

Those bones are not my child by toni cade bambara research paper

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



This novel deals with the series of puzzling disappearances and murders of black youth in Atlanta in the late 1970s and early 1980s and was published posthumously after being edited by Toni Morrison. Bambara explores “ the ways in which government power and politics, communal paranoia, and personal suffering transform the Rawls family” (Greene p. 338). Because it centers on one city and one family, and real events and deals with a sensitive series of racial crimes, it has tended to be read as part of the African American tradition of fiction. Indeed at the very end of the novel Zala quotes from famous black poets when she addresses the final meeting: Gwendolyn Brook, Andrew Salkey, and Maya Angelou; she wears a T shirt that bears the title of an Alexis De Veaux poem. (Bambara p. 658). This essay will explore those links with the African American tradition, but it will go on to argue that the novel goes beyond its seemingly small focus on Atlanta to deal with global issues. It will also argue that the way Bambara has written this novel as a “ panoptic montage”, according to Greene (p340), encourages a multitude of perspectives on the novel’s subject matter, even though overall it remains the story of Zala and her “ transformation from shocked mother to the empowered activist who confronts government agencies that trivialize Sonny’s disappearance” (Green p 339).

Much of the novel is seen from Zala’s perspective as she and her family struggle to find out what has happened to Sonny and to repair their own relationships with each other. Bambara, however, often shifts the narrative perspective so that the reader suddenly sees events through Spence’s eyes and these shifts of perspective are mixed in with personal reminiscences. These shifts of time and place and character are appropriate in a novel in

which the central character is struggling to discover the truth. As readers we go through a similar experience as we shift perspective, shift time, hear different theories about what has happened to the missing children, and try to follow the interplay of characters. This way of telling the story mirrors what Zala is going through. It is not just that we are told what Zala is going through. The narrative makes us experience what Bell (p169) calls:

Zala's discontinuous, retrospective reflections on the injustice, incompetence, irresponsibility, insensitivity and inadequacy of the detective and investigative reports by the authorities, media, journalists, and writers.

At times we sense Zala's genuine confusion:

Had the children been killed because they were Black, or should she say because the murderers were white? Had the authorities marginalized Dettlinger because he was white, because the high command was Black? Had the memo writers' warnings been trivialized because they were females, their supervisors male? (Bambara p. 149)

This is an interesting quotation because it fuses issues of class, race and gender which are all at the heart of the problem of the authorities' and the media's response. Ironically, since from the start of the novel we have seen Zala's growing fears from the very first morning that Sonny did not come home, the parents are, in every case, the chief suspects or, in some local gossip, at least guilty of neglecting the children who are missing. Again the question of class and race is raised in the conversation that Zala and Kofi have after the police have labelled the missing children " juvenile

delinquents” (Bambara p. 199). These slurs make Zala angry, implying that she is a bad mother because she lets her children go out:

We go lots of places, 'cause a lot of people fought hard for our right to go any damn place where we please. But when the children go out like they've a right to and some maniac grabs them, then it's the children's fault or the parents' who should've been watching every minute, like we don't have to work like dogs just to put food on the table. (Bambara p. 200)

She goes on to say that if you live “ in a certain part of town” (Bambara p. 200), then people have certain prejudiced stereotypes about who you are and what you are like. Economic segregation leads to the same stereotyping that racial stereotyping once did. It is also interesting that Zala refers in that speech to the history of the struggle for civil rights in the South, because the fractured, broken family in this novel has its counterparts and forerunners in many novels by African American women writers (such as *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*) and, of course, was the actual experience of generations of slaves, whose owners deliberately separated family groups by simply selling them to other slave-owners.

One of the reasons that the authorities seem to want to keep the abductions and murders out of the media spotlight is so that it does not tarnish the image of the new Atlanta. Bone (p. 22) argues that Bambara deliberately criticizes the gap between the image of Atlanta as a modern, international city that has a global and open outlook (the image favoured by the city authorities and peddled by the media), with the real Atlanta of empty,

abandoned lots and waste ground, strewn with garbage. The reader becomes familiar with this real Atlanta because of Zala's work with the search parties which scour waste ground in their search for the missing children. This notion of the reality of place is signalled early in the novel when Zala remembers her father when she was a young girl making sure she understood that the Atlanta they had a stake in was not the mythical one dreamed up in the guidebooks, the billboards, the newspaper ads, the novels, the glossy brochures with tables of figures and graphs and maps showing gray areas slated for "demographic changes and redevelopment." Atlanta, the real one, was documented in the sketchbooks, the scrapbooks, the photo albums, the deeds, family Bibles, in the memories and mouths of the elders. (Bambara p. 84)

It is especially appropriate that Zala should develop so much in the course of the novel that her speech at the very end of the novel is accompanied by the encouragement of her listeners: "Tell it!", "Tell the people" - and when she closes her speech with the words "Coerced silence is terrorism", a member of the congregation agrees - "Say it again, sister!" (Bambara pp. 659-661). The real Atlanta is in Zala's experience and in Bambara's rendering of it in this extraordinary novel.

Zala is not the only character who changes in the course of the novel: every member of the family does, but the one I find most interesting is Kenti. While the adults discuss community issues and the campaign for the truth, Kenti stages a play for the children based on the story of the Prodigal Son from the Bible. Like her mother and like Bambara, Kenti is a teller. She wants to "

write a good last scene” and is perplexed that there is no mother mentioned in the Bible because “ she had good lines for the mother to say.” (Bambara p. 647). Kenti is astute to have noticed the patriarchal bias of the Bible and by the end of the novel she has realized what the adults have taken so long to learn: “ the lesson was that people who struggled in the dark and got scared should keep on with the struggling and then they’ll be blessed and can change.” (Bambara p. 648). Kenti’s play, like her mother’s speech, ends the novel on a note of hope through “ telling” and through solidarity for the black community of Atlanta.

But for me what makes this novel great is not Zala’s progression from scared mother to activist or the way the community coheres to question the authorities. It is the way that Bambara extends the story to take in issues of global corruption and malpractice. We first get a hint of this in Spence’s thoughts about his experience in Vietnam: “ He had killed. He had killed children... One My Lai per serviceman.” (Bambara p 104-5). Bambara reminds us constantly through the novel that what the authorities did during the Atlanta Child Murders is part of a wider cover up by those in authority all over the world, and the victims are minorities, the powerless, the silent. Martyn Bone argues that Bambara moves from such local politics of place, centred on the neighbourhood and the body, to resituate ‘ international’ Atlanta within a world-system of inequality of oppression. (Bone p. 222)

The ending of the novel has already been referred to - the play that Kofi puts on and the speech that Zala makes - and it does affirm the importance of ‘ telling’ and community activism (it is very reminiscent of the ending of

Morrison's *Beloved* when the community of black women finally chase away Sethe's past and, as an ending, offers the same message, I would argue - that it is only through being united that communities of black women can survive). However, that is not the end of the novel: the final page mentions the covert activities of Oliver North outside the USA, in order to highlight global oppression of the poor by those in power - In addition to arming the thug Savimbi to topple Angola, Oliver North also organized the invasion of Grenada. (Bambara p. 669).

This connection between the corruption of the authorities and the complicity of the media is signalled throughout the novel as a key concern. Spence, while waiting for Zala, is reminded of the abuses of those in power everywhere:

The junta, hit lists, government by torture. The bullet-ridden corpse of Che Guevara; the attacks on the Tupermaro in Uruguay; the overthrow of Allende; the forced sterilization of Andean labourers; the wholesale slaughter of the Quiche Indians in Guatemala; Argentine Jewry one percent of the population, twenty per cent of the disappeared. Strikers in U. S. companies in Central and South America disappearing. (Bambara p. 175).

Zala's awareness of global issues is an integral part of her growth as an activist and Bambara explicitly links the situation in Atlanta with other injustices throughout the world -many of which are characterized by government complicity. Even a brief conversational reference to the favelas (the slum shanty towns) of Brazil keeps in the reader's mind the global phenomenon of the gap between the rich and the poor. (Bambara p. 481).

For me that is the true power of *Those Bones Are Not My Child* – that Bambara succeeds in “illuminating the interconnectedness of the political and social abuses of people of color all over the planet.” (Gordon & Gordon p. 199).

Works Cited

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