

Bombingham: Anthony Grooms's Contribution to Constructing Control over Black Representations in Contemporary American Literature

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Abstract: *Some Critics complain that American literature has done a poor job of accurately depicting blacks and that an authentic portrait presenting the black man as a free American citizen has not yet been painted. In the main, these complaints draw upon the notion that early and modern American fiction confined the images of African Americans to stereotypically limited depictions, exemplified as primitive characters that needed the protection of the 'benevolent' whites they served.*

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A dramatic change took place, nevertheless. On the 15th of September, 1963, racially motivated bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham killed four black girls, and this incident generated an unprecedented literary response from black writers, who started to gain more of a sense in black pride and cultural identity as well.

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Almost as soon as blacks could write, it seems, they set out to redefine – against already received racist stereotypes – who and what a black person was. (Henry Louis Gates: 1984, 131)

Some Critics complain that American literature has done a poor job of accurately depicting blacks and that "an authentic portrait, at once aesthetic and true to life, presenting the black man as a free American citizen, not the humble slave of Uncle Tom's Cabin ... has not yet been painted" (Cooper: 1988, 222-3). In the main, these complaints draw upon the notion that early and modern American fiction confined the images of African Americans to stereotypically limited depictions, exemplified as primitive characters that needed the protection of the 'benevolent' whites they served. Their positive depictions in urban settings were "neither prevalent nor acceptable to the literary establishment" and, with few exceptions, "African American characters who were placed in urban spaces were portrayed using the pastoral identities that had been defined by [white] ...

authors" (Morgan: 2004, 213). Ironically, but not surprisingly, these representations, which had the blacks as servile and dependent and, sometimes, rude and dangerous characters, were made to appear as the only legitimate and acceptable representations of African Americans. Black authors, therefore, found that obtaining access to correct narrative representation was not simple: to turn the field into a viable space for black representation would require genuine social changes that many whites were unwilling to make. The fact is that many popular white writers "met the threat of black upward mobility in their fiction with ridicule, caricature, and at last resort, force" (Andrews: 1980, 79).

A dramatic change took place, nevertheless. In the 1950s and 1960s, Birmingham, Alabama, was the centre of the civil rights movement aimed at abolishing racial discrimination against black Americans. The struggle relied mainly on mass mobilization, non-violent resistance and civil disobedience¹. But the turning-point occurred on 15th of September, 1963 when racially motivated bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in the city killed four black girls, in a drive aimed to terrorize and intimidate (Hampton and Fayer: 1990, 171). The incident generated an unprecedented literary response from black American writers, who started to gain more of a sense in black pride and cultural identity as well.

This paper aims at examining how Anthony Grooms's novel *Bombingham* has contributed to representing black characters and constructing a black identity that challenges the stereotypical depictions dominating the pre-Birmingham era².

Grooms has, until recently, been known through only some articles and a few reviews, and presentations; published critical and analytical studies of his works are still very few. Yet, his poetry, short stories and his first novel, *Bombingham*, which signals "the emergence of a brave and promising talent, fully equipped to take on the writer's task of confronting chaos and wrestling it into form" (Asim, 2001), are read in schools and universities in several states in his home country, the United States of America. He is also known in academic and literary circles in some African and European countries, where he has delivered keynote speeches at conferences and has been interviewed by journalists and men of letters.

In *Bombingham*, and in *Trouble No More*, his book of short stories, Grooms reveals that he is capable of speaking for his fellow black Americans' experiences in the past century, especially the experience of their struggle to face the challenges imposed on them in a society of racial inequality. His works, as Diptiranjana Pattanaik states, demonstrate "the insider's profound knowledge of the history and struggles of African Americans, while consistently managing to circumscribe his breadth of understanding with a tender story-telling art" (1999: 193).

Grooms's writings are not, however, the only literary representations of the cause he stands for. Besides him, many other African American poets and novelists, who have made the 1963 Birmingham events their point of departure, have in their writings shown collective determination against forgetting. They

have often been attempting to ensure that generations of Americans would not, borrowing Coleman's words, "fall prey to historical amnesia" (Coleman: 2000, 2).

Towards this end, the primary concern of many poets, who were among the first to respond to the 1963 Birmingham bombing, has been to show that historical and present day conflicts are interconnected. Such linkages with regard to the Civil Rights Movement and literature help to (re)situate readers inside or close to the historical events and sites addressed.

Dudley Randall's poem, *The Ballad of Birmingham*, published very soon after the church bombing, is – for example – one of the most eloquent models of a text that accomplishes this type of audience 'relocation.' It is an elegiac record of how the poet was moved to create a poetic response to the 1963 happenings. It intersects and unites history and poetry, whereby the "suffering, violence, oppression, and resistance are translated into verses and preserved, "for the sake of preserving a collective cultural memory." (Lenz: 1984, 29)

This poem, which acquired fame as the earliest response to the bombing, appears to have set the tone for many other works to follow. It begins with a child asking her mother if she may "go downtown / instead of out to play, / and march the streets of Birmingham / in a freedom march today." The mother prevents her daughter from doing so but allows her to "go to church instead / and sing in the children's choir." Although the mother "smiled to know her child / was in the sacred place," it "was the last smile / to come upon her face." Then the poem ends: "For when she heard the explosion, / her eyes grew wet and wild. / She raced through the streets of Birmingham / calling for her child. / She clawed through bits of glass and brick, / Then lifted out a shoe. / O, here's the shoe my baby wore, / but, baby, where are you?" (Bell: 1972, 71-72)

This same sense of fear and terror can be found in other poems written after and about the Church bombing. One significant representative text is *Birmingham Sunday*, by Langston Hughes, which is grounded in the immediate circumstances surrounding the bombing. He opens the poem with a scene of "Four little girls / Who went to Sunday School that day / And never came back home at all" (Rampersad: 1995, 557), and succeeds in capturing the anger caused by the bombing.

Raymond Patterson's 1965 poem, entitled *Birmingham 1963*, echoes similar images. It begins with a mother's hands "weaving the two thick braids" of her daughter's hair on Sunday morning, but ends with that same mother searching for her lost child, who is "alone amid the rubble, amid the people/ who perish, being innocent.

By creating this mood, the poet provides the reader with a lasting, though unpleasant, image of the young girl literally buried inside the church (Adoff: 1973, 209-210).

With the novels about the Birmingham 1963 event, things get more sophisticated as broader space for argument is available for fiction than for poetry, due to the differences between the two genres. In addition, the fact that

the 1963 Birmingham event, which "circulates through American memory in forms and through channels that are at once powerful, dangerous and hotly contested," has resulted in a dominant narrative that "distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals" (Hall: 2005, 1233). Nevertheless, the powers of ideology and political contestation that can twist, distort and suppress the narrative, can also be defied and countered, and this may be done by telling a more expansive, more progressive and truer story (Ibid, 1235) and by "compelling us take a closer look at how we are telling the story" (Metress: 2005, 2).

In this process of defiance, in this process of countering, one may highlight the significance of Birmingham emerging as a place of a powerful tendency to incorporate literature and history, to read fiction as "imaginative investigations of real historical forces and real historical circumstances" (Gallagher: 1967, 378).

Beauregard James's novel, *The Road to Birmingham*, which was published as early as 1964, is the first fictional work drawing upon the Birmingham legacy. It tells the story of a mixed-race group of eleven men and women, and one eight year old girl, who decide one morning to leave Harlem and head South to "help relieve the siege of Birmingham." They never get to the 'Magic City', however. As they travel the South in the most indirect route possible to Birmingham, they face a series of misadventures.³ Finally, a band of Klansmen, who have been chasing the freedom riders on their way to the city, catch up with them as they hide for the night in a deserted cottage just outside Birmingham. That evening, the up-until-now harmless Klansmen beat and rape the freedom riders – men and women alike – and the strongest in their group, a black ex-boxer, is dismembered joint by joint, and then decapitated. The remaining freedom riders turn around and go home.

The Road to Birmingham closes with a condemnation of the city and concludes that the struggles of its people have amounted to nothing. In a language that turns against the non-violent vision of hopeful activists, such as Martin Luther King, Beauregard James writes:

. . . who were the death makers who hurled the bomb into the church and shattered the bodies of little children because their skins were black? [Our adventure] had pointed the finger of guilt at all white America and at all black men who preach non-violent resistance in a world reduced to a howling jungle. . . The violent ones and the non-violent ones – we are all equally guilty. We are all involved in the fate of every human being on earth, and when a pretty little girl is bombed, and her head blown off, her blood is spilled upon our faces – we lie broken and shattered in the dust and rubble of our spiritual lives. (pp. 190-91)

Other early novels, such as George Davis's *Coming Home* (1972), and John A. Williams's *Captain Blackman* (1972) have the themes that aim at true black representations, but they mostly emphasize in direct reportage the role of black characters in the Vietnam War (Julien: 2006, 6). *Coming Home*, for example, introduces white characters who spout racist thoughts about the Vietnamese while black protagonists speak up against the war using arguments based upon

black perspectives. In *Captain Blackman*, for its part, the significant role played by African Americans in the military is highlighted. Captain Abraham Blackman is a U.S. soldier in Vietnam who is seriously wounded during a search-and-destroy mission. As he drifts in and out of consciousness, he hallucinates about the role of the black soldier past and present in each of America's wars.

Anthony Grooms's 2001 novel, *Bombingham*, and Sena Jeter Naslund's 2003 novel, *Four Spirits*, have a common focus. However, they differ significantly. *Four Spirits* can undoubtedly be read as a literary attempt to reconstruct the story of Birmingham with hope and redemption. With its large cast of characters, black and white, the novel opens with the 1963 protests and ends almost two years later. In the months leading up to the church bombing, these characters try to find their place in a changing city. The author weaves together the lives of blacks and whites at these turbulent times in order to create a real picture of a transforming society.

The novel's main protagonist, Stella Silver, is an idealistic, young white college student who was brought up by her polite, well-educated aunts. She first witnesses the events of the freedom movement from a safe distance but, along with her friend Cat Cartwright, is soon drawn into the confrontation. Her and her friend's lives are forever changed by their new friendships with other committed freedom fighters. Another character, Christine Taylor, is a student at a black college who is inspired to action by the examples of Martin Luther King Jr., and other Civil Rights Movement leaders. Her friend Gloria Callahan, a descendant of a slave, tries to move beyond her personal shyness to join the protests. Lionel Parrish, a teacher and peddler of funeral insurance, and New York activist Jonathan Green work together for racial justice in their segregation-stricken country.

Signaling a turning point in the concluding pages of the first section, Stella Silver goes with several of her white friends to a black nightclub and, after some caution, finds herself "dancing among colored people," thinking that "Birmingham [was] swaying into the future" and may be "she [too] could heal, with her city" (p. 123). However, the novel jumps from May to September, and we are thrust into the rubble of the church bombing and the voices that form a "chorus of grief, horror, grief, [and] outrage" (p. 150). The novel's black characters "boil with hatred" and "howl with revenge" (p. 153), and they recall King's "I Have a Dream" Speech and wonder, "[w]as this what they had caused when they had answered the call in August [and] marched on Washington" (p. 151). Naslund goes on to describe one black character's experience in the funeral for three of the four little girls as "an empty vessel, she had filled, first with rage, now with despair," and, therefore, "things would never change" (p. 167).

The novel does not end here, however. In the remaining pages, the novel attempts to recast Birmingham as a story that must acknowledge both rage and despair, but only as stages in a drive towards transformation. Along this line, many black and white characters eventually regain 'hope' in the future. The

novel, moreover, shows that although four members of these hopeful activists are later racially killed, an integrated funeral service offered in their honor comes to call for leaving sorrow and injustice behind. For this to take place, the story about the Birmingham event, the novel reveals, must be told to compel people to sympathize across the races, a story that obliges them to see how the sorrow and injustice of that dark yesterday help to set the foundation for a brighter tomorrow.

Bombingham is different from its predecessors and its contemporaries. The narrative strategies used in the early representations of Beauregard James's *The Road to Birmingham*, George Davis's *Coming Home*, and John A. Williams's *Captain Blackman*, or in the most recent novel of Sena Jeter Naslund, *Four Spirits*, do not overcome the sense of indeterminacy that has characterized the literature reflecting debates over the possibility of genuine redemption, over the future of racial differences, and over the causes of the perpetuated black poverty. In the very heart of these debates, it seems, is the contested place that Birmingham has held, and continues to hold, in the black memory and imagination. What has prolonged these arguments is the fact that "the larger national racial dilemma remains unresolved even now, a generation after the passage of most of the major civil rights legislation and King's assassination" (Eagles: 2000, 227). With no resolution of these problems, and with no expectation that a solution will soon be achieved, "many believe that the civil rights movement has not only not ended but indeed must go on" (ibid) and that misreading the church bombing legacy may perpetuate such dilemmas.

With such an argument, *Bombingham* announces that a more coherent 'racial consciousness' is in the make, based upon admitting that racial troubles, in fact, "do exist and persist, both physically and, more important and long lasting, psychologically." (Grooms, 2005: xiv). Stemming from this point of departure, attempts to create a viable form of Blackness in fiction have been aimed at constructing an alternate space for theorizing black subjectivity, one that allows black authors to go beyond the fictional limitations that defined black identity in order to "refigure the space of the world for African Americans and to obtain narrative control over black characters" (Morgan: 2004, 214).

A real shift to this 'racial consciousness' comes via the techniques Grooms establishes in *Bombingham*, which was published four decades after the church event. As one of the recent literary representations of the Birmingham event, the novel is characterized by Grooms's endeavour to make visible a different civil rights legacy than the one that has so far emerged from Birmingham, one that "makes the strongest case yet for understanding the Birmingham movement as a dark yesterday unredeemed by any achievements of a brighter tomorrow" (Metress, 2006: 9-10). To present such a clear case, Grooms has his own strategies.

One of these strategies is re-earning the past, and Grooms, it appears, is capable of carrying out this task. In writing the novel, he is not so much "revisiting a long-gone era." In fact, he "lived through the civil rights movement, and [is] still living it" (Medaris: 2006).⁴ But living the experience to 'historize' it,

and living it to come up with a vision are two different things. Grooms's re-earning-the-past strategy employs history, but from a perspective significantly different from others. His examination and his analysis of the events do not make a historical novel, a novel that sets out to recreate in its own terms a given time in the past; rather, his novel sets to engage with or respond to what Coetzee calls "historical present" (p. 2). Such a novel, to borrow Coetzee's words, has only two options: "supplementarity or rivalry" (p. 3), especially during times of intense ideological pressure like the present. According to Coetzee, the supplementary novel, one that is colonized by the historical present, "aims to provide the reader with a vicarious first-hand experience of living in a certain historical time, embodying contending forces in contending characters and filling our experience with a certain density of observation" (p. 3). This novel is documentary, reportorial, providing a camera-eye's view. The novel as rival, however, is one that

"operates in terms of its own procedures and issues of its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history ... [it] evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process ... perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history" (p. 3).

In arguing for storytelling over history, the primary point, Coetzee concludes, is "that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse" and that "the categories of history ... are a certain construction put upon reality" (p. 4).

To achieve the task of the novel 'as rival', *Bombingham* does not record history; it lives and views it from within to analyze its operating forces, and makes an imaginative construct: one that does not reflect a literal translation of experience, but which – in the words of Enomoto – "embodies a strategic and self-conscious dialogue with an inherited set of aesthetic expectations and cultural assumptions" (1999, 217). Such a dialogue is 'imaginatively constructed' throughout the novel.

The protagonist of *Bombingham* is Walter Burke, a black Birmingham native who, when the novel opens, is a soldier in the Vietnam War. Walter's best war friend, Haywood, a black soldier from rural Alabama, is shot dead, and Walter is haunted by the fact that he never told Haywood about what happened in Birmingham in 1963, despite the fact that Haywood wanted to know what it was like to meet Martin Luther King and march, as Walter did, against Bull Connor, the brutal Police Commissioner, and his guard dogs.

The fact that Walter refrains from unveiling the truth at the beginning of the novel seems intentional. Grooms lets his narrative techniques evolve quietly. He lets his characters begin with what is most familiar, and since significant works of black authors are usually distinguished by an individual's relationship to history, Grooms endeavours to come to terms with the legacies of racism and oppression that draw upon the 1963 Birmingham experience. He, therefore, turns the novel into a flashback to Birmingham events, and as Walter remembers those events, readers have the opportunity to listen to the story in the make. Two tragic

things occur that 1963 summer, Walter narrates. First, Walter loses his mother to cancer, in part because she, trusting in God to do all things, refuses medical treatment for her disease. Second, Walter loses his best friend, Lamar Burrell. Lamar and Walter march together in the streets of Birmingham and entertain a great aspiration revealed as the first chapter ends. They want to be astronauts, “the first Negroes on the moon” (p. 14), but are aware of unchecked discrimination. Indeed, Lamar calls for a flying saucer to land and reverse social order on earth so “we could run things for a while.” (ibid.) But then, on September 15, as Lamar is riding home on the handlebars of Walter’s bicycle in the aftermath of the church bombing, a white boy shoots Lamar in the head.

As the plot unfolds, Walter is portrayed fighting all odds to complete a letter to Haywood’s parents. Only in the closing chapter does he complete the letter, and in that letter we understand the lessons he learned in Birmingham as a young teenager and why he wouldn’t tell the idealistic Haywood about what he had learned:

When I lost Lamar, I lost the moon; I lost the stars. What did it matter to be the first Negro in space? . . . The immutable fact was that we were Negroes and being Negro tethered us to the earth. It seemed that my mother was right after all. Trust, but do not hope. To hope will only set you up for disappointment. (p. 299)

With these words, Grooms takes the discourse back home, to Birmingham where the family disintegrates. The Burkes are a black middle-class family. Carl, the father, teaches science at a high school and instills the need to “be scientific” into the minds of his children. Clara, his wife, works as a secretary for A.G. Gaston, the successful black entrepreneur. The couple have two children. The younger sibling, Josie, is about eight years old, and Walter is eleven. Clara develops a brain tumor and submits to her disease – God’s will. Her religious quest has brought her under the influence of a white evangelist, who preaches that only faith – not hope – can help, and she refuses to seek medical treatment. Carl who interrupted his medical studies to raise his family revolts against his wife; he wants her to live to respond to his love. Her allegiance to a “hillbilly hootenanny” (p. 53) religion is to him a betrayal of science and of confidence in progress. He takes to drinking outside and grows violent, and after Clara drives him from the house, he takes a room at the Gaston motel. Clara’s rejection of medical help makes no sense to anyone, her own mother, her stepfather or her sister Bennie who stays to look after the children. Walter also revolts against Clara’s submission to disease and hides her pain killers thinking that if his mother wants to die she might as well suffer: “If she wanted to die, why should she die so peacefully? I slipped the bottle into my pocket. Doing so gave me a cold satisfaction” (p. 160). However, his mother’s moans later make him try to vindicate his action and he thinks up a rationale: that acute pain will make Clara accept surgery.

Significantly, Walter's reference to his mother’s spiritual choice that faith is “Trust, but not hope” (p. 215) allows readers to branch off into a social

interpretation, especially when she says she does not care to go to hospital because she does not want "to be reminded that [she is] being treated second class" (p. 200). Besides, Clara's absolute submission and Walter's disappointment seem, in fact, irreversible according to the so-called 'historical inevitability'. The mother, we are told, went through a deep childhood trauma when her father, a genial man full of ambition and dreams, was falsely accused of assaulting and killing a white woman, and ultimately died in jail from pneumonia, after his death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. As a young girl, her hope in God had been her only resort during this painful experience. That it failed her, led the adult woman to believe that unquestioned acceptance of the inevitable – God's will – was the only proper conduct.

The second strategy Grooms employs is authenticating. Although such a technique risks making the novel slide into a documentary or reportorial, Grooms understands that "historical characters shed light upon the human condition and make real the struggles and fears, hopes and dreams experienced throughout history" (Johnson and Giorgis: 1998, 1). With his dynamic utilization of bridges that travel between the real and the constructed, he gains the space to escape the confines of the imposed stereotypes, and to transform conventional representation of African Americans. In many instances, his use of the generic codes of autobiography, i.e. "the presentation of observational experience rather than the depiction or repetition of established representational types," (Morgan: 2004, 222), and his exploitation of what Jacqueline Goldsby calls the "fiction of 'authenticity'" (p. 255), also give him the space to claim representational control over what is depicted as "experience" in the text. The novel, hence, teems with the sights, smells, and sounds of African American life, chronicling real names of people, avenues, parks, shops, and churches. In doing so, however, it recounts the past without being didactic. It functions as a fiction that smoothly integrates historical elements such as the on-going mayoral election or Tall Paul's announcing the planned marches on WENN, the local black radio station. It also mentions the armed self-defense groups spreading to middle-class districts as white gangs nightly violence mounts, or again Martin Luther King's early reluctance to involve the young in the movement.

On another level, Clara's situation as a victim of an inoperable cancer, invites the reader to construct a parallel with her father's fatal encounter with the notorious Jim Crow laws, which were constantly pushing the Negro farther down" (Woodward: 1974, 108).

Her cancer and her falling under the influence of a white religion of absolute submission read as a metaphor for disease and evil within and beyond the family circle, for an affliction the entire social body suffers from. Besides, to a certain extent, the disagreement between Carl and Clara parallels the intra-community debate about the wisdom of launching a movement in Birmingham: of taking a stand against social injustice. Carl has also been defeated by life: after returning from World War II as a "race man" eager for racial change, he has settled down to family life, complied together with Carla with the dominant white power. They refrain from agitation lest Carl lose his position as a teacher,

and they fear that the children might, should they incur a jail record, hurt their future lives.

Another integration of historical elements is achieved through the construction of the character of Little Josie. She is the one most eager to march and convinces her brother that they must join precisely because their parents are abstaining. She packs her Sunday best and, as advised by activist Tall Paul, wears tennis shoes. The children first try to join the march from school where the headmistress directs them back to class: "Ms Buford is not a sell out. She just tells the children not to play truant from school" (p. 232). Then they are initiated into the violence even before they do march, when Bingo, the family's pet, stands its ground and is killed by a monster of a police dog. Bingo's death is a motivation to march and they confront the water cannons spouting their streams on the demonstrators who become desperate for shelter. Walter does not succeed in remaining nonviolent in so far as he kicks a snarling dog in its mouth to protect his sister while shouting to her to run, to no avail. Josie is arrested. Walter returns to the scene but prudently stays among the spectators. The novel presents the marches from the point of view of a rank and file participant, a lad who is no hero, perhaps out of consideration for his ailing mother, whom he tries to appease, although fear for his sister's fate as well as his sense of responsibility – probably – dehumanize him and bring up very harsh words when Clara remonstrates with him for marching with Josie: "I don't care how you feel. You don't care about us. Why don't you just go ahead and die, for Pete's sake?" (p. 250)

The novel's description of police repression is terse, and although the bystanders' retaliation against the police is vividly depicted, it is left to the reader's imagination to make the parallel construction. However, more historical elements are integrated. For instance, when the city runs out of confinement space due to the fact that in one week 2,400 demonstrators were arrested; the children are detained in the Fair Grounds: the boys in the open stalls originally built to display "prize cattle and pigs" (p. 257) and the girls in dormitories. On the other hand, a few policemen, seen close up, are not fanatical racists. One of them speaks to the children like "somebody's father" (p. 245) and the one whose dog kills the children's Bingo is genuinely sorry, even offers to take them home. Such actions by these men are exceptions, flitting moments. Few whites are spared: Walter recalls Bennie mimicking her "moderate" employer stating that "the preachers were just adding fuel to Bull Connor's fire" (p. 228) for the benefit of the children. The State troopers' intervention to quell the riot provoked by the bombing of King's home and the Gaston motel is relentlessly brutal. They charge the crowd and club people indiscriminately, including Carl, who simply tries to shield a man from assault. More appalling is the blooming out of white narrow-mindedness, such as when the officer guarding the Fair Grounds uses extreme mental violence to humiliate Carl. A war of nerves takes place. The guard's anger at seeing a well-dressed black man coming to bail his daughter out with a \$500 payment, which was then a large sum, is fueled by memories of his own World War II bullet wound "I took a

bullet for you” (p. 264), the death of a fellow combatant, “burnt to a black crisp. Burnt just as black as anyone of you” (p. 264). Spitting in his face, he rejects the possibility Carl might also have been in combat.

The latter’s instinct to look down on an obviously well-off and educated black man gives Walter the space to reflect on the derogatory racist stereotypes that dominated fiction in a country that was supposed to have abandoned segregation.

Obviously, the two strategies Grooms utilizes, earning the past and authenticating, effectively function together to counter historical amnesia. However, in the panoramic demonstration of the blacks' sufferings, other subordinate strategies unfold. The first is the technique of storytelling within the story, by which the novel provides a ritual means of remembering the past. Walter's relentless effort to write the letter to Haywood's parents is in fact a bold attempt to construct a black self. In it, Walter shows that African Americans want to secure an 'authentic historical draft' of the story of Birmingham; they insist that the evils of the past not be deliberately suppressed, because this past should be seen as a legitimate point of departure for seeking redemption and for talking about the challenges of the present and the future. The past, says Njabulo S. Ndebele, "can redeem us;" no matter how horrible it has been, "it can be the moral foundation on which to build the pillars of the future" (p. 155).

Another subordinate strategy is exercising critique as a purgatorial means. *Bombingham* has abundant episodes that expose the narrow-minded white supremacy and the frictions this entails. However, the novel, Grooms says, is not for the mechanics of working out these frictions, but for exploring reconciliation and redemption through stories of "ordinary people in ordinary language."⁵ This, Grooms believes, helps the readers achieve self-purification. His novel can take the readers out of the present, relocate them, and then deliver them back into the present as changed readers. To explain this, Grooms advocates, in the preface to his book of short stories *Trouble No More*, remembering the past sets the human heart in conflict with itself, and this can be a bold step towards redemption:

We sin and benefit from the sin, but we also reckon with the guilt and anxiety caused by the sin. Whether we are conscious of it or not, this anxiety drives us to seek redemption, which is both the act of compensating for the sin and being freed from blame for it. The search for redemption is the narrative arc of our national story. We do not seek redemption for our security and prosperity but because it is the moral thing to do. Seeking redemption frees us from our hypocrisy, indifference, and shallow pride. It makes us stronger ...And at the very least, it frees us from the anxiety, the shame, the guilt that underlies our society. (2005, xxv, xxxi)

By this, Grooms shows that hope and dignity can sometimes be reclaimed.

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Notes:

¹ In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was invited by activists of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham to visit the city and join their campaign against racial segregation. The confrontation they launched together was non-violent, but police met the daily sit-ins and street marches with tear gas, attack dogs, and arrests. King and more than 3,000 people, many of them children, were arrested. In retaliation, the Movement activists called on high school students to take part in the marches. The response was prompt: on May 2, hundreds of students left school and joined the demonstrations, but, again, many of them were jailed. However, more students gathered on the next day, and police again repressed them by force: fire hoses knocking down schoolchildren and dogs attacking demonstrators were followed by a series of racially motivated bombings. The most tragic event, however, happened on September 15, when members of the notorious Ku Klux Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in the city, killing four black girls. This incident was decisive in the history of African Americans' struggle for abolishing segregation.

² Tony Grooms was born in 1955, and grew up in a large extended African American family. His father, a refrigeration mechanic and his mother, a textile worker and housewife, encouraged his education. In 1967, as a preface to the forced racial integration of Virginia's public school system, his parents enrolled him in the Freedom of Choice plan that brought about limited integration of the white public schools.

Though he notes that many of his attitudes about race and class in the United States were formed before 1967, the school integration experience was, nonetheless, a landmark event in his life, contributing to a perspective that is evident in many of his writings.

Grooms is the author of a collection of poems, *Ice Poems*, (Poetry Atlanta Press, 1988) and of a collection of stories, *Trouble No More* (La Questa Press, 1995/ Reprint Kennesaw State University Press, 2006). Though the subject matter of his work varies, his most notable work has focused on characters struggling with the uncertainty of the American Civil Rights Movement. His novel, *Bombingham*, was published by The Free Press imprint of Simon and Schuster in 2001 and by One World/Ballantine in October 2002.

He is a two-time recipient of the Lillian Smith Prize for Fiction, and a Finalist for the Legacy Award from Hurston-Wright Foundation. In 2006, The Georgia Center for the Book selected *Trouble No More* as “the book All Georgia Reads,” its common book program.

³ This is a story of the journey of a group of Harlem Freedom Riders during the days of racial civil unrest in Birmingham. The dust jacket and publisher's foreword rather dramatically proclaims that the author, "a well-known Negro writer" was compelled to publish under a pseudonym out of fear for his life

⁴ Wisconsin Book Festival 2006: Tony Grooms speaks, David Medaris on Tue, 09/12/2006 - 12:06 pm. Isthmus Daily Page - Madison, WI, USA ... at noon Saturday, Oct. 21, in Promenade Hall at the Overture Centre, 2006.

⁵ Keynote speech at the Georgia Council of Teachers of English annual conference, Jekyll Island, February 17, 2005, quoted in *Trouble No More*, p. iv.