

From the Briarpatch File: On Context, Procedure, and American Identity

By Albert Murray

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Reviewed by Paul Devlin

From The Briarpatch File: On Context, Procedure, and American Identity is the latest work of nonfiction from Albert Murray. This collection will provide an excellent introduction to Murray's work and thought for those just discovering him, and will be icing on the cake to those who've been reading him for years. This book consists of fifteen essays and two interviews. The essays were written as early as 1965 and as recently as 2001, although much of the material comes from the late 1990's. Some of these pieces had never been published before and some of them were originally written as talks or addresses, six were written as book reviews. The previously published pieces appeared in *The Chicago Sun Times Book World*, *The New York Times*, *The New Leader*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Times Book Review*. The addresses were given at a wide variety of places including Howard University, The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, the Alabama State Council on the Arts and upon receiving awards at CCNY (Langston Hughes Medal), and The University of Alabama (Clarence Casson Medal for Distinguished Nonfiction). Both interviews were conducted in 1997, the first, with Sanford Pinsker appearing in *The Georgia Review*, the second, with Charles Rowell, in *Callaloo*.

Part I: The Briarpatch includes three essays on Murray's concepts of "the briarpatch" (i.e., the universe, chaos, existence; but what Murray's speaking about is the American dimension of it) and antagonistic cooperation. An example of antagonistic cooperation, as Murray outlined in his third book, *The Hero and the Blues* (University of Missouri Press 1973, Vintage 1995), would be the *hero* as product of a dangerous, (Grand) dragon-infested environment. The menacing dragon helps to create the hero by creating the context for heroism. The orientation toward heroism is where Kenneth Burke's theories of frames of acceptance and rejection come into play. Murray frequently cites Burke's *Attitudes Toward History* when describing the briarpatch in the first part of the book. There are two ways of looking at the world/briarpatch. As Murray says in the second interview, one could say:

This place is rough, I'm going to have to be a hero, or you could say, this is a rough place and it shouldn't be that way - why me? But the result of the latter position is that you spend all your time bellyaching about the fact that it's rough.

Another aspect of the briarpatch that Murray puts forth is that it is a means toward the development of elegance. In other words, the various dodgings and scrapings of the rabbit through the thorns is what produces an elegant manner and resilient approach toward life. The rabbit has to keep its fur clean!

Now more than ever Murray's advocacy of the heroic outlook and disposition needs to be studied. It is the rhetoric of *victimhood*, which is precisely the *opposite* of Murray's position, which directly breeds terrorism. No terrorist group can function at an ideological level without a victim-based attitude (which often has Marxist undertones whether the group claims to be "Islamic", "Catholic" or whatever). One thing all terrorist thugs have in common, whether they belong to Al Qa'eda, Islamic Jihad, the Irish Republican Army, or other groups is an anti-heroic, *why me*-outlook. They certainly "ain't got that swing". Bitching and moaning about how "mean" and "unfair" a government is what the rhetoric of terrorist groups is all about - but Murray's position is a re-stating, an idiomatically American re-stating, of the cosmic realization that "vanity of vanities, all is vanity". But Murray's twist on it is - even though entropy is an eventuality, we get the most out of life by swinging - creating elegance - in the face of it. One of the best things America could do for the Middle East is commission an Arabic translation of *The Hero and the Blues* and then air-drop about a million copies on major cities and across the countryside. It's a shame that the culture that created the *Thousand and One Nights* does not see the nimble-or-nothing, heroic figure of Sheherezad as its cultural hero. As Christopher Hitchens said on "Hardball" to Chris Matthews recently, Islamic

countries would be able to begin to improve their conditions and join the rest of modernity if they would "lose their sense of self-pity".

The two interviews, "The Bluesteel, Rawhide, Patent Leather Implications of Fairy Tales" (from *The Georgia Review*) and "An All-Purpose, All-American Intellectual" (from *Callaloo*) are lively and highly informative. Observe, for instance, an example of flavor, this exchange between *Callaloo* editor, Charles Rowell (CR), and Albert Murray (AM), where Murray defends his fiction against a critique by Henry Louis Gates, which Rowell, at the moment, seemed to have bought into:

CR: As you speak, I hear a merging of two separate genres – that is, the novel and the essay or nonfiction prose. In you as artist, these two meet via imperatives I hear through ritual and through music, for example. There is no separation of sensibilities here. I see the same sensibility.

AM: Separate genre? Come on, Charles. Do you get two separate genres in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or in *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake*?...Let's not make genres where they're not. That's the kind of crap Skip Gates implied about *The Seven League Boots* in his *New Yorker* profile of me. What the hell has he been reading? Everything in *The Spyglass Tree* and *The Seven League Boots* is justified by the character's school-boy sensibility. It's no stiff-ass stuff like some of what your friends write, where they have a character stand up, in effect, and speechify about civil rights. That's artificial to me. Scooter and his old roommate were schoolboys, and they read a lot of books. Sounding bookish is as much a part of what they were as sounding hep on occasion.You can't read a book as old as Goethe's *Faust* and say that he's discussing some deep stuff, so this is not a play. No. It's a play. That's what they play is doing. What he says is entirely consistent with the personality of the character. ...Well, when Scooter gets a letter from an old roommate, we know he's going to get a lecture almost like a college professor. He's as much like a college professor as a college student, because he's a genius.

And I just cannot resist including the following exchange in this review:

CR:...I read *Train Whistle Guitar* as a counterstatement about a southern boy coming of age. It sounds as if you are revising or rewriting, *Rewriting the South*.

AM: Yes. That's true. Why did I write *The Omni-Americans*? To counterstate the use of sociological concepts to provide images of human behavior, particularly brownskin American behavior. You see what I mean? You're not going to get an adequate image of black Americans that way. You can't play poker against a Negro just by reading about Negro behavior in those surveys. You can't even play football against them if you believe what you read in those surveys. And you'd never hire a Negro football player. [*Laughter.*] Would you? Especially if they play white people, because, according to these social science assessments, they would feel so inferior that the white boys run all over them. Wouldn't they? [*Laughter.*] White boys can hardly buy a job on many erstwhile white teams nowadays.

I do not want to discount the first interview, with Sanford Pinsker, by giving so many examples from the second, so here is great moment in the first that encapsulates an important part of Murray's pragmatic philosophy:

SP:...[D]o you really want to claim that growing up in the Jim Crow South had no effect on you whatsoever?

AM: I was *beating* that. I was better than that. I wasn't their conception of me, I was my conception of me. And my conception of me came from the great books of the world. That's what I thought of human possibility, not what some dumb-assed white guy thought a colored guy should be doing and feeling.

The talks and lectures are also lively and brilliant. In *Art as Such*, the Keynote address to the Alabama State Council on the Arts Statewide Arts Conference in 1994, after warning about political correctness in art, he asks:

If any of this sounds the least bit elitist to any of you, ask yourself if you really prefer anything but the most competent craftsmen, doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers, or even servants, etc. Most people obviously prefer all-star quality over mediocrity in sports. Why not in the arts?

"Academic Lead Sheet", based on an address Murray delivered at a Howard University convocation ceremony in 1978, is an educational manifesto worthy of Emerson's "American Scholar". Students are warned about being faked out by charismatic hustlers who may be good public speakers but whose ideas are facile. He also deals with the rootlessness of contemporary humanity, and how the blues idiom is the best approach for dealing with it, and the pragmatic conception of "choosing one's ancestors" (while not necessarily discounting genetic ancestors).

Murray staunchly celebrates and defends the culture and idiom of brownskin descendants of slaves in America but refuses to be called an African-American. "I am not an African", Murray says in the second interview, "I am an American. And I still can't believe my ears when I hear educated people calling themselves a minority-something or other, by the way, which uneducated people never do. All of my values and aspirations are geared to the assumption that freedom as defined by the American social contract is my birthright."

Those who know his work will know that he's been demolishing identity-politics from day one. His total rejection of arbitrary identity labels is not only refreshing, but is also a correct assessment of human complexity. Accepting the term "American" does not imply a surrendering of ethnic identity, because American culture is the pragmatic amalgamation of practically every culture currently in existence, although its roots are from West Africa and the British Isles.

Murray visits these themes again in *Part Four: Book Reviews* with pieces such as "Freedom Bound U.S.A." (apparently unpublished until now, at least it doesn't say if it was previously published or not on the copyright page), "The HNIC Who He" (originally titled "The Illusive Black Image", 1967), "Soul Brothers Abroad" (1968). "Freedom Bound U.S.A." is a glowing review of Henrietta Buckmaster's *Freedom Bound*, which talks about forgotten brownskin American heroes whose deeds are of the same mythic proportions as Davey Crockett and Daniel Boone.

Fugitive slaves escaping toward freedom in the north were just as American and committed to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence as the founding fathers. So why, Murray wonders, should Americans with brownskin be called African-American today? Why should their American-ness be compromised with what is actually an arbitrary adjective? John Hancock knew he was risking his neck by signing his name in big, bold, extravagant penmanship on the Declaration of Independence. But Hancock, Jefferson, Franklin, and the rest in the Continental Congress were not risking their necks at that *very moment*, and had every expectation of remaining secure at least for *that week* in Philadelphia. The fugitive slave is even more heroic than the signers were, because not only was he or she risking their life for the same ideals as the founding fathers, but he or she was in very real danger of being hunted down and killed on the very night of their escape! "The HNIC Who He" is a review of several books on race relations from the late 1960's, but as Jace Clayton of *The Washington Post* noted in the March 17th 2002 issue, it is an essay just as relevant today as it was 35 years ago. The other older reviews, "The 'Reconstruction' of Robert Penn Warren" (*The New Leader*, 1965) and "The Good Old Boys Down Yonder" (*New York Times Book Review*, 1974) also remain pertinent. It's amazing how fresh these essays sound after so many decades.

A more recent book review, "Louis Armstrong in His Own Words", (which appeared in *The New Republic* in 1999) is an informative and concise history of Armstrong's several "autobiographies". Murray gives this history while reviewing a collection of Armstrong's diary entries, which were never intended for public scrutiny, published by Oxford University Press in 1999. Murray comes across as less than pleased with their publication.

In another recent piece, "Made in America: The Achievement of Duke Ellington", (which appeared in *The Nation* in 1999 as "Ellington at 100") Murray gives a concentrated history of how Ellington refined

American music into fine art. Anton Dvorak, in 1895, had an idea that an indigenous American "classical" music would be based on "the Negro melodies", and Ellington fulfilled Dvorak's prophecy. Just as Dvorak, Igor Stravinsky, and Leos Janacek, for example, refined and elaborated the folk music of their particular regions into fine art, so did Ellington when he produced fully orchestrated blues idiom statements.

Dvorak, Murray notes, made one mistake in that he assumed the principles of European composition were universal principles of composition. Ellington made no such mistake. Murray also notes that Ellington's music is the truly indigenous American music, and not the programmatic music of Aaron Copland for example. As pleasant and brilliant as Copland's music is, it is really European concert hall music based on American themes. While Copland's work from the late 1930's and 1940's might include pieces based on the pentatonic scale and Appalachian and Shaker folk tunes, it is very European in its method of composition. What Murray is basically saying, in other words, is if Ellington had written a programmatic piece about Bedrich Smetana's Moldau River, but composed it in the blues idiom for his orchestra, it would not be called Czech music. Therefore, this hypothetical Ellington composition would be American with a Czech topographical theme, just as Copland's compositions are basically European with American themes. It should be kept in mind that nothing Murray says in this essay is an affront to, or a critique of Copland's music as such, but rather the way Copland's music is often described, marketed, and portrayed.

In *Me and Old Duke* (in Part III: "Memos for a Memoir") Murray paints a vivid and touching portrait of his personal hero, and indeed the hero of his generation, Duke Ellington. Murray outlines Ellington's influence upon his life, and chronicles their friendship. Ellington was the great hero to Americans of Murray's generation, Ellington having been born in 1899, Murray in 1916. Duke was not only a hero of Murray's, they were also good friends; beginning in the 1940's and continuing to Ellington's death in 1974. Their friendship was one of deep mutual admiration. The last sentence of this piece is especially moving and poignant. Murray talks about when he was O'Connor Professor of Literature at Colgate University in 1970, and Ellington invited him to fly out to Hollywood, all expenses paid, for the weekend. Ellington was performing there at the Coconut Grove. Murray writes of the event: "I would have been just as thrilled en route to meet him at a roadhouse anywhere on the chitlin' circuit." The second piece in *Memos for a Memoir* is entitled "Me and Old Uncle Billy and the American Mythosphere" and is about William Faulkner's influence on Murray. Murray and Faulkner never met, to say nothing of developing a friendship like he did with Duke Ellington, but nevertheless, "Me and Old Uncle Billy and the American Mythosphere" is just as interesting.

From the Briarpatch File, like all of Murray's nonfiction, is a belle-lettristic analysis done in the most stylish and elegant fashion. His unique jazz-based prose keeps swinging and pulling no punches. It celebrates the context, procedure, and identity of the country that is today more than ever "the last best hope on Earth."