The Dis-education of the Negro

A Contemporary Analysis of Themes and Motifs in *Sacrilege: The Curse of the Mbirwi* by Nyasha Hatendi

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In the great words of Mr. Carter G. Woodson in his riveting analysis of American education systems after which this essay is named, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, he captures readers with this controversial quote: "The 'educated Negroes' have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African" (Woodson, pp. 5). It is no secret that the Black existence and experience has been picked apart and analyzed beneath a telescope since the White Lion's port at Virginia in August of 1619. As exhausting as this cycle may be, it is necessary to analyze and understand the experiences of the disenfranchised and marginalized in order to properly repair the damage caused by their perpetrators. To preface, the purpose of this essay is to vocalize the violent nature of colonization, miseducation, and displacement and the burden it's placed on Black and African peoples' sense of identity and belonging.

Author Nyasha Hatendi captivates listeners with an immersive, horrifying tale of a Black American family, already navigating familial traumas of their own, who patronize a luxury resort in Zimbabwe to 'reconnect with their roots,' but find themselves cursed by an ancient, evil power called the Mbirwi. Despite multiple warnings from local Zimbabweans to respect the land and its spirits, the protagonist, Dashon, spitefully desecrates the ancestral burial grounds; thus, dooming his family to heinous and gruesome deaths at the hands of a spirit that feeds on pain and grief. This complex plot invites listeners to dissect intergenerational trauma, identity and belonging, and colonialism, as well as the ramifications of American exceptionalism. As Woodson delivered, the American education system loads the literary and historical canon with texts from European and Asian countries, teaching in-depth white and yellow histories while constructively omitting necessary revelations about Africa, save for the abundant declaration of its poverty and

pyramids. In America, Black history begins in 1619 with the arrival of the first cargo ship carrying stolen, enslaved people from the continent of Africa. While there is a copious amount of history to be shared thereafter, there is no mention of the cultures and practices from where the ship's 'cargo' descended. The National Black Cultural Information Trust (NBCIT) concludes, "This institutional miseducation has often disconnected multiple generations of African descendants from pertinent Black historical knowledge and nuanced global perspectives on Blackness, African heritage, ethnicity, and national origin. Additionally, the miseducation through enslavement and colonialism has often produced Eurocentric and anti-Black perspectives of "self" and other groups of African descendants" (NBCIT). This grave omission is intentional for many reasons: to separate the Black American from their heritage; thus, robbing them of identity and belonging, to deceive the Black American and the African in their shared heritage; thus, dismantling pan-African unity, and to devalue Africa as a continent of squalor and inferiority; thus, edifying others as plenteous and lofty.

The first juxtaposition immediately noticed in *Sacrilege: The Curse of the Mbirwi* is the Wallace family's plan to better understand and reconnect with their roots, while residing in a luxury resort in Zimbabwe. Like many colonized and gentrified countries, Zimbabwe is misrepresented by media outlets that highlight beautiful vacation rentals and privately-owned safari trails while excluding mention of its surrounded townships and villages where local citizens are subjected to lesser qualities of life and exploitation in exchange for pennies. Their decision to lodge in a white-owned luxury resort with the intention of connecting with their heritage is paradoxical within itself, but it provides a criticism to the way western ideology has separated Black Americans from familiarity with African countries. Amidst the disparity is evidence that the Wallaces lacked ownership within Zimbabwe following generations of

severance, and neither had access to more local accommodations nor the information necessary to obtain it. Probing deeper, it is necessary to question the selection of the location in which the Wallaces concluded.

There are several aspects to interrogate in this matter: in choosing to explore their heritage, why did the Wallace family choose Zimbabwe? Was there unique evidence that suggested their heritage was specific to this country? Arguably not, because upon arrival in Zimbabwe, the family consistently refers to the place as "Africa" (Hatendi, ep. 1), a misnomer commonly used to describe any and every African country, also used to reduce the continent's connotation to just a country. In addition, the violence of misconstruing one country as the entire continent therefore creates the assumption that all African countries are monolithic. Research indicates that the transatlantic slave trade primarily pillaged West African countries and those along the gold coast. Historian and author Sarah Pruitt details, "Of those Africans who arrived in the United States, nearly half came from two regions: Senegambia, the area comprising the Senegal and Gambia Rivers and the land between them, or today's Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Mali; and west-central Africa, including what is now Angola, Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon. The Gambia River, running from the Atlantic into Africa, was a key waterway for the slave trade… about one out of every six West African enslaved people came from this area" (Pruitt). Additionally, Pruitt exemplifies that West African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and Ivory Coast were hubs of extensive slave-dealing operations (Pruitt). This claim is further augmented by the commonly known history of Hispaniola, present day Haiti and Dominican Republic, where chattel slavery originated, and its cultural proximity to the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria, from which its people descended. This being so, had the Wallace family been equipped with true knowledge of their ancestry, they likely would have found

themselves exploring a country directly affected by the transatlantic slave trade. Being that many Americans consider Africa to be one whole instead of a continent comprised of various tribes and cultures, the Wallaces saw no value in differentiating them, as amplified in their consistent mention of being "in Africa."

Finally, it is further apparent that the Wallace family was bereft of knowledge in this matter because they were mistaken in the language spoken in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is a melting pot of tribes and cultures, perceptible by the record number of official languages recognized within the country. Of the bunch are Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign Language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa ("People and Culture Zimbabwe"). It is commonly known that shared language, even attempts at learning, breed familiarity and mutual respect. Experts believe, "Speaking someone's language shows respect for their culture, breaking barriers and building trust. It fosters understanding and compassion in a divided world… it's a bridge to empathy... It fosters appreciation for diversity and encourages an inclusive attitude towards language differences… It opens doors for friendships and community engagement. In diverse settings, it strengthens relationships and encourages unity" (Amlotus). To the dismay of many Zimbabwean characters in the audiobook, the Wallace family made multiple attempts to speak Zulu to them, a language central to South Africa, hardly spoken in the country of reference. Phenomena like these widen the gap between Black Americans and Africans, exhibiting, from the latter's perspective, a lack of intention and reverence for culture as well as proximity to colonial power and superiority complexes closely associated with whiteness. In exchange, Black Americans are left to feel othered and excluded from traditions historically tailored to them for lack of understanding, an apprehension reminiscent of segregation and patronization experienced during and after slavery, which was

likely the catalyst for them searching for identity and belonging amongst African countries. The cycle is perpetrated and weaponized to destroy kinship and alliance between not only Black Americans and Africans, but also all members of the African diaspora.

Diaspora wars are a tale as old as time; there has always been a faction designed to sow divisiveness in Black communities even before the Black Panther Party was infiltrated by the very people it meant to serve. The NBCIT defines diaspora wars as, "cross-cultural arguments among different ethnicities of African people where we express discontent with each other for various reasons" (NBCIT). While it's common to find interest and interrogate other cultures, the NBCIT warns, "these conversations take a counterproductive turn when we internalize and promote anti-Black/white supremacist narratives about each other that hyper-focus on divisions, instead of how we can best unify for the purpose of collective freedom" (NBCIT). Western government has worked tirelessly to diminish African unity, even to the destruction of American neighborhoods—Black American neighborhoods, to be frank. The same havoc is wreaked on a global scale as the cycle of rejection continues between local Africans and Africans abroad, including African Americans. The lack of education about each of our existences fosters a lack of mutual empathy, because local Africans assume Black people abroad live in luxury while they are forced to survive under crippling regimes, but in reality, Black people everywhere are oppressed to some degree. From observation, even when some Africans depart to other countries and hope to find solace and community in resident Black people or Africans abroad, they are met with rejection and ridicule, labeled derogatorily as 'fresh off the boat' or 'FOB' for short, a phrase obviously coined in reference to slave boats, amongst many other hateful derivatives. This sort of welcome, coupled with Eurocentric propaganda targeting Africa countries, leaves its abusee with a bitter perception of Africans outside of Africa as a whole.

The cycle of mass generalization does not cease there. Equipped with colonialist anti-Black stereotypes, local Africans, renowned for their resilience and spunk, return the favor with stereotypes fed to them under white supremacist and Apartheid-era propaganda. While this is primarily pointed at Black Americans, first-generation children of African immigrants fall victim to the same discrimination. The term "Akata," loosely translated from Yoruba, a Nigerian tribal language, to the phrase, "field rat," is a slur commonly direct towards Black Americans, as if there aren't enough already designed for them. The derogatory term is an ode to the violence of chattel slavery, which required the enslaved to work grueling hours on cotton and sugar cane fields. The use of this word is not only disappointing, but also a dehumanizing way to gain a false sense of superiority over an equally oppressed group. Even with strides to condemn hateful language, a severed trust complicates the process. For example, a Nigerian rapper recorded a song meant to educate the diaspora about the harmful undertones of the slur, believing many people didn't actually understand the word and were misusing it to generally describe Black Americans. As social media misconstrued its message, and as clips without context circulated the web, a heated exchanged ensued citing that the rapper was making deprecating remarks. It wasn't until he made a video explaining the context that deeper understanding was achieved. This event, only one of thousands, shows the absence of mutual trust but also the power of conversations educating one another with context.

Sacrilege: The Curse of the Mbirwi provides plenty examples of sentiments resulting from a lack of pan-African unity. Upon the Wallaces' arrival to the resort, the staff of Zimbabweans operating the guest experience engage in conversation ridiculing them for not understanding their customs, as opposed to educating them in their missteps. One host, Ola, even remarks that, "…they're Americans. They're nothing but trouble. Keep an eye on them"

(Hatendi, ep. 1) to another guide, Solomon, who takes a liking to the family. When Solomon takes the family on a safari trail too close to a sacred village in an attempt to educate them about Zimbabwean culture, he is proclaimed a traitor by the village elders—as if there are sides to take in this matter. Finally, after the Wallaces are cursed for their son's folly, Solomon is warned to leave them behind to die or suffer the same fate. As much as Solomon tried to help, none of the village people with a deeper understanding aided in appeasing the *Mbirwi*. The Zimbabweans hated the Wallaces for their American nationality and miseducation before any of the missteps took place, and the family could feel the tension of disdain. In the same vein, the responsibility to digest the facets of another culture is entirely on the tourist. While the internet may not provide the depths of customs and village practices, it would at least inform which languages are spoken there so travelers can be better equipped. In bridging a shared trust with the resort staff and the villagers through language, the Wallaces would have likely experienced a more amicable end. This concept applies vice versa; the onus is now on the African diaspora as a whole to mend relations and foster empathy in our communities.

White supremacist propaganda, especially in education, rears its ugly head in the worst fashion. Not only does it plague diasporic communities with divisive stereotypes, but the stereotypes also then permeate to create a substandard vision of Black people comprehensively, within our own communities and at large. Woodson states in *The Miseducation of the Negro*, "… the races were described in conformity with the program of the usual propaganda to engender in whites a race hate of the Negro, and in the Negroes contempt for themselves. A poet of distinction was selected to illustrate the physical features of the white race, a bedecked chief of a group those of the red a proud warrior the brown, a prince the yellow, and a savage with a ring in his nose, and of course, the Negro stood at the foot of the social ladder" (Woodson, pp.12). This

social ladder is created to psychological skew the worldview of Black and African societies. Coupled with the electivity of Black American curricula in schools, students are bereft of an opulent history to counter anti-Black sentiments. Woodson augments this observation, stating, "The description of the various parts of the world was worked out according to the same Plan. The parts inhabited by the Caucasian were treated in detail. Less attention was given to the yellow people, still less to the red, very little to the brown, and practically none to the Black race. Those people who are far removed from the physical characteristics of the Caucasians or who do not materially assist them in the domination or exploitation of others were not mentioned except to be belittled or decried" (Woodson, pp.12). If the discoveries and intellectual prowess of African society, such as metal extraction from nature to develop industrial arts or Northern African chemistry or the science of color mixing for paintings, among many other technological advancements, Black people wouldn't have to accept a spot at the bottom of the totem pole.

Woodson continues, "From literature the African was excluded altogether. He was not supposed to have expressed any thought worth knowing. The philosophy in the African proverbs and in the rich folklore of that continent was ignored to give preference to that developed on the distant shores of the Mediterranean… In the teaching of fine arts these instructors usually started with Greece by showing how that art was influenced from without, but they omitted the African influence which scientists now regard as significant and dominant in early Hellas. They failed to teach the student the Mediterranean Melting Pot with the Negroes from Africa bringing their wares, their ideas and their blood therein to influence the history of Greece, Carthage, and Rome. Making desire father to the thought, our teachers either ignored these influences or endeavored to belittle them by working out theories to the contrary" (Woodson, pp.13). The effect of erasure is exemplified through the Wallace children's reluctancy to visit Zimbabwe at the pilot of the audio

series. Their perception of African societies conflicted with Zimbabwe's beauty revealed upon arrival. Awe stricken by the country's infrastructure and cultural architecture, the characters were offered a glimpse into the depth of Zimbabwean wealth with just a few glances at art. The mention and expansion of African art—whether through visual art or literature—humanizes African people. The Harlem Renaissance began as a period of artistic enlightenment after centuries of propaganda suggesting Black people were incapable of creative thought. The repercussions are evident; the absence of invention develops a sense of inadequacy that cycles throughout generations, and it takes more than performative appreciation during the shortest month of the year to recondition ages of psychological inuring.

The only omissions of European history happen to be those that mention expensive extractions from the wealth of Africa. A core of oil, diamond, gold, and various precious metals and resources, the continent of Africa is a major target for exploitation. European settlers ravaged every corner of the continent for anything of value, and they now hoard them in their museums and art galleries while spewing rhetoric that suggests Africa has always been poor. In recent events, the Edo government has succeeded in reclaiming famous bronzes, looted from modern day Edo State, Nigeria in the 1897 invasion of the Benin Kingdom, from European museums. They appreciate the value in African artifacts, but it would be detrimental to western society for Black people to recognize the same. culture Television advertisements portray African children living in squalor begging for sustenance, but they neglect to show the opulent expanses of countries with plenty of culture to proudly display. This offense is particularly ironic because western societies have the equally poor habit of commercializing beautiful locale of their countries while neglecting inner city neighborhoods with uprooted concrete roads and potholes and abandoned homes, poverty amuck. The same tactics are apparent in American media that

profit from the exploitation of Black American culture, while promoting the illusion that Black people have no culture and failing to credit Black creatives, plenty of which reside within the aforementioned inner cities. It's clear that ethnicity and nationality do not sever the African diaspora enough to earn one group or the other different treatment; Black skin alone classifies the criteria.

The reverberations of miseducation span farther than collective disdain; they rear palpable side effects inflicted within that hamper individual success. Imposter syndrome, financial insecurity, and diffidence are only the surfaces of internal conflict within Black bodies due to miseducation and deliberate dis-education in western communities. Mr. Woodson exemplifies the calculated omission of Black and African representation in the American academic canon and how it has ensnared several generations of Black learners into believing they have no history, no culture to celebrate. A community displaced and bereft of representation will struggle with identity and belonging naturally, which is the plight of Africans and those who trace their roots there. In this pivotal period of pan-African pride and reclamation, it is necessary to shoulder the responsibility of educating one another to better understand one another. *Sacrilege: The Curse of the Mbirwi* connects colonialism with American exceptionalism, and the latter as the result of identity crises and the search for belonging. The Wallace family, while fictional, are a distinct reminder that displacement carries generational consequences, and though it's no fault of their own, communion comes through empathy. Empathy is achieved through mutual respect. As a people despised by all others, there is hardly space to war with one another. The real-life implications of diaspora wars may not be a gruesome death at the hands of an angry spirit, but it could one day manifest into something equivocally distraught.

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