

A Re-Membering of Things Past?

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Essentialism/Accidentalism

The perennial problem of identity is one that appears not only in philosophical texts, but also in novels and memoirs. Counterintuitively, despite the wide range of literatures that address the problem of identity there nevertheless is something of an implicit agreement with respect to which questions comprising this vast field of study are of more pressing importance. Generally, the questions attempt to address the following binaries: (i.)*determinism/indeterminism*, (ii.)*nature/culture*, (iii.)*male/female*, (iv.)*past/present*. More succinctly, these binaries reduce to a more embracive binary, *viz.* Essentialism/Accidentalism.¹

Sherman Alexie's novel *Flight* and Linda Hogan's memoir *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* are two non-philosophical texts that wrestle with the problem of identity. Laying emphasis upon the individual's relationship to the socius, as well as his relationship to his forebears and successors, these works seem to narratively articulate a form of accidentalism. The identities of each narrator seem to be constructed via interaction with their own past experiences, as well as the past experiences of others. When this assessment of the texts in question is pressed, however, the reader is left with the impression that these texts only present a superficial form of accidentalism. Alexie's protagonist stands in a privileged position, morally speaking, which allows him to judge the past actions of his forebears and their enemy as good or bad. Zits is essentially a *moral agent*. Although "race" is important to him, it is accidental to his identity as a moral agent. Contrariwise, Hogan essentially *is* her genetic and sociological inheritance. This being the case, the reader is faced with the task of evaluating the relative merits of either form of essentialism.

¹ Accidentalism is anti-essentialism.

This paper will describe the two forms of essentialism as they appear in *Flight* and *The Woman Who Watches Over The World*, critically evaluate the relative merits of each, and offer concluding remarks regarding the plausibility of a synthesis between each.

Ishmael's Pistol vs. Justice's Pistol

Flight begins with an allusion to the opening lines of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: "Call me Zits."² Both characters are disenfranchised sojourners; however, whereas Ishmael's journeys on the open seas are a "substitute for pistol and ball"³ (i.e suicide), Zits' journeys from one foster home to another are detrimental to his psychological well-being, eventually placing a "thirty-eight special" in his hands.⁴ Moreover, whereas Ishmael's journeys are freely chosen, Zits' journeys are determined *for him* by the United States government. "Since I'm not legal Indian," he explains, "the government can *put* me wherever *they* want. So *they put* me with anybody who will *take* me."⁵

This external socio-political determinism is paralleled by an internal psychological and genetic determinism. Regarding his genetic composition, we are told that Zits' "ruined complexion and black hair and big Indian nose" have been inherited from his father,⁶ while his eyes have been inherited from his mother.⁷ Regarding his psychological composition, Zits explains:

I'm fighting and kicking *because* that's what I do. *It's how I'm wired. It's my programming.* I read once that if a kid has enough bad things happen to him before he turns five, *he's screwed for the rest of his life. So that's me, a screwed half-breed who can't do anything but spit and kick and bite and punch.*⁸

² p.1; cf. "Call me Ishmael."

³ p.18, *Moby-Dick*, Ed. Hershell Parker, Harrison Hayford; W.W. Norton & Co. (NewYork:2002).

⁴ *Flight*, p.29

⁵ p.9

⁶ p.4

⁷ p.5

⁸ p.17 (emphasis added)

Zits later refers once more to his having "been programmed" as he considers the possibility that he might be *doomed* to "fill [his] empty life with fires and fists...*doomed* to spend the rest of [his] life in jail cells."⁹

It is important to note that Zits' understanding of himself even extending to his gender,¹⁰ is not *simply* essentialist. In the midst of his quasi-essentialistic considerations, he openly admits that these categories are only of secondary importance in relation to one's moral character. For instance, upon seeing Edgar (one of his foster fathers) destroy "six hundred dollars' worth of model airplane," Zits exclaims:

*So who cares if Edgar was an Indian or not? His Indian identity was completely secondary to his identity as a plane crashing asshole.*¹¹

And again, reflecting on a racially ambivalent dream, he explains:

Sounds racist, right?

But I don't think I'm a racist. *I measure men by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, and I find all of them are assholes.*¹²

Zits' rage, therefore, seems to be rooted primarily in the fact humans are unjust and unloving toward one another - despite their genealogical affiliations. Race is a *secondary*, or *accidental*, constitutive element of an individual's identity.

Hence, Zits' emphasis on bio-socio-political determinism is contradicted by his commitment to a moral standard that transcendent to all such categories. And this is a cause of internal conflict that he only comes to resolve after he has taken Justice's pistol into his own hands and woken up as *the other*. He is not merely *empathizing* with the other, he *is* the other, a reality

⁹ p.27

¹⁰ p.20: "There's no reason to talk after that. Why should we talk? *We're boys. Boys aren't supposed to talk.* So we sit there in our *boy silence.*" (emphasis added)

¹¹ p.11

¹² p.27 (emphasis added)

that drives him to reckon with the fact that "Everybody has secrets."¹³ He repeats this when upon hearing Art's assertion that "We all got blood on us," he thinks - "He's right about that."¹⁴

Zits' commitment is not to a particular people, which allows him to critique individuals on the basis of their relationship to their neighbor (i.e the *socius*). Like Levinas' subject, Zits is the passive recipient of data from outside of himself that forces him to become other *for the sake of the other*. Anthony F. Beaver explains this process in the following manner:

Consideration for the other means being-considerate-for-the-other. Substitution then is recognizing myself in the place of the other, not with the force of a conceptual recognition, but in the sense of finding myself in the place of the other as a hostage for the other. Substitution is the conversion of my being as a subjection by the other into a subjection for the other. [...]

Suppose for a moment that you are walking down the street and the person in front of you pushes a garbage can into the street. You might pick up the garbage can, you might not—but, certainly you will not feel like an injustice has been done to the garbage can. Now suppose that in the same situation, the person in front of you pushes another person into the street. Suppose further that this person, while lying on the ground looks up at you. Do you "feel" the need to respond? Levinas says that at this moment, the ethical command has been waged. You are obligated to respond. If the desire to respond does not, at first, present itself as a command, and you respond because you want to respond, then you have just been witness to the depth that substitution has taken in your own being. The desire to respond is already a responsiveness to the command of the other.¹⁵

Apart from this capacity to become other, *for the other's sake*, Zits could only criticize the other on the basis of some *accidental* feature of his and their identity. This runs the risk of being unable to come to the realization that "Indians have always killed other Indians," and that such behavior is objectively "twisted."¹⁶ Even more profoundly, Justice's pistol would itself become a means of perpetuating injustice and violence against the other.

¹³ p.47

¹⁴ p.51

¹⁵ *Introducing Levinas to Undergraduate Students*, p.7 <<http://faculty.evansville.edu/tb2/PDFs/UndergradPhil.pdf>>

¹⁶ p.30

Blood Memory

Linda Hogan's memoir *The Woman Who Watches Over The World* stands in direct contrast to Alexie's novel, presenting a form of essentialism that does not allow for the I to become other for the sake of the other. Hogan speaks of *inheriting* her "territory...of physical pain,"¹⁷ and being "one of the children who lived inside [her] grandmother, and was carried, cell, gene, and spirit, within mourners along the Trail of Tears."¹⁸ "Many fates," she says, "dwell inside a single human being. We sleep with all those *whose blood or lives we share, inheriting their histories.*"¹⁹

Hogan states that she inherited her mother's "chemistry, fear, and depression."²⁰ Likewise, she tells the reader that she inherited her own childhood speechlessness from her mother.²¹ This emphasis on biological, sociological, and cultural *inheritance* is not unique to Hogan, it should be noted, but is derived from N. Scott Momaday's 1968 novel *House Made of Dawn* in which he speaks of *memory in the blood*.

Blood memory, a memory though forgotten yet never lost, redefines Native American authenticity in terms of recollecting and remembering. The genetic constitution preserves memory in the body. Whereas the government's designation of American Indian "blood quantum" problematizes Native American identities, "blood memory" holds tight on Native American bloodlines and by naming the genetic ties to specific Indian nations, particularly to illustrious ancestry, Native American authors recuperate an integrated Native self.²²

By so doing, Hogan effectively establishes a link between herself, her ancestors, and her

¹⁷ *The Woman Who Watched Over The World*, p.19

¹⁸ p.123

¹⁹ p.114

²⁰ p.102

²¹ p.101

²² Hsinya Huang, "Blood/Memory in N. Scott Momaday's *The Names: A Memoir* and Linda Hogan's *The Woman Who Watches over the World: A Native Memoir*," in *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 32.1 January 2006, p.173

successors; however, she also promotes a genetic essentialism that identifies *ethics* as subservient to one's indigenous culture/society. *Blood Memory* preserves national identity only by means of subjugating ethics to "the order of the same" (to put the matter in Levinasian terms).

Concluding Remarks

The concept of "blood memory" endorsed by Linda Hogan is not only complicit in advancing the cause of racism, as Arnold Krupat notes,²³ it also, because of this, destroys any hope of ethics. Alexie's implicit endorsement of an essentially moral agent, on the other hand, neither disregards the past nor blames it for all of the problems the individual *presently* faces.

As Miroslav Volf notes,

To the extent that we sever ourselves from memories of what we have done and what has happened to us, we will lose our proper identity [...] [But] We are not just shaped by memories; we ourselves shape the memories that shape us. [...] To the extent that we are psychologically healthy, our identity will consist in our ability to respond in freedom to our memories and in our free responses to memories, and not just in the memories themselves.²⁴

Hogan and Zits are at odds with one another; nevertheless, there is some chance of synthesis between the two views they present. If genetic essentialists recognize that one is *first and foremost* essentially a moral agent for whom and to whom one is responsible, then accidental features of one's identity (e.g. ethnicity, culture, etc) will be dealt with in a manner that is reflective of the recognition that I am myself *for the sake of the other*, my neighbor, no matter where he or she comes from.

²³ "Arnold Krupat derides Momaday for his use of the phrases "racial memory" and "memory in the blood" in *Red Matters* (76-97). He attacks the essentialist dangers of references to "Indian blood," as he asserts that Native American resistance should not be associated with the vexed category of "Indian blood," which is roughly parallel to the concept of race (xi). To dismantle the intricate edifice of racism, it is imperative, as Louis Owens and Gerald Vizenor demonstrate to Krupat, to expose the essentialism embodied in the very idea of "Indian blood" and to discard its associated policies as well. "Indian blood" in effect appears to Krupat as "a discourse of conquest," as he cites Pauline Turner Strong and Barrik Van Winkle (76). Krupat remains wary of blood logic, even in the interest of rights and resistances." (Huang, footnote on p.18)

²⁴ *Memory, Salvation, and Perdition*, pp.6-7, <http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/x_volf_memory.pdf>