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Who's responsible for these blues?

Isaac Stewart-Silver

In Bebe Moore Campbell's Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, Armstrong Todd, a young black Chicagoan living in Mississippi, is beaten and murdered by three white men. In this essay I am responding to a prompt asking for a list ranking the degree to which each character (in one case a group) is responsible for Armstrong Todd's death. I will include the first portion of my response in which I consider three parties I deem most responsible.

Determining various amounts of responsibility for the death of Armstrong Todd is a challenging prompt for me to respond to. I believe it can open up valuable and critical conversation, while I also find myself concerned with what use this responsibility will be, once located. Considering the violence and harm in Campbell's story, I wonder how engaging with this prompt can reveal or help to realize possibilities of healing for those who have experienced harm, and how this engagement can be part of a project that transforms the conditions which birthed violence?

Below I try to critically think through various positions, responsibilities, and motivations of different parties, and to make sense of them in a coherent order. In the process many questions have come up for me, which I think are worthwhile subjects for attention. For instance, can two parties share an equal amount of responsibility? How can individual agency and structural forces, operating simultaneously and interacting with each other, be understood with respect to responsibility? Does establishing level of responsibility lead to accountability? How can I determine agency from my position?

After a lot of thought and back and forth, I feel I must declare a "tie" for most responsible party in Armstrong Todd's death. It is between Floyd Cox, Clayton Pinochet, and The Honorable Men of Hopewell, all of whom I think bear a great deal of responsibility, albeit in very different ways.

The Honorable Men of Hopewell (HMH)

The HMH are fully responsible for the death of Armstrong Todd, albeit in a less direct way than Floyd. These men collectively represent and help produce the conditions that allow for and encourage the death/murder of Armstrong.

In her novel we see Bebe Moore Campbell engage with ways that socialization occurs through reproduction of oppressive logics and systems, and with the humanity of the process. The Honorable Men of Hopewell are each individual people with their own stories and hurts, fears, and desires; they are preservers of tradition and significant contributors to, even architects of, the social order in Hopewell. This social order is one that greatly benefits these men and others who are white, financially secure, (cis) men, or combinations thereof, while dehumanizing those whom are necessarily exploited within this system in order for such benefits to exist, such as blacks and non-black people of color, poor whites, and women. The Honorable Men of Hopewell may know on some level that this exploitation exists, yet they continue striving to maintain and further entrench these benefits for themselves and those like them; they continue broadly to ignore the humanity of blacks and folks living in poverty; they attempt to cover up any wrongdoing related to the concrete racist beating and murder of a black 15-year old boy at the hands of three white men.

As a group, the Honorable Men of Hopewell substantially influence the institutional, economic, political, and social order in Hopewell. As such, I believe they bear a lot of responsibility for logics and conditions that lead to the possibility and reality of three men beating and killing a young person because of a rumor that he had spoken to the wife of one of the men; and of the collective shoulder-shrug, justification, or even celebration that characterize the way most whites in the community respond.

Given the importance of socialization and the role that power plays in this story and in real life, I place a great deal of responsibility on those that are in positions of power or have strong

relationships to power. That is not to imply a lack of agency for those who do not fit such a description but to attend to the particular roles and responsibilities of institutions/institutional power and those with access to institutions/institutional power.

Floyd Cox and Clayton Pinochet

At the same time as systems are significant I think it is dangerous and misguided to wait for those with power to lead efforts for justice. The characters of Floyd and Clayton, like so many of Campbell's, shed light on the complex ways that people relate to power, are socialized and also own agency and power beyond the forces enacted upon them. I think that this shows up in Campbell's writing of other characters as well, which is something I really admire about her.

I consider Floyd and Clayton to be as responsible as the HMH. Along with recognizing the agency of individuals I think engaging with questions about what responsibility individuals have in the face of unjust systems is important. For me, recognizing people, including myself, as having the power to potentially interrupt violence even in the face of structurally unjust conditions, allows me to feel hope and try to be a part of a world with less violence and injustice.

When it comes down to it, Floyd pulled the trigger. I do not want to lose sight of the bigger picture and other forces that lead to that moment: racism, economic exploitation, and (hetero)patriarchy may all be formative to the desperation and disregard of Armstrong Todd's life that lead Floyd to murder of Armstrong Todd. Without dismissing these systems I believe individuals must be accountable to others for their actions, and Floyd shot and killed Armstrong Todd in cold blood. Despite his own misgivings about his father and brother's thirst for blood, Floyd fails to push back against their hate in speech or action.

It hurts me to primarily blame Floyd, despite feeling overwhelming disgust and hatred for him at

times. Floyd, like many in Hopewell, is hurt, wanting for community and basic resources, and trying to do what they think is best given their circumstances and socialization. I think it is important recognize that Floyd faces the potential for ostracism from his family and community if he attempts to "go against the grain," so to speak. For Floyd, he has very little else outside of this community. Floyd is afraid, for his physical safety at times, and constantly of failing to fulfill the duties and responsibilities he has been taught throughout his life he must embody as a white man in his family and larger community. He knows on some level that he risks losing love and respect if he fails to perform in certain ways - love and respect from his father, wife, family, Hopewell, and himself. It is sad to see him increasingly devaluing the life of another human in order to rationalize and justify his actions.

While Floyd's harm is not invalid, he is still reproducing the very oppressions that are hurting others and himself. While Floyd is himself hurt by the patriarchy, racism, and capitalism that shapes his community, he is exempt from myriad violences and injustice enacted upon those who do not have the privileges of whiteness, like Armstrong Todd, or being a (cis) man, like his wife, Lily. If Floyd is concerned for his physical safety, what about Armstrong?

Floyd murders Armstrong Todd and nothing in this paragraph or in Floyd changes that reality. That being said, I understand Floyd's memories of being socialized as a young man and his professional relationship with Jake to reveal ways that he is operating outside of, to an extent, dominant logics regarding race and gender that constitute official social structure in Hopewell. Such a consciousness can allow greater recognition of the ways others are impacted by oppression and hold insight into what transformation of such oppression could look like. But Floyd murders Armstrong Todd and nothing in this paragraph or in Floyd changes that reality.

I also think that Clayton Pinochet was more aware of ways that injustice was present in Hopewell than many others around him, such as his father and perhaps other members of the HMM; he is also responsible for the death of Armstrong Todd. While Clayton has some pleasant thoughts and actions toward black people in the story, he seems to have a tremendous amount of guilt related to race as well. This guilt seems to come from his being able to sense the contradiction of the hierarchical social order in which he exists. Because he has somewhat close relationships with a few black people, he is able to see that the normative racialized assumptions in (but not unique to) Hopewell that hold up such a hierarchized social order, are not truly telling. He can see at least to some extent the pain, anger, and humanity that black people possess in a community that hates them and may, as is made clear, have them killed with no acknowledgment or reparation.

I think, perhaps he knows that he does not belong in an unmerited, "higher" position, and his guilt and desire to "save" or "rescue" black people is his way of dealing with something he can hardly speak out loud to of with others in his community. I think this is a warped notion of coming to terms with the privilege and position he possesses, though it may be very well-intentioned on his end. Ultimately, however, Armstrong Todd is dead, his family is in mourning, the black community in Hopewell has received one more message about the value of and their right to their lives.

The novel was written in 1992, set in the 1950s and based upon the story of Emmett Till, murdered in MS in 1955; what stories are being written today?