FIRE IN THE LIFE OF THE NEGRO IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: FROM SLAVERY TO TODAY

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Résumé:

Cet article démontre que le feu a de tout temps été le douloureux compagnon des populations Nègres depuis leur transport forcé dans le Nouveau Monde à leur vie de tous les jours aujourd'hui aux Etats-Unis d'Amérique. Il s'article donc principalement autour du traumatisme que cet élément a pendant longtemps représenté pour les membres de cette minorité raciale. Cette étude démontre en outre que la fracture raciale qui existe entre les noirs et les blancs devient de plus en plus grande et qu'elle est entrain de ramener le pays à certaines des années les plus sombres et les plus sanglantes de son histoire tout en donnant naissance à une nouvelle race de noirs prêts à chercher vengeance toutes les fois qu'un membre de leur communauté est injustement assassiné par un blanc.

Mots clés:

Feu, meurtre, haine, nègre, Etats-Unis d'Amérique.

Abstract:

This contribution demonstrates that fire has always been the painful companion of Negro populations from the very days they were forcibly brought to the New World to their everyday life today. It therefore underscores the trauma that this element has long represented for the members of this racial minority in the United States of America. This study also shows that the racial divide between blacks and whites is deepening and bringing the country back to some of the darkest and bloodiest years of its history while giving birth to a new breed of blacks ready to seek vengeance whenever a member of their community is unjustly assassinated by a white person.

Keywords:

Fire, murder, hate, Negro, United States of America

Introduction

Sharmeka Moffitt's name would be unfamiliar to most Americans and the rest of the world if a Facebook page entitled "Prayers for Sharmeka Moffitt" had not been created after she faced death in a peaceful community park in Winnsboro, Louisiana. And yet, this African American woman lived on that quiet Sunday night of October 21, 2012 a traumatic experience that most Negroes dread in the United States: being the victim of a brutal hate crime only motivated by the color of their skin. On the crime scene, indeed, the police found evidence that could support Sharmeka's allegations for having been assaulted because she was black. The three letters KKK and the racial slur "nigger" that were written on her car tended to confirm what she told the 911 operator she called for help and to whom she indicated that she had just been set on fire by three males dressed up in white hoodies. The attack left this 20-year-old African American woman with burns over 60 % of her body and in critical condition. Investigations, however, did not fully confirm her allegations and the police became dubious about the case. After they found Sharmeka's fingerprints on the cigarette lighter and other objects left on the scene, they started believing that she had staged her own immolation. But, no matter what the motives of this staged immolation could have been, if ever Sharmeka is found guilty, it poses two important questions. Why would an African American woman immolate herself and accuse the members of the dominant race for it? And more importantly, why has she chosen "fire" as a mode of expression? Conversely, what kind of message does the attack she underwent send to the black community, in case she was really the victim of skilled white supremacists who orchestrated and made their murder look like a suicide? These are some questions that the present article is going to address.

Built around the plight of the Negro, a term that does not intend to devalue let alone disrespect the black population in the United States but that is used here as a unifier of all the black people who ever set foot on the American soil, this study intends to present some of the representations of fire in the life of this racial minority. To do so, arguments will be drawn from a diversity of sources that include the media, personal accounts, literary and historical documents, as supported by social theories that have made race relations one of their key subjects of study. Methodologically speaking, arguments will be presented following Derrida's dichotomous "system of binary oppositions: presence/absence; essence/appearance; true/false; good/evil; inside/outside" (P. Goulimari 2015: 18), whiteness/ blackness, action/reaction, life/death and will

be articulated around three main parts. The first will present some of the representations of fire in history while the second will specifically discuss the mental representations Negro populations in the United States have of fire. The third and last part will show how the racially-oriented killings and destructions are giving rise to a new breed of Negroes whose vindictive actions are in turn drawing the United States of America into a quasi state of civil war.

I. Fire in history

Fire in mankind history has been used for many different purposes and has prompted different kinds of representations and beliefs ever since it was discovered and domesticated by our pre-historic ancestors. After its appearance on our planet that geologists and archeologists date back millions of years ago, it has indeed gradually shifted from its primary usage that consisted in cooking food, protecting tribes from wild animals, providing heat during cold times and light at night to much more sophisticated employments over the time. Quoting the British archeologist J.A.J Gowlett in the article "How Fire Made Us Modern" available on the website of the National Geographic, Patrick J. Kiger wrote that "fire has underpinned the development of all modern technologies –from ceramics, to metal working, to the nuclear industry." Undoubtedly, fire has prompted humanity to become more adventurous and to undertake some of the most daring and extraordinary voyages way beyond the limits of our terrestrial dwelling.

In fact, life on the planet would not exist had it not been for fire. The sun, the ultimate fire in our solar system, for example, keeps us at the ideal gravitational distance that permits the development and all living beings. It also plays an important role in the photosynthesis of plants that in turn produce oxygen for our lungs. Another benefit of the sun is the production of vitamin D that makes our bones strong while boosting our defenses against diseases. But alongside these beneficial attributes, the sun sometimes leads to destruction and death. Bushfires are now and then generated by the extreme heat it produces occasionally and cyclically. Sometimes, the flares on its surface disrupt satellite communications and even affect the smooth operation of some power grids in the world as it did in Quebec on March 13, 1989. Excess exposure to its rays can be fatal as it can lead to skin cancer and other diseases. The high temperatures it sometimes generates claim thousands of lives every year in many countries around the world.

Still, the sun, and fire in general, are revered and often considered as gods in many cultures around the world where they symbolize a wide range of powers and ideas. Agni, for example, is a Hindu and Vedic god who embodies the sun, fire and lightning and incarnates a

messenger between humans and the gods, between the earth and heaven. For its followers, Agni represents the "*illumination of intelligence*"[8] (L. Benoist 2012:58). But, he also stands as a purifying and destructive warrior. Scores of other functions or representations are given to fire on all the continents of the world. Athenians believed that the power of the gods resides in fire and used it as a result to practice the art of divination. The Fulani, in present-day Africa, see in the upward movement of fire an elevation towards heaven and venerate it. Ancient Greeks also believed in the deity of fire, that they identified as one of the four foundational elements alongside the earth, the air and water. This belief translates in the myth of Prometheus stealing fire from Zeus, the father of gods, in order to help humans survive. Interestingly, Greeks use of fire for cremation in ancient times was believed to be a purifying rite of passage to immortality.

Fire is also central to the three major monotheistic religions where its purifying, redemptive, but also destructive power is omnipresent. God himself is often portrayed as a consuming fire in the Bible, for example. To send Moses on his mission to free the Hebrews from servitude in Egypt, as it can be read in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, he chose no other form but a burning bush to interact with him. The New Testament, and particularly the book of Revelation, is fraught with the presence of fire as a sign of God's divine power and wrath. In the Qur'an, the word fire, *Al-nar*, is typically associated with Hell and is declined in some specific representations such as *Al-Jaheem*, the blazing flame and *Jahannam*, the hellfire, to name a few, while for Judaism, the *esh tamid*, the continuous fire, maintains a permanent connection to God.

But beyond its domestic, mythological and religious representations, fire has physically permitted the birth of great civilizations while putting an end to some of the most prominent ones. Such past empires as Rome and Greece and many others in the course of history thrived and prospered because they had harnessed fire and derived a lot of benefits from its usage. Also, their expansion from small tribes or nations into bigger entities did not go without massive destructions and killings that only fire could make possible. In fact, humans have often used the tremendous power of fire in acts of belligerence towards other humans. Camps, villages and even whole towns have regularly been burnt in open warfare situations or in retaliation for causes known to the perpetrators. Recent excavations in Peru for instance have evidenced the fact that some nations expanded after having burnt down others. This was the case of the state of Taraco

[8] This is my translation of Luc Benoist's "illumination de l'intelligence."

that the inhabitants of Pukara had finally set on fire after having massively killed its population. As a consequence, "Pukara rose to become the dominant force in the region" (C. Q. Choi 2011).

Others however have voluntarily set their own camps or towns on fire as a military strategy to prevent the enemy from taking over their lands or taking advantage of the resources and facilities they have been forced to leave behind in their retreat. Known as "scorched earth," this strategy has regularly been used by armies all around the world. Napoleon faced it when he tried to conquer Russia and so did the German armies when they tried to invade the Soviet Union during World War II. Japanese scorched earth tactic devastated long stretches of the Chinese territory during the Second war that erupted between the two countries. Entire villages were totally destroyed as a result and a town like Chongqing was almost utterly left in ruin. The Chinese themselves implemented it in some parts of their country in an attempt to slow down the progress of the Japanese troops during the same armed conflict.

In the specific case of the United States of America, all these attributes of fire along with its positive and negative impacts have also been felt long before Christopher Columbus's voyages to the coasts of the New Land, for example. American Indians for whom fire bears a sacred meaning just like all the different elements found in nature were taking advantage of its regenerative power once they had understood it. Having noticed that plants grew better when the land had been burnt, they harnessed this blazing element to create great pasturelands. But fire did not only bring innovation and prosperity to the original populations of the American continent. It also meant death and sorrows to scores of them during and after the colonial period. In 1585, for example, the American Indians who had manifested their hospitality by welcoming and helping Richard Greenville and his followers had seen their village utterly destroyed and burnt down by Greenville and his army just because a silver cup was reported stolen by one of them (H. Zinn 2010:12). Rosewood, a town that was primarily inhabited by African Americans in Levy County, Florida, experienced the same destruction and killings after white mobs flocked there and burnt it down in January 1923 (T. Dye 1997).

In modern times, fire has been abundantly used in warfare by most of the modern armies since World War I. On each continent, developed countries have built sophisticated weaponry that permits the delivery of incendiary rockets and bullets to maximize casualties and break some of the defense barriers of their enemies. The American troops that already had flame-throwers in their arsenal, for instance, developed during the Second World War a highly flammable liquid

named “napalm” that would be extensively used by its armed forces in all the wars it fought until the 1980 United Nation’s ban. Known for its devastating effects on both infrastructure and people, this weapon has left indelible scenes of horror in the memory of the populations who managed to flee the areas that were targeted.

II. Fire in the psyche of the Negro in the United States of America

Just like napalm etched its terrifying psychological effects in the memory of the enemy troops and populations, so has fire for all the Negroes in the United States who have, whether directly or indirectly, experienced at least one of the following: branding, the burning of the cross by the Ku Klux Klan or the swastika by other hate groups, the lynching and burning of a Negro or the burning of a black church by a white racist. All these actions, added to other brutal or more subtle manifestations of racism and discrimination are taking their toll on the whole Negro populations living in the country. They are creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity that is even affecting the health of this racial minority. “Studies have [indeed] found that internalized racism is positively related to psychological distress, depressive symptoms, substance use, and chronic physical health problems” (D. R. Williams 1999:185)

A whole range of events lived individually sometimes take blacks to revisit their history and discover how fire, under the form of branding, has been introduced in the lives of their ancestors. But the Black History Month also known as the National African American History Month held every February since 1976 plays a pivotal pedagogical role for keeping the memory of the African American heritage alive. Indeed, this month never overlooks slavery and the sufferings that the African slaves endured. In doing so, it teaches audiences on the cruelty of such a practice that was carried out for two main reasons. The first was that the African slaves were often branded like simple commodities before embarking on the ships that took them in Europe and on the American continent. This marking done on the body of the slave with a hot iron etching a specific sign or initials was meant to identify the slave as being the property of his or her master. And this was a common practice all through the eighteenth century. But, in the nineteenth century, branding became primarily a punishment used to mutilate the slave in whom any form of criminality or rebellion had been spotted.

The cruelty of the systematic branding of recalcitrant Negroes that some reported to have continued up to the beginning of the twentieth century was no match to the complete burning that some members of this racial minority have suffered from slavery times to a very recent past.

Countless of slaves who were found guilty of murder or important acts of defiance towards the established order were indeed burnt at the stake. Still, these executions that were used to shock and deter the slaves from undertaking any rebellious action never stopped them from either murdering their masters or trying to seek freedom. In fact they hardened some slaves who believed they had nothing to lose and were therefore ready to take all the risks to bring about change. Nat Turner who led one of the most organized and bloodiest rebellions in the history of American slavery was one of them. In just one night, his insurrection claimed more than fifty white people's lives, injured scores of them, and "threw the slaveholding South into a panic" (H. Zinn 2010: 174).

These brutal treatments regularly exposed in books, documentaries and movies, can be seen as far-off events, even though they remain poignant testimonies of the past of the Negro in America. Also, because history is often related with a certain level of bias as the historian interprets the data that he or she has gathered, some of its reconstructions could easily be subject to interpretations and even rejection. Pictures of live events, however, like the beating of Rodney King captured on tape in 1992 or the lynching and burning of Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, on May 15, 1916 leave no room for interpretations. And even though the reasons offered to explain such inhumane acts can be debated, their outcome, that is, the sight of two black men being tortured at the hand of whites, remains troubling to most Negroes who see them. It is even more troubling when Rasul Mowatt, in his article "The King of the Damned: Reading Lynching as Leisure" that revisits this tragic event, reports the delectation of the massive white crowd that "celebrated and rejoiced," (2009, p. 186) and even shoved to get the best view of the burning body of Washington.

Today, these massive lynchings and burnings at the stake are no more. Still, Negroes are regularly reminded of the hatred some white population feel towards them through the burning of the cross in their yards, neighborhoods or communities by members of the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group that former Confederate officers created right after the Civil War. Even after more than 150 years of existence, the Klan's purpose of terrorizing Negroes and keeping them out of the political arena endures. The recent rise of the Klan's memberships during the Obama's years in office, and other hate groups for that matter, evidences this rejection. The will of these hate groups to see Negroes clearly separated from whites so as to keep their race pure is also regularly advertised through leaflets and on social media and overtly proclaimed in rallies that are

episodically organized all across the country. And the messages they send to the black community are clearly heard and learnt.

Learning also takes place when black churches are burnt. Predominantly perpetrated in the southern part of the country during the 50s and 60s, a period that coincides with the civil rights movement, the burning of black churches gained momentum in the 90s with 1995 and 1996 being the peaks of these racially-motivated destructions. Recently, "in November 2008, three white men set the Macedonia Church of God in Christ in Springfield, Massachusetts, ablaze hours after Barack Obama was elected the nation's first black president" (2016: 240), Michael Eric Dyson reports. As it can be seen, this attack came as a gesture of defiance against the symbol president Obama incarnated as the first black president of the country. But there is more to it. In fact, white supremacist groups and lone racists know that by attacking a black church, they are trampling one of the major symbols in the African-American community. Since slavery, indeed, the church has always represented a refuge for this minority and a place where they can not only express their frustrations, pains, angers but also find comfort and develop hope in a better future. The black church has also traditionally played a political role in the country to the point that some of its leaders, among whom are Martin Luther King, Jr., Jessie Jackson, and Al Sharpton, Jr, to name a few, have had a tremendous impact on the struggle for equality. Also, by denying Negroes the only refuge they really have, white supremacists are denying them their very presence in a country that they helped built. And this was one of the motives of Dylann Roof, the young white supremacist who translated his white superiority ideology into a bloody rampage when he "unload[ed] his .45 pistol on June 17, 2015, on nine black souls in Charleston at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, seeking, he confessed, to provoke a race war" (M. E. Dyson 2016: 239).

III. A country on the brink of a race war

This race war that Dylann Roof has wished to ignite is probably underway right now with regard to the acceleration of the number of killings on both ends of the racial spectrum. Indeed, in response to all the assassinations that whites have committed on Negroes lately, desperate but fierce and determined retaliatory actions have been carried out by some individuals in the black community. Certainly, no town in America is burning today on the scale of what happened in Tulsa in 1921 or in all the United States following the Rodney King case in 1992 as a result of

those killings, but there are signs that tension is building between the black community and its white counterpart.

One of these signs is to be found in the vindictive actions that Lakeem Keon Scott and Micah Xavier Johnson embarked on in June 2016 to express their exasperation at the numerous and repetitive killings of black men by white police officers. The first gave full vent to his anger in Tennessee by opening fire on any white person he met, regardless of their gender or status. As a result, he killed a woman and injured three other people. The second, an army reservist, shot down five officers and wounded seven others in Dallas. All his victims were also white. These events that received important media coverage in the country increased a little more the racial gap between the two communities. So did all the other incidents of the same nature that were reported all across the country during the same period.

In addition to these actions that some in the black community see as cathartic, Sharmeka Moffitt's case, if she is proven to have set herself alight, opens a new chapter in the reactions to racism in the United States. This would indeed mark a turning point in the struggle of the blacks for justice and equality as no such case has ever been reported in the recent history of the United States. Also, it would somehow match Dylann's desire to start a race war in the country as this kind of sacrifice typically triggers violent reactions from the members of the community who identify with the cause the sacrificial victim has given his or her life for. Evidence for this affirmation can be seen in the events that led to the Arab Spring and the changes they brought about in countries like Tunisia, Libya and Syria, for example.

More than ever, Negroes in the United States are displaying attitudes that are far from the one of the docile Sambo in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Today, the burnings and killings perpetrated by the whites are being responded to with equal hatred and killings that in turn beget even more fear and suspicion in both communities. Ultimately, these overt vindictive acts are representing one of the most important menaces to the national cohesion and tend to confirm what Samuel P. Huntington's words when he declares that "all societies face recurring threats to their existence, to which they eventually succumb" (2004: xvii). In the case of the United States of America, this threat is unavoidably epitomized by racism.

This point of no return was announced a few decades ago by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*'s last lines that foreshadowed a gloomy future for the United States if the issue of race was not properly addressed. Others like Alexis De Tocqueville before him had also announced

the total destruction of the country if Americans are not courageous enough to tackle this racial problem by either mingling or separating altogether. Scores of intellectuals, politicians and ordinary people too regularly sound the alarm so as to avoid a racial apocalypse to the country. But, they do not seem to be heard as more unjustified killings of Negroes, church burnings, cross and swastika burnings, though carried out by a number of Americans that some say to be marginal, unfold day after day in the country. "Black Lives Matter," some shout, but slogans have not put an end to the unfair treatment most Negroes suffer at the hands of a police and judicial system.

The blind killings and burnings that are now becoming commonplace in the country demonstrate all too well that the two races have co-habited for centuries without really accepting each other. And even when they happen to meet, these rare encounters typically end up in frustration for the Negro or in false accusations that sometimes climax in his or her death. In actual fact, too many murders of unarmed Negroes in the country are being committed out of the so-called fear that whiteness has developed towards blackness. Founded on the stereotypical belief that all blacks belong to a violent- prone race, fear is now becoming one of the most used excuses to explain the killing of defenseless and inoffensive blacks.

Today, there is no sign that the trend of these unjust killings will be reversed. And the election of President Trump is making matters worse with regard to the growing number of provocations and killings that blacks face on daily basis but also the intensification of the activities of hate groups and lone racists in the country. As Michael Eric Dyson puts it, "Donald Trump harms our nation's positive racial future [because he is] the epitome, not only of white innocence and white privilege, but of white power, white rage, and yes, even of white supremacy" (2017: 222). But the rage is no longer unidirectional. Neither is the fire. Today, more than ever, it is burning in both black and white communities.

Conclusion

Fire, in the history of mankind appears as a life changer; for the better or for the worse. In the life of the Negro in America, it represents more the worse than the better. It epitomizes a long past of humiliation, fear, suffering, and killing that none of the successive generations of blacks in the United States has ever been exempted from ever since their ancestors were brutally snatched or cunningly bought and shipped to the New World from the coasts of Africa. Indeed, in addition to the racial slurs and flogging they were subjected to all through their long presence in

America, Negroes have either felt the burn of the hot metal on their bare bodies, the smell of a cross or that of their church set on fire, or the scorching flames that put an end to their life. In the face of such dehumanizing and humiliating situations, they have sometimes retaliated by setting some facilities in fire during gigantic riots or isolated actions.

But history is not fully repeating itself. Today, like never before, some blacks are taking the law into their own hands through vindictive actions. White violence is now met with black violence and white fire is being responded to with black fire. As a result, fear is now being shared by all and tension is escalating in the whole country.

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