

Notes on Tu Do Street by Yusef Komunyakaa:

In his poetry, Yusef Komunyakaa weaves together the elements of his own life in short lines of vernacular to create complex images of life in his native Louisiana and the jungles of Vietnam. From his humble beginnings as the son of a carpenter, Komunyakaa has traveled far to become a scholar, professor, and prize-winning poet.

“Tu Do Street” by Yusef Komunyakaa can be understood as autobiographical. Through the development of the poem, the use of imagery and historical allusions allow the reader to find out the speaker’s identity in a racial context. Komunyakaa wastes no time in revealing who the speaker is. First creating an image of two concrete, contrasting colors: black and white, the reader can see that the poem will comment on race. Alluding to “soul, country & western,/ acid rock, & Frank Sinatra,” genres and singers popular in the late 40’s and early 50’s, Komunyakaa guides readers’ minds to the stereotypical black, American soldier of the time period, “Searching for love, a woman,/ someone to help ease down [his] cocked hammer.” This racial identity is further stereotyped in the “White Only” signs the speaker passes by on his way into a bar. An outcast in this place, “[He] get[s] the silent/ treatment.” The bartender does not even acknowledge his request for a beer “while her/ eyes caress a white face.” We see the speaker continually breaking the stereotype. Unlike the stereotypical black man of the time that we know to be innocent, conflict avoiding, and obedient, the speaker disregards the “White Only” sign and later “An off limits sign pulls [him]/ deeper into alleys.” The speaker is further identified as a pensive and thoughtful individual, gaining a new perspective from his location in Saigon as the reader gets to hear his commentary on the ‘United’ States of America, “There’s more than a nation divided/ inside us, as black and white/ soldiers touch the same lovers/ minutes apart, tasting/ each other’s breath.” We finally get to see some of the thoughts that guide the speaker into that “White Only” bar and down the forbidden alley and it’s these thoughts that complete the speaker’s identity as more than a stereotypical black GI.