert between pp. 220–21). It is a vertical classification of all creatures, from God Himself (never Themselves!), through angels, who are hierarchical themselves, then people divided into class, racial, sexual and age categories, down to animals led by the lion, to plants, rocks and elements. It is the concept of a great order that describes the entire universe as understood in the spirit of Ptolemy, that is, with the Earth at its center but actually extending from the heavens, from the sphere of God and the beings closest to Him, to the vilest creatures, in which the percentage of the divine element is the lowest and which are closest to the fires of hell at the very center of our planet. It was this tradition, continued with some modifications by eighteenth-century

³ Hereinafter, this main source will be cited parenthetically as *MC* followed by the page number.

ethnologists, that gave rise to the theory of races (Fredrickson 57; Jordan 482–512). Aristotle did not write about races, and only mentions slaves as ranking just above the animal kingdom (6). Carl Linnaeus did not stop at ranking crustaceans, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals: he divided the human species itself into *Americanus*, *Asiaticus*, *Africanus*, and *Europeanus* (Charmantier). Of course, it was always somehow assumed that God was quantitatively most fully expressed in the latter, though less than in the angels.

Komunyakaa examines the echelons, the dynamics, and the occasional disruptions of the Southern great chain of being. African American men, women, children, and animals are subjected to its oppressive power, but also perpetrate related modes of oppression themselves on all the creatures beneath them. Importantly, in *Magic City*, the poet also tries to break down this ideological regime into its various components to understand its complexity and comprehensiveness. Komunyakaa once said that poetry is an activity that allows us to retrace the formation of our ideas about human life (Hass et al. 22); and that he belonged to those who “attempt to refashion [their] inherited landscape through consciousness” and bring themselves “an awareness of what has shaped” them (Komunyakaa, “More” 163). He also often claimed that he had actually learned poetry from his father, a carpenter, who would encourage him to dismantle defective objects and put all the elements back together so that an error could be detected (Mitrano and Komunyakaa 522). This seems to be the purpose of these poems: it is a detailed analysis of various forms of violence by ancient Christian discourses that have chopped up our world in a very specific way.

3. Existentialism

The illusory nature of all such distinctions was Komunyakaa’s childhood realization. In one of his interviews, his interlocutor told him that the inhabitants of “Magic City” seemed strongly connected with nature; hence the author himself must have felt part of the natural world if he can write so well about animals and insects. Komunyakaa’s recollection is mixed: he admitted that life in Bogalusa “was a semi-bucolic existence,”

but when I was there it was sheer hell in many ways. But I remember venturing out into the woods. Often I would. I liked being alone, and it was a kind of meditation on that landscape, but also almost a clinical look at the landscape because I wanted to know the rituals of animals. I wanted to know the rituals of insects. Consequently, in a way, for me those rituals came to parallel the rituals of people around me. It was a way of seeing for the most part. (Derricotte and Komunyakaa 515)

The bliss of being part of nature was mixed with the horror of the same, horror that gave beginning to the imagination of the great chain of being.

In his adult life, Komunyakaa’s perspective has been resolutely existentialist. The poet often talks about how much he was influenced by the art of Alberto Giacometti and more

widely by existentialism (Mitrano and Komunyakaa 522). There is certainly a parallel between Komunyakaa's vision and the existentialism of the sculptor's renowned friend, Jean Paul Sartre. Man in Komunyakaa is part of nature in a world without God; he has nothing in his essence that would make him unique. Like anti-Semitism in Sartre, however, classism, racism, childism, and speciesism are forms of bad faith, an escape from a more rational analysis of one's own situation and from the awareness of the randomness of one's own existence. In the very volume in question, in the poem "Knights of the White Camellia & Deacons of Defense," Komunyakaa invokes Sartre's *The Respectful Prostitute* (1946), a short play exploring the hypocrisy of white supremacists from the South, convinced that they are the norm of humanity (MC 54). They are Sartre's *salauds*, unaware of their nonessentialism and blind to their own corruption.

Racism, of course, was what triggered Komunyakaa to reflect on the systemic subjugation of all creatures in Bogalusa—not only minorities on the basis of various identity markers but animals as well. Racism was in great demand among white workers who built their lives around the belief in their uniqueness. In bad faith, they evade realizing their sharing life with the rest of creation and their material misery. Indeed, this working-class town is an important site in the history of racially motivated lynchings. In 1959, an African American truck driver, Mack Charles Parker, accused of raping a white pregnant woman in the presence of her little daughter, was dragged by a masked lynch mob from Pearl River County Jail in neighboring Poplarsville, Mississippi, tortured, and shot. His body was weighted down and tossed over the railing of the Pearl River, two and a half miles from where the poet grew up (Smead 50–56). In 1965, when Komunyakaa was eighteen, in Bogalusa's nearby village of Varnado, an African American, O'Neal Moore, a newly appointed deputy sheriff, was ambushed and shot dead (Nelson 8–10). A year later, another Black resident of Bogalusa was slain by KKK nightriders—an African American bricklayer, Clarence Triggs, who was seen in a civil rights march for the Black vote. Racial conflicts became so serious that a civil Black guard, Deacons for Defense and Justice, was set up to defend the African American community, especially civil rights activists, from increasing attacks by the Ku Klux Klan (Hill 2–9).

4. Bogalusa's Hell

But the brutal treatment of African Americans is only one form of oppression in the town; actually, all the residents are engaged in brutal practices and rituals intended to battle everything they find less than human or beneath them. Before World War II, Bogalusa was the home of the largest sawmill in the world, the Great Southern Lumber Company, which seems to have established the town's culture of subjugation. Following the war, the sawmill morphed into a giant papermill, but that did little to moderate the culture of warring against all life. As Komunyakaa remembers it, even into the 1950s big pines were continually felled, stripped of bark, and cut into planks. More broadly,

it was a culture of constant warfare against all elements. In the volume, even children's kites, made of reeds whittled with penknives and "shanks of glass," are then armed with razorblades to slash the air (*MC* 6–7); automobiles' chrome tailfins are described as busy "gutt[ing] the night" (*MC* 53).

The permanent war waged against the Louisiana forests and air is driven by the same psychological mechanisms as cruelty to animals, women, and children. Everyone in Bogalusa must know their place, and the lines of division are reestablished by force every day. In Komunyakaa's poems, cats are bullied by children, police dogs choke on short leashes, and circus animals are trained with whips. While white boys shoot at Blacks with slingshots (*MC* 9), Black boys in turn target animals when they inadvertently approach *their* territories—for instance, birds sitting on high-voltage transmission lines. Pigs and goats are slaughtered not just for meat but for the preservation of human identities. Many animals are hung on trees and subjected to torture as if they were not even sentient creatures. Most crimes seem redolent of others, against other oppressed groups, even other species. The scenes of animals being butchered bring to mind images of lynched bodies of African Americans, captured in thousands of macabre postcards and memorial photos once very popular in the South, and they seem to have a similar function. Men, including the protagonist's father, maintain their status by beating their wives (*MC* 43), while Black youths become men by abusing girls belted into car seats (*MC* 53). Resisting, opposing or simply standing in the way of ordinary, widely accepted and systemic violence is dangerous. Symbolically, a cow that strays onto the railroad tracks dividing the town is smashed by a train (*MC* 1). A pig getting her hooves into the trough confirms its piggy nature and therefore dies at the hands of humans (*MC* 19).

In his poem "The Smokehouse," for example, Blacks seem resigned to the domination of whites, but jealously protect their own relatively favored place within the natural world to which whites have relegated them. In the slaughter of a pig, they seek confirmation of their distinctiveness and separateness from still lower echelons of being.

The hog had been sectioned,
 A map scored into skin;
 Opened like love,
 From snout to tail,
 The goodness
 No longer true to each bone.
 I was a wizard
 In that hazy world,
 & knew I could cut
 Slivers of meat till my heart
 Grew more human & flawed. (*MC* 21)

The “map” on the pork carcass that denies “goodness” “to each bone” probably reveals latent distinctions between the mind and the body, reason and passion, that underlie the chain of being and inform the butcher’s practice. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, the head symbolizes the “most divine part of us” (35). Is the cut severing the head from the rest of the body driven by the traditional elevation of creatures following the dictates of reason over those more susceptible to emotions? The chest stands for impulsiveness, proneness to anger and “choleric” disposition, which Linnaeus, for instance, identifies with the red-skinned *Americanus* (Charmantier). The area of the “diaphragm” is a zone of passions that, if dominant, make people lustful, where the soul succumbs to the whims of the body (Plato 69). Paradoxically, the pig’s carcass has been thoroughly hierarchized by African Americans themselves in accordance with the discourse that has kept them in subjugation.

The above passage also illustrates the dangers of identity based on the duality of matter and spirit (Dowdy 815). Since in Bogalusa the human heart is shaped by being carved out of what is not its essence in the Christian discourse—what is not the soul itself—there is a risk that the whole heart will be chopped. A person who completely dissociates from their body, in a sense, ceases to live. In the Voodoo religion practiced on the margins of Christianity in Bogalusa, a soul without a body is nothing but a zombie. A radically pared heart, even if it survives, is much smaller in terms of imagination. Man carved out of nature in accordance to the values of the Christian tradition is a failure of the imagination.

In another poem, “Immolatus,” a porker being slaughtered by Black men is a female, a sow, devoid of pigment (MC 19). The butchery performed by African Americans is richly suggestive—presumably also to the men themselves—of unhindered possession, free enjoyment, if not of gang rape and murder of a white woman. The poem’s final ten lines read as follows:

Soon her naked whiteness,
 Was a silence to split
 Between helpers & owner.
 Liver, heart, & head
 Flung to a foot tub.
 They smiled as she passed
 Through their hands. Next day
 I tracked blood in a circle
 Across dead grass, while fat
 Boiled down to lye soap. (MC 19)

The fantasized transgression compensates for the terror that Black men are subjected to on a daily basis at the hands of white women and their men.

As a boy, the protagonist does not participate directly in such rituals: he is allowed, indeed supposed, only to look and carry water to wash. Decades of his growing up and socialization are compressed into a few lines; imperceptibly, the little helper turns into an adult butcher himself. The boy blends into his elders and, gradually assuming more and more responsibilities, takes over their ritual: “They splashed hot water / & shaved her with blades / That weighed less each year” (MC 19). Black teenagers grow up following in the footsteps of Black men who build their manly identities by rehearsing their unlimited control over a body that eerily stands in lieu of a body that is forbidden to them.

In the poem “Salomé,” the protagonist, concealed in the bushes with a fishing rod, accidentally witnesses a white girl bathing (MC 47). He understands he has found himself in great danger; Black men accused of spying on white women in the nude were often lynched.⁴ He cowers in terror of being discovered, and blends in with the surrounding greenery.

I had seen her
 Before, nearly hidden
 Behind those fiery branches
 As she dove nude
 Into the creek.
 This white girl
 Who moved with ease
 On her side of the world
 As if she were the only
 Living thing. Her breasts
 Rose like swamp orchids (MC 47)

Significantly, the poet describes the girl as coming into view from behind “fiery branches.” The Biblical allusion is unmistakable: like Moses, the boy is terrified because he caught the sight of a being from higher echelons than his. Moses was warned against wanting to see the face of God Himself (Exodus 3:5), and even the sight of the burning bush was disturbing to him. The boy could end up like other luckless men—John the Baptist, or Actaeon from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—who unwarily caught glimpses of blue-blooded or divine beings and paid the highest price (Mark 6: 21–28; Ovid 97). One person he fears the most is Salomé’s brother, Cleanth, whom he remembered as torturing a cat once. Cleanth’s sadism toward the animal bode ill for the boy as well.

4 Komunyakaa’s story in the poem is an interesting inversion of Richard Wright’s 1938 story “Big Boy Leaves Home” in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (25–66). In Wright, Black boys fear for their lives because, after they were swimming in a hole, they were seen naked by a white woman.

I knew
 Salomé's brother, Cleanth,
 Hung our cat with a boot lace
 From a crooked fencepost—
 Knew he pulled on the cat's
 Hind legs, a smile on his face,
 & it wouldn't be long before
 He would join her in the creek
 & they'd hold each other
 Like Siamese twins at the State Fair,
 Swimmers trapped under
 A tyranny of roots, born
 With one heart. (MC 47)

In a moment of oblivion, white Salome, immersed in water, seems to blend in with the natural world. The imagery is strongly reminiscent of Ophelia from the painting by the Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais, drowning among flowers, passive, united with the vegetation. The Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics is relevant here because it represents a precise contradiction of the logic underlying all emotions in Bogalusa. With that canvas, Millais responded to John Ruskin's call to finally "go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning [. . .], rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing" (Ruskin 178). Eddies and currents, including the subconscious ones, draw Salome to the invisible Black boy and the rest of the creation in a world where no being is privileged. But the men of her family, like Laertes and Polonius, guard her "dignity." Salome is balanced between horizontal unity with the whole of nature and the vertical order of her ancestors. Cleanth, entering the water, feels the same power of attraction. Holding hands, the siblings must support each other so as not to succumb to that natural power.

The temptation is great because nature surrounding the African American is full of splendor; "Tall greenness" around him is contrasted with a "stunted oak," with nature classified, subject to Christian symbolism, or tamed by lumbermen. In this poem is also a suggestion that people who isolate themselves from all creation are deformed (one is reminded of James Baldwin's adage, "As long as you think you are white, there is no hope for you") (Baldwin 90–92): Salome and Cleanth, with their awareness of belonging to the highest caste, are ultimately freaks of nature, "Siamese twins at the State Fair" (MC 47).

The great chain of being also determines order within families, the order dictated by age and gender hierarchies. The father is the head of the family, the wife, more susceptible to emotions, ranks below him. Children swarm at the lowest level, stirred by momentary desires. The generational divisions are reflected in the spatial structure of

the protagonist's house: ceilings and walls are the physical embodiment of these barriers. Boys spend a lot of time in cellars, whereas dogs and cats live in burrows dug under the foundations. Within the limits set by the whites, the boy's parents try to cultivate their dignity by denying their children access to them during serious discussions or, as in the poem "Sunday Afternoons," during lovemaking (MC 24). Keeping children away for the sake of conventional decency and dignity is one of the rituals in which they manifest their separateness from the animal world to which they were relegated in slavery. One is reminded of Josiah Henson's recollection of slavery days in his memoir *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life* (London, 1877): "In a single room were huddled, like cattle, ten or a dozen persons, men, women, and children. All ideas of refinement and decency were, of course, out of the question" (23).

The respectable divisions within African American families are tenuous, impermanent, and constantly in danger of being compromised. The walls separating the parents from their children are often made of paper; the door is transparent or replaced with a frame with an insect screen; the windows are covered with shabby blinds. Even a whisper intended only for adults' ears penetrates the ceilings, ruining family order, parental authority, and children's innocence. While playing in the cellars, the boy repeatedly overhears conversations and noises not meant for him.

The hierarchies of the South are performed through, or manifest in, the unequal distribution of privilege to make noise or to be heard. The whistle of a locomotive spreads fear among local animals. Black boys, who quickly learn the rules of domination and submission, mock the dogs for whimpering at the trains' noise; they claim superiority over dogs by walking up to the tracks dangerously close (MC 1, 3–6, 55). The local sawmill's shift whistles dominate the area and regulate the lives of all working-class residents, Black and white; it is "the melody / Men & women built lives around, / Sonorous as the queen bee's fat / Hum drawing worker from flowers, / Back to the colonized heart" (MC 3). But only the voices of whites and the noises of their machines and institutions can cross the racial dividing lines and set the tone for the entire town. When, for example, the speaker of "History Lessons" lashes out in anger against a white supremacist—when "hot words / Swarmed out of my mouth like African bees"—he strikes other Black men as doomed, courting death at the hands of whites (MC 31). Black women are more careful when whispering (MC 4, 42). Loretta Lynn's country music can resound in whites' pickup trucks, but Satchmo often can be played only in the minds (MC 3, 12). As Komunyakaa writes, in "Happiness," "Silence belonged to gods" (MC 12).

This motif of the privilege of noisemaking or being heard is partly rooted in the story of Emmett Till. Komunyakaa likes to say that he grew up "near the time Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi" ("More" 163), and in the poem "History Lessons" he alludes to the story by mentioning a white man heard to have said that "Emmett Till had begged for it / With his damn wolf whistle" (MC 30). Growing up in Chicago, Emmett, a boy of fourteen

in 1955, was unfamiliar with the rules of segregation in the postwar South where—in the town of Money in the Mississippi Delta—he visited his uncle on vacation. One day he was hanging out with friends at a store. To the dismay of everyone, Black and white, the boy flirtatiously wolf-whistled at a white woman behind the cash register (Tyson 2). Two days later, the woman’s husband and his half-brother massacred the boy in a manner reminiscent of the scenes of animals’ slaughter by Komunyakaa: they cut off his tongue—as if to silence the whistle—and split his head with an ax as if to strip him of his human face (Tyson 71). The boy’s bound body was weighted down and thrown into the local Tallahatchie River.

Most relevantly, Emmett Till’s wolf whistle ran counter to all the accepted rules of noisemaking in the South. In the medieval chain of being, the voice could travel only in one direction, from top to bottom; angels announced God’s will with trumpets, and preachers regularly thundered at the faithful from the pulpit. Emmett’s boisterous whistle went in exactly the opposite direction.

But happiness needs more than freedom of expression in a secluded place. It is about setting the tone for the environment and being in a position to silence creatures beneath you. With Satchmo’s music in their minds, African Americans slaughter and silence a bleating goat after polishing a knife on its throat. Komunyakaa offers a comprehensive review of what has a voice in Bogalusa; through poetic means, he maps a territory similar to Gayatri Spivak’s in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

While Komunyakaa reveals the conventionality of the great chain of being, he shows that most attempts at transgression are ruthlessly punished. In the poem “The Steel Plate,” a WWII Black veteran, Mister Dan, goes outside on the street one night at a moment of excessive inebriation and joy to dance. There was also something inspired about him: he could often be heard singing, and that night he was “pulled like a moon / Pulls water.” That night, found disturbing the peace, he is cudged by the police to the ground: “His impression in the dirt / Heavier than any white line” (MC 22). Mister Dan’s aspiration, imagination, or simply his refusal to stay put was symbolized by a steel plate he had installed in his head. He had a bone defect in his skull, resulting from a wound sustained during the war. It was covered with a shiny plate that symbolically and transgressively reflected the sun and the blue of the sky—as if he had aimed higher than others, even over the heads of those above him. Finally, the police pounded him to the ground until his sphincter gave in. “The next morning / A rain of crushed blossoms / Just wasn’t enough to cover / The vaporous smell of human / Feces outside his gate” (MC 22). The stench of excrement must have finally seemed to the police to be a confirmation of Dan’s belonging to the horizontal lowest life. The funeral parlor staff made every effort to cover the shiny plaque with dark powder and hair, all of which—the speaker remembers—was nevertheless powerless to “to stop or hide / The sun’s gleamy, blue search” (MC 23).

The protagonist of “Fleshing-out the Season” may be an exception in that he both evades the ruling ideology and avoids violent death (MC 26): everyone knew he lived in

two houses—in one with his white wife, and, in another, with a Black one who previously had been his and his white wife’s maid. He was the son of a wealthy planter and politician from Jackson, Mississippi, so the Ku Klux Klan did not dare touch him even though his lifestyle was an outrage. If that were not enough, both women were good friends; they hugged each other heartily goodbye, and fully accepted the resulting triangle. The African American woman’s house was identical to his white wife’s, nothing short of being a “replica” of the other, albeit a “scaled-down” one. Most tellingly, like Mister Dan, they both allow their backyards and paths to be completely overgrown with azaleas, bougainvillea, and clover (MC 26). The man himself was deemed a freak: curiously, not only because he hung out with Blacks but also because he didn’t bother to suppress in himself childish whims. In the summer, people could often see him gorge on raspberry ice cream. On Mardi Gras Day, he would take both women to New Orleans, where he would dance with them “in a circle of flambeaus” (as in the poem “Temples of Smoke,” fire is a symbol of the impermanence of the human order, of which racial divisions are apart [MC 32]). He had two sons—a white boy and a Black one—one with each of the wives. In the evenings, he would read Blake’s poems to both of them. Presumably, among them was “Little Black Boy” from *Songs of Innocence*, which ended with a picture of two boys of different races sitting on the lap of God the Father (Blake 58). The British Romantic’s poem not only questions racial divisions as an illusion; it also suggests that time in the heavens also passes, and God is simply the sun that, even in the afterlife, gradually destroys and burns the dead.

After the man’s death, the women split his ashes. The funeral was an insult to all rules of conventional decency. The women refused to indulge in forms and rituals keeping up the pretense that death was not what it was. In southern Louisiana, floods often send coffins and lighter concrete mausoleums afloat (which was also the case in 2005 after the floods caused by Hurricane Katrina) (Koppel). The region is known for the so-called “Cities of the dead”: old, beautiful cemeteries, where rich, white people buried their loved ones in special concrete or stone mausoleums unnaturally high above the ground. Distinctions based on race, age and species are part and parcel of the desire to preserve the shreds of civility for the dead. But in “Fleshing-out the Season” neither the bigamist nor his wives succumbed to such delusions. As was his wish, one scattered the ashes in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, and the other dumped them on the flower beds, then used the flowers that grew on them to adorn her hair. Blatantly contradicting the great chain of being, the man united with the whole of creation.

5. Conclusions

Komunyakaa investigates the mechanisms of, and the occasional challenges to, the discourse that has scrupulously categorized all humans on a continuum “between angels and monsters,” as it is put in one of the poems’ titles. The great chain of being in the

American South is predicated on the most sterile vision of humanity, the denial of the body and emotions, and the epistemic silencing of pretty much everyone except white men. He unflinchingly describes the terrors and the devastation, both physical and psychological, caused by the ideology. He not only lays bare its ruinous workings, but from time to time counters it with instances of an alternative imagination—far more at ease with all beings, the unity of all nature, and a thoroughly secular worldview.

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