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Review Article

Rooted in Resistance: Correlating Memory, Heritage, and the Pursuit of Equality in Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land*

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Abstract

This paper underscores the crucial role of heritage awareness in the ongoing struggle for liberation and social affirmation of African American communities. It critically examines the correlation between black cultural and spatial memory and the fight for social equality in Dolen Perkins-Valdez's work *Happy Land,* illustrating how heritage awareness and preservation function as foundations for identity, resistance, and social dignity. Through the novel, it tries to make the case on how memory and heritage empower resistance and can empower the ongoing pursuit of equality for African Americans. The study also observes that dominant groups often shape historical narratives to their advantage, marginalizing minorities and depriving the latter of the benefits embedded in their own history. Thus, passing down black heritage through storytelling empowers marginalized African Americans communities to reclaim and preserve their ancestral legacy and assert their claim to collective ownership of the American land. Through a psychoanalytic lens, the study explores how the affirmation of heritage not only fosters a sense of belonging and entitlement but also restores dignity to African Americans.

Keywords: black heritage awareness, identity, dignity, entitlement to social equality.

INTRODUCTION

In an era shaped by the rapid pace of modernization and its emphasis on individual freedom and material progress, Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land* shows that the concepts of heritage and identity remain major pillars in the ongoing struggle for resistance, equality and social recognition. Today, many African Americans, in the image of Nikki, the main protagonist in Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land,* fail to grasp the formative role of their own history in shaping their lived realities. They hardly perceive the correlation between identity and heritage. The connection between identity and heritage often appear attenuated, obscured by the social pressures of assimilation, mobility and present-oriented culture that privileges immediacy over memory. However, heritage is far from being a static, antiquated inheritance confined to the past. Black heritage today actively informs the economic, social and political experiences of African American communities, whose histories have been marked by displacement and dispossession.

This paper argues that for African Americans, descendants of enslaved workers, the preservation of heritage and identity goes beyond the mere remembrance and is woven into the testament to the resistance and adaptation that have enabled survival against the odds of enslavement, of Jim Crow and of current mass incarceration. African Americans have used these frameworks of resistance and resilience rooted in history to transform adversity into a source of collective strength and pride. Back in history, Black people showed the use of prophetic traditions fused with African spiritual cosmologies as a means of resistance and resilience through the enslaved workers' revolt led by Nat Turner in 1831. The Underground Railroad efforts of the 1800s-1865s, with reliance on the inherited values of family ties and codes of communications, heavily relied on Black legacy. Similarly, the leading activists of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement articulated their struggle as the continuation of a long Black freedom struggle rooted in the earlier anti-lynching campaigns.

Based on these observations, this paper brings under analysis frameworks of resistance and resilience grounded in history and legacy, focusing on their role as it emerges in the fight for social affirmation in Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land*. It makes its analysis from a psychoanalytic theoretical framework, interpreting *Happy Land* as a multifaceted strategy of resistance. It studies the mechanisms by which Mother Rita and Nikki preserve and value their ancestral heritage and identity

and how collective memory serves for them both as a shield and a sword, in the struggle for survival. The analysis is carried out with the aim of awakening in Black people a renewed awareness of the wealth of the heritage bequeathed by ancestors which holds the promise of a more inclusive and empowered future.

1- Heritage Awareness and Preservation as Foundations of Identity and Resistance

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the concept of heritage as a property that is or may be inherited, as well as valued objects and qualities such as historic buildings and cultural traditions that have been passed down from previous generations. In this paper, it is viewed as the living inheritance of memory, values, practices, as well as assets, that are transmitted across generations, binding individuals to a shared past while shaping their sense of belonging, identity and responsibility in the present. Toni Morrison, in her seminal essay *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation* (1984), insists on the necessity of understanding and preserving ancestral heritage as a fundamental tool for self-discovery. She warns that the absence of a conscious historical connection can be perilous, depriving individuals and communities of the roots necessary for growth and fulfillment. Through intergenerational transmission, both physical and symbolic heritage becomes a source of affirmation, entitlement, and dignity. Today, however, lots of black people fail to correlate heritage to identity in the fight for social equality, thinking that historical experiences are just mere happenings of the past. As Nikki states in the novel, before she moves along her developmental arc, "To me, Appalachia [the place where her ancestors inhabited] is a concept. Something on television specials. Something I associate with old-time music" (Perkins-Valdez 17).

One important foregrounding element in Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land*'s exposition is Nikki Lovejoy-Berry, the second main protagonist, a Washington, D.C. real estate agent, being summoned by her grandmother, Mother Rita, to visit her in the Appalachian town of Zirconia, North Carolina. Once she arrives, she finds out that Mother Rita is terminally ill, and needs assistance in fighting a developer attempting to recover their ancestral land. Mother Rita has summoned Nikki to tell her about the stratagem which the Thomas brothers fashioned to evict her from her ancestral land where she has been living after the loss of their large land heritage twenty years before. The old lady's attachment to the land is expressive of Perkins-Valdez's portrayal of heritage as a precious living continuum collectively entrusted to the care of all the descendants of Queen Luella:

> Now our entire family will be stewards of this place once again, will understand this rootedness is a gift. When we call ourselves kings and queens, it isn't just a fantasy of Black pride. It means something. I am the descendant of a queen, a real queen, and I guess that makes me one, too. (Perkins-Valdez 303)

The later affirmation of Nikki's rootedness in her heritage in the book stands as a reclamation of identity. Heritage encompasses some concepts as family, tradition, cultural background, repositories of memory and meaning upon which claims of birthright, belonging and property can legitimately rest, as they confer continuity across generations. They root individual and collective identities in a shared past which provides a stable foundation for social recognition. The intergenerational transmission process serves to preserve the wealth; the rich experiences embedded within this heritage for future heirs.

The awareness of the past is able to expand personal ambition since it buffers the post traumatic syndrome of deprivation and truncating. The protagonist Nikki confesses to this after her reckoning when she states: "I realized that maybe I would've done different if I'd known I was descended from royalty. Maybe I would've gone to college or dreamed bigger. Maybe I would've understood that the possibilities for my future were limitless" (Perkins-Valdez 281). Her previous ignorance illustrates the overall situation of African Americans who were denied knowledge of their ancestral and histories. The deficiency of the knowledge of their royal and noble lineage chipped their expectations into limited dreams and opportunities. Nobody can believe that all African Americans are descendants of kings and queens. But the fact is that, due to conscious obliteration, the only patch of their history that Black people in the USA are fully aware of, is the memory of enslavement and humiliation. The lack of the knowledge about less humiliating patches of personal and collective histories comes from the absence of the intergenerational transmission.

For Mother Rita, the transmission process involves a collective negotiation of identity [self], whereby the kingdom memories such as land ownership, the racial violence and resistance faced from the Ku Klux Klan, the founding and leadership established by Queen Luella and her husband King William Montgomery, the narratives of self-sufficiency and culture are mobilized to serve as compass for subsequent generations. So, new generations, Smith writes, find their path "using the past, and collective memories, to negotiate new ways of being and expressing identity" (45). The rich narratives embedded in Mother Rita's cultural heritage thus function as a foundation for resistance and social affirmation for her people, as a marginalized community in America.

Nikki's reconnection with her grandmother, symbolically linking the future to the past, symbolizes what is known as Pohlhaus's "standpoint epistemology" (2002). Paulhaus argues that communities gain a deeper and more authoritative understanding of the world

through interactive, shared practices that question dominant systems of knowledge, rather than through individual identity alone. It is a framework that states that individuals' social identity, considered in isolation versus in relation to their communities, makes a great difference in how they shape their own worth, their understanding of the world and their place within it. The *standpoint theory* highlights that people like Mother Rita and the Lovejoy family in position of marginalization and historical erasure, are able to conclude a turning point in the life experience of each member by first of all collectively putting a curb on the initial expropriation dynamic.

The influence of this framework leads Nikki to get involved in the legal battle to reclaim the family land. Her involvement, surprisingly, enables her to tap into the remarkable family history, the kingdom of the Happy Land: her great-great-great-grandmother, Luella, was the queen of a self-sustaining community known as the Kingdom of t Happy Land. To win the battle of regaining the land, Nikki goes to the lawyer R.J, an offspring of Jola Casey, one of Queen Luella's friends back then, and asks for assistance. Through judicial procedures, the lawyer R.J defends the Lovejoy family at the Henderson County Courthouse. It looks first difficult to gain the land back but thanks to the law of the "adverse possession" which states that if a person occupies a property for a certain length of time, in an open notorious fashion, while improving upon the land and living on it as if it is their own, they can claim title, the judge issues a temporary stay on the eviction and finally rules that Nikki's family are the rightful owners of four acres out of the fifty acres left by Luella and William for their descendants as heritage. One also understands that property right comes from occupancy, as is the case in all societies. African Americans' entitlement to the shared American land ownership comes from the collective history of work and suffering, of hundred years of hard life experiences.

Despite Queen Luella's significant historic achievements, struggles, and rich heritage, the Montgomery brothers, Robert and William, their descendants, Lorelle, Mother Rita and Nikki, continue to experience material and immaterial dispossession due to the systemic erasure of their history. This is also seen today in contemporary society, and notably in the United States. The current social status of African Americans reflects inherited fears, and unconscious traumas, and, with acute precision, the torment that Nikki faces, aligns with Nicolas Abraham and Maria Török's theory of transgenerational haunting. The theory posits that unresolved ancestral trauma is unconsciously transmitted across generations. This is compounded by family silences and repressed memories, factors that contribute to a pervasive sense of "trepidation" and the emergence of "vigilante groups" within these communities (Crouch 63). As mapped in *Happy Land*, the matriarchs (Luella, Rita and Lorelle) embody inherited silences. Some patches of Black history may be restrained to protect descendants from dominant oppressions, while others are lost to systemic erasure. The oppressed minority's voluntary forgetting of painful historical episodes, combined with the dominant class's systematic erasure of the community's proud and resistant past, produces a generational wound that Nikki must courageously confront in her quest.

To address her challenges, Nikki requires a conscious reconstruction of identity that enhances her capacity to confront the distorted and repressed patches of her history imposed by dominant groups and to develop what can be conceptualized, in Lacan's jargon, as a 'mirror stage' or self-recognition. Psychologically, such reconstruction is feasible through processes of awareness, self-definition, and preservation, particularly when supported by a rich oral tradition (McDaniel 33). This fact evidences the critical role of oral tradition in confronting and overcoming historical erasure.

The confrontation of repressed histories, whether through intergenerational transmission, physical and symbolic preservation of heritage, or intergenerational reconciliation, is essential for healing the wounds inflicted by systemic erasure. Within this framework, Mother Rita in *Happy Land* illustrates that the preservation of Black ancestral heritage transcends mere physical and symbolic acts. And in content, this preservation reflects more physical significance and symbolic facts. It is invigorating for Queen Luella's descendant to hear exactly the message of hope, joy and celebration she utters when she founded her beautiful havens of peace, she proudly calls kingdom:

> In that year of our Lord, 1894, nearly thirty years into freedom, hundreds of years after our people first landed on these shores, we lifted our arms to the sky. The kingdom had been more than grass, trees, and dirt—this land had the power, wonder-working healing power, to save us. It was God's promise to the poor in spirit, our kingdom of heaven, our treasure. (Perkins-Valdez 267)

Her kingdom symbolizes for Mother Rita the Happy Land, God's promise, a promised land of liberation and dignity. That happy land, in the symbolism of Perkins-Valdez's novel, is nothing more than the American land where everyone is supposed to be happy. Queen Luella furthermore assimilates the 46 acres in Appalachia [later reduced to 4 acres], to the "kingdom of heaven" endowed with a "wonder-working healing power." The heavenly salvation on earth that she refers to is the salvation from shame and humiliation, deprivation and scorn, the entitlement to political and economic empowered like any other American.

Mother Rita's preservation of collective memory for years becomes a social and psychological imperative intimately connected to the transmission of

identity and to survival as a whole. On the one hand, emphasizing intergenerational transmission of heritage enhances Nikki in developing keen interest in her family, enhancing self-esteem and self-awareness. On the other hand, the belated recognition of her heritage had thus far obstructed her devotion to family property and deferred the fulfillment of her potential. Nikki's failure to fulfil her ambitions in *Happy Land* is premised on an epistemic rupture: the belatedness of duty's revelation, which might have otherwise disciplined her labor into purpose. She herself confesses to that, stating: "…maybe I would've done different if I'd known I was descended from royalty. Maybe I would've gone to college or dreamed bigger. Maybe I would've understood that the possibilities for my future were limitless" (Perkins-Valdez 281). These brighter prospects are the ground on which the battle for equality is fought. The depreciated sense of the self she initially had negatively impacted Nikki's social dreams. The understanding of these connections between the past, her ancestral history, and the present, her current struggles, restores her capacity of resistance in confronting forthcoming adversities in a society rife with racism. Memory creates historical consciousness which in turn empowers descendants' sense of self-reflection and awareness by increasing their connection to ancestors. Reversely, the lack of historical consciousness engenders a perilous rupture (Morrison 331). The rupture creates a late start in many African Americans' personal journey, which Nikki personally experiences (Perkins-Valdez 302-317). This fosters a collective amnesia wherein Blacks, unmoored from ancestral narratives, are condemned to an existence of destabilized pursuits, adrift between the void of unbelonging and the ceaseless negotiation of selfhood: "If we don't keep in touch with the ancestors, Toni Morrison argues, we are, in fact, lost" (331). Disconnection from the past kills the ancestors who constitute our roots. "When you kill the ancestors, Morrison goes on, you kill yourself" (Morrison 331).

As exemplified in Perkins-Valdez's *Happy Land*, the transmission of heritage occurs through oral traditions. The novelist dusting and exposing the lost memory of Happy Land community contributes in linking to that past. In the novel, Mother Rita recounts the story of Queen Luella, Nikki's great-great-great-grandmother, to reconnect her granddaughter to her family lineage. This mirrors historical African traditions where griots preserve communal memory. The novel suggests that stories are tools of resilience which can allow descendants to dream big, to get confidence and ambition.

2- Heritage as a Means of Social Affirmation, Entitlement to Belonging, and Dignity

Heritage, whether material like buildings and artifacts, or immaterial like languages, traditions, cultures, serves as a means for marginalized groups to claim their presence and to withset erasure. For Mother Rita, self-assertion and opposing erasure need a kinship relationship between family members and an understanding of ancestral heritage. Nikki furthermore emphasizes that heritage serves to maintain connection as a family and a knowledge of ancestral heritage. However, losing heritage means you lose emancipation, autonomy, and connection. As in the following statement, the kingdom exists only when the its rightful subjects hold sway over their land, live like a community, and claim their belonging to a culture. The metaphorical collapse of the kingdom is its subjects lapsing back into bondage after they have enjoyed the privilege of owning a piece of land instead of being owned as property, being worked as animals instead of working the earth on their own and for their survival and profit. The kingdom collapses when people lose their control over their land, their influence, autonomy, and connection to one another, which is nothing less than psychological emasculation:

> Losing the kingdom has meant we've lost connection as a family and our knowledge of ancestral legacy. We're no longer stewards of the land. Mama no longer puts her hands in the earth, and neither do any of us descendants. Maybe if we still owned a place for repair and refuge, we wouldn't have crumbled into pieces as a family. (Perkins-Valdez 169)

These understanding fuels mother Rita's persistence in pursuing her ancestral heritage for many years. The Lovejoys experience a setback and get marginalized when they lost their family narratives about who their ancestors were, who descendants are. So they get entrapped into the narratives of their enemies who exhibit a false land deed and robbed the family of their property. By losing connection to their ancestors, they surrendered the power to others to define them and what they can achieve. There has always been a battle between master narratives and marginalized stories as to which one is true. Ultimately, we understand that history puts its stamp of truth only on versions that have survived and won and not on narratives that are closest to what really happened. Historical truth is always a battle between several narratives. This is what Nikki finally understands when she claims her family heritage with pride and confidence against the arguments of the usurper of their land: "You should know the kingdom is a local legend around here. I grew up hearing about it. There's a lot of rumors, of course. And a lot of misinformation and lies, I'm sure" (Perkins-Valdez 166). Whose narrative is ultimately called rumor, misinformation and lies, is contingent on the outcome of the confrontation between the two clans. If Nikki loses her battle, her truth, her family's right of ownership, is the version that becomes a lie and their adversaries' "truth" gets passed down to posterity since there is no truth that stands on its own when it is not relayed through narratives.

In that logic which highlights the values embedded in their narratives, Blacks have to reclaim their marginalized narratives. For Nikki, reclaiming her

marginalized narratives is about asserting identity for entitlement to belonging, to ownership, for dignity. It is the only way she can refuse to be cased into stereotypes and step "into her new self" (Perkins-Valdez 306). Furthermore, getting into a new self helps Nikki unveil a self-esteem by making to herself the promise to "be the great-great-great-granddaughter of Queen Luella's dreams" (306). She expresses a newly affirmed dedication to honoring her family's memory and sustaining a lineage marked by survival, creativity, and resistance:

Beneath that sun, I make a promise to myself. If I'm fortunate enough to be granted more time on this earth, I will read more books. I will plant lots of flowers. I will be the great-great-great-granddaught of Queen Luella's dreams. In this field, once tended by men and women stepping out of their past and into their future, I will seek the footsteps they left behind and I will walk in them. (Perkins-Valdez 306)

Eghan espouses the same ideology by highlighting that by reclaiming narratives, African Americans challenge dominant stories imposed on them and create new, more inclusive and inspiring narratives that reflect their ongoing prejudices and hopes. Mother Rita, in the same standpoint as Eghan, reclaims her marginalized family memories by not just telling her family history to her granddaughter Nikki but by confronting the dominant narratives the Thomas family imposed on her. By so doing, she metaphorically "plants lots of flowers". *Planting lots of flowers* is sowing the seeds of legacy keeping for the benefit of one's posterity, a way to confront the dominant narratives imposed on them. It is also to keep the culture and tradition of liberation, community-building and self-sufficiency alive. By the same token, planting lots of flowers constitutes the means of reclaiming marginalized family memories.

As well, mother Rita's narratives serve in resolving social conflicts. In *Happy Land*, the narrative is mapped as a vital tool able to put an end to social conflicts of land ownership. Happy land, even though it directly refers to a small "kingdom" erected by African Americans, is the metaphor for the United States of America that is home to Black people formerly enslaved who are also entitled to be happy living in the country they worked to build. Furthermore, when the Lovejoys are confronted to land issues in front of the Henderson County Courthouse, Nikki's lawyer R.J uses her own narratives as descendant of the kingdom of the Happy Land to convince the judge based on ″adverse possession″ to rule Lovejoy family as rightful landowner. This triumph in front of the court shows the importance of reclaiming narratives and using them to resolve social conflicts, aligning with the battle of self-assertion. Oral narratives serve as "source of information" (Tulius 187) and "the best way to learn anything" (LeClair 123).

On the one hand, Nikki's resolve to understand and learn narratives through actions like reading ["I will read more books"], planting ["I will plant lots of flowers"], and walking ["I will walk in them"] eventually renews the kinship relationship lost between the Lovejoys (Perkins-Valdez 183). Reading can be understood as getting knowledge, planting flowers as working for a more beautiful life, and walking standing one's ground, rightfully occupying the American territory. The interconnections that collective legacy builds finally solidify the Lovejoy family. Conversely, the ignorance and neglect of narratives breeds disconnection between family members opening gaps within the familial bond. This gap causes the deterioration of narratives in whole which leads to the systematic erasure of collective memories. There is an intricate, mutually sustaining relation between family and narratives of memory. In general, cultural, traditional and historical truths are variable and often created either for domination and oppression, or for survival.

Happy Land highlights the aftermaths of Lorelle's misconception and ignorance of the narratives of her family memories and ancestral heritage. When Lorelle Lovejoy, Nikki's mother, turns eighteen, her mother asks her for help to pay the property taxes. But she refuses to pay and leaves her mother in North Carolina and disappears. Lorelle's disinterest in everything about land ownership stands for means she takes the family history carried through storytelling for fairy tales. Had she cherished her cultural heritage, the Lovejoy family might not have lost their land. For too long, she has denied the existence of a queen and king on the land as her ancestors. Her neglect results into the loss of family memories and property. In addition, her neglect creates a disconnection between her daughter Nikki and ancestral heritage and she never knew anything about her ancestors until she turns almost forty years. These gaps triggered from Lorelle's obliquity create a decline in the trail of her ancestral heritage. Because of her neglect, the family loses fourty-six acres due to the transgenerational disconnection between the matriarchs. In conclusion, the Lovejoy family's inability to preserve their ancestral land heritage in its entirety can be attributed to a deficiency in intergenerational transmission of narratives. For many African Americans, a deep sense of "cultural homelessness" arises from the erasure or marginalization of black people's historical contributions, despite their ancestors playing a foundational role in the building of the nation. In response to this exclusion, Langston Hughes powerfully reclaims his sense of ownership and belonging this profound declaration, "I, too, am America" (Hughes). Hugues's statement underscores the urgency of preserving and sharing stories, as it is through such narratives that the past is connected to the present, empowering generations to gain awareness, honor, and uphold their heritage, preventing it from being lost to oblivion.

For the Lovejoys, a true way forward means aligning their personal path and vision with collective ancestral narratives, a stark contrast to the paradoxical reliance on official records in contemporary America, records often designed by those who perpetuated their marginalization. the result of the official records taught in schools is that it has become difficult for Nikki as well as for many Blacks to keep the memories of their ancestors, since "there is no systematic attempt to maintain tradition or memories of ancestors who have come from elsewhere" (Carsten 320).

Like Mother Rita did, who fights to her last breath holding on to her family land, challenging metanarratives on Black people, requires an active participation in constructing a sense of contemporary social belonging, enabling individuals to counter marginalization. As a historical account, for Tulius, custodians must "properly preserve a family story by carefully transmitting the content and significance of the story to following generations" (187). Narrative preservation and transmission is vital to entitlement to belonging and the fight for equality.

In general, devoted descendants like Mother Rita have to reclaim their ancestral narratives which are marginalized and challenge discourses which shape their collective memories, collective memories which symbolize their heritage for social affirmation, entitlement to belonging and dignity. It is by doing so that they carry memories and know their ancestors' aspirations for their descendants and align with their own mission in the generational continuum. Queen Luella hopefully affirms this when the kingdom regains fifty acres out of the two hundred acres they firstly bought: "carrying the hope that my children and my children's children would make something even better, that they'd carry with them the memory that we had tried our best to give them something like home" (Perkins-Valdez 301). Queen Luella's dream of "carrying the hope" voices her desire to break cycles of disconnection, trauma, and marginalization, and to create a brilliant and better future for coming generations, despite historical injustice and erasure. Even if *Happy Land* is a work of fiction, Perkins-Valdez partakes in the enterprise of narrative preservation by salvaging the memory of a real black community from historical erasure. Keeping memory alive is what minorities should all struggle to do. Mukherjee espouses the same line of thought, asserting: "it is through such folk tales that a consciousness of [minorities'] being and belonging can be forged" (22). This ideology is the root to opposite marginalization.

CONCLUSION

In Happy Land, Perkins-Valdez presents heritage as a living continuum. It is not a static, predefined concept that needs no evolution, but a thread spun with pride which each time needs preservation, intergenerational transmission, and continual redefinition. This paper highlights through *Happy Land* that heritage is ever evolving, with new contextual hopes, values grafted on the old, necessary for its survival. It argues that these contextual readjustments are provided by each custodian through their own rendering of the heritage. Furthermore, Mother Rita in her adventure illuminates that continuous narratives nurture the notion of ancestral heritage that is not turned backward, focusing on ancestors only, but a perpetual reinvention that can be preserved. When studying heritage, it is vital to pay attention to narratives which help marginalized communities like the Lovejoys to save their collective memories from oblivion and to claim social affirmation, entitlement and dignity. This is necessary to liberation.

By hailing heritage as a mode of cultural preservation, *Happy Land* invites readers to reconsider heritage as an active practice rather than a passive inheritance. Such a perspective emphasizes storytelling as a vital instrument through which memory, identity and resistance are continually sustained.

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