The Sorrowing Child in the "City Too Busy To Hate": the Atlanta Child Murders in Contemporary American Literature

Yuri Stulov

Abstract
The paper deals with the way the Atlanta Child Murders became the focus of books in different literary genres by James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara and Taryaki Jones. Baldwin's The Evidence of Things Not Seen *is a long publicist essay; Bambara used the form of a documentary fiction in* Those Bones Are Not My Child*, and Jones'* Leaving Atlanta *is fiction based on individual memory. The figure of the sorrowing child who illuminates the injustices of the world divided by class, race and wealth is in the center of all three works. Thanks to the figure of the child the tensions and complexities of the adult world become conspicuous; the child acquires the role of a moral model that challenges the mores of American society.*

Keywords
African-American literature, sorrowing child, documentary fiction, essay, individual memory, trauma, post-traumatic stress.

Since the early 1970s Atlanta, GA has turned into the "black mecca of the South," hailed for the economic opportunities it provided to African-Americans in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement. The city went through enormous transformations: black businesses began to mushroom; Andrew Young became the first African-American from Georgia to be elected to Congress since the Reconstruction period; Atlanta got its first black mayor… It looked like Atlanta was really the "city too busy to hate".[1] However, in July 1979 the first black boys were killed, starting the twenty-two month long era of the Atlanta Child Murders that destroyed the myth of race peace.

When it became clear that police had failed to stop ethnic violence, volunteers organized a number of organizations to patrol the streets, provide help to children, give assistance to the panic-stricken parents, and conduct their own investigation of the cases of the child murders and other missing people. The atmosphere in the city became tense, and the White House had to interfere not to lose public support. The events in Atlanta became the topic of talk shows on television and radio as well as other numerous reports in the national media. There was an invasion of leading politicians and public figures who used the situation to their own ends.

The Atlanta Child Murders also drew the attention of many writers and film makers. James Baldwin, the most prominent black writer of the period, came to Atlanta twice in 1981, as he was commissioned to write an article for *the Playboy* magazine on what was going on. The result of his observations was an extended essay which turned into the non-fiction book *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* published in 1985. In it Baldwin comments on the "social and political apparatus [that] cannot serve human need"[2] and

1 This now popular slogan was used by the Atlanta mayor William Hartsfield during the Civil Rights movement to refer to Atlanta because it peacefully desegregated its public schools. See http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/government-politics/william-b-hartsfield-1890-1971, or Bernard D. Headley, *The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Politics of Race* (Carbondale: SIU Press, 1999), 12.

2 James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 124.

emphasizes the political implications of the events, pointing out that the roots of the tragedy lie in the policy of racism and imperialism.

Toni Cade Bambara was closely connected with Atlanta, her mother being an Atlantan. She revisits the scene in her posthumously published novel *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999) choosing the genre of docu-novel. The work focuses on the search for the fictional missing boy Sonny by his parents and their friends giving a panoramic view of 1980s Atlanta and the tense atmosphere in the "city under siege." Among the most important characters in the book are Sonny's brother Kofi and sister Kenti, who help provide a deep insight into the psychology of adults and children; the siblings play an important role in showing relationships between races, minors and adults, parents and children as well as individuals and community at this dramatic period in the city's history.

In 2002 the Atlanta-born writer Tayari Jones published her first novel *Leaving Atlanta*, in which the tragedy of the city is seen through the eyes of three black adolescents who had had to learn what violence, fear and despair are like since their early days.

The figure of the sorrowing child is focal for the three writers. The children determine the twists of the plot, the motivations of adults who are trying hard to understand what is happening around them and the youngsters own transformation under the influence of outer and inner forces that they are unable to control in a situation in which child sacrifice turned into a daily routine. Thanks to the figure of the child the tensions and complexities of the adult world become conspicuous; the child acquires the role of a moral model that challenges the mores of American society, recalling of the biblical words of Jesus, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."[3] Little Kenti in Bambara's novel epitomizes ethical norms that are under threat and need to be fought for.

According to *The Times* literary critic Tom Gatti, the child narrator is "a device that offers a level of emotional and imaginative directness unavailable to the baggage-laden adult"[4]. The child's feelings are open and sincere, and his responses are spontaneous. It is generally believed that this is the happiest period in human life. According to a definition by UNICEF, childhood is "a precious time in which children should live free from fear, safe from violence and protected from abuse and exploitation. As such, childhood means much more than just the space between birth and the attainment of adulthood. It refers to the state and condition of a child's life to the quality of those years."[5] Childhood is a major formative period in human life, when basic moral principles and character traits are molded. At this stage the role of the parents is enormous. Children look up to them for assistance and guidance in their attempt to understand the unknown. The wisdom and ability of the parents to communicate with the kids adequately and delicately is especially important, with family relationships typically developing into either to greater bonds between the child and the parents, or to the rejection of parental authority and the incipient conflict between youth and adult. This is the beginning of a journey through life which is expected to lead to self-identification and self-realization. Traumatic experiences during childhood affect a person's whole life, changing beliefs and attitudes. Seeing the struggle between good and evil, which the child understands in a straightforward way, the adolescent discovers the appalling darkness of the human heart. This knowledge is shattering. Juxtaposing the sophisticated, distorted and frightening adult world with the purity of the innocent child's view of

3 Mt 18:3, KJV.

4 Tom Gatti, "Listening to the Child Within: Fiction," *The Times*, April 8, 2006, 14.

5 "Childhood defined." Accessed July 29, 2014. http://www.unicef.org/sovc05/englisj/childhooddefined.html.

things, an artist makes the problems of the world more vivid and dramatic. The child in this case is often a catalyst that contributes to the deep-rooted changes in the social fabric.

The books examined here deal with events that took place over 30 years ago. Baldwin's was written right after the events, Bambara's about 18 years later, Jones more than 20. Each of the authors had their own reason to take up the subject of the Atlanta Child Murders.

By the end of the 1970s Atlanta became one of the most rapidly developing cities in the USA. It looked like the glamorous showcase of the new South, opening up greater opportunities for racial peace and prosperity. The Atlanta Child Murders that started in 1979 radically changed the situation. Racists tried to explain the events by the flaws in African-American communities, their moral inferiority, promiscuity, licentiousness, drug abuse, the availability of children from poor neighborhoods for pornography, and prostitution that involved young girls. In their turn, African-American citizens were sure that among those who were responsible for the tragedy were various racist organizations like the Ku-Klux-Klan, the FBI, porno industry moguls, and / or the police. The city authorities and the police failed to cope with the crisis, and communities began to organize groups of volunteers that started investigating the cases, patrolling the streets, taking care of the victims, contacting the media, etc. The scandal was ruinous for the reputation of the city, and the authorities did what they could to minimize the reputational damage, concealing the facts of the iniquitous cooperation of some officials and the criminal world. The arrest of a certain Wayne Williams, a black man who was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment in spite of weak evidence against him, aroused even more questions and did not improve the situation.

Baldwin saw the ramifications of the tense atmosphere and obtained hands-on experience of living in a city torn by fear, suspicion and hatred. His major aim was to bear witness to the tragedy of American blacks in "the city too busy to hate" and to belie all the gossip, innuendoes, half-truths and outright lies that were spread by official mass media, the police headquarters, FBI, and other institutions that were involved in the investigation. Baldwin expresses his disagreement with the official version of the events and the court verdict of Wayne Williams: murders of children continued after the man's arrest, and a few were committed even after he was incarcerated. Baldwin's message was openly political: the target of his critique is the white supremacist system that denies African-Americans their "unalienable rights to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It is clear, therefore, why he chooses the genre of an essay, which allows him to analyze the facts and interpret them from his own history of being black in a society dominated by whites. He remembered only too well the policy of segregation, race discrimination, the challenging events of the Civil Rights movement of which he was an untiring activist, the drama of the Black Revolution of the 1960s, the death of his close friends Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers and Malcolm X.

Bambara was 15 years Baldwin's junior. During her college years she became a political activist and became involved in a number of social projects. She was among those who greatly contributed to the growing visibility of African-American women in the country's political and literary life. Living in Philadelphia in 1985 she witnessed the bombing (by the order of the city police authorities) of a home occupied by militant blacks belonging to the sociopolitical group MOVE who refused to be evicted, an event on which she based her screenplay of the documentary film *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*. Like millions of other Americans, she was shocked by the Atlanta Child Murders. Like her mother, Bambara had lived about 10 years in the city in the 1970–80s, and felt a strong urge to go deep into the study of the situation. When the writer was diagnosed with

cancer she understood that no time was to be lost and returned to Atlanta to collect materials for her new book *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, which begins with the inscription:

> *We are the light*
> *we are robbed of*
> *each time one of us*
> *is lost.*

Bambara studied the court materials and police files along with interviews with witnesses and parents of the dead or kidnapped children. She met people who were involved in the investigation and wrote a 900-page draft of a work that she did not manage to prepare for publication. New facts and documents that Baldwin could not know of had become available; the reality concerning the relationship between whites and blacks seemed to have changed; Atlanta looked like a glamorous picture; and yet, there was something that kept Bambara's mind focused on the events of the early 1980s. It was the realization of the fact that nothing much had changed in the relations between races in the USA, and what had happened then could happen again. The form which she chose for the book was different from that of Baldwin's: a mixed genre of docu--fiction that, according to Michael Hinken, "intentionally blurs the line between fact and fiction."[6] Some critics use the term "faction", which denotes "a work that is on the borderline between fact and fiction, concerned primarily with a real event or person, but using imagined detail to increase readability and verisimilitude."[7] The peculiarity of this genre is that it "uses the illusion of facts to enhance the narrative, to provide a greater sense of authenticity, and to allow readers an interactive, insider's view of the story."[8] To a great extent, this seems to be Bambara's intention: she involves the readers in an interpretative discourse making them re-evaluate and re-think Atlanta's recent racial history and realize that racism is still an issue.

The novel was published posthumously with the help of Bambara's close friend and colleague Toni Morrison, who did the editing job cutting down about 200 pages and added coherence to the text, which abounds in a huge number of personages, both real and fictional, as well as details, facts and other trivia that help to communicate the complexity of the situation and the degree of human drama.

Tayari Jones is a born Atlantan. She was about 10 at the time of the Child Murders, and the reminiscences of those tragic days and months formed the background of her debut prize-winning novel *Leaving Atlanta*, which reflects Jones's impressions of the early 1980s in the form of a pure fiction that presents a story of three fifth-graders – two girls and a boy. The narrators keep changing throughout the novel as well as the forms of narration, which include first-, second- and third-person narrations. The writer manages to create an authentic atmosphere of the school life at a period when students saw fear and death all around them. Her goal is to go back to those years, showing them from the perspective of a child. Unlike the other two books, this one is less politically charged and more lyrical in tone, probably because it was written by a young author with much less life experience than that of Baldwin and Bambara. The author called it "a love letter to my generation."

6 Michael Hinken, "Documentary fiction: authenticity and illusion," *Michigan Quarterly Review* XLX, no. 1 (2006): 218. Accessed July 31, 2014. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0045.128;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1;g=mqrg

7 Jeremy Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. (London et al.: Arnold, 1997), 64.

8 Hinken, "Documentary fiction," 218.

Marta Koval, a well-known Ukrainian researcher, maintains that "one of the key narrative tasks of ethnic literatures when they look into their people's past is discursive and narrative *construction* of history of a specific group as such and the representation of its version of American history from a position of its earlier, more or less, radical exclusion."[9] This is based on generational memory, which Baldwin discusses at length in his book, pointing out the specific conditions of the American South and the role of class in the African-American community. Baldwin is sure that those middle-class blacks who "used to know" their place in the intricate social hierarchy of the South were so outraged by the goings-on that the situation went out of control. The writer insists that "the performance of this 'class' […] when confronted with the brutality to which their children were subjected – this, above all – turned the White Southern romance into an unreadable nightmare, and the results of this uneasiness are vindictively visible, in Atlanta, for example, or in Birmingham."[10] Baldwin is convinced that in spite of the city's African-American administration and councilors, blacks in 1980s Atlanta were as powerless as ever. The struggle for civil rights had to go on because, for all the achievements of the Civil Rights movement, "It is impossible to know what might have happened had Authority felt, or dared suggest, that the darker brother has every right to be here, and nothing whatever to prove. […] Blacks have never had any human reality at all."[11] The result was a terrible social and moral vacuum, which brought the ultra conservative Ronald Reagan to the top position in the country and made aggressive reactionary discourse dominate in US home and foreign policy.

An analysis of the manifestations of moral chaos and degradation of US politics became the focus of Baldwin's deliberations. The children who in Baldwin's words became "candidates for the slaughter of the innocents"[12] served as the most important means by which he could interpret the No. 1 issue in US society – race relations. Examining the events in Atlanta, Baldwin persistently emphasizes that racism is primarily an outcome of the system of the white man's economic supremacy, which affects all walks of life. The author is especially critical of the changes in US politics that were connected with the election of Ronald Reagan, who was responsible for union busting, the cutting down of social programs, the dismantling of affirmative action programs, a military build-up, the Strategic Defense Initiative, the invasion of Grenada, an intervention in Lebanon as well as the Irangate scandal. He comes to the gruesome conclusion that "given the bottom-line realities of life in these so ambiguously United States, the missing, menaced, murdered children were menaced by color and locality: they were – visibly – black, which, in this Republic, is a kind of doom, and actually poor – which condition elicits from the land of opportunity and the work ethic a judgment as merciless as it is defensive."[13] For Baldwin the reluctance to accept diversity as a major characteristic of the contemporary world is an obvious manifestation of the "white consciousness" that led to the polarization of political forces, social tension, cynicism, skepticism in relation to social and political institutions and, finally, to the tragic events in Atlanta.

Baldwin's special concern is Wayne Williams, who is to him a scapegoat who is sacrificed for the sake of the "white man," whom the writer holds responsible for the

9 Marta Koval, *"We Search the Past… for Our Own Lost Selves.": Representations of Historical Experience in Recent American Fiction* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2013), 13. Italics in the original.

10 James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 37.

11 Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 41.

12 Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, XV.

13 Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 6.

conflicts in the relations between races in the USA. The author analyzed contradictions in the court procedure, which clearly showed that it was impossible "for him to have, as the quaint American jargon puts it, a *fair* trial: he has already been condemned."[14] His arrest was to decrease tension in the panic-stricken city; it was not really meant to exercise justice. The whole case was a tight mix of racial and class bias added to the tense atmosphere in which the city had lived for nearly two years. In his essay Baldwin once again takes the role of a prophet who sends a warning to the nation before it is too late as was the case with his remarkable book *The Fire Next Time*.

A similar approach is taken by Toni Cade Bambara in her voluminous, densely populated novel. The setting of the work is Atlanta's inner city, where desperate parents are looking for their lost son who, as it turns out, was kidnapped. The city is plunged into an atmosphere of hysteria, despair and fear; there is little hope that the police can or want to find the organizers of the Atlanta child murders. For over twenty-two months the city had been terrorized: a race war was still going on.

The novel has a sophisticated structure, starting with a map of Atlanta, the killer's route, a prologue beginning almost at the end (November 16, 1981) and an epilogue dated July 8, 1987. In-between are seven parts that include entries from July 20, 1980 to July 11, 1982 covering two years in the life of the Spencers, who are trying to get their bearings in a world which collapsed when Sonny had disappeared. At the end of the novel we see the transformed family and, hopefully, the community. Zala, the boy's mother, becomes a politically conscious member of the African-American community who comes to realize that only by joint effort of a society aware of their responsibility for the future of their children can the situation be altered. She is supported by all her family members who overcome their grievances and complaints.

At the beginning the time difference between each of the chapters is only a day or a couple of days; later it is from a week to several months. Time perception depends on the emotional states of the characters, who vary in each chapter; time may be accelerated or compressed because tensions in the family and the environment are enormous, or it may simply drag to allow the adults (Zala and Spence) to adapt to the situation and regain themselves in the face of adversity. Their kids perceive time differently, as their mind works differently from their elders'. Grown-ups are more likely to accelerate time or slow it down, while kids cannot yet control it. In her novel *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf comments on how

> Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second.[15]

Historical time includes the characters' subjective perspective, but the relationship is not direct, which becomes clear from the juxtaposition of the perception of time by the elders and the kids. Kofi and Kenti, who are given great prominence throughout the novel, especially in the chapters when we see the world from their perspective, perceive things differently because of their age and inability to take things rationally. Their innocence is both their weakness but also their strong point because their perception of the world

14 Baldwin, 77. Italics in the original.

15 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), 59.

is not spoilt by normativity and standardized views and deeds. They do not yet have the psychological mechanisms that can help them survive, but it is exactly their reactions that allow the reader to become aware of the horror of living in a city under siege, when a detour to a local store may be a question of life and death. For them time is swift, while for their parents it may be ridiculously slow.

Kofi and Kenti play an extremely important role in the development of the plot, adding new touches to the picture of the panic-stricken city and their desolate parents. They are at an age that is formative for their whole life, and the experience they acquire during the tumultuous early 1980s is going to rub off on their socializing practices and personal growth ever after. They are plunged into the complexities of the world that is dangerous and enigmatic, being unprepared for what they will have to go through. They are still kids, and they have childish ideas about the events. However, in their innocent simplicity they often see better than their elders. Naďve as their judgments often are, they intensify the tenseness of the situation because, unlike grown-ups who do not always tell the truth about what is going on and who put on an act when it concerns family relations, the kids are sincere in their commentaries and they help their parents regain the sense of responsibility not only for the situation in the community but also for their children, who acquire a kind of maturity long before their time.

The parents are trying to mobilize the community, while Kofi and Kenti are left to themselves. In their despair Zala and her husband often forget their responsibilities as parents. Kenti is very much given to herself and her books and dolls, which seem to represent a family communion. She often recites nursery rhymes, sings children's songs and does things a child is expected to do. As a child figure, little Kenti epitomizes those moral norms that seem to be under threat. Though she can hardly understand the nuances of the events the girl is, nevertheless, observant making her own conclusions about the situation: "'All they do is talk, talk,' Kenti said."[16] [p. 42]. Her comments strike one with their deep insights, unexpected in a child. She is a kind of "wise old child" who is instrumental in revealing the depth of Atlanta's drama, in a way representing the romantic view of the child as a "vessel of grace".

Kofi is older, and his evaluation is deeper. He is also hurt by his parents' seeming neglect of their children and their inability to understand how much the little ones need their support at this dramatic time. They are worried about their brother's disappearance, but they seem to know something about Sonny's ways which their parents have no idea about: "The brass in Kofi's mouth was worse. He could've told them a few things […] Kofi wasn't trying to hide it. He wasn't saving it to tell it at a special time, either. He just forgot. And if he told now, he's get yelled at."[17] Often abandoned by their parents who are constantly involved in an investigation that takes all their time, they begin to discover the unbearable complexity of life in a city that has turned into racinated space, a locus of desolation, poverty, and death, divided along the color line. They cannot express it yet, but they cannot but see the gap between the well-off, educated, thriving people (mostly white) living in the suburbs and the poor, untrained, ignorant African--Americans residing in the inner city. The kids who are murdered or kidnapped are from the poor neighborhoods; they are black, and danger may lurk round the corner – on the way to school, a local store, a swimming pool. The established order is confused; the teacher's words seem to be empty of meaning; the codes of reason no longer work. It is a devastating experience for a child, especially when you know that your elder

16 Toni Cade Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 42.

17 Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, 43.

brother has disappeared. Almost a year passes before Sonny is brought home, but when he is finally back, their relationship is far from easy because this is a new Sonny whom they do not understand and find difficult to deal with. Their elder brother has hidden memories which he cannot and does not want to share with anyone, least of all with his younger brother and sister. The social context of his adolescence is disastrous. He is stigmatized by the kidnapping and internalizes his demoralizing experience and is suffering from post-traumatic stress, which takes a long time, if ever, to heal. Sonny completely reunites with his family only after he goes through the painful process of self-identification and self-acceptance, which is not easy after his experience with the kidnappers.

In all the seven parts of the novel we see the world from four different viewpoints – Zala's, Spencer's, Kofi's and Kenti's. The one perspective we can only guess about is Sonny's, and this is hardly accidental. The boy had to go through such humiliation and moral degradation that his vision of the world is smeared and he has not yet adjusted to the new reality.

The disoriented kids are aware of the chaos in the family relations and of the loss of "home" as a safe place. They discover something unknown and at times frightening about their parents, who are so taken away by grief that they cannot control themselves in front of the children. The adults are unable to understand the moral burden, which is almost more than the kids can bear. Kofi is frightened to see his mother as a scary stranger in a state of mental abstraction: "Standing there staring, shaking her head, her fists on her hips, the head scarf gone and her hair all over her head, she looked like somebody else's mother. Bestor Brooks's mother looked weird like that sometimes on Saturday mornings, except she always had a cigarette in the side of her mouth."[18] In this situation the children quickly learn to take care of themselves and make their own decisions. The nervous pressure on the kids is enormous, and it is surprising that they manage to learn to control not only their fear and discomfort but their parents. In fact, it was Kofi who guessed that the strange telephone calls that would come at unearthly hours were from Sonny who was trying to reach them. The kids also learn that color matters, and this is the most difficult lesson in their life. They realize that only by sticking together will they get a chance to start a new life:

> "Mama, you don't leave us alone. Do she, Kofi?"
> "She sure don't." He sat back on his heels knocking the boots over.
> "You a good mother, Mama." Kenti fitted herself between Zala's knees and wrapped her mother's legs back around her middle."[19]

The chapters focusing on the kids add one more dimension to the panorama of Atlanta. Little Kenti, a diligent and hard-working girl who is always busy studying, gets to know the story of Jacob from Chapter 32 of Genesis and arrives at a conclusion which the grown-ups have been looking for: "people who struggled in the dark and got scared should keep on with the struggling and then they'll be blessed and can change."[20] By juxtaposing the children's vision of the world with the perception of the world by grown-ups Bambara achieves an unusual degree of poetic power.

Bambara intricately weaves patches of private lives of the kids onto the broad quilt of Atlanta in the early 1980s, combining scenes of the everyday life of ordinary

18 Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, 58.

19 Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, 201.

20 Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, 648.

people with fragments from newspapers, political reports, radio broadcasts, etc. giving a panoramic view of the life of a huge metropolitan city that became the focus of the knotty questions of race, class and gender. She concludes the novel with Zala speaking at a Sunday church service to commemorate the children who had been lost, kidnapped or killed. In the presence of her whole family, who are showing her their support and dedication, Zala calls on the people to not stop their struggle against racism finishing her speech with "this reminder: coerced silence is terrorism."[21]

Like Baldwin's book, Bambara's is also clearly politically engaged. In the epilogue, in which she does not hide behind a fictional character but uses 2nd-person narration Like Baldwin, she asks "how the costly Williams trial from December 1981 to February 1982 might have proceeded had the defendant's attorneys had access to the suppressed files". She also remembers people who "raised the question, would Williams have been picked up at all?"[22] Bambara links the events in Atlanta with the war in Angola, the invasion of Grenada and other manifestations of US conservative policy, which hark backs to the issues raised by James Baldwin.

Tayari Jones's novel deals with the same events but is mainly built on individual memory. Analyzing contemporary American historical fiction, Koval points out that family stories are "based on family (generational) memory."[23] She maintains that "[A] change of generations makes shared experiences, values, and obsessions distinct and serves to reveal the most significant segments of individual memory, in particular those connected with traumatic events."[24] Jones revisits the city of her childhood years, but her picture of the events mixes drama with nostalgia, for she was too young then, and in spite of the dead or kidnapped children, the life of the fifth-graders went on, with their little worries, small victories and daily routine. The book is focused on the adolescents, who are discovering the fear of living in a world that is incomprehensible. They acquire identity in the struggle against all odds, with their most important of the problems being that of race. In her review of the novel, Gerianne Bartlett writes that the work is "a well-written story that intertwines the perspectives of three fictional children into the terrifying tale of a series of real murders that happened in Atlanta in 1979."[25] However, in comparison with the outstanding book by Bambara, *Leaving Atlanta* is only a minor attempt at revealing the truth about the Atlanta Child Murders.

Going back to the events of the early 1980s, the writers here under analysis do their bit in making their readers construct Atlanta's history in order to show that unless a lesson has been learnt the country will remain a symbolic place of suffering, violence and tension divided by class and race. The innocent child illuminates the problems of the adult world, its worries and tensions. The child who lives and dies in a poor African--American neighborhood becomes a symbol of humanity raising awareness of the injustices of the world. In a racist society the child becomes vulnerable to various forces that are responsible for everything connected with the Atlanta Child Murders. It is possible to change the situation only by social activism involving large groups of people, black and white, old and young.

21 Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, 661.

22 Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, 669.

23 Koval, *"We Search the Past…"*, 31.

24 Koval, *"We Search the Past…."*, 31.

25 Gerianne Bartlett, "Southern Author Tayari Jones to visit Winston–Salem: Review of 'Leaving Atlanta,'" *Examiner. com*, July 5, 2012. Accessed July, 29, 2014. http://www.examiner.com/article/southern-author-tayari-jones-to-visit-winston-salem-review-of-leaving-atlanta.

In spite of tremendous changes in ensuring the rights of minorities there is still a long road ahead to overcome racial stereotypes, misunderstanding, distrust, and prejudice. African-American literature is making a significant contribution to this process.

Bibliography

Baldwin, James. *The Evidence of Things Not Seen.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985.

Bambara, Toni Cade. *Those Bones Are Not My Child.* New York: Vintage Books, 2000.

Bartlett, Gerianne. "Southern Author Tayari Jones to visit Winston–Salem: Review of 'Leaving Atlanta'." *Examiner.com*. July 5, 2012. Accessed July, 29, 2014. http://www.examiner.com/article/southern-author-tayari-jones-to-visit-winston-salem-review-of-leaving-atlanta

"Childhood defined". www.unicef.org. Accessed July 29, 2014 2014. http://www.unicef.org/sovc05/englisj/childhooddefined.html

Gatti, Tom. "Listening to the Child Within: Fiction." *The Times*, April 8, 2006.

Hawthorn, Jeremy. *Studying the Novel: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. London: Arnold, 1997.

Hinken, Michael. "Documentary fiction: authenticity and illusion." *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Vol. XLX, no. 1. 2006. Accessed July 31, 2014. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0045.128;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1;g=mqrg

Koval, Marta. *We Search the Past… for Our Own Lost Selves: Representations of Historical Experience in Recent American Fiction*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2013.

Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando: A Biography.* London: Vintage Books, 2013.

Yuri Stulov chairs the Department of World Literature at Minsk State Linguistics University. He heads the Board of the Belarusian Association for American Studies, represents BelAAS on the Board of the European Association for American Studies, and chairs the Belarusian Association of Teachers of English. He is also editor of the journal *American and European Studies*, published since 1995. In 2005 Stulov was presented with the Distinguished Leadership Award for Internationals 2005 from the University of Minnesota, USA. He was awarded IREX and Fulbright grants to conduct research in the USA and has participated in numerous academic conferences in Europe and the USA with presentations focusing on different aspects of contemporary U.S. culture and literature. His academic interests lie in contemporary African-American fiction. Yuri Stulov has authored over 175 articles, conference papers, book reviews, and course books for students in British and American literature, education, methodology, and related studies. His book *100 U.S. Writers* has enjoyed great popularity in Belarus, Russia and neighboring countries. At the moment he is completing a book on contemporary African-American fiction.