
BLACK ICE: A VOICE FOR THE BLACK
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Abstract: A lecturer in creative writing, Lorene Cary wrote *Black Ice* in 1991 to commemorate her adolescent years spent in Saint Paul's school in New Hampshire. In this cheerful autobiography we hear the chirpy voice of a Black woman whose frolicsome nature and flair for life is the literary equivalent of playful sunshine on black ice. Her spirited reminiscence show how today Black American woman have sloughed off the sapping memories of the bygone years and can revel unpretentiously in the choices they make and the effort they put in to make life meaningful.

Keywords: Voice, Black Woman.

Introduction: Lorene Cary's *Black Ice*, published in 1991 is an absorbing autobiographical account of the two years she spent at Saint Paul's, an elitist school in New Hampshire which had just become a co-ed school after years of being an exclusively all boys institution. Before she enrolled everyone in her family in Philadelphia was keen on seeing her move on to acquire a position none of her ancestors had thought possible. Cary herself was eager to get away from home because she was just fifteen and her head was among the stars. In fact, *Black Ice* reveals all the traumas an ambitious adolescent Black girl experiences when she, aware of the bitter history of her race, tries to pursue her dreams through education. Though Cary has written four other books yet she hasn't made any further excursion into her own life. Perhaps she found fiction a more appropriate genre to express her passionate love of her race and her commitment to the cause of her people. These four fictional books are, *The Price of a Child* (1995), *Pride* (1998), *Free! Great Escapes from Slavery on the Underground Railroad* (2006) and *If Sons, Then Heirs* (2011). Indeed, it is in fiction that Cary explores, underlines and highlights all the racists and sexists' mechanism of oppression that Black women are subjected to in American society even after the abolition of slavery.

When a new America that believes in integration offers Cary a chance to find a genuine place for herself in the midst of affluent white students, her adolescent mind is bewildered at her transformation from Yeadon, her home school, to Saint Paul's. As a matter of fact, from the time she enrolled at Saint Paul's her aspirations and misgivings coupled with her distrust of white folks and further complicated by her passionate commitment to "Skin, skin, ya na know me?" (*Black Ice* 130) led to conflicting psychological impulses that she could hardly bear on her frail adolescent shoulders. When she went back to Saint Paul as a teacher, a little over ten years later, she could still feel that her mind was the same old cauldron of conflicting emotions. "I found my own adolescence, in all its hormonal excess, waiting for

me at Saint Paul's: old rage and fear, ambition, self-consciousness, love, curiosity, energy, hate, envy, compulsion, fatigue." (*Black Ice* 4) She could still sense how profoundly Saint Paul's had shaken her and how "damaged and fraudulent and traitorous" (*Black Ice* 4) she had felt when she graduated.

Nevertheless, she gradually learned to cope with the conflicting emotions of her own inner self and the finely tuned academic curriculum of Saint Paul's. At the end of her two years sojourn she graduated without honors but was able to win the Rector's special award for being an outstanding student and her contribution to the community everyone shared at Saint Paul's. The Rector praised her for being "Even tampered, talented, conscientious and well mannered." (*Black Ice* 217) Indeed he called her "a girl of sterling character and high integrity." (*Black Ice* 217) On the whole *Black Ice* faithfully reveals all her positive and negative feelings and convictions that marked her life at Saint Paul's.

Cary reflects on her twin identities of teacher and student at Saint Paul's and reassesses her outlook on the school as one of its trustees. At this final stage of her association with Saint Paul's, she is able to speak about her *Alma Mater* with some sense of belonging and even urges young black students to think of St. Paul's as their school and not as a white place where they were trespassing.

Cary in *Black Ice* speaks about her positive role as a teacher and her responsibility as a trustee and her reunion with classmates fifteen years after graduating from St. Paul's. At the end she makes certain elucidatory observations about an important factor that preoccupied her mind while writing the autobiography. This factor was the stories she had heard from her grandfather and the charm they had for her. Inevitably fragments of those stories crept into her autobiography. The following snippets from the final section testify to their importance.

1. I recalled my great-grandfather's stories that might when I'd sat out on the ice. (*Black Ice* 236)

2. Nowhere else I get the rhythm of these stories, the ghosts and their magic. Without the stories, and the songs, I am mute. (*Black Ice* 236)
3. St. Paul's gave me new words into which I must translate the old. But St. Paul's would keep me inside my black skin, that fine, fine membrane that was meant to hold in my blood, not bind up my soul. The stories show me the way out. I must tell my daughter that. I must do it so she will know. (*Black Ice* 237)
4. I didn't ask for the stories, but I was given them to tell, to retell and change and pass along. (Each one teach one, pass it on, pass it on.) I was given them to plait into my story, to use, to give me the strength to take off my skin and stand naked, and unafraid in the night, to touch other souls in the night. (*Black Ice* 237)

Black Ice shows the growth of Lorene Cary's identity as a young black woman in a predominantly white world. What is important is that this wafer-thin autobiography, far from being an assault on the past deeds of white Americans, is as Houston Baker says "A journey into selfhood that resonates with sober reflection, intelligent passion and joyous love." (*Black Ice* Back cover) *Black Ice* brings out most of the significant observations, experiences and reflections that Cary makes as she speaks of her grandparents, parents friends and family members in the context of her life as a student at St. Paul's show all that enabled her to be rid of her illusions and develop and honestly discover what it means to grow up as a Black in America.

Beginning with a mixture of expectation and a growing sense of discovery, *Black Ice* reveals Lorene Cary's eagerness to prove her worth and establish herself in a world away from Yeadon High (her school) and the Yeadon Enclave of Black professionals and wanna be professionals. Cary begins to anticipate her future and subdue her adolescence defiance at the first sniff of Saint Paul's school at the age of fourteen in the year 1971. She realizes that Saint Paul school "could mean credentials, self confidence, power." (*Black Ice* 8) She dreams of her future identity: "I imagined living away from home, making a precocious launch into the wide world of competition." (*Black Ice* 8)

The path to St. Paul's practically begins with a meeting with Mr. Jeremy Price, a black teacher at St. Paul's and Mike Russell, a teen aged senior at St. Paul's, engaged in an independent study project of recruiting new students. This meeting ignites the flames of her aspirations as she felt "the great God of education" move within her. "This school -why, that's why I had been raised for, only I hadn't known it." (*Black Ice* 12) Later when she, accompanied by her parents, visited St. Paul's to attend an interview and apply for admission, she could feel that the school

would set her free of her past and leave her free to recreate herself. Her parents as well as she could sense that St. Paul's was a dream come true. Indeed the dream took on an aura of inevitability and instilled in her a feeling of necessity. A voice within her said "I had to go to St. Paul's. I had been raised for it." (*Black Ice* 32) This realization began to take hold of her as she introspected about how a mother had groomed her to set high standards for herself. She started questioning herself about her own role and her own goals in a country where integration not segregation was the order of the day making. Slavery and its abolition had become a thing of the past. She questioned herself "Wasn't it time for me to play my part in that mammoth enterprise- the integration, the moral transformation, no less of America." At the same time she realized that she had been waiting for this "The way a fairy prince waits for a man" (*Black Ice* 33) without suspecting that her fate would be revealed to her "so handsomely or so soon." (*Black Ice* 33)

Lorene Cary speaks about her parents and their Negro identity- parents who were only too eager to see her move up in the company of whites without exhibiting any trace of resentment at how the Negro race had been treated in the past. It is in this context that Cary makes her first observation on Negroes. She refers to the merciless self criticism of her race in these words: "What's wrong with the colored race? I'll tell you what's wrong with the colored race. We don't think. That's what. And we do not stick together." (*Black Ice* 10)

Lorene Cary's *Black Ice* is considered as one of the classic modern memoirs of growing up in America. Lorene Cary celebrates her Black female self in her autobiography. *Black Ice* stands out as proof of how Black women, despite carrying the psychological scars of their ancestry, have managed to make their mark in the white world without selling out but with their color and races still intact. What is perhaps more significant is their ability to maintain the dignity of their Black womanhood. Lorene Cary's indomitable pride in her skin is writ- large in the book and it is heartening to note to do justice by them and defend their deeds, manners and memorable tales. Lorene Cary's life is indicative of the true emancipation of her daughter who, she hopes, will live without the burden of inherent doubts and fears she herself had to bear. Remarkably, Cary's scars are not her own but the reminders of the ignominy and exploitation the Negro race was subjected to. Thus Cary carries the Black female agency ahead by asserting herself in the academia and professional career and also in her relationship with black and white men of America. Her act of writing her autobiography empowers to present the changing vision of reality for Black women in America.

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