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Assumed Truths in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*

As humans, our realities are based on assumed truths, some backed by science, others by family beliefs, cultural beliefs, personal memories, and faith in religious texts. In his first novel, *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), Randall Kenan creates a main character, Horace, who bases his beliefs about right and wrong solely on the assumed truths of his family and the community in which he lives. The family bases most of their beliefs on Christianity, even with its numerous contradictions. Yet as each family member often fails to live up to these supposed standards themselves, they condemn Horace for his inability to live up to their standards, or rather, their rules. This leaves Horace in the middle of several "truths"— those of his family, and facts that he is learning on his own upon becoming a grown man. The careful reader begins to realize the logical fallacies of these truths and the possible repercussions, as we see in the end of the story, in which the character, Horace, ultimately takes his own life.

Throughout the novel it appears that Kenan is arguing against the psychological term, "truth by consensus," the definition being that truths can be assumed when generally agreed upon by a particular group. The author makes extensive references to the family lineage of the characters — there are scores of people listed in the family tree and the relationships become confusing, not only to the reader but to the characters as well. It appears that Kenan intentionally creates this tension and several discrepancies to

make a point. I contend that Kenan uses the Cross family tree as a tool to argue against truth by consensus and point out the dangers of assumed truths.

As the reader learns about discrepancies in the Cross family tree between family members, it becomes apparent that a consensus on the matter cannot be had. The definition of a similar idea, that of "argument to moderation" is that the truth can be found as a compromise between opposing oppositions. We see that neither of these ideas are possible for Horace's character. In looking at the belief system of the Cross family, we see that it is based mainly on the scriptures of the Bible. Throughout the story, the reader is told of the Christian history of the family and the importance the family places on following the Christian doctrine. The family is proud of the long line of deacons and preachers that they have produced. The Cross' strong literal beliefs in the Bible creates an environment in which assumed truths destroy Horace, putting him in a situation in which he cannot escape except by death. With the literal readings of the Bible, there is no possibility for compromise between himself as a gay man and his family of strict Christians.

When Horace takes his journey, whether in his mind or with the demon that he has conjured, to important moments of his life, he visits the church he was brought up in. He listens to Brother Barden's sermon on homosexuality. "Unclean. That's what it is. Unclean. And you knows it" (79). This sermon, this cultural "truth" has been engrained in Horace since he was a child. It causes the demons that eventually result in his destruction. While he is attempting to find a way to live with all aspects of his life, it becomes apparent that it is not Horace who needs to change. As essayist Eva Tettenborn, suggests, "there is no true way out of his melancholia, since it is not Horace who needs to change

his supposedly impossible object attachments; rather, the community surrounding him needs to accept his libidinal choices" (251). With this family and community's strict beliefs in the assumed truths of the Bible, this acceptance is unlikely to ever occur.

Rather than speak of the inconsistencies and contradictions of the Bible, Kenan uses the family tree to help make his point. This is very important tool that he uses as his story would likely be rejected by a large portion of society today, if he were to criticize and question the validity of the Bible.

A major problematic issue with the family tree is the discrepancies in its telling, based on confusion, forgetfulness or just plain story telling (much as some may say the Bible was written). These incongruities in the family tree point to fallacies that are accepted as truths when spoken or recalled by an otherwise reliable person or character. Ezekiel Cross (Zeke), for example, gives the reader his memories, his truths, about his family history. He describes how his grandfather Ezra was a boy on a plantation who witnessed Lincoln visiting Geoffrey Cross, the white slave owner. Zeke admits the possibility for error in this family history: "and I suspect he added right much to the tale whether it was true or no . . . he could put together the best lie I ever heard come out of a man's mouth" (52). The Cross' regard this oral family history as truth, yet Zeke admits the possibility that this was, in part, one of the tall-tales that his grandfather was known for. This reiterates the idea of an assumed truth and that it might not be a truth at all.

The reader is told numerous times throughout the story of the Christian beliefs of the family and the Cross' community, yet the family members often preach one thing and turn around to break those same "rules" that they pretend to live by. Literary critic, Trudier Harris points to acceptable and unacceptable sins within the family and

community. "Again at issue is sanctioned and unsanctioned sins, for numerous are the tales of so-called believers in Horace's community for committing regular sins, which presumably would land them in hellfire as effectively as other sins" (126). In several instances throughout the novel readers learn about admissions of adultery within the Cross family and the community. Zeke admits to adultery against his wife: "And yes, there were children by other women—well, shoot . . . a twenty-two-year-old boy . . . well, he got needs, well, maybe they ain't needs, but they are mighty powerful wants. And I declare if you wants something enough in your mind it becomes a need" (60). This was an acceptable sin, whereas, homosexuality was absolutely not, though in Zeke's reasoning above on committing adultery, he is in essence excusing Horace's need for male affection in the same manner. This reiterates the idea of assumed truths. It is acceptable to cheat, though still a sin, yet engaging in homosexual acts is a "sin" that is unforgivable. "The Cross family, along with the family's community, favors a compartmentalized definition of the identities of its members in which certain group members, such as homosexuals, can be excluded at will without influencing the desired group identity endorsed by the Cross patriarchs (such as being a Christian)" (Tettenborn 251). Jimmy, too, experiences the effects of adultery when he finds his wife in bed with another man.

When Horace speaks with Jimmy about his desire for men, Jimmy admits to his own experimenting but then says it is a sin: "Horace, we've all done a little . . . you know . . . experimenting. It's a part of growing up" (113). And when asked by Horace if he enjoyed it, Jimmy responds, "En . . Enjoy it? Well . . . I . . . you know. Well, the physical pleasure was . . . I guess pleasant." (113). Jimmy doesn't want to admit that he did enjoy it and that this experience is part of who he is, yet he is quick to turn back to the Bible to

condemn the action: "Well, you know as well as I what the Bible says" (113). Horace responds, "It's wrong" (113). "Yes," Jimmy replies (113). Yet, after all of this, Jimmy still contends that being gay was a normal deviation from accepted society:

> "He, just like me, had been created by this society. He was a son of the community, more than most. His reason for existing, it would seem, was for the salvation of his people. But he was flawed as far as the community was concerned. First, he loved men; a simple, normal deviation, but a deviation this community would never accept. And second, he didn't quite know who he was. That, I don't fully understand, for they had told him, taught him from the cradle on" (188).

In the same thought of admitting that homosexuality was a "normal deviation" and thereforee a part of who someone is, Jimmy states that he doesn't understand how Horace cannot know who he is, as he has been taught who to be since the moment he was born. Jimmy evidently fails to understand the ultimate truth of believing in yourself and who you know yourself to be. This again points to assumed truths that are conflicting logically.

In relating these ideas of truth, we come back to the idea of the family tree. Other than story telling or forgetfulness by characters, another way that Kenan creates doubt in the accuracy of the family tree, and ultimately, truth, is that children born out of wedlock, *in sin,* must still be accounted for. Since it was not considered acceptable in history to have a child out of wedlock, though it undoubtedly often happened, those children must still be listed. On family trees, thereforee, they were ascribed a mother and father whether

it was the biological father (or mother), or not. Within the novel, at least eight children were fathered by someone other than a spouse. Zeke, as discussed earlier, admits to fathering children by two women other than his wife. Jimmy is also a "fatherless" child. We know that his mother was Rose but she was never married, and his father is presumably a different person than that of his other siblings. Zeke also remembers the story of Amy, a woman in the community, who has three children, each by a different man: "Amy, too— all three of them married to different people, even though they tell me, and I don't know whether I believe it or no, that she went on and had a child for each of them boys after she got married" (49). This again points to the likely inaccuracies of assumed truths and to the hippocracy of choosing to believe one "sin" worse than another. The characters seem to be in charge of choosing which rules can be broken yet forgiven and which cannot . . . all perhaps, but Horace.

Yet another conflict in the family tree, based on character confusion, which ultimately creates errors, is the difference between Zeke's statement of relationships versus Ruth's and Jimmy's. Zeke lists for the reader, his siblings: "...and there is Ruth and her old husband Jethro and my sister Jonnie Mae" (58). The reader learns that Jethro is Zeke's brother through both Ruth and Jimmy's dialogue. Refer to diagram 1 and 2 to view the differences in the family tree based on characters memories.

Zeke continues with the contradictions to others memories of how the family is related by speaking of "my sister Jonnie Mae and her husband William and their children Rachel and Rose and Rebecca and Ruthester and Lester" (58). The reader is told that Malachai Greene was the husband of Jonnie Mae and the father of her children, by Jimmy on pages 115 and 116 and by Ruth on page 137. At least one character has the

"truth" incorrect. Who is wrong does not so much matter as much as the fact that these fallacies point to the belief in assumed truths.

Jimmy recalls the family history from memory as he narrates it to the reader. He remembers, "Rachel seemed disinterested in men, and though her mother nudged and pushed and argued and coerced her to find a husband, she never did" (118). Within six paragraphs, Jimmy contradicts this statement. "But she [Rose] had not reckoned on her sisters. All three had been 'good'; *all three had married*" (119). It is impossible therefore, to construct a family history of truths based on memory. If someone were to draw a family tree based on what they thought or believed to be true, these "assumed truths" may not hold any validity.

It is understandable that the family has based their lives on assumed truths as they see them. Their very survival as a family and community has depended upon it. As one critic has pointed out, "...the community [of the Cross family] has attributed its survival to the rigid maintenance of patriarchal family structures, stable racial identities, and normative sexual desires" (Tucker 306). The family has a purpose and need for their beliefs and values in order to keep control of their lives. This has become extremely important to a community of people who historically have had no control over their own fate. It seems that Kenan understands this, but points to problems that this highly structured belief system can cause individuals. Tucker states, "Yet, as Kenan is intent on showing, such control – often imaged in tropes of spatiality – is unrealistic, unworkable, and only serves to underscore the permeability of all borders, whether communal, bodily, or psychic" (306). This family's method of survival is not working for Horace who does not fit the family's idea of normalcy. The reader can see that the family's truths are not

the same as those of Horace and therefore contradict the idea of truth by consensus and that of argument to moderation. It is interesting that another term for argument to moderation is "gray fallacy" which suggests the liminality in which Horace finds himself unable to function.

Kenan uses the Cross family tree as a tool to prove that not everything which is believed to be true by a person, a family or a community, is ultimately true, including literal translations of the Bible. His character, Horace, takes his own life based on the assumed truths that have been engrained in him since childhood based on family, cultural, and biblical truths, that homosexuality is a sin, even when these "truths" are often contradicted by those same people preaching those "facts."

It is apparent that the family places ultimate faith in the "facts" of the Bible. The logical fallacies of the family tree may lead a careful and religiously open-minded reader to the conclusion that not all assumed truths, including biblical texts, can be read as literal truth and is a way to make his point without questioning the validity of the Bible. To do so would likely cause his story to be banned by the Christian population. *A Visitation of Spirits* can be read as a parable on why we, as readers, should be wary of assumed truths. The Cross family tree is a strong device that Kenan uses to point to this lesson.

I, Kym Lutz, give Erica Abrams Locklear permission to use my paper, either with or without my name as she sees fit, as a model for future classes. I also give permission for Professor Abrams Locklear to make grammatical and technical changes as needed.

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