

Visual Metaphors of Racial Hoax and Cosmic Understanding

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Abstract

This paper considers the use of visual metaphors in two poetic works, Cornelius Eady's Brutal Imagination and Pattiann Rogers' Holy Heathen Rhapsody. Two concepts are employed: a central moment or defining moment, a key impression, is focused on in Eady's poem; in Rogers' work, one complete poem is selected for examination.

Eady, in his book titled Brutal Imagination, wrote the "Brutal Imagination" series in the voice of a black man who only existed as an invented personification of racism. The real-life fact situation, which was the impetus for this poem, was the 1994 racial hoax in which Susan Smith murdered her three-year-old and 14-month-old sons and then reported to police that a black man had stolen her car at gunpoint and abducted the boys. In analyzing the rhetorical power of the core metaphor—that blackness represents criminality—this paper also suggests the concept of meta-context as a way context and metaphor work to trigger deeper associations that have the power to convince and persuade without relying on evidence.

The second half of this article presents an analysis of visual metaphor used by Pattiann Rogers using the example of "The Doxology of Shadows" in Holy Heathen Rhapsody to exemplify the nature of visual metaphor. Further, this exploration suggests that visual metaphor creates a narrative—tells a story and takes us on a journey—that serves the rhetorical function of persuading the reader to adopt a particular point of view and the discursive function of creating a meaningful context, which invites the reader to engage with the poet's message.

Keywords: *Brutal Imagination*, central moment, Cornelius Eady, cosmic understanding, critical thinking, *Holy Heathen Rhapsody*, literary analysis, *meta-context*, Pattiann Rogers, poetic narrative, racial hoax, visual metaphor

Part 1: Racial Hoax, the Tyranny of Metaphor and the Possibility of Meta-context

1.1 Introduction

Cornelius Eady's "Brutal Imagination" series of poems presents a succession of compelling metaphors in poetic form through the character of the imaginary black man that Susan Smith fictionalized to blame for her murder of her children. The core metaphor Eady's work explores is that to be black in the United States—particularly if one is a young, black male—is like being a criminal. Eady writes poems that function as an extended narrative of the crime and examines how and why Susan Smith's explanation was believed. It is significant that the practice of fabricating a crime and blaming it on a person of another race is so common that the term *racial hoax** has been created to refer to the body of works that explore and document this subject.

Eady appraises how so many avowed eyewitnesses claimed to have seen the imaginary carjacker and kidnapper. He explores how the metaphor *being black is like being a criminal* extends to the notion that being black naturally involves disrespect for laws and an ignorance that hides insolence behind submissiveness. Eady presents the stereotypes of Uncle Tom, Uncle Ben, Aunt Jemima, Buckwheat and Stepin Fetchit as the metaphors that formed the way blackness is contextualized. These persuasive metaphors made the man at the gas pump, the motel clerk, the teenage girl, the woman driving on the highway and so many others swear they'd seen the imaginary black man with the children. This paper will begin with a consideration of the metaphors that support racial hoax.

Next, this paper will analyze one two-sentence stanza as a defining point I see as a thesis of this paper. This thesis is that an extended metaphor of "Brutal Imagination"—that blackness is like criminality—serves to reveal the way metaphor creates context. Further, it will assert that the metaphors that emerge from these contexts perform a rhetorical function based on

prejudicial illusions. Finally, this paper will suggest and explore a concept of contexts beneath contexts using the term *meta-context*.

1.2 Metaphors that identify racial hoax

The section called “Sightings” begins

A few nights ago

A man swears he saw me pump gas

With the children

At a convenience store

Like a punchline you get the next day,

Or a kiss in a dream that returns while

You’re in the middle of doing

Something else. (Eady, 6)

Here there are two metaphors that describe the nature of racial hoax. The first is that details of time (A few nights ago), activity (pumping gas), affiliation (With the children) and location (At a convenience store) may all be recalled and constructed from the recollection of something that is *already* in one’s consciousness, “Like a punchline you get the next day.” The metaphor of the imagined recall of details that didn’t take place suggests there’s a subconscious predisposition to accept the racial hoax that if someone says a black man committed a crime American society has been conditioned to *already* accept as fact that there must be details to go along with the crime and the crime is taken as a given. In the absence of hoax or myth, the logical order is that details that add up to something criminal are gathered first. Comparing imaginary details to a joke that one only appreciates the humor of after the passage of time suggests that the motivation to imagine and then claim to be recollecting all these prejudicial details was subconsciously present and waiting to be sprung, like a punchline. This is how a hoax or myth gets its energy. One must be predisposed to the notion that flying saucers are landing in cornfields on new-Moon nights before “crop circles” (typically made by teenagers with a board and a length of rope staked to the center of the faked landing site) are

accepted as evidence we are being visited by extraterrestrials.

The second metaphor, that the imagined details of time, activity, affiliation and location ascribed to the illusory black kidnapper are like “a kiss in a dream that returns while/ You’re in the middle of doing/ Something else” serves to deepen the erroneous nature of the alleged sightings of the imaginary black kidnapper. Noting that this supposed recollection may even occur when one is preoccupied with other tasks (*doing/ Something else*) further suggests the propensity for many white Americans to believe racial hoax, and that this hoax is something that—like a dream that creates a situation in which one is kissed—is resident in the psyche to surface unbidden.

Both metaphors are used to illustrate the ways racial hoax relies on believers as well as perpetrators for its power.

1.3 The Tyrannical Metaphor

The stanza in Eady’s poem that forms a kernel that pops open into his extended metaphor, that blackness is like criminality, is the one in which Eady describes his family’s advice to him:

*Wait ‘til you’re grown. And I hear this sad place
At the middle of that word where they live,
Where they wait for my skin to go sour. (29)*

The sad place I hear at the middle of the word “grown” (italicized in the original by Eady) is “own” and I think of why owning is the sad place where his family lives. Immediately, I think of Lao Tzu, who writes, “Owning is the entanglement” (54) and of how what people own is what they sometimes want to define them.

In close analysis of the metaphors in this passage, “they” is a backwards reference to “my family” from the beginning of the section titled “Buckwheat’s Lament” and “my family” is a metaphor for not only African-Americans, but for all victims of prejudice. Eady’s suggestion of a sad place at the middle of the word “grown” as the word “own” is, in my first analysis,

a revelation of Eady's clever way of advising us to look below the appearance to see the function some central trope or element may serve.

A slightly different analysis might leave the word "grown" intact and examine the metaphoric meaning of living in the middle of that particular word. The "sad place" that they have grown up into, "where they [now] live", is a place of sadness they expect the younger generation to grow up into. They foretell, "this white gang I run with will/ Grow up and leave me behind" in a metaphor for the cycle of prejudice.

The last metaphor in this passage, that black skin is like sour milk, also suggests that when he is young it doesn't matter if he's black or white—that he may as well be white for all it matters to children—and that this will change when he grows up. The full phrase, "where they wait for my skin to go sour" introduces an element of helplessness. It is a metaphor for the fact that his family is powerless to stop this horrible transformation; skin turning sour is a metaphor for how being black will block his opportunities, will "spoil" his chances in life. The fact that they must wait in a sad place is a metaphor for being condemned, in Kafkaesque fashion, to accept their disenfranchisement. The motionless acceptance of not only their fate, but that of their child—accepting their fate must also be their child's—presents the metaphorical image of loss of hope.

The rhetorical value in the use of these metaphors by Eady is that they are calls to action. The stereotypes can be identified, confronted and discarded. Expectations of ongoing hopelessness, helplessness, and immobility can be questioned, challenged, and rejected.

1.4 Moving to the possibilities in *meta-context*

We may now return to the first interpretation in the quoted sentences of *being grown* as *owning who and what you are*. In light of the other interpretations of metaphor in the extract above, the implications of being owned (and this also recalls the basis of slavery) by the metaphor that is used to describe you is relevant. How metaphor creates this ownership, just as stereotypes reinforced tyranny, will be explored with the aim of advancing

a notion of *meta-context*.

It may be contended that the prejudicial notions of being black, that made plausible the existence of the imaginary black man Susan Smith fictionalized to own the blame for her murder of her children, show how the metaphors own Eady by defining him. Of course, Eady is not speaking of his family exactly or himself exactly. He is speaking of the stereotypes and caricatures that create an image of what it means to be black in the United States/ of what assumptions are built into the ways being black is defined and how these metaphors are employed as rhetorical devices to compel belief/ to convince and persuade even if they offend against the principle principal of justice to judge each case on its own merits.

Modern digital photography converts variations in light to electronic impulses. Silver halide (traditional black and white) photography uses variations in light to tarnish silver dust suspended in jelly (the emulsion part of photographic film) to record an image. The term *metadata* is used to describe information about the information we're viewing that helps understand its true nature—that contextualizes it. Like photographic film emulsion and electronic data for digital images, metaphors Eady explores make the true picture visible.

The metaphors that Eady describes hold the metadata—the information about the information—that let us see the true picture of how prejudice made each flimsy shred of description Susan Smith offered into a plausible reality.

I also suggest that information about information—while appearing to be only descriptive of the process whereby metaphor reveals prejudice—may also be the information that is beneath the information. If we term the data in which data exists its context, may we call information beneath the surface its *meta-context*?

1.5 Discussion and conclusion

One instance of how *meta-context* was employed as a rhetorical device may be considered in the circumstances surrounding Michael Brown, the

unarmed black teenager who was shot to death by police on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. Within days of the shooting, police released a video showing Mr. Brown engaged in what appears to be criminal activity in a convenience store. Attempting to contextualize the public disclosure of this material, police explained that they were compelled, under freedom-of-information laws, to release the video. The *meta-context* the video tapped into—like the metaphors of black people Eady explores in “Brutal Imagination”—then served to provide a *meta-context mythology* of young-black-male-as-criminal that goes beneath the attempted contextualizing of Michael Brown.

In considering how the existence of *meta-contexts* identifies where metaphors get their power, two questions are relevant: Is *meta-context* a blending of metaphor with context? Is it a sense of where contextualizing triggers a deeper level of metaphor? Metaphors give us a new way to look at the world; *meta-contexts* put us into different worlds. In the shooting of Michael Brown, the basic fact situation was clear; an unarmed citizen, who was not in the act of any crime, was shot and killed.

As we understand from “Brutal Imagination,” the metaphors of race have a life of their own. Charles Stuart and Susan Smith’s tapping into those metaphors, as well as the August 2014 events in Ferguson, Missouri, create the world they live in. The threads of metaphor then get woven into the contextual cloth of American society and create the *meta-contextual* fabric of an inhumane alternate world of prejudice and racism.

At this point, we shall transition to a second example of visual metaphor and a different technique for literary analysis.

Part 2: Visual Metaphors that Cast the Charm of “The Doxology of Shadows” in Pattiann Rogers’ *Holy Heathen Rhapsody*

2.1 Introduction

Pattiann Rogers’ *Holy Heathen Rhapsody* is rich with visual metaphors

and examines the everyday world with a poetic depth of detail and comprehension. In seemingly simple and charming passages, alternate universes are revealed. Rather than attempting to minutely analyze each visual image in every one of the poems in *Holy Heathen Rhapsody*, or of erring in the other direction and making comments too general about the entire volume, our focus will only be on a single poem, “The Doxology of Shadows”, as representative of the whole.

Each of this poem’s seven stanzas will be presented and an analysis of the visual images will follow. This will be done to honor the flow of the poem’s message on the one hand and, on the other, to offer logical portions for analysis in the process.

2.2 The Flow of the Universe of Discourse

This analysis of the visual metaphors in Pattiann Rogers’ “The Doxology of Shadows” will engage in stanza by stanza close examination with two questions in mind: How does each part evoke emotional responses, and how do these responses function to make a convincing argument for the power of invisibility?

First Stanza

*They float and sweep. They flicker
and unfold, having neither electrons
nor atoms, neither grasp nor escape.*

*Like skeletons, they could be
scaffolds. They are visible echoes.*

Like scaffolds, they could be memory.

When of cattails and limber willows

on a summer pond, they are reverie. (Rogers, Kindle location 809-45)

The start of Rogers’ poem conjures up images of biblical proportion by calling on the reader to envision an existential place, to consider shadows as nothingness, to think *in the beginning there was nothing* and yet the picture we form in our minds is of electrons and atoms, like illustrations from a high

school physics textbook. This vision of what is *not* there introduces us to shadows as images of nothingness, even on the atomic level, that “flicker and unfold, having neither electrons nor atoms.”

That shadows could be skeletons or scaffolds introduces the next visual action in the poem. The poet employs these visual images with a masterful sense of ambiguity. Skeletons may be scary Halloween apparitions and scaffolds may be the structures one climbs before being hanged. This ambiguity creates tension and excitement. The closer reading of “like skeletons, they could be scaffolds” reveals these skeletons are not frightening but necessary, like bones that serve as the scaffolds our body is built onto.

The relief following the scary skeleton and scaffold-as-gallows ambiguity being shown to be otherwise then leads to the next image of a scaffold as a metaphor for memory and memory as a living framework that recalls the life we have built.

Our sense of relief is completed in the final two lines of the stanza when memory moves to reverie—a cross between daydream and contemplation and the image of plants swaying in the breeze beside a pond in summer. The poet has moved the reader from the nearly unfathomable to a brush with death and execution and taken her or him to an idyllic countryside of cattails, willows and summer ponds.

A rhetor’s first job of is to get the audience on her or his side. In the visual imagery of the first stanza, Rogers has logically, succinctly, and sequentially introduced information, activated emotions, and presented a solution to the problem of fear. We continue the poet’s story of shadows.

Second Stanza

*Layering each other in a windy
forest, they can cover and disfigure
a face to a puzzle of shifting pieces.
If straight and unwavering when
crossing grassy lawns and clearings,*

*they are measures of time, true
of direction. The shadows
of minnows on the creek bed below
are either darting ripples of black
sun over the sand or reverse reflections
of surge as fish, design as soul.*

In the second stanza, we see where we go from our place beside the pond. We go to the forest. The wind has picked up and we will again need the poet, who has begun to gain our trust—though we still remember the initial unsavory misimpression of the skeleton and the scaffold—to create a more favorable impression of shadows.

We are given the image of someone walking through a forest with her or his face hidden by an unstable pattern of shadows and appreciate this as a metaphor for human mortality—all of humanity made up of “shifting pieces.”

We learn straight shadows over grassy lawns are a measure of time and direction. Shadows of minnows as “darting ripples of black sun” and the patterns of “design as soul” impart a spiritual quality to the elements of light and the creatures that interact with light to create shadows.

This sense of the natural world, through the images of trees and variability of life, through images of grass and fish, continue to assure us the reality of the poet’s world is the reality of our world. The reader feels the poet is credible.

Third Stanza

*They bring the devices and edicts
of winter, of spring, into the house,
over walls, ceilings, staircases—
the inside motion of a blossom falling
outside, a bird beyond the window
swooping a passage of pure flight
through the room. Shadow-drops
pearl over sofa, table, books, replicating*

*rain lingering in gold among leaves
and branches at dusk.*

In the third stanza, shadows are personified with the pronoun “they” and we are given the visual image of beings who bring symbols (devices and edicts) of the changing seasons—of the natural world—into the built world of our homes and change “walls, ceilings, staircases” by creating shadows of falling blossoms, flying birds, and raindrops on them and, in this way, bringing them to life.

Even smaller locations, like sofas and tables and books are described as recipients of this animating gift as places where “shadow-drops pearl.”

In this stanza, the mixing of natural and built entities and interaction of the inner and outer world—the juxtaposition of sofas, tables and books with rain, leaves, and branches at dusk—creates a sense of harmony that serves to persuade the reader this vision of shadows is a source of comfort and balance. Small visual triggers, like the words pearl and gold, assure the reader there is also great value in the poet’s feeling about shadows.

Fourth Stanza

*I sit on the floor within the shadow
network of a winter elm, its architecture
spread across the rug. The substance
of this structure is less than the bones
of a bumblebee bat, yet it holds me.*

The fourth stanza gives us the image of the poet sitting in the shadows a winter elm makes on the floor and describing the shadows as architecture.

Although the structure is described as having less substance “than the bones of a bumblebee bat” we learn it has the strength to hold the poet. Each of these images conveys a sense of durability to the appreciation of shadows.

We also learn of the poet’s acceptance of the embrace of shadows as part of the natural world, “within the shadow network of a winter elm” and though this image of a deciduous tree in winter may be of the bleakness of

bare branches, architecture implies there is a design for the creation of something new and the presence of a rug lends a cozy feel to the scene.

Saying “I sit” gives the poet’s personal endorsement to the interaction with shadows and is an appeal for agreement based on the speaker’s personal appeal.

Fifth Stanza

*Some shadows are much esteemed,
those of canopies, awnings, and parasols.
Many ancient tales record sightings
of ostriches seeking the black relief
of cloud shadows on the savannah,
following them across the treeless plains
like magi following the holy star.*

An appeal to authority—admiration and reverence for some shadows—is described in the fifth stanza, where “ostriches seeking the black relief of cloud shadows on the savannah” are compared to “magi following the holy star.” Deep respect for the natural beauty and sagacity of the ostriches is connected with the wisdom of seers seeking a savior and the shadows are compared to the divine light of the holy star.

Each of these visual images serves as further evidence to support the poet’s assertion that shadows are to be venerated and appreciated.

Sixth Stanza

*Maybe the metals of meteors, the drifting
remnants of galactic debris, the ices
and gravels of disintegrating comets
in their orbits cast showers of tiny pale
shadows (like spells or blessings or praises
upon us) as they pass between sun and earth.*

The sixth stanza moves toward the poem’s end with reflection on the cosmic nature of shadows.

The visual metaphor is that the universe is a benevolent force mediating on our behalf between sun and earth and that their shadows are “like spells or blessings or praises upon us.” This image continues to link shadows with divinity and is moving toward the summation of the argument. It also moves the discourse from the general to the particular (by actually referencing particles!) and likening shadows to individual blessings upon *us*.

Seventh Stanza

*With no fragrance—neither spicy, sweet,
acrid, nor mellow—without sighs or summaries,
without an aim of their own, like wraiths
and ghosts with no heft of any kind—the sole
matter of shadows is lack. Disappearing
in darkness, they depend for their being
on light. Therefore, they cannot be evil.
Some people still do not believe.*

The final stanza ends the poem with a call to action. We are advised of the lack of qualities shadows possess and that *unlike humans* they are “without sighs or summaries, without an aim of their own.”

Images of wraiths and ghosts are presented, but the poet nowhere suggests they are evil. Rather, they are neutral “with no heft of any kind” and are a pleasant or even playful paradox because their “matter ... is lack” and they only exist because of light. Thanks to the points the poet convinced us of by beginning with skeletons and scaffolds, we are not afraid. We are emboldened.

The poem’s final line is, “Some people still do not believe.” The phrase “some people” is a rhetorical device used to suggest “people other than you” and seeks to allay the speaker with the reader or listener. The use of “believe” rather than “have faith” is a rhetorical device that invites the reader to engage with the poet’s message. While faith does not require proof, belief suggests a higher standard of testability and contestability. For example, “I believe there are twelve oranges in this bag” is a verifiable statement. The

statement, “I have faith there is an afterlife” is a proposition that can’t be tested and only demonstrates the speaker’s personal feelings and hopes. “Some people still do not believe,” is a call for we who do to join in common cause to not see evil in what is different or opposite and to proceed, instead, with courage and openness to understanding.

Finally, there is the word “Doxology”, as ritualistic praise of the divinity that rules the universe that praises shadows, in the title of the poem. The use of a magical and obscure word is also a rhetorical device, appealing to enchanted authority like the secret ingredient in a recipe or prime mover of the universe.

2.3 Discussion and conclusion

Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, one of Japan’s most popular novelists, writes in *In Praise of Shadows* that

the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows—it has nothing else ... the walls of the sitting room will almost always be of clay textured with fine sand. A luster here would destroy the soft fragile beauty of the feeble light. We delight in the mere sight of the delicate glow of fading rays clinging to the surface of a dusky wall, there to live out what little life remains to them. We never tire of the sight, for to us this pale glow and these dim shadows far surpass any ornament. (Tanizaki, 18)

In a similar spirit, Rogers has created a narrative in praise of shadows that moves us from ignorance and fear to a place of understanding and appreciation for the usefulness of what is not there to see what is there. When we confront the absence we gain an understanding of what is not there as well as what is there.

3. General Conclusions

This paper has presented two techniques for engaging in analysis (with analysis understood as a process that relies on and builds skill in critical thinking) of literary works. It has demonstrated the usefulness of employing either analysis of a *central moment* in a work or analysis of a *selected extract* from a work. In practice, both techniques may be used in support of each other.

Technique is important; so is the subject on which the technique is performed. Consider the example of skiing. Skill, as appropriate technique, must be demonstrated when taking part in a giant slalom race. It is not enough, however, to merely demonstrate the form of the technique “on the flat.” Following the course (the narrative, in literary terms) and understanding the terrain (considering how language creates meaning which creates images) is also necessary.

Words create images. We say what we imagine because language is an imaginative leap. Letters and words, as representations of objects and states in the real world (as the environment we inhabit), symbolize and codify the alphabet, grammar, and vocabulary of a shared imaginative system. To use the image of alpine skiing, the course represents the story being told and the terrain is the ground on which the narrative happens to be set.

Visual metaphors are the bedrock of a shared imaginative system. The narrative—the story being told—is derived from the images that are presented; and they are presented not as photographic evidence, but as pictorial impressions. The phrase “seeing is believing” is often adduced as a statement of proof. The root proposition is that we see what we have already visualized. Social context advises us. We visualize what we have been trained to visualize. Training in visualization depends on one’s culture; and each culture performs its visualization training by using metaphors that evoke its core cultural beliefs.

In the case of Cornelius Eady’s *Brutal Imagination*, we explored how

the metaphor of blackness as criminality enabled supposed *witnesses* to supposedly *see* what wasn't there. They had believed a racial hoax and visually confabulated the images to support its racist and prejudicial narrative. In contrast, Pattiann Rogers' "The Doxology of Shadows" presented visual images to support cosmic understanding of the universe, neither as a malevolent nor as a beneficently sentient entity, but as a source of wonder and enlightenment.

Lastly, I shall address the question of *standing* as a legal and moral right. The discussion may be framed in the following questions. How do I have the right to stand up and comment on a culture to which I do not belong? How do I move beyond cultural and into cosmic considerations of what constitutes reality as a shared imaginative system created from visual metaphors? What standing do I have? In fact, I have none. Or rather, I have no direct standing. How, then, may any individual have a stake in an issue with which she or he is not directly involved? The issue, of who has the right to speak for others, is an important question because it also compels us to question what or whom we have given power to speak for us and how we wish to be represented; we must ask how visual metaphors are defining our values or how we allow our values to be defined by the visual metaphors that are prevalent in our culture. I raise this question in these closing remarks for purposes of prompting further discussion rather than providing a perfect answer.

Nonetheless, I do have an answer. I recall the legal notion of *amicus curiae* (often translated from Latin as *friend of the court*) and slightly modify the terms of the concept. My position as a white male from Canada, who has been living in Japan for the last 17 years, does not give me standing to litigate the case of racial prejudice in the USA and claim personal damages. I do, however, have the right to debate the case and seek understanding. While short of cosmic, though nonetheless urgent, the quest for understanding accelerates the dismantling of racism. As for the cosmic understanding envisioned in Rogers' "The Doxology of Shadows", we can appreciate that each one of us is party to the need to understand her or his

connection with the universe. I also trust our practice of reflecting on visual metaphors that narrate this relationship will give us the experience to interrogate and the energy to challenge other visual metaphors claiming to speak on our behalf.

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