

Transgenerational Trauma and Fetishism in Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to analyze transgenerational trauma in the African American context and fetishistic attachments developed as a coping mechanism to control and overcome transgenerational traumas. It is a fact that the history of people of African origin in the United States is marked by a centuries-long suffering from slavery, violent oppression, discrimination, and racism, which meant that generations after generations were born into this inhumane system in which they have been heavily traumatized. The gravity and the longitude of the situation created a cycle of trauma where current generations, without having suffered from these conditions first-hand, show signs of a traumatic legacy that can be explained by the transmission of trauma within groups of people with the same identity markers. As a result of inherited traumas, a pattern of psychosocial and behavioral effects can be observed, such as a lack of self-esteem, racist socialization, or a pervasive feeling of anger among the individuals in the community. As with any trauma, transgenerational traumas call for coping mechanisms. In certain works of African American literature, a pattern of fetishistic attachments can be observed as an effect and a coping mechanism for inherited traumas. By developing fetishistic attachments to mostly arbitrary objects and using them as props, characters try to overcome the otherwise destructive outcomes of their traumatic legacies. Two very important works of African American literature where this transgenerational trauma and the resulting fetishism can be observed are Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The thesis presents a detailed research on transgenerational trauma and fetishism and examines how the characters in the two works display fetishistic attachments as a result of their inherited traumas within an African American context.

Keywords: Transgenerational Trauma; fetishism; African American studies

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that the history of African Americans in the United States is one that is marked by a centuries-long resistance to slavery, racism, and segregation. The transatlantic slave trade which was followed by more than 200 years of chattel slavery, and the subsequent decades of institutionalized segregation in all parts of life amount to almost four hundred years of systematic dehumanization of African Americans. Since the first twenty Africans brought to Virginia as slaves until the modern day, this discrimination is still far from being completely over. The long period of legitimized segregation has bred a cycle of race-based discrimination, which has been deeply seated in various aspects of social life. Although the African American experience in the United States is mostly described with the concepts of segregation, racism, and oppression, when examined closer, it does not do them justice to say that the extent of their tribulations was limited to these general terms. With the indelible mark of brutal slavery, forced heavy labor, sexual abuse, inhumane medical experiments performed on slaves deemed “unfit for duty” (DeGruy, 2005, p. 336), mass racial violence, lynchings, and legitimized segregation, the experience was grave enough to amount to “a crime against humanity” (United Nations, 2002, p. 6) at the very least.

This painful history of Black Americans in the United States was so long and so full of suffering that it inflicted incurably deep wounds. Historical accounts of slavery, Jim Crow laws, legitimized segregation, exclusionary acts in various parts of social life, violence from law enforcement and white nationalist organizations provoked traumas whose effects can still be seen today. According to scholars and researchers like Dr. Joy DeGruy and Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, not only does the psychological toll of such brutal, long-term massive group experiences traumatize the firsthand experiencers of these situations, but it also affects the future generations of victims who share the same identity markers with them such as ethnic, national, or ethno-religious group identities (Brave Heart, 2011; DeGruy, 2005). In such cases, the trauma adopts a transitive nature among the successive generations of a family, community, group, nation, or practitioners of the same religion, making it a transgenerational trauma. In different works in the literature, transgenerational trauma, which can be defined as the transmission of the effects of “deep and distressing experiences within and across generations” (Barlow, 2018, p. 903), is also referred to as intergenerational, multigenerational, cross-generational, or simply generational trauma, all

referring to the transference of the social and psychological effects of a trauma of a group of people to their future generations.

Starting with early research on the children of Holocaust survivors in the 1960's (Rakoff et al., 1966), transgenerational trauma research has covered many different groups such as Native Americans, Aboriginal people (DeAngelis, 2019), war survivors (Castro-Vale et al., 2019), and refugee families (Sangalang & Vang, 2017). One standout group that falls under the transgenerational trauma research is African Americans due to their complex traumatic past in the U.S. Although the effects of transgenerational trauma in the African American community may be "less directly studied" (DeAngelis, 2019) compared to other focus groups such as Holocaust survivors' offspring, there are seminal studies focusing on transgenerational trauma and its effects on the African American people as well. The most prominent of these studies is Dr. Joy DeGruy's monumental work, *Post traumatic slave syndrome: America's legacy of enduring injury and healing* (2005), which provides an important theoretical base for this thesis. In her work, DeGruy argues that centuries of slavery and the ensuing discrimination against Black people in the United States has caused transgenerational trauma, and the effects of it are visible today in the African American people. The psychological, social, and behavioral effects of this trauma that can be observed are vacant self-esteem, racist socialization, and a common feeling of anger among the African American population.

Transgenerational trauma theory and DeGruy's related study and observations on the African American community are instrumental in understanding the overrepresentation of African Americans in detention centers (Honoré-Collins, 2005), psychiatric inpatient care facilities (Snowden et al., 2009), child welfare programs (Horton & Watson, 2015) and among the lowest income and poverty groups (Economic Policy Institute, 2020). Not only a social and psychological theory, but also as an area of study in biology and epigenetics (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018), transgenerational trauma provides an important level of explanation for the disproportionate rate of African American people in these institutions. It is important in showing how long-term exposure to traumatic experiences like slavery, oppression and segregation in the past can keep adversely affecting generations after generations even though these subsequent generations did not necessarily experience such traumatic experiences firsthand.

Trauma, whether individual or transgenerational, creates a need for coping mechanisms (Goodman, 2013, p. 386). Coping and resilience strategies may take different forms and may be passed down from generation to generation just like the trauma itself, such as sustaining one's culture despite adversities and forming closed family systems (Goodman, 2013, p. 389). Yet, coping mechanisms can vary across communities, families, or individuals. One such coping mechanism that can be observed in a selection of African American literature works, as in the focus of this thesis, is fetishism.

Although the abstract nature of fetishism has made it suitable to be interpreted in various ways, the overarching meaning behind the concept relates to the meaning attached to arbitrary objects, "endowed with qualities pertaining to human relationships" (Iacono, 2016, p. 1). A deeper exploration of the fetishism literature brings out different aspects of fetishism that expose its potential exploitation as a coping mechanism. One such study on fetishism is Anne McClintock's *Imperial leather: Race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial contest* (1995) in which she takes a more overarching perspective on fetishism, taking race and class issues into consideration. She argues that fetish objects embody social contradictions that are also experienced at a personal level, and an attribution of power to the fetish object and its manipulation gives a person a sense of control over ambiguities (pp.184-185). In this respect, just like Freud's fetish (1927, pp. 152-153), a fetish object can act as a prop or a tool for coping with trauma and the complex emotions it brings. McClintock's (1995) interpretation of the fetish as standing "at the cross-roads of psychoanalysis and social history, inhabiting the threshold of both personal and historical memory" (p. 184), having a "repetitious, often ritualistic recurrence" and being "experienced at an intensely personal level" (p. 184) despite stemming from social contradictions is parallel to the nature of transgenerational trauma with its "timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics" (Balaev, 2008, p.152) and its spectral nature which make it bound to return and haunt the victim (Caruth, 1996; Wolfreys, 2015). The intended relationship between the transgenerational trauma and fetishism here is not that of a similarity, but of a cause and effect where transgenerational trauma calls for fetishistic attachments as a coping strategy.

RESULTS

From this vantage point, by examining Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" (1973) and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the thesis *Transgenerational trauma and fetishism in Alice*

Walker's "Everyday Use" and Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye seeks to examine transgenerational trauma in the African American community and fetishistic attachments as a coping mechanism against transgenerational trauma. Focusing on the lives of socially and financially disadvantaged African American families in the 1970s and 1940s respectively, both works present uncannily similar fetishistic attachments to the reader, with obvious signs of mostly inherited, but also acquired, traumas. The characters in focus present odd and seemingly groundless attachment to mostly arbitrary objects. The meaning and value they attribute to them is not representative of the innate meaning and value of those objects, making them fetish objects. A closer look at the relationship between these fetishes and the characters reveals a deep-seated, inherited trauma in their background that incites them to seek ways of overcoming them and leaving them behind.

DISCUSSION

In "Everyday Use", fetishism as a coping mechanism for inherited traumas is mostly observable in the character Dee. Her exaggerated excitement over the everyday objects in the house, like some benches her father made when they could not afford to buy chairs, a simple dasher or a churn top her mother still uses for its intended purpose makes the reader question the reasons why Dee attaches such an unnatural value attached to these objects. Her theatrical excitement and questionable attachment are most obvious in the case of her mother's old quilts. Although the reasons may not be obvious to the reader at first, a closer reading reveals that the value Dee attaches to these objects is related to their function in her unconscious efforts to overcome her inherited traumas related to being African American. By stripping the objects of their use value, or *everyday* values, and by giving them a new value as artifacts, Dee tries to dissociate from her past which she connects with these objects. Taking them out of their *everyday use* and giving them a new nature is Dee's way of overcoming the trauma she inherited from and associated with her past, and which is represented by these objects that remind her of her family's and her community's tribulations.

In *The Bluest Eye*, not only the central character Pecola, but also many other characters have an unusual relationship with the objects around them. Claudia's peculiar hatred for dolls while all the adults and all the other kids adore them, her mutilation of dolls as if they were white girls, her and Frieda's *magical* seeds and their ritualistic sacrifice of them for Pecola's unborn baby, African American people's overattachment to their houses and to the materials they own as described in the novel, Pauline's feelings of safety and peace among the objects in her employer's house,

Geraldine's excessively overdecorated house that she hides behind, Soaphead Church's weird collection of random objects that make him forget about his problems and finally, Pecola's destructively intense desire for blue eyes and the meaning she attaches to them are all examples of fetishistic attachments from the novel that function as coping mechanisms for the characters' inherited traumas that are at the same time consolidated with the racism and discrimination of the day related to being African American. The novel pictures the effects of transgenerational trauma as described by Joy DeGruy in her *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005), a different aspect in each character, in the 1940's African American population. The Black American characters from different backgrounds suffering from the same societal pressures show how the inheritance of race-based transgenerational trauma is inescapable and is irrespective of one's social status.

An important note to the reader is that by focusing on the African American population, the thesis *Transgenerational trauma and fetishism in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye* does not intend to make any reference to the African religious and anthropological origins of the fetish. Its sole purpose for examining African American literature in relation to transgenerational trauma and fetishism is to open this "less directly studied" (DeAngelis, 2019) area to discussion and, less directly, to show solidarity with the movement to understand and work on ways to overcome cycles of trauma and disadvantage that any oppressed minority group may suffer from. It should also be noted that despite focusing on the transgenerational nature of traumas, this thesis does not imply that, for African American people, trauma is something that only originated in the past, and that traumatic experiences do not exist anymore. In fact, the thesis acknowledges the grim reality of racism and discrimination today, and the traumatizing outcomes of these social illnesses.

CONCLUSION

The thesis *Transgenerational trauma and fetishism in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye* intends to contribute to the literary transgenerational trauma studies on minorities who have had a long-term traumatic experience as a community in the past and draws attention to the fact that such traumatizing experiences are very likely to keep on negatively affecting their future generations in various ways. A deeper and overarching analysis of transgenerational trauma in relation to fetishism can be made by focusing more on the psychological, psychiatric, and sociological aspects of transgenerational trauma and the underlying

reasons for seemingly arbitrary fetishistic attachments, combining these areas of study with African American literature. However, although psychology, sociology and even biology (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018) may provide a more evidence-centered base for the arguments related to transgenerational trauma and the resulting fetishism in African American society, literature arguably brings all the cultural, social, and historical realities together to reflect a *real* picture of this legacy of trauma and its inheritors' struggles to cope with it. After all, certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination (Morrison, 2019, p. 2).

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