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### Clarence Major: Performed Versus Preformed Ideas

After reading Clarence Major's *Reflex and Bone Structure*, one is reminded again of the postmodern penchant of discontinuity, deconstruction, and word play. However, in many ways, this work appears even more discontinuous than many other postmodern works. The novel establishes its narrative line with the declaration of being a detective novel, and the reader is presented with a detective narrator and a resolution explaining the crime and its motives. However, in Major's novel, the unifying theme of searching for Cora's murderer is disconnected from any sense of linear progression as Cora is killed five different times and in five different manners. Consequently, the reader is left struggling to reorder Major's text in a way that makes sense of the author's intentions through postmodern conventions. Major warns, "I simply refuse to go into details. Fragments can be all we have. To make the whole. An archaeologist might, of course, look for different clues" (Major *Reflex* 18-9). With only fragments in hand, the reader is drawn into participation in the search for clues.

In searching for these clues, one reads various critics of Major's novel such as Joe Weixlmann and Jerome Klinkowitz, who maintain that Major's work is a jazz riff that he performs for his own satisfaction, and that he ignores the strictures of prescribed or preformed ideas and conventions. Major emphasizes in an interview with Kutnik, "Why write out of some phoney sense of narrative stability if that doesn't reflect how I feel about myself?" Despite Major's statement of writing as a personal exploration and Weixlmann and Klinkowitz's stance

of Major's engaging in compositional abandonment, a question arises as to how free Major's text is from conventions whether Postmodern or Afrocentric. It, therefore, becomes necessary to explore his text as a self performance of ideas versus a reworking of established, preformed or prescribed ideas.

For the reader, it is necessary to order the text along cultural and social lines that are familiar; however, just as many readers are conditioned to a Eurocentric perspective, it is difficult to read Clarence Major's work, written from an Afrocentric perspective, as well as a postmodern one, without investigating different aspects of that culture. To be sure, just as jazz is informed by the oral tradition of the black culture, so, too, one finds elements of black culture threaded throughout Major's text. Similarly, Major's training as an artist and a poet also imbues his writing with strong visual images and lyrical constructions. Major's texts must be viewed as "abstract painting[s]." All of the elements that Major brings to his text should certainly qualify his text as an expansive written experience and a unique performance instead of a text that limits as it depicts something that already exists in the world.

Certainly, no one would question the African roots of Jazz. Its distinctive style includes "improvisation, syncopated rhythm, lyrics with such blues-influenced devices as call and response, repetition, and . . . the practice of signifying: [a] thoughtful revision and repetition of another's work" Major uses references to jazz as music and employs jazz's structural methods throughout *Reflex and Bone Structure*. Indeed, Major places music throughout the text, such as when he reveals that "Musicians are coming out of the woodwork. Clarinets piano vibes trumpets tenor sax trombone drums are speaking a language that rhymes" or as when Canada "sends for Red Garland to play piano. . . . Stan Getz follows Red. With a funky ballad. The tenor sax is an act of love" Recognizing the music motif, Klinkowitz asserts that Major

is “[l]ike a jazz musician piling chorus after chorus of improvisation upon a basic chord structure and melody, Major . . . pushe[s] the writing . . . as far as he can, with detail after . . . detail and each piece of action striving to outdo the last.” With Klinkowitz’s assertion, one can understand why Major kills Cora in five different ways and in five different manners. Major explores the variations of Cora’s death just as a musician improvises along a musical theme. Coming back time and again with a different variation to the same musical theme, the narrator reveals, “I begin to play with a notion” and “[f]or the first time since the first time, the idea was appealing. What idea. With care it becomes clear. Sometimes it takes a while. But it forms. It builds. It spreads. It becomes useful” (28). It is through the repetition of the idea along with its variants that an idea gives itself form just as if one were to hold an object and explore its surface by viewing it at different angles and in different lights even if at first view it was too dark to discern its true shape. Major also utilizes the different viewpoints in his expression of the painterly qualities of his text.

Major had a fellowship at the Chicago Art Institute after high school and his paintings are an integral part of his repertoire along with his novels and poetry. Throughout *Reflex and Bone Structure*, one sees evidence of his painterly eye, notably, when the narrator describes Cora where “[o]ne side of her face soon became blue shade.” (60). And after changing his position, the narrator illustrates: “From this angle I see Cora standing in the doorway. The other side of her face. The light shines on this side. . . . I walk to the other side of the porch to see her from still another angle. The curve of her full mouth. . . . Her face is in shadows on this side” (61). Hence, the reader is taken on a visual exploration of Cora in a set location. Additionally, in another part of the story, the narrator exposes his view of Cora as his “eyes take a dolly shot of her rushing from the room. The hallway door banging behind her” (47). Although Cora is the

primary focus of most pictorial frames within the book, the narrator does apply it to other characters such as when he looks at “Canada [who] is a mystery behind his dark glasses. Clad in yellow ochre shirt and ivory slacks. Standing beside the bed. As I move in a circle around the bed” (12). Thus, exploring a character in a cinematic vision, framed as for a still photo, the narrator reveals Major’s painterly eye. In the same way, Major uses the television media as a means of transformation.

Throughout *Reflex and Bone Structure* as a character becomes involved in watching television or when television characters appear, it acts as a transitional device. Just as when Canada watched so many movies with Edward G. Robinson in them that “Canada . . . turned into Edward G. Robinson. He’s smoking a cigar and wearing a three-piece dark gray suit” By using that particular transition, Major then sets up Canada as a “drama critic” managing Cora’s stage career. In this way, Major can allude to the music of *Porgy and Bess* to establish the emotional context between the narrator, Canada, Dale, and Cora. Thus, in using the television, Major is able to give more information about what is occurring within the novel.

Television is taken for granted as a pop culture barometer of how society views itself. It often is used as the modern “novel of manners” that show how societies’ members should behave within society’s conventions. That being the case, it also emphasizes the impact that particular visual material has on society. As Major points out in an interview,

Television is a very ‘real’ part of life for a lot of people. It’s an extension of what their daily lives are all about, not something removed from them. . . . They become personally or even metaphysically wrapped up in the world of television so that its boundaries literally become the boundaries of their world. (Kutnik)

The boundaries imposed by this medium of expression can also distort an understanding of an

African-American's role in society. Specifically, Herman Gray stresses that

[b]ecause television is very much a social and cultural institution, it necessarily shapes and is in turn shaped by the historical, political, and cultural forces that organize the social world. . . . Television is very much involved in the process of shaping, forming, and organizing the ways in which the significant issues and events of our time are expressed. (713)

Gray goes on to say, in 1972, when television programs strove “for ‘authentic’ representations of black life within poor urban communities,” the programmers were only successful in producing “television programs involving blacks in the 1970s” that “were largely representations of what white liberal middle-class television program makers assumed (or projected) were ‘authentic’ accounts of poor black urban ghetto experiences” (Gray 715). Consequently, when Major places well known television characters throughout his novel, it is important to note that they are predominately white and serve as a prescribed representation of stereotyped behavior for African-Americans that Major and other African-American writers have to overcome.

In a 1994 interview with Jerzy Kutnik and Larry McCaffery, Clarence Major emphasizes that “black writers [are] . . . working against a single dominant impulse in American culture: the use to which white America put blackness.” Therefore, it is the whites using their own stereotypical definition of blacks against which to define their own sense of whiteness that necessitates many black writers to overcome that definition and to “humanize black people and to overthrow the burden of this symbolism.” The white definition of blackness, however, is not the only prescription that Major is writing to overcome. Additionally, Major finds himself working against the Black aesthetic movement of black literature. Major, admits that his

difficulty with this movement was the “attempt to replace the Eurocentric with something that closed down the view of the writer and restricted it to the service of certain political ideologies that were as stifling as the ones they hoped to replace.” It can be asserted that it is in this twinned struggle against defining himself as a black writer and against defining himself as a creative individual that Major’s work receives its energy as well as its fragmentation.

The importance of this struggle against conventions is one that every creative artist has to contend within his or her attempts to establish a unique identity and to reach a readership. However personal the struggle may seem to the individual writer, it is important to recognize that the writer is part of a larger cultural context, and despite movements to suppress a racial context to flatten the playing field for a writer, a writer cannot separate himself or herself from race. As Phillip Weinstein argues in his book, *What Else But Love?: The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison*:

Race as unreal, race as primary reality: this makes sense not as biology but as culture. Identity formation is inseparable from the absorption, refusal, and reaccenting of the subject roles that make up our culture’s repertory for ways of being. We are engaged in drawing from this repertory and in treating such roles as mirrors in which to recognize ourselves, as we go about the never innocent business of negotiating identity, becoming white and black, men and women . . . . *The ways in which we take on race and gender identity are radically unforeclosed.* We express these socially proposed components of ourselves with such individual accenting that no prejudging — no prejudice — can account for us on these bases.

Hence, the importance of a writer’s racial culture and how it contributes to a racial but universal

dialectic cannot be overlooked. And, to be sure, Weinstein argues that no matter what racial or cultural dynamic one is immersed in, the individual is capable of a unique creation despite the hindrances of cultural prescriptions.

Major's objections to categorization are found throughout *Reflex and Bone Structure*. His sentiments are apparent in the narrator's statement that

I want this book to be anything it wants to be. A penal camp. A bad check. A criminal organization. A swindle. A prison. Devil's Island. I want the mystery of this book to be an absolute mystery. Let it forge its own way into the art of deep-sea diving. Let it walk. I want it to run and dance. And be sad. And score in the major-league all-time records. I want it to smoke and drink and do other things bad for its health. This book can be anything it has a mind to be. (59)

Perhaps, the imprisoning images in this passage can be attributed to Major's own feelings of confinement and a desire to rebel against established constraints. His declaration of independence is voiced by the narrator declaring, "I'll do anything I like. I'm extending reality, not retelling it" (49). An additional illustration of Major's moving outside of constraints occurs when leaving the theater; the narrator observes that the movie screen moves ahead of Cora and him "still showing the same movie" (52). Movement of the fictive device of a theatre screen outside of its normal fixed embedment serves to emphasize Major's attempts to move beyond confining conventions by invention. As he advises in his book, *The Dark And Feeling*,

Writing poems and novels is also a way of inventing answers. If you are black and born in the United States and happen to feel the compulsive urge to write, and if you are to have the slightest chance at real success, the style of your inventions, must from concept to finish be dominated by and operate in and through the

premise of your racial identity. (23)

Major's inventions, of necessity, are words and how they are creatively constructed and organized.

Reading *Reflex and Bone Structure*, one becomes aware that words are used for creation of the novel and for creation of things inside the novel. This metafictional device becomes apparent as Major plays with words as signifiers and with their ability to create themselves within a postmodern convention. Such an example occurs when “Cora is in the bathroom inspecting the word mouth. She looks into her mouth in the mirror. The word mirror provides her with this opportunity” (Major *Reflex* 70). Another passage is: “Body is a word nobody notices. The word naked is naked. I cover it with the word cover.” (66). It is in passages like these that Major manipulates the reader's imagination to actualize an object by taking it out of the novel's world and forcing the reader to handle it as an unfamiliar object.

Interestingly, the naming or use of a word as a signifier is not only a postmodern convention but also an Afrocentric convention. Just as Canada believes that “when he read the words, speaking them to himself, they came closer to being the items themselves than the scribble—since the scribble itself had already achieved an entity, a concreteness, an independence” or the narrator considers “Tags signs symbols magic words” (Major *Reflex* 42, 114). Within African-American culture, “because names and naming practices represent cultural ideas and values, personal experiences, and attitudes toward life, they symbolize, in their many variations, a striving toward personal identity and self-respect.” Naming is more powerful in the African-American culture as a result of slave practices where individual names were stripped away along with a sense of community as slaves were deliberately placed into mixed tribal communities to discourage communication. Therefore, “name changes and self-naming are



revelatory. One's name is an assertion of identity—and in identity is freedom.” Additionally, one finds that “the transformative power of words combined with symbolic acts is at the heart of the ‘magic’ of conjuring. The notion that words can heal, maim, or kill is an ancient one and indeed appealing to the literary imagination.” Major uses words to affect his characters in a variety of ways.

Dale is a character that the narrator does not like. As a result of that dislike, the narrator feels no remorse as he allows Dale to be “caught in a duststorm” by “a hoodoo” or by “eras[ing] him.” A process of conjuring takes place as Major shows how words, in the reader's imagination, become actualized as manipulated objects:

Cora inspects the word of her mouth. She touches the paper on which her name appears. The word Cora, she thinks, is the extent of her presence. This is a word. . . . Cora writes her name on the paper. She erases it. It goes away but it is still there. Cora is trapped in herself. Trapped in her own imagination. When she sleeps the word sleep sleeps with her. When she dances she dances through the loops of the word dance. She draws a stick figure dancing. Canada enters the room. Dale enters the room. I enter. The three of us look at the sheet on the table. It's blank. Cora is not here. (70)

Accordingly, one finds that words in Major's novel serve not only postmodern conventions but also Afrocentric conventions.

After the publishing of *Reflex and Bone Structure*, Major is viewed as a successful postmodern writer; his works are accepted as falling within postmodern conventions. As Lisa Roney observes,

*All-Night Visitors* (1969), *NO* (1973), and *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1975) . . . .

[had] more in common with Euro-American and European post-modern concerns than the works of most other African-American writers, [therefore,] had little appeal to most African-American readers. By the mid-seventies, Major had joined the mostly white Fiction Collective, which would publish his next three novels.

(Roney)

Major is still unhappy with his classification as a postmodern writer. He contends “[w]hether or not you judge a novel by a black writer according to European-American standards or a private Black Aesthetic is a moot point. . . . In any frame of reference they *should* remain good.” Therefore, one sees that Major resists association with conventions but cannot escape them.

While readily admitting the influence of his African-American heritage on his writing, Major is quick to point out that such influence does not limit the scope of his writing:

. . . in taking a look at black novels and their authors separately from American fiction, in considering their moods and interests, it is clear that black novelists form a distinct group with very clear-cut cultural characteristics peculiar to no other group But you can’t get around the fact: among the black novelists themselves there is so much diversity that *no single* Black Aesthetic or formula or fixed method for looking at their work can be employed. You might do well to employ instead a fresh open mind. (Major, *Dark* 23).

Admittedly, writing this essay is as much as a process of exploration and experimentation. It is a process of discovering where the hidden lines are within academic criticism and cultural divides. While trying to employ an open mind, it is amazing to discover how conditioned one can be to the Eurocentric view. Such a discovery occurred when looking at the basis for the overt sexual content of Major’s novel and understanding that one has to apply an Afrocentric perspective to

the material.

It is easy to judge explicit sexual content within a novel in terms of the Judeo-Christian ethic; however, that ethic cannot be applied indiscriminately to all cultures. Many automatically assume that because many African-American cultures center on the Christian Church that that ethic would naturally form the basis for that culture. On the other hand, it must be remembered that Christianity is not the originating cultural base for African-Americans but rather it is a hybrid that came into being when slaves were forced to deny their African based religions. Trying to follow the Judeo-Christian ethic has been a problem for many black writers. As Major reveals,

This problematic aspect of black fiction has to do with the puritanical hang-ups of many black writers. Too many tend to be as antisexual as their white counterparts. So anxious are they to prove that they are not the sex fiends or savages white people say they are, that they go overboard to leave the natural activity of sex out of their work. Freedom to write what one wishes to write has never been a fully realized concept, particularly for black authors. . . . Novels that deal openly with sex as a part of the natural sequence of human experience are clearly free from the bad influences of modern Christianity. Not many American writers, black or white, can claim such freedom. (*Dark* 27)

In contrast, explicit sexual material is frequently used by postmodern conventions precisely because it is addressing sexual inhibitions.

Perhaps, his process of writing should be looked at with this codicil: “Words. The raw material of my trade and the medium that either bridges or stands between peoples everywhere” (Major, *Dark* 12).

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