

CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE  
in THE  
AFRICAN DIASPORA



*Quarta*

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Cover Design: José Martín Pérez

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ISBN: 84-89716-38-2  
Depósito legal: LE. 1105-1997

Imprime: gráficas CELARAYN (impresión electrónica)  
Ordoño II, 31 24007 LEÓN

León (Spain) 1997

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present book is mainly the result of the «First International Symposium on Contemporary Literature of the African Diaspora,» held at the University of Salamanca in March 1996. The University of Salamanca must be especially thanked for their support and assistance in the production of this volume. Emanuel Nelson, Professor of English at the State University of New York College at Cortland must be acknowledged as the first person to encourage me to hold a symposium on the African diaspora. Geneviève and Michel Fabre, Maria Diedrich and Justine Tally deserve a special mention for the conferences and symposia they have organized in France and Spain, which highly inspired me to carry out the symposium at Salamanca, as well as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for his encouragement and support. However, I am particularly indebted to my colleagues Natalia Fontán, María Frías, Manuel González de la Aleja, Ana María Manzanás and Daniel Pastor—the planning committee who made the organization of the symposium possible—for their enthusiasm and hard work, as well as to the students in English courses who volunteered to help in carrying out the symposium itself. Among the institutions that financially supported this international event and that must be acknowledged are the British Council, the City Hall of Salamanca, the Embassy of the United States in Spain, the English Department of the University of Salamanca, Junta de Castilla y León, and the University of Salamanca.

Of course, without the participation and contribution of all panelists, this collection of essays would not have been possible. It is for this reason that I want to thank all participants, especially Trudier Harris, whom I had the honor to meet at the symposium; Velma Pollard, whom I had met at UCLA while completing a Masters Degree in African American Studies; and Kriben Pillay, whom I could not meet while I was doing research in South Africa in 1989 but, after several years, finally met. Special mention needs Bernard W. Bell, who came to the English Department of the University of Salamanca as a Fulbright Scholar and whose encouragement, enlightening comments and suggestions highly contributed to the development of the symposium, and greatly helped me in the editing of my article included in this volume. As a senior specialist in North American and African American Studies, Bell has been of invaluable assistance in selecting and patiently editing with his graduate assistant Susan Searls the essays included in this book. The participation of Bernard W. Bell in this project was facilitated by support of the Fulbright program. Finally, Dirección General de Investigación Científica y Enseñanza Superior del Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia is acknowledged for its endowment to publish this book of essays.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Saline Consciousness and Hybrid Cultural Identities: Race, Gender, and Class Issues in Contemporary Literature in the African Diaspora

What is the relationship of non-white peoples of sub-Saharan African descent in the Caribbean and North, Central, and South Americas to the African continent? How do contemporary artists, intellectuals, and cultural workers construct and reconstruct diasporic identities in literature? How do their *imagined communities* relate to the facts of a vast, multicultural Africa? What is the relationship of race, gender, and class in the reconstruction and reproduction of diasporic identities in African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latin, and African literatures? These are the key questions and issues addressed by the essays in this book.

Most of these essays were presented in the First Symposium on Contemporary Literature of the African Diaspora at the University of Salamanca, March 20-23, 1996. This symposium was sparked in part by recent international conferences on the African diaspora in Spain, especially «Africana» in Alcala de Henares, May 1994; and «Trans-Atlantic Passages,» in Tenerife, Canary Islands, February 1995. But its major purpose was to provide its principal organizer, Olga Barrios, the University of Salamanca, and the many participants an opportunity to reinvigorate the University's academic program in North American literature by focusing on interdisciplinary, transcultural critical inquiries into issues of race, gender, and class in contemporary literature in the African diaspora.

The plan of the symposium was to have an equal number of papers on Africa and the African diaspora by participants from Africa, Europe and the New World. Although most of the participants were actually from Spain and most of the papers presented focused on African American literature in the United States, the symposium and this book illustrate the impressive range and depth of the growing internationalization of research in African American Studies. Equally impressive is the number of intriguing papers presented on Caribbean and Afro-Latin literatures. Because of the absence of black West African participants in the symposium, we also solicited a couple of additional illuminating papers on African literature from a Kenyan and a Sierra Leonean literary critic.

Contrary to the argument by black American feminists like bell hooks that race, gender, and class constitute an interlocking matrix of social markers in North American society and culture, most of the papers privilege gender issues over the politics of race and class in the formation of a viable contemporary diasporic identities. Some of the

contributors conflate gender as a binary category for studying both men and women with the unitary study of women. Most do not rigorously analyze how black masculinist discourse previously dominated the politics of diasporic identity. Even so, many of the essays do provide a window on the now more frequent focus on the issue of multiple feminisms, especially for women writers, in the African diaspora. «Despite the proliferation of feminist scholarship during the last decade or more,» as Sidney Lemelle and Robin D. G. Kelley observe in *Imagining Home*, «gender has only slowly been integrated into the field of diaspora studies, mainly by African American and African feminist scholars, whose work is all too often ignored» (1994, 5).

Rather than a single definition of the African diaspora and earlier nineteenth-century and pre-World War II varieties of black cultural nationalism, the contributors provide a provocative, if not always historically specific and complete, range of descriptions and explanations of the African diaspora. Some focus on the forced dispersion of peoples of African descent in the New World. Some trace African cultural survivals in the diaspora. And others examine the problematics of reclaiming a fragmented African past and reconstructing hybrid racial and cultural African identities. Regardless of their focus, however, most contributors apparently assume that their audience knows that the advocates of black nationalism have historically sought to inspire emancipation movements by establishing and reinforcing racial and cultural ties among Africans on the continent and between continental Africans and those in the African diaspora, i.e., the Americas—North, Central, and South—and the Caribbean.

In this age of antiessentialist, antigeneric, anticanonical multiculturalism, some conservative and progressive critics—from literary formalists to radical feminists, postmodernists, poststructuralists, and postcolonialists—argue that it is ideologically reactionary and romantic as well as critically reductive and divisive to engage in the reconstruction of specific racial and ethnic literary canons. As socially constructed classifications of texts that embody and encode basic beliefs, values, and issues of a specific time, place, people, canons are neither static nor eternal categories. To contextualize historically and culturally this ethnocultural debate, let us turn first to Nobel Prize-winner Wole Soyinka's eloquent response to cries of *divisionism* and *reactionism* in the Conference of Ministers on African Culture (AFRICULT) in Accra in 1975. During that planning conference for the Festival of Black and African Art and Culture in Lagos in 1977—where I presented my first international paper on the tradition of the African American novel as a member of the Colloquium—Soyinka questions the historical tenacity of the double standards and fallacious reasoning of contemporary debates concerning the rights to self-definition of black people and researchers of sub-Saharan African descent.

In spite of the obvious discrete cultural differences of their constituent nations, the reality of European, Arab, and Asian cultures is generally accepted by most individuals and international institutions. In contrast, the validation and valorization of a black African world and culture is generally dismissed as a romantic, totalizing construct (i.e., the sociocultural process of using rhetorical and other forms of power to unify disparate, contradictory elements), even by some black African and African American intellectuals (e.g., Kwame Anthony Appiah, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West).

In defining the reality of the African world, Soyinka writes in «The African World and the Ethnocultural Debate»:

any intellectuals have been anxious not to give it a reacting character, that is the character of a world which can only be grasped in relation to others. This form of definition is not

itself wrong; it is merely fraught with unhappy connotations. The African world did not come into existence in reaction or in response to any other world. But sometimes, when all other arguments and expositions have failed—failed not intrinsically, not from lack of merit, but as a result of what we have described as the illogical imposition of external references—then we must resort to allied methodologies and define the world that is being denied in relation, not merely to the properties of other worlds, but in relation, in complementarity, to the very existence, the assertiveness, even aggressiveness of other worlds (Asante and Asante 1985, 14-15).

For Soyinka, then, oppositional dualism—in contrast to Derridean hierarchic binarisms that are absolute, static, and inflexible—is neither inherently wrong nor inevitably oppositional in the interrogation of the powers and limitations of the political and cultural construction of the *Self* and the *Other* in colonial and postcolonial discourses.

In contrast to the history and consciousness of Soyinka and the Yoruba people, the identities of Americans of sub-Saharan African descent have been shaped by a different configuration of experiences and racialized language. As W. E. B. Du Bois reminds us in his paradigmatic theory and trope of double consciousness, and as I explain in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, the identities of African Americans have been sociohistorically, sociopsychologically, and socioculturally shaped by a particular configuration of experiences. Informed by the pervasiveness, perversities, and paradoxes of racism, these experiences begin with the temporal and spatial sites of colonial Africa, slavery, the transatlantic Middle Passage to the New World, and the Southern plantation tradition in the United States. They culminate in the Civil War, emancipation, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, Northern migration, urbanization, and industrialization. And as the essays in this book reveal, the identities of black Americans continue being shaped by the distinctive pattern of our individual and collective experiences as a biracial, bicultural people of African descent in the United States, especially by the legacies of Africa—however spiritual, distant, and imagined—and vestiges of institutionalized racism.

Stuart Hall, a major black Jamaican cultural studies theorist, provides a superbly lucid, intelligent explanation of the two dominant yet different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first defines it

in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective «one true self,» hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed «selves,» which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. . . . This «oneness,» underlying all the other more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of «Caribbeanness,» of the black experience (1990, 23).

Allowing for spatial and temporal differences, this conception of cultural identity not only informed the Negritude Movement of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, but also, Hall reminds us, «played a critical role in all the post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world» (1990, 223).

While neither underestimating nor neglecting the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery and *imaginary reunification* grounded or centered in a common African past and ancestry, Hall aligns himself more with the ideological shift toward the second related, but different conception of the production of cultural identity through the *re-telling of the past*. Although the second definition acknowledges the many points of similarity, he argues persuasively that it



stresses the critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute «what we really are»; or rather —since history has intervened—«what we have become.» We cannot speak for very long with any exactness, about «one experience, one identity,» without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's «uniqueness.» Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of «becoming» as well as of «being.» It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities . . . have histories. But . . . they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous «play» of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere «recovery» of the past. . . identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall 1990, 225).

Peoples of sub-Saharan black African descent were not only constructed as different and inferior Others by the power of the dominant colonial and postcolonial systems of knowledge and language of the West, as postcolonial theorists Edward Said and Frantz Fanon reveal in *Orientalism* (1979) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) respectively, but also compelled and induced to «measure one's soul by the tape of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity» (Du Bois 1961, 17).

Although he acknowledges both the right of Somalia to redefine, reconstruct, and represent itself culturally as a member of the Arab nations and the right of Ethiopia to claim a Semitic cultural heritage, Soyinka—like Du Bois, Fanon, and Hall—also advocates the idea of an African diaspora and decries «saline consciousness.» He writes:

How can we as intelligent beings submit to the self-imprisonment of a «saline consciousness» which insists that, contrary to all historic evidence, Africa stops wherever salt water licks its shores? Or that, conversely, all that is bound by salt water on the African continent is necessarily (black) African. What other race, and especially on the African continent, has lost 200 million of its people through forcible uprooting? Elementary curiosity justifies that we seek out those who survived of that number and inquire in what forms have they survived? What have they achieved? What have they contributed to their new environments? What lessons, if any, have their specific genius evolved for those who were left behind? The human (and African) habit of celebration, which is an act of recollection, assessment and rededication validates this impulse (1985, 19).

While supporting the idea of sub-Saharan black African cultural unity and continuity with a difference in the New World, Soyinka simultaneously maintains that «Senghor's concept of a black African culture as represented in negritude is poles apart from mine» (Soyinka 1985, 19-26).

Students and specialists in African and African American Studies should therefore critically reexamine and judiciously reassess essays and books on the relationship of various general and specific African histories and cultures to peoples of African descent in the New World by such pioneer creators of models of paradoxically and authentic yet hybrid African diasporic identities as William Wells Brown, Martin Delany, Edward W. Blyden, Alexander Crummell, W. E. B. Du Bois, and J. E. Caseley-Hayford. Although «their critiques were generally constrained by a highly moralistic and nationalistic Western epistemology grounded in a hybrid discourse that combined Christian rationalism and its attendant notions of 'civilization' or 'progress' with a Black prophetic tradition of Ethiopianism,» they laid the foundation for the construction and reconstruction of diasporic identities by subsequent generations (Lemelle & Kelley 1994, 3).

In 1900, 1919, 1923, 1927, and 1945—during the resurgence of white American and European nationalism and imperialism that culminated in two world wars—Du Bois was the multiracial/black academic principal leader of Pan-African Conferences. In the 1920s Marcus Garvey, a black Jamaican journalist inspired by Booker T. Washington, led the largest grassroots Back-to-Africa Movement in the United States. And in the 1920s and 1930s Leopold Senghor, Aimée Césaire, and Léon Damas were leaders of the Negritude Movement. Equally important in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was the leadership of activist politicians, academicians, and cultural workers, such as C. L. R. James, Cheikh Anta Diop, George E. M. James, Eric Williams, Kwame Nkrumah, and Walter Rodney, who were mainly educated in England, the United States and Europe in the radical African decolonization movements of the post-World War II era. In the movements and writings of these intellectuals and cultural workers, we discover the roots of Molefi Kete Asante's Afrocentrism and the construction of a 1980s diasporic identity by the reconstruction initially of ancient Egypt and subsequently of Central Africa as a black African civilization that was prior to ancient Greece and a primary contributor to our contemporary systems of knowledge.

«Ancient Africa's influence on ancient Greece . . . was profound and significant in art, architecture, astronomy, medicine, geometry, mathematics, law, politics and religion,» writes Asante in his critical response to Mary Lefkowitz's *Not Out of Africa*. «Yet there has been a furious campaign to discredit African influence and to claim a miraculous birth for Western civilization.» Arguing that Lefkowitz «ignores or distorts the substantial evidence of African influence on Greece in the ancient writings of Aetius, Strabo, Plato, Homer, Herodotus, Diogenes, Plutarch and Diodorus of Sicily,» Asante advises us to read these writers and decide for ourselves who is more believable, the ancients or Lefkowitz (Asante 1996, 67).

He also explains the essential difference between Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity:

Afrocentricity seeks to discover African agency in every situation. Who are we? What did we do? Where did we travel? What is our role in geometry? How do we as a people function in this or that contemporary situation. But the Afrocentrist does not advance African particularity as universal. This is its essential difference from Eurocentricity, which is advanced in the United States and other places as if the particular experiences of Europeans are universal. This imposition is ethnocentric and often racist. Afrocentricity advances the view that it is possible for a pluralism of cultures to exist without hierarchy, but this demands cultural equality and respect (Asante 1996, 68).

Despite this apparent essential difference, however, Valentin Y. Mudimbe, a specialist in romance languages and comparative philosophical anthropology, argues persuasively «that . . . Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order. Even in the most explicitly 'Afrocentric' descriptions, models of analysis explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer to the same order» (Mudimbe 1988, x).

Although most contributors to this book do not invoke Benedict Anderson's argument for reconceptualizing nation-states as «imagined communities» that «are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined» as analogous to the construction of African diasporic identities, Anderson's model, with appropriate rewriting, provides a needed alternative interpretive strategy to the categorical dismissal by too many critics of diasporic identities as romantic or idealistic fabrications. «But, more than style itself,» as historians Lemelle and Kelley suggest, «it is important to bear in mind that hegemonic institutions construct and

maintain systems of knowledge/information that reproduce. . .the imagined community, a sense of national obligation, patriotism, and familiarity necessary for the success of nationalism» (Lemelle & Kelley 1994, 7). As Mudimbe impressively demonstrates in *The Invention of Africa* (1988), despite the role of dominant systems of European power and knowledge, especially educational institutions and information technologies, the recurring invention of Africa and hybrid diasporic identities was bidirectional rather than monodirectional. In short, while European imperialists, colonialists, and missionaries were transforming Africa and Africans, Africa and Africans were also transforming Western culture and character.

In addition to identifying and interrogating various constructions of diasporic identities, the twenty essays in this book are divided into three regional categories in which many other issues are examined. In the first section on African American literature in the United States, the issues range from the problematics of the imaginative reinvention of Africa by African American women writers, including African patriarchy and female fibulation in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, to black male stereotypes in the fiction of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Terry McMillan. This section concludes with an examination of the reconstruction of a diasporic black male consciousness in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*.

The second section is on Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American literatures. Its topics include the diasporic poetics of Derek Walcott; the subversive metaphors of the balm yard in two Jamaican texts; the female rites of passage in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*; the complex politics of race, gender, and class in a Puerto Rican short story; and the erasure of racial difference in Afro-Columbian writers by critics in Columbia.

Reversing the forced transatlantic journey of Africans to the New World, the third and final section focuses on contemporary African literature in English. It explores Wole Soyinka's poetics of solitude and the disruptive legacies of colonialism in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, as well as the politics and poetics of the South African theatre movement by non-whites, and the role of memory in the rewriting of the Amistad revolt in the Theater of Relevance in Sierra Leone.

With the resurgent institutionalization and internationalization of African American and Diasporic Studies, this book is designed to showcase a wide range of cultural sites, critics, authors, texts, and methodologies that shed light on the complex issues of race, class, and gender in the construction of identities in contemporary literature in the African diaspora. In this context, it is hoped that the book will contribute to more frequent and productive interrogations of two postmodernist fallacious arguments by many recent students and several leading specialists of African American literature and culture. The first is that all binaristic theories and methodologies of this field of study are equally reductive. The second is that all theories of traditional, folk, or authentic African and African American cultures should be categorically dismissed or demeaned as ahistorical and romantic. Despite the tactical and hyperbolic proclamations and advocacy of an African identity by some black cultural nationalists, the revisionist diasporic scholarship of internationally respected black pioneers and modern critics in the field, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Paul Gilroy, assumes and affirms a hybrid racial and cultural identity of diasporic unity with diversity, especially as authentically expressed in music, speech, and religion. The essays in this book contribute to continuities as well as discontinuities in this debate on the politics of identity in contemporary literature in the African diaspora.

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# **African American Literature**

## Introduction

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The first section of this book on African American Literature is mostly dedicated to African American women writers, which shows how women writers and feminist criticism are increasingly occupying a more relevant place in the field of literary studies. One of the last essays is, however, a reflection on male stereotypes in the fiction of African American women, compelling us to think about the possible contradiction of feminist criticism vindicating the rupture of female stereotypes in men's writing. The section ends with an analysis of Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage*. The authors have examined the literary works included in this volume within the context of the concept of diaspora, which is defined in various ways depending on the work under study. Each essay demonstrates a scholarly and personal style which enriches its content and reveals the existence of a colorful multicultural range of approaches and perspectives. And each is a previously unpublished essay.

The first essay, «What Is Africa to African American Women Writers?» by the well-known African American literary critic Trudier Harris, opens with an extensive reflection on the representation of Africa by African American writers in poetry, fiction and theater from the 1920s to the present. Harris argues that for most African American women writers Africa has remained an imagined and unexplored territory. By examining how Africa has been represented in different literary works—such as a site to discover and reassert one's identity or as a place to which African Americans can flee from the effects of racism—Harris insists that the vast variety and complexity of African cultures have been reduced to a unitary identity and «contained within the smallness» of the writer's created art. The essay questions whether African American writers have not «re-colonized the continent» for their own needs and consequently failed to examine Africa the way it deserves.

After the general overview of how Africa has been represented in African American women's writings, two essays reflect especially on the diasporic experience presented by Alice Walker in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Sheila Lloyd's «Revisionist Desires: Culture, Gender and Diasporic Consciousness in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*» reexamines the term diaspora and asserts that diaspora studies maintain a masculine discourse that forgets the traditional sense of diaspora where «women were the *enabling ground* from which male figures emerged.» Focusing on the main issue of Walker's novel, Tashi's genital mutilation, Lloyd then interrogates this «re-inscription of masculinity.» The author concentrates mainly on a counter-reading of Walker's

feminist discourse to assert that liberal global feminism is not self-reflexive enough to realize that, like masculinist discourse, it also takes women's bodies as its ground. According to her, Walker's novel is a feminist revision of an «eroticized nationalism,» displacing the sexual orgasm, or joy, from the female body to the body politics, thus participating in the masculine «appropriation of women's bodies as a discursive material.»

A different approach to Walker's novel is Josefina Cornejo's «Deconstructing Tradition and Reconstructing the Self: Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.» Cornejo's essay examines the character of Tashi, reflecting on the traditions of both storytelling and female genital mutilation in Olinka, an imaginary African country. Cornejo argues that Walker's novel plays with various dualities—i.e., individual vs. community or praise vs. rejection of certain traditions. She emphasizes that Walker uses storytelling both to deconstruct the tradition of female genital mutilation and to reconstruct the mutilated body and fragmented self of the central character. The female body is equated to a fragmented text, which reflects the physical and emotional consequences of genital mutilation; and storytelling becomes a means of resistance to survive the oppressive situation which the rite of female initiation involves.

If storytelling can be considered a creative force utilized by women writers, María del Mar Gallego's essay «Female Creative Powers in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*» continues in the same line and focuses on the inherent multiplicity of female creativity, asserting that Shange creates thus a distinct feminist value system. Gallego examines Shange's novel in the light of a feminism of difference, where women's abilities—including everyday chores and/or artistic skills—are claimed as legitimate cultural manifestations of women's genuine creative powers. Moreover, she adds that Shange's work culminates with the celebration of the potentiality of women's biological procreation as a conscious, cultural and creative art. Whereas Cornejo's essay views Tashi's body as a fragmented text in Walker's novel, Gallego observes that the feminine body in Shange's novel is considered as a metaphor for a privileged text in which «African American female identity is constructed in a continuous process of self-discovery and self-expression.»

Continuing with the issue of difference, Ana María Fraile's «Negotiating Difference in the Diaspora of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*» argues that Naylor's novel presents the multiplicity and fragmentation of the experiences of Blacks in the United States, showing the diverse and complex experiences shared by the women of Brewster Place. Difference lies in the fact that women, although part of the same community, are products of different backgrounds. Besides, Fraile claims that history acts as both «a differentiating and agglutinating factor» in constructing Brewster's community, which has come together by intermingling sexual, racial and class oppression. Dramatic examples of heterogeneity and difference in Brewster Place enclose homosexuality, class and generational issues.

Whereas difference was examined in previous essays, Australia Tarver studies diasporic implications in the three novels she analyzes in her essay «Mother-Daughter Agency in Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways*, Paule Marshall's *Daughters* and Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell's *When Rocks Dance*.» Tarver reflects on the bond and interaction between mother and daughters, asserting that the role of women—as also suggested by Lloyd—suffers a *double colonization*, and insists on the importance of a feminine agency that will help women to advance and obtain other liberating issues. She evaluates how agency changes and is challenged by history and how it occurs in different degrees

in the three novels, reflecting also on the conflicts created by the diasporic result of multiracial characters. Tarver, nevertheless, asserts that the mother-daughter bond empowers women's self assertion.

The well-known African American scholar and literary critic, Bernard W. Bell with his essay «Nails, Snails and Puppy Dog Tails: Black Male Stereotypes in the Diasporic Fiction of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Terry McMillan» becomes the bridge between the previous essays and the last article of this section on male fiction. Bell's provocative title incorporates a counter-reading to any feminist theory of contemporary African American writers by analyzing the male stereotypes that appear in the fiction of three celebrated contemporary African American women writers. His essay introduces a historical line of stereotypes about the black community, including the stereotypes of black males and females by black revolutionary leaders of the 1960s and the final male stereotypes created by contemporary African American women writers. His essay focuses on four main stereotypes observed in Morrison, Walker and McMillan: The Brute Negro, the Dog, the Existential Black Anti-Hero and the Misogynist Black Revolutionary Nationalist, analyzing the historical origin of each of them. Bell explores how these oversimplifying images in different degrees have contributed to the «neocolonial cultural and political domination of American males of African descent.»

In his essay, Bell mentions his first trip to Africa and his experience in going back to his mythic *homeland*, and in the last essay Jesús Benito and Ana María Manzanás Calvo examine the symbolic reversal of the middle passage of Calhoun, the main character of Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage*—Calhoun crosses the Atlantic from the New World to Africa. In their study «Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage* and the African Diaspora,» Benito and Manzanás argue that Calhoun's journey symbolizes his movement from ignorance to knowledge, from emptiness and amnesia to enlightenment, and from philosophical dualism and material self-gratification to what Chinua Achebe calls «spiritual congruence with others.» The authors demonstrate how Calhoun exemplifies the middle passage man, who has suffered the effects of colonization and who is based, like diaspora, on a flux and dispersion, insisting that diaspora «fosters cultural intermingling and engenders multiplicity for multiculturalism.»



## What Is Africa to African American Women Writers?

TRUDIER HARRIS

A rediscovery of Africa characterized several works of the New Negro Movement of the 1920s in the United States as some of the prominent writers asserted Africa's relevance to their self-conception. Many of them actually visited countries in Africa. Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay were all focused on Africa in some of their works. «What is Africa to me?» Cullen asks in his poem «Heritage»: «Copper sun or scarlet sea,/ Jungle star or jungle track, / Strong bronzed men, or regal black/ Women from whose loins I sprang/ When the birds of Eden sang?» (1925, 36), and he proceeds to depict the origin of Africans in America as a romanticized, idealized, mythical place that few human beings could inhabit. Cullen's Africa is lush, green, tropical, and pagan. It is a world lacking in inhibitions, where young lovers bask in each other's embrace in glorious forests. It is a world that cries out to him in his civilized Western veneer and asks that he rejoin his ancestors by tossing aside all the accouterments associated with America. Cullen's Africa is *myth*, «A book one thumbs/ Listlessly, till slumber comes» (Cullen 1925, 36). With the repetitive beat of a metronome, that is, the monotony of three and a half feet poetic lines with four stresses each, Cullen tries to drill into his very body what a history beyond the United States *should* mean to him. Unable to assert affirmatively a tie to Africa or to the United States, Cullen's lack of specified allegiance, his playing a «double part,» perhaps serves as metaphor for the position of many African Americans and African American writers in relation to Africa.

Certainly Africa is homeland, place of origin, but it is also, as Langston Hughes discovered on one of his trips there, a place where a light-skinned African American is considered a «white man» and is treated accordingly. In «Outcast,» McKay laments being born in the Western hemisphere, which means being born «far from [his] native clime,/ Under the white man's menace, out of time» (1953, 41). For him, Africa is the place where «the sciences were sucklings at [its] breast» when the rest of the world was «young.» Exportation of people to be enslaved caused Africa to become a «harlot,» a continent whose time had passed when McKay expressed these sentiments in the poem entitled «Africa.» Yet there is still an attraction that McKay holds for the continent, just as a similar attraction existed for Hughes and Cullen. Their collective responses to the continent—home yet strange, romantic but harshly realistic, hoped for escape but possible imprisonment—illustrate the ranges that existed during the 1920s and shortly thereafter when the rediscovery of origins was a major tenet of the New Negro Movement, whether those origins were in the South of the United States or in Africa.

Africa as place, romantic ideal, or possible site of cultural renewal are some of the ways in which African Americans have come to view it. For African American women writers, who were less on the scene in the 1920s than in more recent times, Africa is these many things and more. Contemporary with Hughes, Cullen, and McKay, Zora Neale Hurston was one of the few black women writers who contemplated what Africa meant to African American culture, but she did so in the context of studying folk forms. Folk narratives or voodoo practices that had come to New Orleans by way of Haiti from various African countries engaged her as an anthropologist, but they did not find their way—with African connections—into the literary works she created. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and her other novels are primarily grounded in African American culture. It would be well into the 1960s and 1970s, in conjunction with the Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic, that large numbers of black women writers began turning toward Africa for some sense of connection to their creative imaginations.

As might be expected, therefore, the elevation of Africa as cultural icon initially appeared in rather dramatic forms culturally as well as in literature. Huge afro hairstyles, dashing colorful dashikis, and Swahili and Yoruba became signature statements of one's affinity with African cultural nationalism. The red, black, and green of the Black Nationalist Flag reiterated that claim. And black Americans rocked and bopped to the beat of what they *thought* Africa was. Indeed, I would venture to say that, for most black Americans, Africa remained and has remained an unexplored territory, something that comes in handy as a point of reference, but not something that is ever experienced realistically. I would also venture to say that many of the Swahili spouting militants of the sixties would not have lasted longer than a week in the Masai country of western Kenya. But the language and apparel were designed to embrace the unknown, if not the unknowable, Africa.

The drama of big hair and kenti cloth has its parallels in the writings of a poet such as Nikki Giovanni. Giovanni appropriates Africa for her own site of personal boasting. Her need to embrace blackness leads her to reduce the continent to image, distort its reality for her own ego, and dish it out again as some quasi-authentic construction. She asserts in «Ego Tripping»:

I was born in the congo  
 I walked to the fertile crescent and built  
     the sphinx  
 I designed a pyramid so tough that a star  
 that only glows every one hundred years falls  
 into the center giving divine perfect light  
 I am bad (1975).

And her *badness* is manifested in her assertion that Nefertiti is her oldest daughter and that her birth pains created the Nile. She can only be comprehended, she asserts, by her permission. Finally she avows that she «can fly/ like a bird in the sky. . .» (1975). The tremendous popularity of this poem attests to Africa as icon in the black popular imagination during the Black Arts Movement.

Whatever Africa *is*, it exists for Giovanni to give birth to her own myth of herself. It is the site for resurrecting the value of black womanhood. It is the site for pride in race and assertions of extranatural feats. Giovanni exhibits none of Countee Cullen's ambiguity here. For Giovanni, Africa, as a thing imagined rather than experienced, can

be shaped into whatever it needs to become to augment her identity and her conceptualization of self. Giovanni's Africa—as place of origin—is the space upon which Giovanni builds her re-assertion of African American identity. Her claims are as dramatic as six-inch afros, and they carry the psychological impact of discovery combined with creation. The continent is the site upon which Giovanni works her magic to make it the base of the pyramid from which she leaps into the center of the Black Arts Movement.

Mythologizing Africa. Appropriating Africa. Reclaiming African heritage. Instead of painting unbelievably idealized forests of animals, Giovanni idealizes the idea of Africa itself. Her dramatic mythical self-creation is the individualized counterpart to myth-making that occurs in works by writers such as Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Audre Lorde, and Octavia Butler. For Paule Marshall, in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* (1977), the myth takes the shape of identity formation and cultural preservation. For Marshall's Aunt Cuney, Avey Johnson's great-aunt, the story of Africans enslaved in the New World is a narrative whose ending she rejects in favor of the narrative she has received from her grandmother. In that story, Africans enslaved in South Carolina simply walked, chains notwithstanding, back to Africa.

Collectively referred to as *Ibos*, these Africans fall into narratives told in many African American communities—that Africans brought to the United States either walked or flew back to the continent. Morrison develops the latter possibility in her retrieval of Milkman Dead's great-grandfather in *Song of Solomon*, who flew off and left many bodies in the New World. For Milkman, the magic of his great-grandfather's flying feat outweighs the reality of the needy family members he left behind. For Milkman Dead and his great-grandfather, as well as for Avey Johnson, Africa represents possibility, the mind space of escape, the imaginative power of creating myths that can counteract the negative effects of American racism by transcending them.

That is also the case for Audre Lorde and Gloria Naylor, who create out of the imaginative space of Africa ways for their women characters to *be* on American soil. Lorde conceives of a mythical ancestor, of African origin, who has extraordinary strength and courage, and who serves as ancestor to the poet Lorde who, like Claude McKay, is born «out of time» on American soil. In *The Black Unicorn* (1978), Lorde reclaims, according to some critics, the culture, land, and people of Africa.

For Naylor, the myth takes the shape of a conjure woman, one whose extranatural powers and identification with the forces of nature enable her not only to return to Africa from an oppressive American existence, but to return to America when her descendants need her help. Sapphira Wade, conjure woman extraordinaire, who can «walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot,» who «turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four» (Naylor 1988, 3), also has the power to transcend death, become a force of wind, and fly back to Africa to escape the oppressive condition of slavery. In the present action of the novel, when her descendant Cocoa is conjured by an evil woman named Ruby, Sapphira assists Mama Day by returning in the form of a hurricane to destroy the villainous Ruby, a hurricane that «starts on the shores of Africa, a simple breeze among the palms and cassavas, before it's carried off, tied up with thousands like it, on a strong wave heading due west. A world of water, heaving and rolling, weeks of water, and all them breezes

die but one» (Naylor 1988, 249). That one, Sapphira, grows from an innocuous force into the power of «Woman,» «And *She* has no name» (the lack of a name is in keeping with Mama Day's inability to learn the name of her ancestor) (Naylor 1988, 251, emphasis added).

Myths of Africa harbor the power for vengeance just as they transform Africa into justification for cultural/identity formation and familial preservation. When those who originated on its shores are endangered and cannot return to its nurturing bosom, it can send forces to aid them. Those forces might be tangible, as with Sapphira Wade, or they might be psychological, as in the ceremony where Avey Johnson is awakened to a new sense of her history and heritage by participating in a dance designed to unleash the western cultural blockage that is forcing her to put aside her African origins. In a healthier manifestation than that Countee Cullen exemplifies in his recounting of the African urges pulling him to go out and dance in the rain in his poem «Heritage,» Avey Johnson comes to a true, sensitive understanding of what her Great Aunt Cuney has tried to teach her on those summer strolls when Avey was a child visiting in South Carolina. Reclaiming the past, reclaiming the possibilities for movement toward a secure future—these are what the African myths accomplish for these characters.

For Octavia Butler, Africa becomes the origin point on which she works out a series of myths in the speculative fictional mode. It is in an African village that Doro, a four-thousand-year-old Nubian who appears in several of Butler's novels, discovers that he can transcend space and time, escape the confinement of his physical body by allowing his spiritual essence to inhabit the bodies of others, which—unfortunately for them—destroys their spiritual essence in the process. For Butler, Africa is the site of mystery that must serve as possible explanation for seemingly inexplicable phenomena. Africa is the birthing place for the more than human, the touchstone for imaginative possibilities. In *Wild Seed* (1980), Butler provides the background on how Doro came to be, along with his consort Anyanwu, who lives to be several hundred years old; both of these characters have exceptional extrasensory or psionic powers. Anyanwu is a shapeshifter as well; she can change into dolphins, lions, birds (which bring to mind Lissie's reincarnations in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* [1989]). In *Mind of My Mind* (1977), the novel in which Doro is finally destroyed by the collective efforts of the mutant children he has fathered, Butler allows Africa to remain the unspoken if not the spoken touchstone. It is only in Butler's works that the Africa of *origins* for African Americans becomes problematic, that it produces something harmful to its wandering, far removed children. Usually references to Africa are the positive psychic space to counteract negative Western circumstances.

Certainly that is the case for the Lorde, Naylor, Morrison, and Marshall works to which I have referred, but it is also the case in Morrison's *Beloved*, Marita Golden's *A Woman's Place* (1986), and Marshall's *The Chosen Place: The Timeless People* (1969). In these works as well Africa is the site of memory and recovery of lost heritage. The memories in *Beloved* are as much of slavery as they are of the confinement of the Middle Passage, which in turn evokes the possibility for an African world that was healthier, more nurturing, now merely a distant memory. *Beloved's* memories of *the men without skins* who take her from a place of safety to a place of physical and psychic violation mirror those of many involuntary travelers on the Middle Passage. Africa becomes the *haunting*, the longing for better times and days gone by, for that—in many cases—which is irretrievably lost.

And yet African American people and African American characters in the literature nonetheless frequently undertake journeys to attempt to recover that loss. While Langston Hughes was viewed as a white man, was discouraged by that designation and simply returned to the United States, literary characters work harder and longer to replace themselves in the context of Africa. That is the case with Marita Golden's Serena in *A Woman's Place* (1986) as well as with Merle Kinbona in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place: The Timeless People*. Serena lives and works in Kenya and Zimbabwe in her re-situation process. After disastrous sexual liaisons during her school years in England, and ostracizing days on her island in the Caribbean, Merle Kinbona decides to journey to Africa, where her ex-husband has gone with her child, in order to recover a sense of herself as a healthy human being and a nurturing mother. It is noteworthy that she has to return to the ancestral mother—Africa—in order to become the biological mother. Recovery of self and heritage is crucial for both these women. They go, to borrow a phrase from African American prayer tradition, like empty pitchers before the full fountain of Mother Africa, to be renewed and reclaimed, to immerse themselves in the healing atmosphere of that place and space.

Africa frequently figures in the literature as well as the site upon which one can find model communities, model behavior, and model harmony with nature. This Africa-as-model myth is perhaps most strikingly presented in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Indeed, that novel represents the history of colonization even as it presents its ideal standard for behavior and patterns of interaction for African Americans. Except for its sexism, which is gently undermined during the course of the novel, the Olinka village to which Celie's sister Nettie goes as a missionary is everything that Celie does not have in her life. People work together, they care about each other, they do not exploit each other, and they exist in an admirable harmony with nature. Their thatched roofs become mansions beside the house Celie is forced to clean for her offensive husband in Georgia. Their relationships are Edenic in comparison to how Mister treats Celie. Life there is generally so opposite to Celie's that Celie can only wish even more fervently to be rescued. Even the language of the letters in which Nettie records her adventures seems rhapsodic beside the hardships of Celie's life and her hesitant attitude toward recording her own experiences. Thus Africa is the object lesson for Nettie to teach Celie about patterns of interaction that are antithetical to her own circumstances. No matter the seeming attempt at broad ranging history, the real purpose is private and familial, not about the survival of a continent and its various cultures.

Works on which I have focused to this point all situate Africa in its geographical locale and either refer to it across distance or place their characters on the continent. There is another strand in the literature in which Africa or African references appear on American soil, within American settings. These occurrences in literature by contemporary African American women are worthy of note for effecting some of the same attitudes as the earlier works. On American soil, Africa and Africans are frequently as romanticized as they are in their imagined home spaces. What, for example, does Africa mean in a play like Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)? Clearly Hansberry was drawn to Africa, and one of her later plays is set on the continent, yet her character Beneatha Younger romanticizes Africa and Mama Lena Younger has adopted the prevailing missionary Christian attitude toward it. Asagai, the African in the play, must suffer through Mama Lena's misdirected sympathies toward him just as he must suffer from Beneatha's notions of who and what she wants and needs him to be. To Beneatha, Asagai is a way for her to find her identity, which is

manifested as much in clothing as in transformation of the mind; when Asagai brings Beneatha some wraps from his sister's wardrobe, she wears them flamboyantly, and she is even inspired to get her hair done naturally, into an early afro. African Asagai is a way for her to discover what it means to be truly black. For Walter Lee Younger, African songs are an inspiration during a drunken dance in which he recites poetry about jungles and spear-carrying hunters. For all her personal interest in Africa, therefore, Hansberry does not allow it to fare particularly well with her characters. And perhaps that is merely a reflection of the times. After all, 1959 was not a time in America when black was beautiful or when Africa was in vogue.

And when black did become beautiful, what did it do for Africa? In Alice Walker's «Everyday Use» (1973), references to Muslim and African cultures become the impetus to a transformation process from *Negroness* to *blackness*. Dee, who leaves her sharecropping mother and sister in Georgia and goes away to college, discovers there the rhetoric that defined so much of the 1960s. She sheds her so-called slave name and becomes Wangero because she has discovered the light of larger African heritage. In Wangero's militant rejection of her mother and sister, Walker makes clear that the black power rhetoric of the 1960s was frequently that—just rhetoric. People could wear the garments that suggested identification with Africa and change in conception of identity, but that did not necessarily mean that they had undergone any significant change in mental perception. With this clarity in viewing how notions of Africa can be distorted, it is perhaps surprising that Walker came up with such a romantic view of Africa as cultural and communal model in *The Color Purple*.

References to Africa in Alice Childress' *Wine in the Wilderness* are romanticized, then transformed. This play occurs during rioting in an urban area. A painter, Bill, is in the process of painting a triptych of black women, two of which are completed. The first panel is «Black Girlhood» and depicts innocence. The second is «Mother Africa, regal, black womanhood in her noblest form. . . . She's the Sudan, the Congo River, the Egyptian Pyramids . . . Her thighs are African Mahogany . . . she speaks and her words pour forth sparkling clear as the waters . . . Victoria Falls» (1969, 9). The third panel remains unpainted because Bill has not found a model for it:

This woman is to be the kinda chick that is grass roots, . . . no, not grass roots, . . . I mean she's underneath the grass roots. The lost woman, . . . what the society has made out of our women. She's as far from my African queen as a woman can get and still be female, she's as close to the bottom as you can get without crackin' up . . . she's ignorant, unfeminine, coarse, rude, vulgar . . . a poor, dumb chick that's had her behind kicked until it's numb . . . and the sad part is . . . she ain't together, you know, . . . there's no hope for her (1969, 9).

It is during the riot that Bill's wife Cynthia discovers and brings to Bill's apartment a black woman who is to serve as the model for the third panel of the triptych. A wig-wearing factory worker, Tomorrow Marie has no pretensions to beauty, culture, or middle-classness. During the course of the play and conversation with Tommy, Bill is made to understand that his image of Africa is so far removed from the reality of black women as to be utterly useless. Through a transformed consciousness, he comes to see that the tacky Tommy-Marie is indeed the regal essence of black womanhood. Myth must give way to reality, image cannot take the place of substance.

Toni Cade Bambara, in *The Salt Eaters* (1980), gives African Loa a home in the red clay of Georgia. When famed healer Minnie Ransom conducts her healing ceremonies, the Loa attend her. Minnie's powers derive from a variety of sources, including a

ghostly attendant as well as the Loa. As the Loa attend her, Minnie in turn pours out libations to them, respects their existences and rituals, and lives in a truer harmony with them than some of the characters in other texts.

Notwithstanding the brief pause and genuine respect, however, what Africa *is* as an entity and what things of African origin *are* to African American women's literature is at times more troubling than laudatory. With the poetic license of imagination, most of these writers have reduced a continent into the smallness of its collectivity, its common denominators, instead of allowing it to expand into the richness of the various countries contained within the entity. While writers such as Marita Golden make specific references to Kenya, or Nigeria, or Zimbabwe, most writers simply refer to *Africa*, and that reference is designed to contain whatever connotations of identity, heritage, culture, and history the writer wants to evoke. In its monolithic construction, Africa in contemporary African American women's writing is a poor stepsister stunted by her sisters' desperate need to keep her without light and water instead of allowing her to blossom forth into her myriad manifestations.

In the interest of bolstering African American identity, these writers have *distorted* African identity, disrespected Africa's unique cultural traditions, and contained Africa's largeness within the smallness of their created art. There is seldom a genuine desire to *know* Africa. More often than not, the writers genuflect in the direction of Africa as they create the various antitheses to United States territory that have garnered their attention. The gap between literary device and the reality of African peoples and cultures is greater than the distance between New York and Nairobi. It is no wonder, then, that some African scholars took Alice Walker to task for her depiction of African culture in *The Color Purple*. It is no wonder that Africans and African Americans are perhaps only slightly closer to understanding each other than James Baldwin depicted in «Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown» in 1955, his essay on interacting with Africans in Paris.

African Americans probably never think of themselves as committing sins against Africa. After all, how can children forcibly separated from a mother really think ill of that mother? Yet in many ways, the depictions of Africa and things African in some of the works I have discussed here could be viewed as various kinds of sins, beginning with the sin of ignorance. Another sin is collapsing of the individuality of African countries and cultures into a singularity that probably does not exist—and certainly not to the extent these writers would claim. But perhaps the greater sin is arrogance—the arrogance in assuming that black Americans, because they have an historical tie to Africa, can use its connotative resources however they wish in their own bids for individual and communal freedom and identity. There is an arrogance of cultural appropriation with the use of Africa by African American writers that these writers would not tolerate if it were directed against them. «They've taken my song and gone,» so the lament goes about white Americans who routinely presume upon African American culture and take whatever they want of it. Yet many of these black writers appropriate, create, slant, and distort images of Africa—without ever setting foot on the continent—and all for the sake of reclaiming identity or asserting political stances. And more recently the appropriation has become financial as more and more African Americans make or import things identified as African and sell them like ice cream to the unsuspecting as well as the knowing.

Can we not reasonably ask, finally, if African American writers, in their problematic uses of Africa in their works, have not re-colonized the continent for their own uses?

It could have been argued in earlier decades that an image of colonization might have been inappropriate because black Americans did not reap financial rewards for their depictions of Africa. That is certainly no longer the case. When Alice Walker writes about a pygmy enslaved in a zoo in New York in *The Temple of My Familiar*, she reaped financial rewards for that, as she did for *The Color Purple*. Morrison undoubtedly benefited financially from *Beloved*, as Nikki Giovanni did from «Ego Tripping.» These writers have been as much entrepreneurs as the vendors who sell their so-called African wares in the booths in Underground Atlanta, at the National Black Arts Festival held in Atlanta every other year, or at numerous other places around the United States. Africa as point of reference, Africa as text, Africa as artifact—its presentation and re-presentation in literature by black women writers is one of the neglected areas of study that deserves attention not only for what it teaches us about African American literary creativity, but for what it does *not* teach us about African countries and peoples.

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## Revisionist Desires: Culture, Gender, and Diasporic Consciousness in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

SHEILA LLOYD

The classic exemplar of transnationalism—that crisscrossing of economies, intersecting systems of meaning, and decentered identities in the current historical conjuncture—is the diaspora. The term, *diaspora*, originally signified both the social processes of Jewish exile and dispersion from their historical homeland to many lands and the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion (Safran 1991, 83). Today, however, diaspora is increasingly used as a metaphoric designation for several categories of people—expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, guest workers, and ethnic and racial minorities (Safran 1991, 83). Black communities in the Americas and, more recently, in Europe have been referred to as diasporas in the sense that people of African descent have been victimized by imperialism, forcibly uprooted from their homelands, and dispersed, only to be subjected to disabilities and persecutions (Safran 1991, 89). Organizing these senses of the African diaspora is the myth of return to an imagined or actual homeland; given the centrality of myths of return, diasporic consciousness then can be considered as the intellectualization of the existential condition of homelessness and dislocation.

With the recent interdisciplinary attention to the comparative study of diasporas, the examination of the African diaspora has taken on a unique status—one that, if only in the United States, gives it the lion's share of attention in ethnic and minority studies and positions it alongside developments in postcolonial studies. What African American diasporic studies shares with other fields examining diasporas and nationalisms is the doggedly persistent narrative that the cultivation of a homeland myth has uniquely been the province of men in the diaspora. In the rhetoric of the African diaspora, the diaspora and nationalism are equated with masculinity, with black men protecting either Africa or diasporic communities from colonial and racist practices. From this emerges the explicit or implicit endorsement of statements that the redemption of the African homeland, and of the black nation as manifested in the diaspora, concerns the attainment and assertion of manhood rights; that is, the paradigmatic subject of African diasporic studies has been the masculine subject or men willing to claim that their desire to assimilate into the social and political life of their

host countries or into the teleological goal of modern political life—the community of nations—has been blocked.

In their introduction to *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora*, the editors, Sidney Lemelle and Robin D.G. Kelley, suggest that the biggest weakness in diaspora studies has been its reluctance to adopt a gendered analysis of the diaspora (1994, 5). For Lemelle and Kelley, «gender offers perhaps the freshest and most exciting possibilities for the study of of diasporic political and cultural movements» (1994, 6). However, while these scholars are sensitive to the inquiries that African and African American feminists have conducted on the contingent relations between gender and nationalist and diasporic discourses, they temper their praise by insisting that «[a]lthough some of these initial contributions have tended to conflate gender as a category of analysis with the study of women, more recent scholarship has extended the discussion to how gender shapes dominant discourses and how Black male constructions of masculinity shape culture, ideology, and politics in the diaspora» (1994, 5). My contention is that feminist scholars, both male and female, have attempted to interrogate the place of particular constructions of masculinity in masculine-informed nationalisms that exploit and appropriate women's bodies «as the raw material of [their] cultural [and political] representation[s]» (Correll 1989, 287). Feminists have argued that women's bodies are taken as «the enabling ground from which transcendent meaning, and male figures of the sovereign subject, emerge» (Correll 1989, 287).

In spite of the critical ambivalence with which Lemelle and Kelley call attention to the marginalization of gender in diasporic studies, I want to register their re-siting of masculinity as *the* central gendered term in diasporic studies. Part of my point can be illustrated here by reference to the etymological link between diaspora and sperm. As Stefan Helmreich explains it, diaspora's etymology from the Greek *dia* (through) + *speirein* (to sow or scatter) originates in the Greek translation of the book of Deuteronomy in the Bible (Deut. 28:25: «thou shalt be a diaspora in all kingdoms of the earth»); the original meaning of diaspora summons up the image of scattered seeds (Helmreich 1992, 245). At least in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic cosmologies, seeds are metaphors for the male substance, and the word «sperm» is etymologically connected to diaspora and comes from the same stem, *speirein* (to sow or scatter); diaspora thus refers to a system of kinship reckoned through men (Helmreich 245). The etymology of diaspora allows a view of how, in the traditional sense of diaspora, women are *the enabling ground* from which male figures emerge. It is to interrogate this re-inscription of masculinity that I turn to Alice Walker's 1992 novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, which may be read as a redaction of the relations of identification that inform two competing African American conceptions—a masculinist universalizing discourse and a feminist revisionist discourse—of African American diasporic cultural traditions. I want to begin my examination of these competing discourses by disclosing the ways in which Walker's text clarifies how gender and sexuality (specifically, sexual desire) are appropriated as the raw material used in the process of cathecting citizens to nations and diasporic subjects to mythic homelands.

By placing femininity and female desire at its center, Walker's novel complicates the historically privileged linkage between masculinity and the categories of race, culture, and consciousness (some of the constitutive elements of nationalism and of the diaspora)—thereby insisting that its readers consider the implications of the historical use of femininity and of the female body as the enabling ground in diasporic studies.

The novel's basic plot line traces Tashi Evelyn Johnson's movement from her homeland (where she has been subjected to genital mutilation as part of her community's female initiation ritual) to the United States (in the company of her husband, Adam Johnson, a black American missionary) and then back to her homeland (where she murders the woman who mutilated her). This homeland, Olinka, is the fictional nation which serves as the cultural matrix to which Tashi's physical and psychological travails are complexly referenced. I shall return to these movements later, but for now I want to examine the nexus of social meanings that the Olinka themselves attach to the female initiation ritual.

The text not only makes it clear that Tashi herself insists upon participating in the ritual, it also establishes the context within which her assertion of agency—i.e., a person's capacity to understand and evaluate his or her actions in terms of their social and historical significance for him or her (Satya Mohanty 1989, 23)—manifests itself, supported by an anti-colonial nationalist call to maintain indigenous cultural traditions such as the female initiation rites. Notwithstanding the novel's attempt to generalize beyond Tashi's particular experience, I find the conditions of her initiation to be markedly different from that of other Olinka girls; Tashi in fact submits to the procedure alone, in a guerilla camp, without any of the usual fanfare and ceremony.

Unaccompanied by other initiates and by female relatives who typically witness and participate in the event, Tashi endures the pain of circumcision and of healing alone. In a radically different symbolic economy, Tashi and M'Lissa, the *tsunga* or ritual circumciser, are the only women in the rebel camp. M'Lissa is present because she knows how to perform the procedure, and Tashi is present because, in undergoing the procedure, she provides the Olinka male fighters with the means of publicly demonstrating their loyalty to their cultural traditions. Although Tashi makes the trip to the guerrilla camp so that she can actively participate in guerrilla warfare and sabotage and thus defend her people, she later learns that her circumcision makes it physically impossible for her to storm colonial settler plantations and that her role is the less active one of symbolically representing the guerilla camp's resistance to the Western settlers' mores and manners. As the text explains it, the fighters summon Tashi to give «the new community a symbol of its purpose» (Walker 1992, 238). However, why Tashi's body, and not a man's body, serves as the symbolic container of the community's purpose is clarified by examining the place in the Mbele camp for the cultural tradition of female initiation.

In the situation of crisis that is war, the traditionalists—transformed now into anti-colonial guerrilla fighters (not that the two positions are mutually exclusive)—rely upon the old ways and the appropriation of women's bodies as the raw and discursive material with which to maintain «common sense» (in Gramsci's use of the phrase) and to (re)produce subjects: in this case, the sovereignty of the masculine anti-colonial subject. They reinvent tradition, to modify Eric Hobsbawm's term, in order to establish continuity with a suitable historical past (1984, 1-2). Because they find their lives disrupted by Westerners who encroach upon their villages and farms in order to carve out space for colonial settler plantations, the Olinka later resist these events through physical and culturally symbolic means; they achieve the latter by reinscribing women's bodies as the metaphoric equivalences of the actual appropriated Olinka lands. They also see the female initiation ritual, euphemistically referred to as «the operation[,] . . . as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition» (Walker 1992, 63). This is how Tashi's manifestation of agency places her body in the service of the Olinka

masculine anti-colonial discourse; her idea is to join herself to Olinka women fighters, «who she envision[s] as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka» (63). Tashi believes that by subjecting herself to «the operation,» she will rid herself of any vestiges of Westernization resultant from her missionary education. By thus re-forming her *actual* body, she not only hopes to re-unite her various identities into a singularity, but also to *materialize* the Africanist ideology of Africa for Africans; in this case, a body to be claimed for Africa and a territory to be claimed for Africans.

In spite of Tashi's desire for uniting her identities into a singularity, the symbolic containment of women's bodies in Olinka masculine anti-colonial discourse is, in fact, three-fold—for their bodies are simultaneously represented as the productive matrices of Olinka identity, the available metaphors for expropriated lands, and the moral beneficiaries of the land's eventual restoration. The difference between this new rhetorical mode of establishing identity and sociality and the older practice that sought the same goals can be located in the new, albeit inchoate, values that overlay the older practice. Specifically, such notions as loyalty, duty, sacrifice, and patriotism are imbricated in the female initiation ritual with such previously established notions as feminine acceptability and womanhood. Through this discursive reshaping, the reinvented and historically transformed cultural tradition becomes central to the phenomenon of Olinka anti-colonial nationalism, which shares many features with the imaginary relations of identification that organize Pan-Africanism into a coherent and meaningful discourse, most typically, uniting men from the African continent and the diaspora.

Pan-Africanism, as the general principle informing theories of the diaspora and some versions of continental African nationalism, is based on a recognition of shared public pasts and futures. Communal suffering, for example, is more often than not represented as a public event establishing a fraternal solidarity for men (Anderson 1991, 7); that is, the experiences of colonization and enslavement are represented and considered from a masculine vantage. Most typically, understanding the dynamics of colonialism and enslavement, as well as other forms of subject(ificat)ion, and developing mechanisms for eradicating these forms of domination are achieved from and through an analysis of the experiences of men and the strategies devised by them. This public discourse, with women's bodies as its ground but not its actual subject matter, is shaped by memories and desires that establish particular forms of public and communal identification for men. In the case of the Olinka, the ritual mutilation of women's bodies in the *private* sphere makes possible the performance of male identity in the *public* sphere. In other words, the Olinka men fashion themselves as uniquely Olinkan, as loyal subjects to the Olinka group and to the group's old ways, by insisting that *their* women return to and participate in a ritual that had been rejected by some of the Olinka people prior to the anti-colonial struggle.

In light of the above reading of the anti-colonial masculinist use of Olinka women's bodies, I now want to provide a counter-reading of the novel's feminist discourse that aims to compete with the masculinist discourse. The text's version of a feminist-revisionist critique of nationalist/diasporic discourses emerges from its sentimentally liberal claim that the manifestation of Tashi's suffering as a woman can be generalized not only to Olinkan women as a class, but to women globally. Indeed, Tashi's subjection to genital mutilation is taken as an extreme manifestation of male-sponsored violence and oppression that affects all women regardless of their historical and spatial

locations. My counter-reading of this putative alternative to a masculinist appropriation of women's bodies is that liberal global feminism is not self-reflexive enough to view how it, too, like those masculinist discourses, takes women's bodies as its ground.

It is in Walker's envoy, «To the Reader,» that the informing vision of liberal global feminism as a counter-identifying discourse becomes clearer. Walker writes that the character Tashi appeared to her «in the flesh» during the filming of *The Color Purple* (282). The role of Tashi, Walker explains, was played by a Kenyan woman who «brought the Tashi of my book vividly to mind, as I was reminded that in Kenya, even as this young woman was being flown to Los Angeles to act in the film, little girls were being forced under the shards of unwashed glass, tin-can tops, rusty razors and dull knives of traditional circumcisers, whom I've named *tsungas*» (282). Leaving aside the transnational and diasporic implications of flying a Kenyan actress to Los Angeles from Kenya for her to perform as an African character in a Hollywood film adaptation of a novel by an African American writer, I want instead to demonstrate how this passage evokes «third world difference»; that is, that «stable ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women» in «third world countries» (Chandra Mohanty 1991, 53).

This concept of *third world difference* saturates the liberal global feminism that gives meaning to Walker's statement and helps to explain Tashi's fascination with the United States, where she, Tashi, feels safe from those conditions that Walker details in her statement and that Tashi has both undergone and from which she attempts to distance herself. In order to track Tashi's movement from and return to Africa (a privileged itinerary in African diasporic studies and a recurrent textual feature in African American writings), I want briefly to discuss her investment in two figures: the United States and the Olinka freedom fighter mentioned in the novel only as Our Leader.

From the Olinka prison where she is being held during her trial for the murder of M'Lissa, the *tsunga*, Tashi states: «Sometimes I dream of the United States. I love it deeply and miss it terribly . . . In all my dreams there is clear rushing river water and flowing green trees, and where there are streets they are wide and paved and in the night of my dreams there are lighted windows way above the street, and behind these windows I know people are warm and squeaky clean and eating meat. Safe» (55). These metonyms—clear rushing river water, flowing green trees, wide and paved streets, lighted houses, clean people, and meat—for the United States are suggestively apposite Tashi's impressions of Olinka particularly and Africa in general. Notwithstanding that her use of these metonyms indicates a particular class insularity to social ills in the United States—e.g., environmental devastation, hunger, homelessness, the abandonment of urban centers in many cities, and the exploitation of workers for their surplus labor—Tashi insists upon holding on to a dream of an idyllic United States. However, on several occasions, Tashi's dream of the United States is called into question.

The first such occasion, and the one most important to my reading, finds her husband relating the Olinka prosecutor's method of cross-examining him in the courtroom: «We are aware, says the prosecutor, that Mrs. Johnson, though Olinkan, has lived in America for many, many years and that American life is for the black person, itself a torture. . . . Is it not true, Mr. Johnson, that in the United States, with its stressful whites, your wife is often committed to an insane asylum?» (162-63). The prosecutor's statements constitute a discourse that clashes with and brings Tashi's understanding of the United States into crisis. Although his questions discount a potential defense based

on psychic self-preservation, he does seem to suggest that Tashi's manichean perspective of the United States as being radically different and demonstrably safer for its citizens, at least in her eyes, than is Olinka is indefensible precisely because of its implicit premise that all that is unsafe, and therefore evil, is located in Africa. Unlike the émigré, who maintains a view of the past and of former circumstances as being more important to constituting a sense of the self than are present circumstances and who asserts the superiority of her native land and its culture to that of her land of her arrival, Tashi demystifies the myth of return and has no nostalgia for Olinka and for her lost ties to her homeland. In fact, when she returns to Olinka, she views the country with disdain. For example in detailing her bus trip to seek out M'Lissa, she states:

The bus ride from Ombere station was long. The roads bumpy. The dust everywhere. Each twenty-five kilometers or so we stopped to use roadside facilities. These were not at all like those in America but were entirely makeshift. Smelly holes in the earth on either side of which some forward-thinking person had nailed a board. On these boards, inevitably splashed with urine, one placed one's feet (147).

The fear and loathing with which Tashi regards Olinka upon her return is strikingly different from the naively sentimental attachment she had to Olinka before undergoing the initiation ritual and before departing for the United States. Although Tashi's revised views of her homeland may arise from an implicit fear of becoming associated with and being re-incorporated into Olinka society, her reaction has larger implications.

In colonial discourse, such tropes of debasement and defilement as Tashi deploys to describe the bus trip are used to supply the negative end of a system of value by which Africa becomes a repository of all that can be considered uncivilized and corrupting. These isolated moments in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in which Tashi negatively compares Olinka to the United States can be seen as a compensatory gesture whereby she connects the trauma of her genital mutilation and her resultant loss to the signs of economic (under)development that she notices in Olinka.

Upon seeing signs of development and Westernization in Olinka such as «the billboards shouting out to people that they must buy Fanta and Coca Cola and Datsuns and Fords and chocolate and whiskey and sugar and more sugar and coffee and more coffee and tea and more tea» (107), her first consideration is «Of course! This excrement is the reading matter of the masses. I am only one old and crazy woman, but I will fling myself against these billboards. I will compete» (107). While Tashi takes issue with the transnational, imperialist-driven, circuit of consumption to which the Olinkans are bound, she herself participates in that circuit both as a consumer and as a producer of sorts. As a consumer in the United States, Tashi «bathe[s] constantly, as if to rid herself of any scent whatsoever; to her an agreeable odor was that of Palmolive soap, Pond's cold cream or Nivea lotion. To smell like herself seemed beyond her ability to accept» (94). This gesture may be read as a prosthetic one with the cosmetics serving to mask what she sees as her disability, the smell of menstrual blood and urine, of waste products, that her infibulated vulva does not allow her to dispose of entirely. Her rejection of her Olinka corporeality is attenuated by her desire to consume Western commodities as if they had the fetishistic power to confer upon her a new body. Yet, Tashi's stock of commodities are not only physical; she also has Western political ideologies at her disposal. With these ideological products, Tashi assumes the position of the Western political ideologue who brandishes slogans and sees herself as competing in some free-market place of ideas; in this latter case, Tashi, much like a multi-national

corporation, exports and appeals to Olinka consumers to purchase her *product*; i.e., her political message—«If you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it» (106).

Tashi's appeal to Olinka consumers to invest in her political message qua product suggests how politics are related to affect, and in this case, to erotic and social desires. Her memories of Our Leader reveal the connection that I want to establish between Tashi, and Walker's, politics and their exploitation of bodily pleasure. Tashi recalls that:

In every hut, even when I was a little girl, there was a picture of him [Our Leader] wrapped in plastic and carefully hidden in a special place among the rafters. His eyes were laughing! Such wise, gay eyes. They seemed to speak. Whenever we received a message we took down the picture, and while going over the message and learning it by heart we gazed at it. We loved him. We believed everything he said. We thought he knew best . . . about everything (116).

Our Leader's political message seems to get lost in Tashi's erotic memory of her scopophilia—i.e., her erotic investment in his portrait, consumed in an atmosphere of secrecy and prohibition, is privileged in her memory of learning Our Leader's message «by heart».

Her erotic attachment to Our Leader becomes clearer in her subsequent confession to her analyst that «[l]ike every Olinkan maiden . . . I was in love with the perfect lover who already had three wives. The perfect lover and father and brother who had been so cruelly taken from us, but whose laughing eyes we saw in the photograph he'd left us, and whose sweetly tempting voice we heard on cassette in the night. Poor Adam! He couldn't hold a candle to Our Leader, the real—to us—Jesus Christ» (121). Tashi's love for Our Leader is thus represented as an eroticized nationalism in which she is willing to offer her body to the leader of the anti-colonial movement and to the nation coming into being.

The novel's liberal feminist revision of this eroticized nationalism is encoded as a celebration of the «blameless vulva» and the unleashing of women's erotic potential as an act of political resistance in the postcolonial nation (1992, iv). The novel suggests that Tashi cannot experience sexual joy, or *jouissance*, because her clitoris has been excised. Therefore, as one of the final moments building up to the novel's denouement explains, «RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY» or of *jouissance* (1992 279).

In displacing the sexual orgasm, or *jouissance*, from the female body to the body politic, hence in ideologizing the erotic body, the novel's liberal feminist vision itself participates in the masculine appropriation of women's bodies as discursive material. This, too, is where the novel's liberal feminist discourse becomes saturated by *third world difference* which reassures its non-third world women readers, including African American women, that they, unlike Olinka women, are «modern . . . [and] ha[ve] control over their bodies and sexualities» (Chandra Mohanty 1991, 56). Like Walker, who wants to «claim the [African] continent . . . [and] create Olinka as my village and the Olinkans as one of my ancient, ancestral tribal peoples» (283), Tashi's view of Olinka, on her return to Africa, is that of a diasporic perspective that is reluctant to examine its uses of temporal distantiation; i.e., the Olinka not as contemporaries occupying a different space from the diasporic feminist subject, but as representing what would be analogous to an earlier, less advanced stage in Western feminist development. Walker's and Tashi's refusal or inability to see the Olinkans and Africans as their contemporaries challenges readers to interrogate both masculinist and feminist

representations of diasporic desires for fictive or actual returns and connections to Africa.

Although *Possessing the Secret of Joy* deconstructs and demystifies myths of the African homeland, it still maintains a problematical diasporic consciousness. Its solutions—women's orgasmic potential as that which evades containment in patriarchal constructions of the nation and the diaspora (in the sense that orgasm is non-productive, unlike the nationalization of wombs), and as that which serves to unite women against practices such as genital mutilation—do very little to decenter masculinity as the privileged gendered term in diasporic and nationalist thought, which I understand to be one of its implicit goals. On the one hand, what it does achieve is the elaboration of some ideas of the theoretical contours of an imagined community of feminist men and women, from around the world, who work with Tashi to develop her final political position that gives the novel its title. This community relocates women's experiences and bodily pleasures, not as material facts but as transhistorical and self-identical categories, in the place that the masculine national and diasporic subjects arrogate for themselves. On the other hand, the work's blind spot is its reiteration of the very terms and methods of giving the nation and the diaspora their forms in their African American guises. Its other shortcoming is its inattention to the specific material structures and embodied effects of patriarchal ideologies and practices. Since identities are always already decentered and relational whether the subject realizes this or not, the difficult work is to perceive how material and historical conditions allow for the emergence of some identities at the expense of others. This, I believe, is one of the primary critical tasks for contemporary diasporic studies.

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## Deconstructing Tradition and Reconstructing The Self: Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

JOSEFINA CORNEJO

The term diaspora refers to the spreading of a nation and the dispersion of a culture. The dispersion of Africans through the Americas and other parts of the world, primarily as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, separated them from their homeland and fostered a fragmentation of African cultures in the New World. Elements of African cultures and traditions are, then, found throughout the world. In North America, African Americans have attempted to reclaim those historical and imagined African elements as constitutive of their hybrid African American present. This process of reclamation and reconstruction of identity implies a metaphorical or literary return to the African continent in search of the ancestral roots of their consciousness of themselves as African Americans.

Alice Walker is one of the African American female authors who demonstrates that return to her people's past and culture in some of her novels. Through the female characters she creates, Walker portrays the African American women for their African cultural heritage. Moreover, she partially sets her novels in the African continent, as a means of symbolizing the journey back to one's roots. In *The Color Purple* (1985), Walker created and contrasted the worlds of an African community and the Deep South of North America. She discovered the strong bonds existing between Africans and African Americans. In the novel, one of the characters asserts: «We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves» (1982, 127). In her latest work, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), two mentalities and two worlds, African and Western, are confronted. Walker creates a fictive African community, the Olinka, which is contrasted with a Black community in the United States. At the center of her narrative is the search for roots and self-identity of an Olinka-American woman. Caught on the border between two cultures, Tashi, Walker's protagonist, suffers the dismemberment of her self. It is in this diasporic experience where she finds the strength to liberate and reconstruct herself through the African and African American tradition of storytelling.

The connection between freedom and storytelling is a recurrent motif in African American literature since the time of slavery. Former slaves like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs recorded in their narratives how they learned to read and write in order to gain individual freedom. Modern novelists have also incorporated this theme in their writings. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937),

empowers her character Janie and her friend Phoeby to liberate themselves through storytelling. Alice Walker also understands storytelling as a means of liberation. In *The Color Purple* (1982), the central character's liberation comes through writing. Through her letters, through the writing of her story, Celie learns to reshape those forces of oppression that have dominated and abused her. Moreover, Walker has repeatedly expressed her aim to establish a link with the past through literature, and the necessity for African American people to preserve their oral tradition since personal identity depends upon the knowledge of familiar and racial history.

However, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker deals with the duality of praising traditions that are beneficial for Black people's survival, and rejecting those that are harmful and damaging for Black women's lives. The confluence in the novel of storytelling and female genital mutilation enables the author to critically explore such traditions rooted in some African communities. She assumes the task of demonstrating how some of her people's traditions and folklore rooted in African cultures are therapeutic for her community, whereas others may be used to justify women's domination and abuse by men. Walker sets her novel in the fictitious Olinka community and focuses on an Olinka woman who tells her story. Through her telling, Walker's protagonist explores her female experience, and denounces the barbarity of genital mutilation and the sexist discrimination inherent in this practise. The novel is, then, about the tyranny imposed on those African women obliged to undergo a specific gender construction. Walker denounces a rite which is much praised as an ancient tradition rooted in some African communities, but whose procedure is, in fact, desexualizing: this rite commits an outrage against women's bodies, and, therefore, besides physical and emotional consequences, denies pleasure to all sexual activity.

The purpose of my study is to analyze the confluence and the critical exploration of two traditions, female genital mutilation and storytelling, in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Storytelling becomes a means of resistance to survive the oppressive situation which the second tradition, the rite of female genital mutilation, involves. Thus, Walker uses the African and African American tradition of storytelling to question and deconstruct the practise of female genital mutilation, which is still maintained in several countries of the world and especially in many African communities—the focus of Walker's novel. At the same time, storytelling serves to reconstruct the mutilated body and fragmented self of the central character.

In the epigraph to the novel, referring to the connections between *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and her previous two books, *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), Walker states: «I have claimed the storyteller's prerogative to recast or slightly change events alluded to or described in the earlier books, in order to emphasize and enhance the meaning of the present tale» (1992, 283-4). Therefore, Walker grants herself and Tashi the role of storytellers, and conceives Tashi's story as a tale. Tashi is, then, bestowed with the storyteller's power to relate her own life as a physical and emotional mutilated woman and her final liberation. In this regard, she appropriates the storyteller's licence when telling her story. From the trial in Olinka where she is judged for having murdered the woman who circumcised her, Tashi's story moves back and forth in time and from Africa to the United States and Europe. Moreover, storytelling is the device by which Tashi connects herself to her heritage and acquires a thorough knowledge of her past. Tashi becomes, then, a symbol of the African diaspora: she embodies the reunification of the African roots within the American culture. At the same time, her narrative becomes a communal experience as

other characters, who reveal more details about the protagonist's life, are introduced. Through this polyvocal narrative, which characterizes traditional storytelling, Tashi will be able to reunify her shattered identity and to emerge as a liberated self.

The female body dominates the novel. Conceived as the site of harmful social and cultural practises, the body is equated to a fragmented text that reflects the physical and emotional consequences of female genital mutilation. The woman subjected to such tradition, devoid of her sexual self, splits into fragments which deny her wholeness. According to the writer Alexis DeVeaux, a woman reveals herself as a three-dimensional human being, constituted by a social, political and sexual self. Devoid of one of her selves, the two remaining ones cannot fulfill the woman's development as a complete human being (Tate 1988, 55-5). In the same way, Walker's Tashi is an Olinka woman who, destituted of her sexual self, is not able to become a whole woman. Her lack of wholeness is clearly expressed by her split into three different personalities symbolized by the three names under which she appears in the novel: Tashi, Evelyn and Mrs. Johnson.

The dismemberment of Tashi's self reminds of the African American diasporic movement which tries to reincorporate the African and the American selves, in order to acquire a true African American identity. Moreover, Walker's character needs to reintegrate her body and self. It is through her narrative, that the reconstruction of her fragmented self and mutilated body becomes possible. According to bell hooks «oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story» (1989, 43). Tashi is a woman looking for her own voice, which, once accomplished, will enable her to forge her identity. Furthermore, she will transcend and break the fear and silence she has been immersed in since the time she was the object of gender mutilation. In doing so, as hooks points out, Tashi transforms herself from being an object into being a subject. Through the voice she acquires telling her story, Walker's character converts her silence into language and her actions into acts of self-affirmation. Tashi's point of departure, the acknowledgement that «[she] did not realize for a long time that [she] was dead,» is her first step towards freedom (3). It is, then, through this blending of body and text, that Tashi's (Walker's) narrative becomes a fiction of resistance against female genital mutilation.

Another reason for Tashi's fragmentation is the conflict between her Olinka and North American selves. The African-born Tashi needs to reconcile her origin with Evelyn's North American present. Furthermore, if she achieves the reconciliation of the two selves reflected in those two names, Tashi will be able to accept her sexual self represented by Mrs. Johnson, the third name she adopts. Her internal conflict starts when Tashi leaves Olinka to go to the United States, and her beliefs clash with those of the new society she becomes a member of. Referring to the ritual scarification of her face, her friend Olivia remembers that in her wedding «Tashi protested that, in America, [Adam, her husband] would grow ashamed of her because of the scars in her face» (66). From the first moment, Tashi is afraid of being a cause of shame for her family, and realizes that the traditions she has submitted to in Africa do not have any meaning in America.

Furthermore, Olinka is conceived as a place of death and fear. Tashi, «[whose] soul,» as Olivia says, «had been dealt a mortal blow» (66), associates her emotional death with Olinka, the place where mutilation was performed on her. The United States, on the contrary, is the place where she feels safe: «I was in love with America» (38), Tashi

admits. She associates North-America with modernity and progress, security and peacefulness, as her reflections in the Olinka prison reveal:

Sometimes I dream of the United States. I love it deeply and miss it terribly . . . . In all my dreams there is clear rushing river water and flouncy green trees, and where there are streets they are wide and paved and in the night of my dreams there are lighted windows way above the street; and behind these windows I know people are warm and squeaky clean and eating meat. Safe. I awake here to the odor of unwashed fear, and the traditional porridge and fruit breakfast that hasn't changed since I left (55).

In this regard, she makes another important association: the bad corporeal odor «of sored blood» (65) after mutilation—of which she is very self-conscious—and the smell of the Olinka country. Her friend Olivia remembers that ashamed of her own smell, Tashi «had taken to spending half the month completely hidden from human contact, virtually buried» (67). According to her son, Tashi «bathed constantly . . . . To smell like herself seemed beyond her ability to accept» (96). This negative perception of her body is paralleled by «the odor of unwashed fear» (55) she senses in Africa.

The contrast of Olinka versus North America serves to emphasize the duality which characterizes *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Although Olinka is conceived as a place of pain and fear, and some Olinka traditions as cruel and damaging, there are also some that are praised and embraced. Through Tashi, Walker encourages Black people to celebrate those aspects of their culture that are positive for their gaining a true identity and progress, and to reject the detrimental ones. Tashi embodies the ambiguity of belonging to two cultures, Olinka and North American, and, consequently, the need of adopting a critical perspective towards both cultures in order to construct her own self. So, in spite of her initial praise, she later verbalizes her disappointment with the United States when she finds out about the «sewed-up» women, slaves who were genitally mutilated in North America in the name of Science (188): «I saw the healthy green leaves of my America falling seared to the ground. Her sparkling rivers muddy with blood» (187). At the same time, in order to resist and fight her powerlessness caused by mutilation, Tashi embraces the tradition of storytelling, rooted in African communities. Consequently, Olinka is not only conceived as death, but also as the embodiment of a binary opposition: fear and hate versus trust and love. Tashi needs to define what she trusts and loves about Olinka in order to forsake and deny what she fears and hates. What she praises is the oral tradition, which is used to «express herself» (6). Evelyn/Tashi talks about her «lifelong tendency to escape from reality into the realm of fantasy and storytelling» (132). Tashi, sexually and spiritually dead, embraces storytelling as a means of escaping from a reality of abuse and humiliation: «My fantasy life, without it I'm afraid to exist» (36). Storytelling becomes, then, an instrument of survival and both her Olinka—Tashi—and American—Evelyn—selves need it to resist oppression.

Another duality encountered in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is the individual versus the community. Tashi is presented as a woman whose life has been destroyed by the performance of a ritual upon her body. A ritual is a means by which a community identifies and constructs itself. The individual surrenders to the rituals in order to belong to his/her community. Consequently, Tashi, in a time of proclamation of cultural independence in Olinka and influenced by the words of the anonymous Leader that appears in the novel, decides to proclaim her belonging to the Olinka community

by going through ritual scarification and mutilation. She undergoes the rite of initiation into womanhood as a way of affirming her Olinka origin and demonstrating the attachment to tradition. Tashi believes that «the operation done to herself joined her to these women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible» (64), and it makes her feel «[c]ompletely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka» (64). Paradoxically, she gives up the opportunity of becoming a whole woman as an individual in order to be accepted as a female by her people.

Facing a powerful community, the individual is compelled to emblemize submission and to fulfill the community's aim, even if it means rejecting his/her own. Mary Dary asserts that a «group establishes power by imprinting its traces on the bodies of other people. Imprinting . . . often involves invading, cutting, impressing, and fragmenting» (1978, 175). The individual, then, becomes an object manipulated by the community's will and beliefs.

Tashi is overcome and overwhelmed by society, and surrenders to tradition, which implies not only the sexual mutilation of her body but also her annihilation as an individual. Her awareness and questioning of the harm caused by her Olinka community's ritual, though, leads to her healing and unification of body and soul. Through several steps, she will be able to confront society, claiming her individuality in order to reach self-identity. Having been an object in the community's hands, and after several visits to various psychologists in the United States and Europe, who motivate her to talk freely, Tashi is able to start her own healing. As previously mentioned, exorcising her fears and openly talking about her ritual operation, allow Tashi to transform herself into subject, and take her own decisions and responsibilities. Her decision to go back to the Olinka community she escaped from, is both a physical and psychological journey from victimization to consciousness, which will lead to her confrontation with society. Such confrontation, represented through the character of M'Lissa, the woman who practised her circumcision, will enable her to recover her self-esteem and to survival.

M'Lissa embodies a duality parallel to that of Olinka: she is praised and hated. With this character, Walker retakes the black stereotype of the *old mammy*, characterized by her sacrificial service to her people and her yearning for a better life for her daughters (O' Neale 1986, 146). In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, however, the *old mammy* figure conveys a contradiction. On the one hand, M'Lissa is recognized as a racial and cultural symbol, as «the Grandmother of the race» (63), and, therefore, she is worshipped for her contribution to the perpetuation of the culture and traditions of their race. On the other, M'Lissa's role in the community is to perform a ritual that mutilates and inflicts pain upon women's bodies and lives. Tashi rejects this role, but praises her value as a link with the past (154). M'Lissa, then, is presented not only as the *tsunga*, the circumciser, who inflicts pain on Tashi's body, but also as a storyteller, whose stories contribute to the reunification of Tashi's self. On her return to Olinka, Tashi acknowledges that «each morning, like the storyteller Scheherazade, M'Lissa told [her] another version of reality of which [she] had not heard» (1992, 208). In doing so, and recalling Walker's belief in the importance of creating supportive bonds between black women and in the importance for Black women to know their past and culture, Tashi will learn more about her community and herself. In M'Lissa, then, two traditions conjoin, mutilation and storytelling, and it is through this character that the author deconstructs an Olinka tradition, female genital mutilation, through an African and African American tradition, storytelling.

M'Lissa becomes of vital importance for Tashi's survival. Paradoxically, the woman who once murdered her, will be her passage to freedom and life. Through M'Lissa's teachings, Tashi learns that the ancient beliefs (229-39), which the ritual mutilation is based on, have been transmitted generation after generation through the oral tradition, which is mainly carried out by women. Women are the ones that perpetuate the tradition. M'Lissa acknowledges that «from the time of memory, always, in [her] family, the women [have been] *tsungas*» (219). Moreover, Tashi discovers that genital mutilation is a means by which men control women's sexuality. M'Lissa is glorified by her unflinching adherence to the ancient traditions of the Olinka community (149), but she is the *tsunga*, «a witch [Olinka men] could control, an extension of their own dominating power» (277). Tashi acknowledges «the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of domination of women in the world» (139). Tashi remembers their Leader's encouragement to «return to the purity of [their] own culture and traditions. That [they] must not neglect [their] ancient traditions» (117). Both Tashi and M'Lissa realize that they have been two instruments in a male game for power. As M'Lissa says:

They sent for me, you know, just as they sent for you. They were constructing a traditional Olinkan village from which to fight, and therefore needed a *tsunga*.  
They sent for me?  
To give the *tsunga* something to do. To give the new community a symbol of its purpose. Which I became.  
Which you became . . . Lying on your mat of straw, making other little mats of straw. The same work your great-great-grandmother would have done! (243-4).

Tashi comprehends that she has been an object manipulated by a patriarchal society, and with the author, engages in deconstructing the patriarchal order «that maintains power,» as Wendy Wall asserts, «by forcing the female body into a position of powerlessness» (83), and which denies women the right to shape an identity. Their Leader's «acceptance of violence as a means to the end of African oppression» (124) is associated with the practise of mutilation which is an act of violence on women. Walker's character realizes that the community she belongs to has interfered with her search for her own identity. Tashi, who in the beginning says that «[she] could not fight with the wound tradition had given [her]» (122), becomes aware that she actually has to fight and resist in spite of the wound inflicted by the patriarchal tradition.

It is when Tashi deconstructs tradition and questions her community that she is able to start reconstructing her fragmented self: with every step forward in her process of integration, Tashi, Evelyn and Mrs. Johnson come closer together. She also achieves the reconciliation with her body, as she herself acknowledges: «I have the uncanny feeling that, just at the end of my life, I am beginning to reinhabit the body I long ago left» (110). Her return to her birthplace in Africa, and her final act of liberation, the murder of M'Lissa, the woman who long ago sexually and emotionally killed her, lead to her discovery that «RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY» (281). Tashi feels liberated by killing M'Lissa, the symbol for the perpetuation of a tradition, who also senses liberation. However, Tashi does not kill the storyteller which is in M'Lissa. She appropriates her role, and becomes the storyteller of her own life-story. Finally, Tashi dies liberated and relieved from a tortured life. Death, then, is a device to liberate both M'Lissa and Tashi. But even the act of killing the *tsunga* evidences the constant ambiguity in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Tashi kills M'Lissa because «hers was an evil

power» (255), but also because somebody had to fulfill the Olinka tradition, according to which a well-appreciated *tsunga* «had to be killed by a woman she circumcised (276). Tashi, then, resists the tradition of mutilation not only by killing its symbol but also by embracing the tradition of storytelling.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker empowers and gives voice to the protest of African women against the physical violation of their bodies. Without rejecting a culture as a whole, she does affirm the necessity of questioning, reevaluating, and deconstructing some of its traditional aspects. Ultimately, she expresses the need to introduce a missing element when talking about culture and about tradition: the female point of view.

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## Female Creative Powers in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*

MARÍA DEL MAR GALLEGO

Following the celebratory tone of much recent feminist criticism and multicultural and polyvocal characteristics of African diasporic studies, Ntozake Shange in her novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* explores the great multiplicity inherent to female creativity and its significance with respect to the feminist project of self-definition and self-affirmation. In this process of self-creation through appropriation of voice, female creativity occupies a crucial position, due to the fact that it symbolizes an active reconstruction of the woman's active role in the cultural realm, role that has been ignored up to this moment. As a result of such reconstruction, the varied dimensions of female creativity—from everyday activities such as cooking or quilting to those directly related to the intellectual sphere like writing or dancing—are claimed as legitimate cultural manifestations.

This intimate connection between the domestic, familiar domain and intellectual or artistic possibilities<sup>1</sup> pervades the whole text and actually finds its climax in the celebration of the potentiality of biological procreation as a conscious, cultural and creative act on the part of a woman who views her own body as the basis for her multiple creative powers. Out of this concept, the feminine body becomes a privileged text, in which African American female identity is constructed in a continuous process of self-discovery and self-expression.

Creativity, then, becomes the central metaphor of the novel, summarized in the motto that reigns in one of the characters', *Sassafrass*'s, house: «Creation is everything you do. Make something» (Shange 1982, 83). In fact, the four protagonists of the novel—a mother and her three daughters—seem to be actively involved in asserting the reality of this motto in their personal lives by a continuous creative process, whereby the heterogeneous activities in which each of them takes part seem to have a common purpose of affirmation of their unlimited female creative powers.

This communal aim could be interpreted as a sort of embodiment of what the critic Michelle Wallace has called «the incommensurable» or «variations on negation,»

<sup>1</sup> It was Alice Walker in her groundbreaking essay «In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens» (1983) who inaugurated this revision of creative and artistic categories by identifying supposedly *low* activities such as cooking, gardening, quilting or storytelling as *high* artistic forms. Along these lines, a process of reevaluation of this artistic heritage has taken place in African American feminist literature led by writers such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, etc.



loosely defined as «the precarious dialectic of a creative project that is forced to be 'other' to the creativity of white women and black men, who are 'other' themselves» (1990, 53). So the problematic issue raised here is precisely the representation of the creative powers of the *other of the other*, or, in short, black women's creativity, that stands as double negation to dominant white male cultural paradigms.

From this standpoint, Shange analyzes the unstable relationship between black women and this dominant discourse whose result has been an almost complete erasure of black women's presence in general or what Wallace labels «the perpetual invisibility of women of color to the dominant discourse» (1990, 63).<sup>2</sup> In this context, black female creativity has been completely marginalized out of the canon for a long time, so its main concern should be «to achieve voice, or voices» (Wallace 1990, 66). Thus to break away with this pattern of absence and imposed silence, recent African American writers,<sup>3</sup> Ntozake Shange included, have responded articulating the *other of the other's* point of view, following a carefully designed plan where creativity acquires the central role.

Within this project, two main features are deemed essential in the process towards free self-assurance and self-invention, already outlined in the above analysis: firstly, the full articulation of the «repressed and silenced black female's story and voice» (Awkward 1989, 1), and secondly, what Washington phrases as «the need to assert a creative life» (1990, 31), that is to say, the affirmation of the outstanding primacy of female creativity as the basic means to achieve a sense of wholeness and community intrinsic to black women's active quest for a self-satisfying identity. Shange's novel seems to follow these objectives quite closely in her revision of female creativity as essential to the process of self-definition.

These two goals are so intimately connected, that it is almost impossible to analyze them separately. In fact, the novel presents four women's lives focusing on those aspects that have been considered *non-literary* by the dominant male canon,<sup>4</sup> because they are related to the so-called private or domestic circle: daily activities such as cooking, quilting, and so on. These household duties are claimed as parts of the real world inhabited by women and, what is more relevant, as concrete indications of their creative roles. Therefore, the feminine elements silenced so far are brought to the forefront and given their fair treatment, because they actually compose the foremost source for female creativity in everyday routine.

Concerning cooking for instance, the significance of this activity is signalled in the text by the constant inclusion of recipes by all the women of the family. More conscious of what she is undertaking through her recipes, Sassafrass insists on their relationship with her inner creative powers: «She sat on her personal chair to concentrate on what to create for dinner» (83). So cooking enters the creative realm and becomes one possible way to voice her needs and express her own individuality,

<sup>2</sup> The recurrence of the motifs of invisibility and silence in African American female literature has also been analyzed by other feminist critics. Among them, major contributions are worth mentioning: Barbara Smith in «Towards a Black Feminist Criticism» (1982), Barbara Christian in «The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism» (1990) and Barbara Johnson who identifies black female discourse with radical negation in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 166-71.

<sup>3</sup> Among them, the most outstanding examples are Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Alice Walker, who have been most outspoken about their need to articulate silenced voices in their works.

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting discussion of the denigratory way in which male critics view certain works by women writers, see Mary Helen Washington's reaction to male critical reception of *Maud Martha* by Gwendolyn Brooks («'The Darkened Eye Restored': Notes Towards a Literary History of Black Women,» 1990, 30-31).

even investing the recipes with the author's name as to assign them more prominence as individualized creations: «Sassafrass' Favourite Spinach for Mitch» or «Red Sauce: Sassafrass' Variation Du-Wop '59» (84), a practice that is also shared by her sisters, especially by Cypress.

This standpoint on their part follows the line of thought inaugurated by their mother Hilda Effania, who constantly links her recipes to particular occasions of her personal life: «Breakfast with Hilda Effania & Her Girls on Christmas Morning» (61) or «Mama's Kwanza Recipe (for Sassafrass): Duck with Mixed Oyster Stuffing» (132) demonstrating the close correlation between female everyday life and cooking as a feminine way to cope with reality. Therefore, the recipes fulfill a triple function: in the first place, they serve as instruments for self-expression and self-definition; secondly, they constitute an actual display of creative abilities, and thirdly, they manifest an adherence to a female-oriented world view with a common tradition.

The same purpose is achieved by another daily chore that is greatly underlined throughout the text: quilting. This practice accomplishes the same self-explanatory function as cooking, because it has also been regarded as *non-literary* and, due to it, marginalized by the canon. Again Sassafrass takes the initiative in this case and stresses the importance of quilting in the process of identity formation: «i am sassafrass/ a weaver's daughter/ from charleston/ i'm a woman makin cloth like all good women do . . . » (91). So she uses it as a way to denote her own individuality and to formulate herself against other externally imposed definitions.

Obviously, it also represents a renewed allegation of her creative powers, due to the fact that Sassafrass insists on its artistic qualities and refuses blatantly its more practical intent: «Sassafrass wanted her mother to experience weaving as an expression of herself, not as something the family did for Miz Fitzhugh. Hilda Effania was still trying to figure out where in the devil she could put this 'hanging,' as Sassafrass called it» (70). This quotation directly recalls Alice Walker's story «Everyday Use,» in which the same generation gap is explored through two opposed views on the nature of quilting, also symbolized by mother and daughter. Along the same lines, the mother's pragmatism clashes with the daughter's vision of its aesthetic value, who finally exclaims: «You just don't understand . . . your heritage» (59).

From this point, Sassafrass constantly refers to quilting not only as a vehicle for self-expression, but also associates it with a strong perception of female kinship and tradition: «. . . i'm a weaver with my sistahs from any earth & field/ we always make cloth» (91). Recalling the strong link that united quilting women during slavery times,<sup>5</sup> this practice exemplifies the sense of female bonding to the utmost:

Her mama had done it, and her mama before that; and making cloth was the only tradition Sassafrass inherited that gave her a sense of womanhood that was rich and sensuous . . . Sassafrass was certain of the necessity of her skill for the well-being of women everywhere, as well as for her own (92).

As a consequence, quilting also complies with the three-fold objective already seen with cooking: it reflects a new notion of black female identity, it serves as an appropriate instrument to exhibit creativity and, finally, it even reveals a secret world of female bonding only known to those women actively engaged in a process of generation of their own tradition.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent study of the role of quilting during slavery times, see Gladys-Marie Fry's «Link to Survival» and «Epilogue» in *Stitched from the Soul* (Dutton/Penguin, 1990) and also Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges, Julie Silber's *Hearts and Hands* (Quilt Digest Press, 1987).

Actually, quilting seems to stand for all those aspects of female life that have been neglected by male cultural patterns. This opposition between two conflicting ways of understanding creativity and art is enacted through the collision between Mitch and Sassafrass, in which Mitch shows his utter contempt for all her manual tasks: « . . . you makin' me stuff and hangin' all this shit around the walls in every room so you won't haveta write nothing today . . . You want to write and create new images for black folks, and you're always sittin' around making things with your hands» (79). For Mitch, Sassafrass' creativity should be confined to the traditional arts, in this case to literature, while she retains that her creativity can be expanded to multiple facets of the artistic domain.

So her objections are summed up in one sentence: «it was ridiculous for some man to come tell her she had to create» (80). Hence Sassafrass asserts her right to create and to decide on the nature of that creation on her own, strictly according to female-oriented standards, in which any ordinary task can qualify as artistic or cultural. Within this framework, all the plural representations of female creativity are adequate elements in the process of self-definition and appropriation of legitimate voice. Following this line, other activities such as writing or dancing are also analyzed in the text as part of the same female project of reinterpretation of the term *artistic*.

In the case of writing, the redefinition is present from the very structure of the novel, made up from scraps of journal entries, letters, recipes, scattered narration, poems, newspaper reviews, etc., the most varied material becomes object and subject of writing, obviously expanding the conventional limits assigned to it. Especially interesting is the inclusion of journal entries because of its complete absence in traditional male writing. Of course diaries have always been considered literary, but never within a random structure as the one presented by this novel and showing such infinity of material, directly related to everyday life: « . . . i invited them in/ the conversations i was havin weren't important enuf to exclude animals of note . . . » (138). Their structure as small poetic pieces add to the already lyrical tone of the novel, corroborating the importance of writing as a means for self-exploration.

This function is also performed by the letters written by Hilda Effania to her daughters, in which her inner thoughts and feelings are described, disclosing her as the last representative of a traditional way of life: « . . . Now is a good time for you [Sassafrass and Cypress] both to set your minds on a good marriage» (116) or «You and Cypress like to drive me crazy with all this experimental living» (220). They also represent a sort of nexus among the other three women, who are linked to one another by their mother's writing, actually her motherly love seems to support her daughters creating a sisterly network of affection that reaches them through the letters and influences their lives. In a sense, her letters seem to possess the structural function of a quilt, integrating the diverse written materials into one unified whole.

In this way, all these written records become a single account of a communal way of understanding life, in which the four women's perspectives harmonize. Despite differences, their writings form a coherent body which foregrounds their basic similarity as black women who cherish their own creativity. This creativity seems to be contained within a statement pronounced by Hilda, that invests all their efforts with a kind of concealment: «Whatever ideas you have that're important to you, write down . . . but write them so your enemies can't understand them right off» (110). The shared secret code does not only correspond to literal writing, but it can be also applied to any creative act on their part, especially to quilting, by recalling the slave women's hidden messages embroidered in quilts.

Sassafrass' future intentions finally mark both writing and quilting as parallel parts of the same spectrum: «. . . and I'm gonna write, Cypress. I'm gonna write about Mama, and growing up with all those looms» (106). So writing and quilting are thus different manifestations of the same creative power innate in African American women and product of their own aesthetics. In the same way, dancing also signifies another dimension of their inexhaustible creativity, particularly present in Cypress' life. As it has already been mentioned, Cypress partakes of the other activities like cooking, quilting or writing; however, dancing constitutes her most remarkable trait, whereby she also examines her sense of identity and community.

First of all, Cypress finds in dancing her genuine form of expression. Once she gets over a first stage in which she tries to adapt herself to outside definitions that make her reject her own body, she embarks into a self-discovery voyage through her dancing: «she grew scornful of the years of clamoring for ballet, and grew deep into her difference. Her ass and her legs she used like a colored girl; when she danced, she was alive; when she danced, she was free» (136). So dancing becomes another method for the articulation of a profound sense of black women's freedom and personality and also a way of understanding and facing reality.

This self-expressive attitude is constantly interrelated to her dancing: «So this was a dancer. Someone whose body interpreted the world» (188). Thus dancing becomes a medium for self-definition and for explaining the world outside through a consistent reference to a female community that devotes itself to the task of creation: «A dance of women discovering themselves in the universe. She. Her. Hers. Us» (141). Once more, creativity and identity become an identical thing and the result is a reiterated dependence on an explicit sense of female bonding that permeates the text.

This attachment among very disparate women by means of dancing finds its culmination in the affectionate reunion that takes place between Cypress and her sister Sassafrass, in which «. . . the two of them offered themselves to the love they have for each other, improvising» (107). In the end, dancing also satisfies the need to celebrate their process of self-creation and of community formation. This procedure is notably deliberate and outspoken in the case of the *Azure Bosom* group to which Cypress belongs, and which performs «a gender dance. A dance of ovaries and cervix uncovered and swelling, menses like waterfalls in a golden forest» (141). These women, and Cypress in particular, are always conscious of their creative talents, in this case of their bodies, capable of expressing their sense of themselves and of their community.

Something very significant has already been hinted in the last quote: the existing correlation between artistic possibilities and the potentiality for biological procreation. This relationship is, in fact, present throughout the text in the view that recognizes the feminine body as the basis for manifold creative powers, but it is plainly highlighted in the dancing performance: «Accepting menstruation as the key to womanhood, what made bosoms and ass possible, why mama exists, and love among us. The women in *Azure Bosom* became the female body exalted» (142). Therefore the black female body, long-overlooked in the canonical texts, turns into the center of attention of the narrative due to the fact that it is acknowledged as the only real source for creativity.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The process whereby the female body goes from artistic object to active subject is well-explained in Susan Gubar's «'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity.» She also emphasizes the close interrelation between the creation of a female art and the female body as «the only available medium for . . . art» (1986, 13), and its effect on the shift «from the primacy of the pen to the primacy of the page» (1986, 25), that is to say, from a male-oriented type of writing to a female-oriented one.

Within this revisionary attempt, the female body occupies the central position, widening the gulf between male and female conceptions. This fact is demonstrated once more in the disagreement between Sassafrass and Mitch about a hanging shaped like a vagina, that «Mitch had made her hide . . . because it wasn't proper for a new Afrikan woman to make things of such a sexual nature» (78). Confronting this masculine view, the dancers of *Azure Bosom* proclaim a new era «. . . articulating what women had never acknowledged: our bodies are not our destiny, but all freeing-energy» by means of choreographed productions with such evident titles as «Clitoris» or «Vulva Dreams» (141).

The frank acceptance of female anatomy and its potentiality to create life is corroborated in the last page of the book, in which Sassafrass' motto that opened this analysis seems to be transformed by Hilda Effania's words: «. . . whoever you are is all we have . . . » (225). That is to say, creativity is not only everything that can be made by women, it is rooted in their own bodies, in their own selves. To be creative is thus declared not as a temporary condition, but as a state of being, innate to women's nature.

Therefore, the last scene that closes the novel with Sassafrass' giving birth seems to crown the process for self-creation and self-definition. It is a jubilant exaltation of black womanhood in all possible senses: in the first place, it praises the female body in its potentiality to create life and, consequently, to create in general; it also commemorates black female sisterhood because the event joins the four women once again; and, lastly, it celebrates a vital sense of black female identity based on a distinct feminist value system, in which creativity is elevated to the highest degree. In conclusion, the text reveals a sort of matriarchal order in which individual stories amalgamate in order to weave a harmonious communal narration of a new world conceived by and for women. This brand new world is intimately related to the alternative discourse that feminist criticism in the African diaspora seeks for in its constant questioning and revising of the Western male canon.

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## Negotiating Difference in the Diaspora of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

ANA MARÍA FRAILE MARCOS

The resemblance between the scattering of Africans to other continents due to Western colonialism and the dispersion of the Jews outside of Palestine after the Babylonian captivity inspired enslaved Africans in the New World and their descendants to express in song and story their historical sense of loss. It also inspired a transhistorical quest for restoration of a homeland shared with family and friends. The African American spiritual songs and the rich literary tradition that followed bear testimony to the historical and imaginative relationship between the African and Jewish diasporas. But more important to the dispersed peoples of African descent is the role of Africa in constructing their different racial, ethnic, and national identities in the Caribbean and the Americas—North, Central, and South. The impact of the African diaspora in the academy is particularly noticeable in the United States, where African American literature plays an important role in the dialogue and necessary reconstruction of Western—or European-made—history and literary canons. Within African American literature, African American women writers have made a significant contribution to the revision of the traditional literary canon—both American and African American. Adding gender awareness to the discourse against ethnic discrimination, their literature bears testimony to the artistic expression and the vital experiences of previously silenced and critically neglected African American women. As the literary canon has been forced to open up in order to represent the variegated reality of the United States, African American women, like prize-winning Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor have found large, appreciative audiences for their imagined lives of black women in the Diaspora.

Gloria Naylor,<sup>1</sup> a daughter of the African diaspora in the United States, shares with contemporary African American women writers an intense awareness of the literary

<sup>1</sup> The daughter of a transit worker and a telephone operator, Gloria Naylor was born in New York in 1950. In 1981 she graduated in English from Brooklyn College and in 1983 she received her M.A. in African American Studies from Yale University, where she also served as a teaching assistant in a course entitled «Black Women and Their Fictions.» When she published her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, in 1982—for which she received the American Book Award in 1983, she already possessed an exhaustive knowledge of her antecedents, which has been further exploited in her later novels, *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey's Cafe* (1992).

tradition of which she is a part. Her novels reveal a deep knowledge of her multiple ancestry, revising—or «Signifying upon», using Gates' terminology for the trope of African American revision—the work of both male and female precursors, American and European.<sup>2</sup> Her novels thus endorse the idea of multiculturalism, by representing world where difference, even within the same ethnic group, is to be negotiated with mutual respect. No novel of hers expresses this emphasis on difference better than *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). This novel encompasses the multiplicity and fragmentation of black experience in America, illustrated by the complex and varied set of experiences lived by the people—and especially the women—who inhabit Brewster Place.<sup>3</sup>

Although Naylor's protagonists coexist in the deprived street of Brewster Place, separated literally as well as metaphorically from the rest of the city by a wall that made of it a dead-end street, they are differentiated by their particular backgrounds. Taking place in the urban North and in the South, in the present and in the past, time and place signify the diversity of the characters' experiences. In spite of the static situation in which we find the characters, the experience of contemporary African Americans is presented as an evolving and multi-faceted force inescapably linked to history. History acts as both a differentiating and a unifying factor in the construction of community in Brewster's Place, where black people are brought together as a result of the intermingling of racial, sexual and class oppression.

The narrative voice illustrates this point when introducing two of the characters: «Etta and Mattie had taken totally different roads that with all of their deceptive winding had both ended up on Brewster Place» (Naylor 1985, 60). For Mattie Michael, the most powerful nurturing figure of the novel, as well as for Etta Mae Johnson, Lucielia Louise Turner, and Cora Lee, Brewster Place is not a momentary stage. They have touched the bottom of the social ladder, and there is no hope for improvement of their economic or social situation. The same could be said of Ben, the only fully developed male character in the novel. All of them try to overcome their individual circumstances and to counter their sense of alienation by establishing emotional links with each other and fostering a sense of community. The construction and celebration of a nurturing community of African American women is one of the themes that characterize contemporary African American women's writing. Although this theme is essential to the structure of *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor also explores in this novel the reaction of the community to those who differ from the norm.

Thus, Naylor introduces characters that do not belong to the group mentioned above. This is the case of both the lesbian couple in the story «The Two» and of Kiswana Browne, the middle-class young girl who moves to Brewster Place to help the

<sup>2</sup> See Awkward's *Inspiring Influences* (97-134) for the study of her dual ancestry in *The Women of Brewster Place*. As for Naylor's European indebtedness, think for instance of her use of Dante's *Inferno* in her novel *Linden Hills*, or of Shakespeare's influence in her overall work, especially in *Mama Day* (See Peter Erikson's «Shakespeare's Black?»: The Role of Shakespeare in Naylor's Novels»). As for the meaning of Signifying see Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*.

<sup>3</sup> Her acknowledgement of fragmentation can be traced to African American writers of the 1920s and the 1930s. Thus, the multiplicity and difference of experience conveyed by the very form of the novel, constructed around seven distinct stories with their own protagonists, echoes Jean Toomer's loosely woven stories in *Cane*. Similarly, the theory that difference is essential to any consideration of ethnicity was firmly defended by Zora Neale Hurston in her autobiography when she wrote: «There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except 'My people! My people.'» (1984, 237).

community. Their freedom to choose Brewster Place as their home is one of the factors that separate them from the rest (Christian 121). The vision of African American women provided by the novel is therefore enlarged by the presence of Kiswana and the lesbians. The African American middle-class and the issue of homosexuality are allowed to intrude in the world of impoverished African American women mistreated by men.

By introducing a lesbian couple in her novel, Naylor explicitly studies the effect of difference within the black community rather than focusing on the effect of white racism. Lorraine and Theresa owe their marginality with respect to American mainstream society to their sexuality. This makes them doubly marginal because they also become alienated from the African American community. They move to Brewster Place to hide their sexuality from the people at their work place in order to avoid sexual discrimination. But it does not take very long before Brewster Place's community recognizes them as *different* and refuses their integration. Their isolation and rejection in the street is evident in the opening line of «The Two»: «At first they seemed like such nice girls» (129). Whereas the rest of the stories start with the protagonist's point of view, the two are considered from the outside, and the first impression the reader gets of them is that of estrangement from the community.

The couple's opposite reactions to the existing homophobia illustrate Naylor's respect to individualism. In an attempt to defend themselves from the dominant ostracism, Theresa reaffirms her difference saying «we are different. And the sooner you learn that, the better off you'll be» (165). In contrast, Lorraine wishes to efface it because, although she accepts her sexuality as it is, she feels that «it doesn't make me any *different* from anyone else in the world» (165). Theresa is content with just moving within her circle of homosexual acquaintances and asserts herself by making «fun of people who weren't like them» (142). But Lorraine needs to feel integrated in the heterosexual world. As a result, Lorraine is verbally abused by her neighbors.

In an attempt to negotiate the existing intolerance of the African American community towards the lesbian couple, Mattie compares her own love for other women with homosexual love and says to herself: «Maybe it's not so different . . . Maybe that's why some women get so riled up about it, 'cause they know deep down it's not so different after all» (141). Mattie suggests that the opposition to difference sometimes is due to the fear of recognizing such difference—which is socially or otherwise stigmatized—in oneself. Barbara Johnson expresses the same when she argues that «the resistance to finding out that the Other is the same springs out of the reluctance to admit that the same is Other» (1986, 323). Tragically, the resistance to the lesbian couple eventually results in the rape of Lorraine by a gang of black youths .

On another level, the division of the black community into social classes appears in Naylor's novel as one more instance of heterogeneity. With Kiswana Browne and her mother, Naylor referentializes the text again, drawing a new circle where the black middle class is at the center and Brewster community is at the margins. Kiswana, however, tries to shorten the distance between both by moving to Brewster Place, where she tries to «fight for equality and a better community» (83). In doing so, Kiswana also rejects her middle-class background.

Kiswana and her mother negotiate between the rejection of the dominant values and an assimilationist attitude. In her search for autonomy Mrs. Browne chooses to follow the option traditionally defended by the black middle-class, which sought to erase racial



difference by adopting the values of the dominant white society. Mrs. Browne's effort to conform is symbolized by the shoes she wears, which, though very «classy» and «English,» as her daughter notices, inflict a great pain on her feet: «Lord, do they cut me right across the instep» (87). According to this mentality, Mrs. Browne advises her daughter to «fight within the system . . . get an important job where you can have some influence . . . That way you could really help the community» (84). Hers is the philosophy behind the creation of Linden Hills, the wealthy black suburb where she lives. Mrs. Browne embodies a way of fighting for empowerment which is fostered by American capitalism and which has been identified as male, since men have traditionally been in a position of power within the system.<sup>4</sup>

Kiswana, on the other hand, does not look forward to conforming with the values of the dominant white society, but vindicates her ethnic difference by asserting her African roots. This is the reason why she changes her name Melanie for the African name Kiswana. She firmly believes that the black middle-class capitulation to capitalism results in a form of corruption and that, if she were to follow her mother's instructions, she would end up «sitting there in Linden Hills with a terminal case of middle-class amnesia» (85). So, she tries to erase class difference within her race. This is the reason why she moves to Brewster Place. She wants the social improvement of the group, not just hers. Kiswana therefore tries to help Brewster from within, or rather to make the community understand that they can help themselves if they become an articulate political force.

However, although she rejects her mother's idea to help Brewster from outside, which would imply separating herself from these impoverished and powerless women, she is already separated from them. It is her condition as an outsider which helps her to view the situation of these people from a distant economic and political perspective and come out with a possible solution. Her situation as a mediator between the affluent and the poor makes her different. Even though she repudiates her background and her social class, she cannot escape them. Her freedom to move between the world of the affluent black middle-class and the world of Brewster Place is symbolically manifest in the opening lines of her story: «From the window of her sixth-floor studio apartment, Kiswana could see over the wall at the end of the street to the busy avenue that lay just north of Brewster Place» (75). As her mother notices, she can even see the trees in Linden Hills from there.

Besides, despite her commitment and dedication to the poor, Kiswana still considers Linden Hills her home, on the one hand (79), and is seen as not belonging in Brewster, on the other. So, while Cora Lee wonders while she listens to «Kiswana's musical, clipped accent» and looks at «the designer jeans and striped silk blouse,» she wonders «What was she doing on a street like Brewster?» (116). Similarly, fighting the landlords does not risk her personal situation as it would endanger all others. As Barbara Christian remarks, «she can leave Brewster Place when she wishes. She does not risk survival, as the others would, if they rebelled» (121).

Naylor also considers generational distance as a factor contributing to difference among people by showing the passionate disagreement between Kiswana and her mother concerning the meaning of *blackness*. When Kiswana, taking into account Mrs.

<sup>4</sup> Naylor illustrates this point in her representation of the patriarchal society at work in her second novel *Linden Hills*. As a result, the black middle-class separates itself from the rest of the black community in its way to self-improvement, a way shaped by competitiveness and individualism.

Browne's allegiance to the white middle-class values, accuses her of being «a white man's nigger who's ashamed of being black!» (85), her mother responds with a defence of her African Americanness as different from her daughter's intended Africanness. Mrs. Browne claims her heritage of African American ancestors saying:

Then, know this . . . I am alive because of the blood of proud people who never scraped or begged or apologized for what they were. They lived asking only one thing of this world—to be allowed to be. And I learned through the blood of these people that black isn't beautiful and it isn't ugly—black is! It's not kinky hair and it's not straight hair—it just is.

It broke my heart when you changed your name. I gave you my grandmother's name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shot gun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for «not knowing his place.» Yet you need to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud (86).

Hence, Mrs. Browne's concept of blackness is inclusive and dynamic. By honoring her ancestors, she makes space not only for those who are like her, but also for all the characters who people Naylor's novel and who have not made it yet. Mrs. Browne first invests her ancestors, and through them all African Americans who preceded her, with dignity. Then, she defines blackness in the simplest and, at the same time, most complex way she could have chosen. First, by uttering «black is!» she establishes the existence of an African American bond based on a common history of struggle against oppression. Then, she proceeds to destroy any interpretation that could explain blackness as a monolithic and homogeneous phenomenon by implying a plurality of manifestations of blackness. Thus, she accepts any physical traits or external characteristics as different manifestations of the various inner attitudes from which the idea of self-affirmation on one's ethnicity can be defended.

Mrs. Browne, with a wider perspective of time than her daughter, criticizes her for her myopic vision of ethnicity. Kiswana, dazzled by the political atmosphere of the 1960's in which she was immersed, prefers to shape her identity from an idealized past in Africa, rather than acknowledge her more immediate roots in America. For Mrs. Browne, not being ashamed of what one is, is a precondition «to meet this world on its own terms» (86). Hence, she tries to make Kiswana aware of the necessity of bearing history in mind and of vindicating her personal and more immediate roots. If Kiswana accepts them, she will also be reconciled to her mother. Generational distance can thus be overcome. The generational gap between Kiswana and her mother is overcome by Kiswana's realization of their common sexuality when she finds out that both of them share the habit of painting their toenails for their partners' sake, Kiswana «suddenly realized that her mother had trod the same universe that she herself was now traveling . . . She stared at the woman she had been and was to become» (87).

During Mrs. Browne's short visit to her daughter, questions of ethnicity, class, gender, and time intertwine. By the end of this section Kiswana has been provided with a diachronic perspective of history that can help her to understand her parents and to appreciate her own past, without having to be assimilated. A signal that she will maintain her own ideology, different from her parents', is her protest: «'But I'll never be a Republican'» (88). She has received a lesson on tolerance.

Distanced in time from the novel's action, the epilogue shows a dying street with its survivors packing up «the remnants of their dreams» (191) and moving to a similar street. The white man's law that Kiswana intended to use to the community's advantage, eventually claims the street through court orders and eviction notices. Despite effort to

negotiate racial, sexual and class differences, her confrontation with white exploitation on the one hand, and black self-destructive habits born after years of oppression on the other, is too isolated and unsupported to have any lasting effect. No solutions are provided for the social and economic situation of the characters. But, even as they are forced to leave Brewster Place, we are left with the imprint of their lives and of their emotions. Naylor succeeds in making the difficulties and disappointments of negotiating how black women struggle as subjects rather than objects to reconstruct difference and affirm the desire for community.

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## Mother-Daughter Agency in Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways*, Paule Marshall's *Daughters* and Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell's *When Rocks Dance*

AUSTRALIA TARVER

When it was born, the mother held her newborn child close; she began then to lick it all over. The child whimpered a little, but as the mother's tongue moved faster and stronger over its body, it grew silent—the mother turning it this way and that under her tongue, until she had tongued it clean of the creamy white substance covering its body. The mother then put her fingers into her child's mouth—gently forcing it open; she blows into it—hard. She was blowing words—her words, her mother's words . . . and all their mothers' before—into her daughter's mouth (Nasta 1992, xi-xii).

This excerpt from «Discourse on the Logic of Language,» a poem by black Canadian Marlene Nourbese Philip, dramatizes the engendering power of the mothers in *Ugly Ways*, *Daughters* and *When Rocks Dance*. The *motherwork* described in Philip's poem becomes evident as the daughters in these novels become adults. They enact, reflect and fulfill their mothers' intentions as resilient, spiritually empowered women; and they form bonds with their mothers, intentionally and unintentionally, subverting geographical and domestic space into arenas where their power and influence are voiced.

The agency in these novels has diasporic implications in that it focuses on an act of survival emerging from women of African-descent in the New World. The characters and cultures in these texts are further located in the ever-changing discourse on the black diaspora, which Paul Gilroy defines as a black cultural, intellectual and political «dispersal into the western hemisphere» (Gilroy 1993, 211) and Ronald Segal defines as the experience, in the Old and New World, of blacks outside Africa from the slave trade through the present (Segal 1995). Still more useful for locating this study is the interest in the role of women in the African diaspora, as reflected in the theme of a shared feminist consciousness in Stelamaris Coser's study, *Bridging the Americas*. These novels are also suggestive of the homogeneity of women experiencing the *double colonization* of colonial and post-colonial worlds as depicted in the anthology, *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing* by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford.

According to Judith Kegan Gardiner, agency can be described as assertive and liberating for activist and academic feminists who want to move away from the

poststructural stance that an act of agency is limited by the discourse of which it is a part. Rather, agency involves mutuality. It changes and is changed by the institutions, individuals or patriarchy it encounters. Above all, Gardiner maintains, feminine agency can «benefit women and advance other liberatory agendas . . .» (Gardiner 1995, 1). In these texts agency changes and is challenged by history as the mother-daughter bonds reassess, redress the traditions upon which history is based.

Reading these texts does not present a one-dimensional view of mother-daughter relationships. One way of reading agency among the daughters in *Ugly Ways* and *When Rocks Dance* is that the daughters respond matrophobically to their mothers; the daughters' determination not to be like the mother both helps and subverts the mothers' ends. In *Ugly Ways* the mother's reclusiveness is so abhorrent to her daughters that they respond by fearlessly reaching out to the business world to prove themselves capable. By contrast, the refusal of the daughter in *When Rocks Dance* to accept her mother's African gods makes it all the more difficult for the mother to appeal to her African religion to save her daughter's life. More complexities occur when it becomes clear that the daughters' rejection of their mothers emerges from ignorance, fear and the shame or conflicts caused by having to explain the odd ways of the mother to in-laws or the community.

Intertextually, agency occurs in different degrees in the novels. While in both *Daughters* and *When Rocks Dance* mother-daughter bonding occurs as a «strategy against exploitation,» the mother and daughter in *Daughters* are coequals (Klinkowitz 1993, 259); but the daughter in *Rocks* is contemptuous of her mother's power until her life is in danger. In a similar reckoning, the daughters in *Ugly Ways* bond with their mother unwittingly, unaware that her virility has structured their impregnable sisterhood, their educational and material success and their determination to avoid sexual or racial marginalization.

In *Ugly Ways* mother-daughter agency can be viewed as an effort by the mother to construct her daughters' identity while suppressing that of her husband. The daughters, Betty, Emily and Ann Ruth and their father, Ernest, all work in the service of Mudear, a name which the mother has instructed her daughters to use. Ernest addresses her as Mudear as well. As the novel begins, Mudear has died and the daughters return home to Georgia to help their father bury her. Each family member struggles to come to terms with Mudear's death and with the unavoidable reality that no one, especially the daughters, was ever brave enough to tell her that she was as much hated and feared as loved.

In the post-Civil Rights Movement frame of the novel, Mudear provides her daughters with a veritable laboratory of how a woman can use the domestic sphere as an instrument of her power to overcome dominance. As her daughters grow, Mudear is a housewife who lives solely by her husband's commands. Each physical act of Ernest Lovejoy is a signal to service. Drumming his hand on the table meant he wanted his nails manicured, an act which Ernest deemed *almost as good as sex*; pointing to an empty spot on his plate meant Mudear was to refill it. If Ernest commanded, Mudear and the girls would be expelled from the house at night, only to be expected to return the following day to apologize for whatever Ernest felt had displeased him.

Mudear's transformation from servility to empowerment is referred to by the Lovejoys as *the change*. Once the change is complete, Mudear has taken over the household: at her order two head chairs are placed at the dining room table; when the new house is built, Mudear has her own bathroom, leaving the daughters and Ernest to

struggle in the other; the new kitchen is designed smaller and the bedroom, decorated to her taste and furnished for her comfort, is larger; Ernest is silenced over the years, as Mudear develops «the knack for being able to talk with [him] where he didn't have to make much of a contribution» (Ansa 1993, 169); and finally Mudear grows indifferent to Ernest's infidelities, viewing him with open disdain. After her death, Ernest could still see Mudear, «turning up her nose at him as if she were smelling something, like dog shit stuck to his boots» (Ansa 1993, 159).

McElroy Ansa, who has said in an interview that she was born with a caul (membrane affording one special powers) over her face (Carroll 1994, 17-26), ascribes magical powers to Mudear. As witnesses to this power, the daughters become, in a Haitian voodoo context, her *servitors*, or her initiates. Mudear is the *mambo* or priestess who exhorts them into believing that the spiritual forces one calls on can be used to control the daily events and people in one's life. After Mudear's death, the daughters marvel at how the garden world that Mudear created seemed imbued with her spirit.

The idea that *words cannot contain* Mudear's spirit can be explored deconstructively. McElroy Ansa presents her as larger than life, all powerful, one whom family members are *not allowed to dislike*. But Mudear is a manipulator. In this laboratory of learning she provides for her daughters, they are aware that she uses them to fulfill her own material and social needs and that she has effectively excluded and reduced their father, *no longer the hell cat he once was*, to the level of servant and stranger. McElroy Ansa privileges the reader with a view of Mudear that daughters and father do not have: Mudear talks from her coffin at Parkinson Funeral Home, rebutting, challenging and questioning her daughters; like a trickster-goddess, enjoying the chaos she has created, but remaining in control and above it all, she has the last words in the novel while witnessing her funeral. Throughout the text her voice demonstrates the orality and earthiness which inspired McElroy Ansa as she grew up in Macon Georgia. Mudear says:

Look at Annie Ruth sitting there with her hand resting on her stomach.  
Does she really think she or any of my girls are ever gonna be «free» of me? Especially now that she's gonna have a girl of her own?  
Right. Like I'm gonna let her bring up that child without me hovering over. Especially now that I got all eternity with nothing to do . . .  
What's old Ernest getting up for? Don't tell me he gon' give my eulogy! He don't know nothing about public speaking. Hell, he don't know nothing 'bout me! Well, that wasn't bad. «Esther Lovejoy's life spoke for itself.» And he had enough sense to get up, stand up tall, say his piece and sit his butt back down (Ansa 1993, 176).

The sisters in *Ugly Ways* are different versions of Mudear. Similarly, the idea that a mother *marries herself* in giving birth to a daughter (as expressed by a daughter in *Ugly Ways*), is the subtext in Paule Marshall's *Daughters*. In this novel, the mother, Estelle Mackenzie, is the engendering influence for her daughter Ursa. Estelle, an African American, marries Primus Mackenzie from the Caribbean island of Triunion and works in partnership with him to win the elections which make him an increasingly popular and powerful political leader of Morlands, a poor, struggling area of Triunion. When Ursa is born, Estelle begins training her early to take pride in the racial history of the island. What Ursa comes to understand as the enduring symbol of the African's fight against slavery is the massive monument of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe and two other revolutionaries. Estelle insists that Ursa's high school and college education be completed in America because she wants Ursa to learn as she did.

The connection that Estelle establishes with Ursa is borne out in Ursa's determination to do her college senior paper on New World slave communities in the United States and the Caribbean. As if applauding her own efforts in becoming politically and socially conscious, Estelle supports Ursa's resignation from a New York corporate research firm when Ursa felt the job was not as fulfilling as completing a second masters degree on the slavery project she was prevented from doing as a college senior. Estelle refuses to eat until Primus, angry about the resignation, breaks his silence by mailing Ursa a letter.

The assurance that Estelle has *mirrored herself* in bringing Ursa into the world can be measured by Estelle's knowing that if she needs help, calling her daughter back to Triunion would be like marshalling those internal forces of herself that she knew were always there. When Primus begins to use his power in office to buy into the U. S. and Canadian companies which had been exploiting the islanders he represented, Estelle sends for Ursa who then gives Primus' confidential documents to his opponents. Primus' loss of an election after thirty years signals the impact and importance of mother-daughter coalescence in this novel. It would seem that Ursa is closer to Primus than to Estelle, but it is Estelle with whom she joins forces in order to save Primus from becoming the political despot he has fought against during his years as an official. Therefore, Ursa's feeling that she is «seeing double» not only refers to her realization that the racial and economic oppression in the Caribbean and the United States have the same source, but that she also is seeing both of these worlds with her mother's eyes (Marshall 1992, 290).

In both *Ugly Ways* and *Daughters* the daughters respond with their mothers unquestioningly against racial oppression and patriarchy. The daughters in each work embody and uphold their mothers' values. In the case of the lovejoy mother-daughter alliance, to have *ugly ways* is to be anti-patriarchal; to refuse racial subjection without a fight; and to recognize, as McElroy Ansa puts it, that to achieve as much as black women have, it is all right to be crazy (Carroll 1994, 25-26). With Estelle and Ursa, Marshall reconstitutes the monument of Will Cudjoe and Congo Jane, suggesting, as Carol Boyce Davies says, that «[t]he revolutionary couple . . . may be an ideal worth struggling for, but is not the only revolutionary possibility» (Davies 1996, 198).

Like *Daughters*, *When Rocks Dance* is set in the Caribbean. While Marshall's dual American and West Indian heritage allows her to superimpose mother, daughter, hegemony and race, Nunez-Harrell, born in Trinidad, imbues it with history, myth and a mother-daughter bond reflecting the conflicts of its multi-racial character. As a black mistress of an English planter, Emilia is presented with one opportunity to inherit his land. The planter, an old man, proposes that if Emilia gives him a son, he will leave the land to her. Emilia's failure to bring live sons into the world is reversed when her fourth set of twins live. As a devotee of obeah and her ancestral African gods, she accepts the obeahman's prediction that, according to Ibo belief, her sons are cursed and she must sacrifice them to bring a daughter into the world. She submits to the ritual of cleansing and rebirth performed by obeahman who promises her that her daughter will live. When Marina is born, the planter discovers Emilia's sacrifice and disinherits her. Emilia instills in her daughter the determination to own land and Marina carries her mother's plan forward.

If Mudear's development of her daughters appears ambivalent and Estelle's guidance of Ursa is affected by geographical distance, Emilia's effort to help Marina become a landowner is immediate, undaunting and selfless. In one sense, agency here resembles

that in *Ugly Ways* because Marina resists and is contemptuous of Emilia's aid. But in this recast African world, Emilia, spending most of her money to purchase the talents of those who are empowered by the African religious past, relentlessly works obeh on her daughter's behalf.

Agency resonates with other aspects of the novel. The relationship between Emilia and Marina is encoded in the natural forces shaping their lives. As the titled segments of the novel suggest, the seasons encase, control the birth and death of the land, the substance and source of agency. Both Emilia and Marina, in giving birth to children reflect the natural balance between birth and death. Emilia gives life to Marina, but eight sons died so that Marina might live. Emilia also faces the death of her own dream for land with the birth of Marina, and she confronts the English planter's effort to kill her spirit for her perceived failure to serve as the instrument of his needs for sex and progeny. Marina's near death during the delivery of twins parallels a fierce hurricane followed by restorative calm. The birth of Marina's twins is balanced against the death of her eight brothers who, according to traditional Ibo belief, were doomed in a repeated birth cycle. Further, Marina's escape from death is marked by the imminent destruction of the coca leaf by oil, the origin of Marina's future wealth and the contemporary means by which Trinidad was as exploited by western businesses as it was by slavery.

Agency also brings together the cultural and religious worlds of Europe and Africa. In the struggle to save Marina's life, obeh practitioners use the bread symbolizing the body of Christ as part of the rite. During the rite Emilia's methods are challenged by an English doctor who considers her savage and backward, compared to his knowledge and training. But the syncretic techniques employed by Emilia prove more life-affirming. The title of the novel, expressed in the statement «What right have eggs among rocks when they are dancing?» (Nunez-Harrel 1986, 298), seems to bear out Nunez-Harrell's idea that European culture, *the eggs*, do not have the force or impact needed in a ritual of survival or in the life experienced by those who have fashioned an existence from knowing how to reverse what has been denied them in the past.

Intertextually, qualities which engender mother-daughter work offer striking examples of personal sovereignty and self-emancipation. In all of these relationships there is the refusal to be contained or limited. Mudear's project of growing flowers in the privacy of the night; Estelle's community enterprises to improve the lives of poor islanders; and Emilia's unwavering faith in maligned African gods are expressive signs for the daughters' own personal emergence.

Taken together, mother-daughter interaction in these novels valorizes the black woman's acumen for uniting the mother-daughter forces within themselves. This dual or bifurcated self can challenge and subvert forms of domination or bring into being the means by which subversion is achieved.

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# Nails, Snails, and Puppy-Dog Tails: Black Male Stereotypes in the Diasporic Fiction of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Terry McMillan

BERNARD W. BELL

My first trip back to Africa was on a Mediterranean cruise in 1955 as a nineteen-year-old United States Marine to protect our *homeland*—according to military authorities—from communism and to keep the world safe for democracy. My return two decades later to West Africa, my other historic and mythic *homeland*, was even more memorable and meaningful. In 1977 I imaginatively reversed the transatlantic scattering of my ancestors into slavery and the New World by journeying to Lagos, Nigeria, as a member of the Colloquium of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. As an African American scholar and literary critic, I was profoundly and palpably disturbed by feeling and being a racial insider yet cultural outsider in the homeland of my ancestors. I was at best ambivalent about the cultural, political, and psychological distance that I experienced between myself and my African *brothers* and *sisters*, regardless of race, class and ethnicity.

While housed as a United States official of the Colloquium first in FESTAC Village and later in the Ikoye Hotel, for example, I was assigned a new Mercedes with an Ibo driver who insisted on calling me *Bwana*. Later, I was served meals in the hotel by immaculately white-jacketed waiters with crisply folded white napkins across their left wrists who, despite my requests to the contrary, insisted on serving me my salad and beverage after the other dinner courses. I was also addressed in different languages either deferentially or hostilely by people in the markets and streets. From the predictable response of the hotel desk clerk to my passport to the unpredictable responses of people in the street, I was made acutely aware that I was an American, not an African. Even more apparent was my feeling that I and the other African American participants in FESTAC, contrary to our intentions, were possibly complicitous in neocolonial cultural, political, and economic domination rather than part of the emancipatory movement of Pan-Africanism.

It is not only possible but probable that black Americans have been complicitous in different degrees and for different reasons in perpetuating demeaning, disunifying stereotypes of ourselves and our culture. This has occurred primarily because of the legacy of colonialism, capitalism, and racism that informed the scattering of peoples of African descent from their homelands during the transatlantic slave trade and influenced the subsequent migrations North of emancipated slaves and free persons of color from the American South in the post-Civil War and pre-World War I eras. Specifically, some

African American folklore and anti-male fiction by contemporary black women writers provide insidious, ironic, and representative examples of black American complicity in perpetuating colonial and postcolonial stereotypes of racial and gender differences that frustrate rather than facilitate our historical quest for intraracial unity.

While growing up in a single-parent household during the early 1940s near 7th and T Streets in Washington, D.C., for instance, I was fascinated by the little black girls in my neighborhood who were more assertive than me. In response to my questions about the differences between these girls and I, my government-employed mother used to say: «No matter, son. Remember, girls are made of sugar and spice and everything nice, but boys are made of nails, snails, and puppy dog tails.» At six or seven years old, I was not about to question whether this folksaying about identity formation was fact or fiction. But clearly the authority of my mother conflicted with the authority of my very limited experience with the truth or fantasy of this saying.

In my pre-adolescent, black, male, working-class, female-centered, World War II context, was this folksaying realistic or romantic? Did it stereotype and, in postmodern jargon, essentialize females as naturally passive and males as naturally assertive? As I lost my innocence and acquired more varied experiences, I realized, as most of us do, that thinking and feelings based on simplistic, reductive dualisms and on the declared absolute truths of folksayings can be harmful to your health.

This became most painfully clear to me when I was beaten and dumped into a tar barrel by an eleven-year-old black girl whose attentions I resisted as an eight-year-old student in public school in the South Bronx. This female was obviously neither physically nor emotionally nice to me even though she may have considered herself made of sugar and spice. On the other hand, as most of us know and as Sojourner Truth's «Ain't I a Woman» speech in a white women's convention in 1852 dramatically demonstrated, many black women, then and now, embody and express some of the assumed mutually exclusive traits of male dominance and female subservience. In any event, the resurgence of stereotypes of the character and identity of black males in the fiction of some contemporary black women writers reveal a close correlation with the decline of the 1960s Black Power and Black Arts movements, and with the rebirth of the white feminist movement. Of course, as social and cultural critics Paula Giddings in *When and Where I Enter* and bell hooks in *Ain't I a Woman* remind us, the history of the white feminist movements has been as hypocritical and racist as that of many leading white male abolitionists, liberals, and Christians.

But in keeping the development of my thesis short and simple, let me begin with an outline of seven literary stereotypes of black character and the further reduction of black male stereotypes to the Black Revolutionary Rapist popularized by Eldridge Cleaver and the Black Macho popularized by Michele Wallace. Turning next to a brief examination of male types, stereotypes, and archetypes in some of the realist and neorealist texts of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Terry McMillan, I will conclude with a restatement of my implicit thesis: a man ain't nothing but a man.

In 1933 Sterling A. Brown, the late Dean of African American Letters and my mentor, published the classic essay, «Negro Character as Seen by White Authors.» «The Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life,» Brown wrote. «The majority of books about Negroes merely stereotype Negro character . . . Those considered important enough for separate classification, although overlappings do occur, are seven in number: (1) The Contented Slave, (2) The Wretched Freeman, (3) The Comic Negro, (4) The Brute Negro, (5) The Tragic Mulatto, (6) The Local Color Negro, and (7) The Exotic Primitive» (327).

Marked by exaggeration and omissions, these stereotypes stress the divergence of African Americans from an assumed and ascribed White Anglo-Saxon Protestant social and cultural norm as justification of our subjugation, exploitation, and marginalization as a racial and ethnic group. They also «illustrate dangerous specious generalizing from a few particulars recorded by a single observer from a restricted point of view—which is itself generally dictated by the desire to perpetuate a stereotype» (Brown 1993, 328).

In 1971 literary critic Catherine J. Starke's *Black Portraiture in American Fiction* confirmed the validity and viability of Brown's list of stereotypes, which, as quiet as it is kept, assumes that realism is the normative mode of American and African American fiction. Her list of seven familiar fictional images of blacks include: «A kindly old slave, an unhappy white-looking girl, a vicious brute, an exotic primitive, a comic show-off, a butt of prejudice, or a violently angry youth» (1971, 16). In «Images of Black Women in Afro-American Literature: From Stereotype to Character,» a 1975 sketch of her book on the tradition of black women novelists, Barbara Christian adds the Mammy and Sapphire to the gallery of literary stereotypes of black Americans.

In order to analyze and understand better the ironic implications of stereotypes of black males in the fiction of contemporary black women writers, four questions should be asked: How does the concept of stereotype relate to the meaning of type and archetype? How has the shift in power relations of the 1960s and 1970s that resulted from the changing social and cultural dynamics of race, class, and gender during the period influenced the contexts of their fictive constructions of these ideological and social formations? And how is the responsibility of the writer influenced by the politics of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in the production of cultural images?

According to C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature*, a stereotype is a term derived from the printing trade that signifies «anything that repeats or duplicates something else without variation; hence something that lacks individualizing characteristics» (1992, 481). In other words, a stereotype is a commonly held, oversimplified mental picture or judgment of a person, character, race, issue, or event. In contrast to the generally pejorative connotation of stereotype, a type, as we are using it here as an epistemological sign of classification, is a «character . . . that embodies a substantial number of significant distinguishing characteristics of a group or class. Such a character becomes almost a kind of synecdoche, a representative of the whole of which he or she is a part» (Holman and Harmon 1992, 514). Unlike stereotype and type, the term archetype is derived from the depth psychology of Carl Jung. In literary criticism an archetype is «an image, a descriptive detail, a plot pattern, or a character type that occurs frequently in literature, myth, religion, or folklore and is, therefore, believed to evoke profound emotions in the reader because it awakens a primordial image in the unconscious memory and thus calls into play illogical but strong responses» (Holman and Harmon 1992, 36). Archetypes are thus transhistorical, transcultural symbols or images.

Assuming fallaciously that all narratives seek to reflect mimetically rather than reconstruct inventively human characters and experiences, too many readers confuse these literary terms and misuse the term stereotype as a synonym for type and archetype in analyzing modern and contemporary experimental fictions. Even some feminist and postcolonial critics, aware of the stylistic and structural movement of most modern and contemporary novels beyond the conventions of social realism, directly correlate stereotypic expressions and archetypal representations of black women, as Madhu Dubey does in her provocative study of black women novelists and the Black Aesthetic movement. In contrast, after identifying Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, and Ralph Ellison as the four novelists who dominate the genre of the modern African American novel, Barbara Christian contends that «the black women

that appear in the novels of these four literary giants come painfully close to the stereotypes about the black woman projected by white southern literature in the latter part of the nineteenth century» (1985, 15).

What, then, are the major stereotypes of black males in the fiction of black women writers since 1970? Because we have neither the time nor space to undertake either a comprehensive survey or an analytical examination of this topic, I will focus briefly on the texts of the three most celebrated female fiction writers since the 1970s: Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Terry McMillan. In several of the most realistic and neorealistic novels by these black women, we discover a rewriting yet perpetuation of the following four stereotypes of black males: (1) the Brute Negro, popularized by white authors of the nineteenth century; (2) the Dog, represented in folksayings by many black women and even internalized by some men; (3) the Existential Black Anti-Hero, popularized in 1940 by Richard Wright as an amoral Black American native son; and (4) the Misogynist Black Revolutionary Nationalist, popularized in 1968 by Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver and in 1978 by black feminist Michele Wallace as rapist of white women and abuser of black women.

Before looking at some of the texts of Morrison, Walker, and McMillan, let us first look at how social and cultural forces of the 1960s shaped fictive constructions of black males and sought to silence dissenting voices. For people in the United States, among the most significant social and cultural forces during the 1960s were the transformation of the Civil Rights movement into the Black Power and Black Arts movements as well as the Women's Rights movement. As defined by leading black cultural nationalist Larry Neal, the Black Arts movement was «the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology» (1971, 272). Like the historical experiences and racial identities of black Americans, as most leading black nationalists were well aware, the movements were neither homogeneous nor monolithic.

Although black nationalism in the United States ranges in definition from racial pride to various types of Pan-Africanism, two major ideological groups that were frequently in paradoxical and fratricidal conflict in their struggle for unity and common struggle for liberation from the economic, cultural, and political oppression of the white ruling class dominated the media of the period. On the one hand, there were the black revolutionary nationalists, who stressed class mobilization and masculine militancy over racial consciousness, and on the other hand, there were the black cultural nationalists, who stressed the need for an indigenous racial or Pan-African transformation of cultural consciousness before economic and political liberation could be achieved. Because both nationalist movements foregrounded and centered on black men while marginalizing and devaluing black women, many post-movement critics agree with black social historian and feminist Paula Giddings's classification of the 1960s as «the masculine decade» (Giddings 1984, 314).

Just as the abolitionist movement was a catalyst for the women's rights movement of the nineteenth century, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s were catalysts for the resurgence of the modern Women's Rights movement. But as in the past, the leading feminists as well as the majority of the women in that movement were and still are white and middle class. As bell hooks and others have noted, definitions of feminism range widely from individuals who advocate gender equality to a radical, committed political movement against sexist oppression of women and all systems of domination. Even so, the experiences and truths of black and poor women were generally ignored or glossed over when references were made to women and

blacks. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men; But Some of Us are Brave*, for example, is a popular anthology by, about, and for black women that cogently expressed both the irony of this marginalization and the paradox of the absence yet presence of black women in white feminist and black nationalist discourses.

«I became a rapist,» black revolutionary leader Cleaver wrote in *Soul on Ice*. «To refine my technique and *modus operandi*, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto . . . and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey. I did this consciously, deliberately, willfully, methodically. Rape was an insurrectionary act,» he declared in a commercially successful, self-serving attempt to elevate the stereotype of the Brute Negro to the level of an archetypal political revolutionary. «It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women—and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman. I felt I was getting revenge» (1968, 14). In the essay «The Primeval Mitosis» Cleaver reinforces this fusion and confusion of the stereotype and archetype in his sexual and political allegory of white males as Omnipotent Administrators and black males as Supermasculine Menials.

In *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Wallace writes:

[W]hite men were perversely obsessed with the black man's genitals but the obsession turned out to be a communicable disease and in the sixties black men came down with high fevers. . . . Black men began to harp on the white man's obsession with their genitals and that was the very point at which their own obsession began to take hold. . . . Perhaps it was necessary for Huey Newton and the Black Panthers to make a public display of arming themselves. Their actions represented an unprecedented boldness in the sons of slaves and had a profound and largely beneficial effect on the way in which black men would regard themselves from then on. Yet the gains would have been more lasting if an improved self-image had not been so hopelessly dependent upon Black Macho—a male chauvinist that was frequently cruel, narcissistic, and shortsighted (1990, 73).

In the Introduction to her 1990 edition of the book, Wallace disavows «that Black Macho was the crucial factor in the destruction of the Black Power Movement» and acknowledges that her critique was based «upon a limited perception of it taken primarily from the mainstream media,» from white writers such as Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe, and from black writers such as Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Baraka, and Cleaver (xxi). Nevertheless, this image of black males has been dominant in the fiction of black women writers since the 1970s as their voices moved, sometimes with the vengeance of Gayl Jones's castrating protagonist in *Eva's Man*, from the margins to the center of the production, commodification, and consumption of black culture.

The most compelling and controversial images of black males appear in the texts of Morrison and Walker. Although her characters are more often types and individuals than stereotypes, especially in *Beloved*, Morrison has been criticized for creating in *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, some of the most vicious, morally grotesque black male abusers of black women and children in contemporary fiction, especially Charles «Cholly» Breedlove and Elihue Micah «Soaphead Church» Whitcomb.

Abandoned on a junk heap while four days old, Cholly grew up into a self-hating, brawling, alcoholic rapist and impregnator of Pecola, his eleven-year-old daughter. The confused mixture of his drunk memories of her resemblance to Pauline and «the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him,» Morrison writes in probably the most graphic and offensive rape episode in contemporary American literature, «he wanted to fuck her—tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into

her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made—a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon» (19871, 128-9). The moral offensiveness of this episode is compounded for some readers by Morrison's rendering of the rape episode from the interiorized, sympathetic perspective of the incestuous male abuser instead of from the silenced, pre-teenaged female victim.

Soaphead Church is a West Indian spiritualist, misanthrope, and molestor of children like the young, pregnant Pecola, who naively seeks his help in her tragic quest for blue eyes. Soaphead, writes Morrison with uncompromising ironic understatement,

could have been an active homosexual but lacked the courage. Bestiality did not occur to him, and sodomy was quite out of the question, for he did not experience sustained erections and could not endure the thought of somebody else's . . . His attentions therefore gradually settled on those humans whose bodies were least offensive—children (Morrison 1987a, 131-2).

Because *The Bluest Eye* moves beyond the realism of the traditional bildungsroman to a hybrid form of poetic realism and Gothic fable, the representation of Soaphead and Cholly to many black readers correspondingly moves beyond the conventional stereotypic black male abuser to a more disturbing expression of the sexual perversity and social pathology of contemporary black American male character.

In her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alice Walker outlines in unrelenting graphic details the three lives of the patriarch of the Copeland clan. Ostensibly, the novel is about how the birth of his granddaughter Ruth marked Grange Copeland's rebirth of self-respect after a youth and manhood of dissolution. But actually the narrative chronicles the social pathology that he passes on to his son, Brownfield, the brutish, self-hating black male abuser of black women and children. Walker catalogs episodes in the Copeland family life, especially Brownfield's, to arouse the reader's indignation at the price black women pay as the victims of economic, racial, and sexual exploitation and abuse. Like Grange, who drives his wife Margaret Copeland, to drink, degradation, and death, Brownfield destroys his wife spiritually and physically by beating her every Saturday night, «trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face» (1970, 63).

Although more middle class and less physically violent, the black men of the 1960s in Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, are, with the exception of the father, similarly disloyal and despicable in their abuse of women. Truman, Meridian's conquering black prince and Walker's parody of the archetype—a French-speaking civil rights organizer and painter—impregnated her, but betrayed her to marry and then desert a white exchange student and his child. Tommy, a bitter black civil rights activist, rapes Truman's white wife, Lynne, in revenge for the arm he lost to a white sniper. And Alonzo, the apolitical black scrap-yard worker, was so grateful for Lynne's invitation to sleep with her that, Walker writes with righteous political indignation, he «licked her from her earlobes to her toes» (1977, 167). Like the omniscient narrator, Walker thus encourages the reader to see most of her black male characters in the limited moral category of the *low-down dirty dog* in the novel who impregnated the thirteen-year-old tragic Wild Child.

Except for Odessa's Jack, abusive and non-abusive black men in *The Color Purple* are also depicted stereotypically as dogs or frogs with no hope of becoming princes. Gender role reversal, feminine domination of masculine principles and practices, or egalitarianism, however, does foster some redemption for some of the black men.

Harpo, for example, not only acquires a love for housekeeping, especially cooking, but also becomes a house-husband while his wife works as a storekeeper. And the abusive Albert, whom Celie ironically calls «Mister,» learns not only to make quilts, Walker's symbol for the independence, creativity, and integrity of women, with Celie, but also to acknowledge Celie's independence and integrity as a person. Guided by the spirit and achievement of Hurston, Walker has Shug, the liberated bisexual moral center of the novel, to express one of the major themes of the book more poetically in the vernacular when she tells Celie: «You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall» (1982, 168).

Like several of the black women in the narratives of Morrison and Walker, the black female protagonists in Terry McMillan's novels are usually victims of black male emotional, psychological, and verbal, if not physical, abuse. «Most of the black men couldn't find jobs,» the sympathetic feminist, omniscient narrator in *Mama*, McMillan's first novel, tells us; «and as a result, they had so much spare time on their hand that when they were stone cold broke, bored with themselves, or pissed off about everything because life turned out to be such a disappointment, their dissatisfaction would burst open and their rage would explode. This was what usually passed for masculinity, and it was often their wives or girlfriends or whores who felt the fallout» (1987, 20). Some readers may therefore be politically or morally offended but not surprised when Crook, the protagonist's husband, beats her with a belt as he would a child. These readers may also ask along with their young children who hear this violence, «'Why they try to kill each other, then do the nasty'» (1987, 9).

In McMillan's best-selling *Waiting to Exhale*, four educated, independent, modern, urban African American women in their thirties—Savannah Jackson, Bernadine Harris, Robin Stokes, and Gloria Matthews—support each other like sisters as they ironically wait, as the book jacket states, «for that man who will take their breath away.» But, according to the following climactic dialogue among the four women at Gloria's thirty-eighth birthday, all black men are one type of dog or another:

«Shit, I'm smart, I'm attractive, I'm educated, and my pussy's good, if I do say so myself. What happened to all the aggressive men?» Savannah asks. «The ones that aren't scared to talk to you? Where the fuck are they hiding?»/ «They're not hiding. They're just scared to make a damn commitment,» Robin said./ «They're with white women,» Bernadine said./ «Or gay,» Gloria said./ «Or married,» Savannah said. «But you know what? They're not all with white girls, they're not all homosexuals, they're not all married, either. When you get right down to it, we're talking five, maybe ten percent. What about the rest?»/ «They're ugly.»/ «Stupid.»/ «In prison.»/ «Unemployed.»/ «Crackheads.»/ «Short.»/ «Liars.»/ «Unreliable.»/ «Irresponsible.»/ «Too Possessive.»/ «Dogs.»/ «Shallow.»/ «Boring.»/ «Stuck in the sixties.»/ «Arrogant.»/ «Childish.»/ «Wimps.»/ «Too goddamn old and set in their ways.»/ «Can't fuck.»/ «Stop!» Savannah said./ «Well, shit, you asked,» Robin said (1992, 332).

In this stereotyping and commodifying of the sociohistorical and sociocultural battle of the sexes, especially among signifying black women and men, should we really be all that shocked when Snoop Doggy Dog—whose name illustrates the ironic reinscription and internalizing of the neocolonial and post-Reconstruction popular black male stereotype—and other gangster rappers become millionaires by stereotyping and signifying on black women with similar vicious and playful invectives and epithets?

Black feminist and womanist critics such as Mary Helen Washington in her Introduction to *Black-Eyed Susans* and Barbara Christian in *Black Women Novelists* applaud the displacement of stereotypic with more realistic and diverse images of black



women. But as I have attempted to make plain, stereotypes of black males as dogs are not uncommon in black folksayings and in fiction by the most celebrated contemporary black women writers of the 1970s. Major writers like Morrison and Walker have moved beyond the conventions of traditional realism in their more recent contributions to a black female literary tradition, but some of their hybrid narrative constructions perpetuate rather than interrogate black male stereotypes.

In short, by frequently repeating and reinforcing commonly held, oversimplified images and judgments of black males, celebrated black women writers of fiction like Morrison, Walker, and McMillan have been complicitous in different degrees in the neocolonial cultural and political domination of American males of African descent. In *Beloved*, Morrison's most outstanding novel so far, for example, black men are not stereotyped as «low-down dirty dogs» like the incestuous rapist in *The Bluest Eye*, the nameless Assistant and Wild Child's anonymous impregnator in *Meridian*, Mister and even God in *The Color Purple*, and all of the men in *Waiting to Exhale*. Although circumstances in *Beloved* may reduce some of the black male characters to debasing themselves with cows, clabber, or the ghostly daughter of their lover, Baby Suggs, Sethe, Morrison, and this reader agree: a man ain't nothing but a man.

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## Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and the African Diaspora

JESÚS BENITO & ANA MANZANAS

Like *The Oxherding Tale*, Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* appears as a novel of self-discovery. A novel in which its picaresque hero, Rutherford Calhoun, finds his real self in his crisscrossing of the Atlantic on board the *Republic*, a ship that carries «the memory of too many runs of black gold between the New World and the Old» (Johnson 1990a, 21). At the novel's end, the final image of Calhoun, after he has witnessed the «Flood, and countless seas of suffering» (209) on board the slave ship, seems to answer his questions halfway through the story when he wonders: «how in God's name I could go on after this? How could I feel whole after seeing it? How could I tell my children of it without placing a curse on them forever?» (66-67). It is only after the tempest and after his experience of the middle passage that Calhoun manages to start feeling not whole again, but whole for the first time. After his experiences on the slave ship, Calhoun remains trapped within an eternal middle passage: an African-American-African . . . (where should we stop the series?). His identity, he will find, like the uncertain middle passage of the *Republic*, like the nature of history as presented in the novel (from Falcon's perspective first, from Calhoun's later) is based on flux, on multiplicity, on dispersion and on diaspora. Our attempt in this paper will be not only to trace to what extent Calhoun's identity is based on diaspora, but also to assess to what extent diaspora is one of the organizing principles of the novel itself, and, in Charles Johnson's opinion, of all literature and culture.

But what is diaspora? Tackling this concept is one of the most complex aspects of the novel since it seems to participate in the everchanging nature of things in Johnson's text. If we look it up in the *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1988) we will find that diaspora means dispersion, «any scattering of people with a common origin, background, beliefs.» The first and negative sense of diaspora for African Americans is the dispersion of Africans in the New World, whose results are well known: the fragmentation and dispersion of African history, culture and languages. A second, more positive sense of diaspora in the novel appears when we wonder—or rather, Calhoun does—what to do after the dispersion and the scattering. In a word, what to do with the heritage of the diaspora. It is from here that the second, more positive sense of diaspora springs: diaspora fosters cultural mixes; it engenders multiplicity (or multiculturalism). From this point of view, both going back to the original *pre-diasporean* state and assimilating blindly to the host culture would be culturally impoverishing and

reductive. What Johnson seems to favor in *Middle Passage* and in *Being and Race* is a careful balance or, what we can term, a *middle passage*.

Johnson's *Middle Passage* deconstructs not only the Western reliance on polarities and hierarchies, but also the primitivistic vision of Africa as the site of universal unity and harmony. The novelist envisions personal and cultural emancipation as a process of liberation from «monolithic, ideological fictions», whether Eurocentric or Afrocentric, and he favors what he terms «intersubjectivity and cross-cultural experience» (1990b, 38). As Johnson indicates, «artists ought to know as much as they can about as many cultures as they can» (qtd. in Goudie 1995). This diversifying of culture is reflected in the novel through a diversifying of identity and subjectivity in the case of Rutherford Calhoun, and also through engaging a multiplicity of literary and philosophical sources in the novel itself, ranging from Hegelian philosophy to Western literature (like Melville's «Benito Cereno», Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*) and African American literature (like Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*). All this dispersion, personal and literary, African and Western, is implicit in the novel in the middle passage represented by the crisscrossing of the Atlantic. The diaspora symbolized by this middle passage will function as the site of full personal realization, beyond the dangers of cultural or national dogma awaiting on either shore of the Atlantic.

When we first encounter Calhoun he appears as the child of the diaspora. He is inheritor to the cultural-historical amnesia which is the result of the fragmentation of the slaves' history, culture and language in the New World. With no past, history or culture to claim his own, Calhoun finds in the hybridity and sensuality of New Orleans his true home. He is, as viewed by his shipmates, a drifter who believes in nothing and belongs to nobody. They have no trouble imagining his end: «dying in a ditch without so much as leaving a mark on the world» (88). In this sense Calhoun is not only a stowaway on the *Republic*, but also a stowaway in life. However, Calhoun's comrades will prove wrong: Calhoun is going to leave a mark on the world and the word through his writing of Falcon's log—that footnote in history Falcon never managed to accomplish himself.

As Calhoun himself admits before Peter Cringle, he has no past to speak of. At least, he says, «that's how I've often felt. When I look behind me, for my father, there is only an emptiness» (160). As a colonized subject, unattached to family and willing to remain so for ever—and here, of course, we cannot forget Isadora's plight with him, Calhoun is a perfect example of the individualistic self-made man in the United States. The *self-made man* is used here with a little irony. We mean the self-made man as it applies to a black man surviving on the «excessive, exotic fringes of life» (1). As Calhoun honestly admits before the reader, he is «a petty thief,» a vocation he considers in keeping with what is expected from him, for, as Calhoun explains, «was I not, as a Negro in the New World, *born* to be a thief?» (45). Calhoun's deterministic vision of himself shows a tricky internalization of the stereotype of the Negro in a white world. Within the uneasy equilibrium of the self (as an African American), Calhoun's Africanness is entirely subordinated to his Americanness. It is his Americanness that defines what it is to be an African. His existence on the very margins of New Orleans civilized life as an individualistic self-made man who takes to sea as the last frontier, makes of Calhoun a *pícaro*, a rogue who profits from his social invisibility. His self-carving as an individual, however, is extremely elusive. When we ask ourselves what Calhoun is it seems that the question is unanswerable as such. It would be much easier to give an account of what Calhoun is not or does not want to be. He does not want to become a Negro preacher, nor a black saint like the South American priest Martín de Porres. He is not interested

in being «a credit to the race» nor in being a gentleman of color; and above all, as if to emphasize his individualism and his lack of attachments, he does not want to get married.

It will be his symbolic reversal of the middle passage, that is, his crossing the Atlantic from America to Africa on board a slave ship, that will make Calhoun aware of his lost past. On boarding the *Republic* Calhoun gets the first intimation as to the nature of his journey. He has the feeling that he is not boarding a ship, but «a wooden sepulcher» (21) moaning with the memory of many middle passages. As Calhoun embarks himself on a reversed middle passage—as Olaudah Equiano did—he will start his journey towards memory. In this light, the novel, like *The Oxherding Tale*, can be seen as a spiritual odyssey from ignorance to enlightenment, from the shackles of individualistic amnesia to the freedom of knowledge and communal remembrance. Calhoun, who, as we said, had no past, will catch up with time during the middle passage. The atrocities he witnesses on the *Republic* have an immediate effect on him, and his hair turns white right away. The catalyzer in Calhoun's transformation is his contact with the Allmuseri, an African tribe that has been enslaved on board the *Republic*. Calhoun will be mesmerized by their sense of time and their sense of unity. Their ancientness is evoked by captain Falcon when he says they are a people «who existed when the planet—the galaxy, even—was a ball of fire and steam» (43). The Allmuseri are described, through Calhoun's eyes, as «a clanstate.» They are what Charles Johnson calls in *Being and Race* a «pre-individualistic society» (1990b, 29). As Squibb tells Calhoun, they are «as close-knit as cells in the body» (58). That is why the separation of the first caravan of Allmuseri was so painful (and here we can recollect similar accounts of separation in slave narratives). The ritual of separation, moreover, included the shaving of their bodies. This is what Squibb calls «the first humiliation» «since it makes them smooth as babies from the womb, like mebbe they was born yestiday» (59). As if, indeed, they were *tabulae rasae*, a nakedness without which is an instance of the nakedness within, just as if they had no history, no connection. Their clan-like unity had a philosophical basis in their belief in their «unity of being.» For them, and that was the whites' sin, «the failure to experience the unity of Being everywhere was the Allmuseri vision of hell» (65). For the Allmuseri, individualism, that is, the scattering of the self (or of the mind) was madness. Under European-American tutelage they were moving towards «the madness of multiplicity» (65).

In his effort to understand the Allmuseri, Calhoun remembers what must have been the reactions of his ancestors when seeing white people for the first time: «They saw us as savages. We were barbarians shipping them to America to be eaten» (65). It is interesting to note that for the Allmuseri Calhoun is not one of them but part of the oppressor. If the whites are seen as raw Barbarians, he, being a colored one, is seen as a cooked barbarian (75). Calhoun, as we said before, is mesmerized by their culture and writes: «I wanted their ageless culture to be my own» (78). It seems that Calhoun, who in America felt as the «inheritor of two milenia of things he had not himself made» (47) would be able to identify himself finally with the culture of his ancestors. After his own reversed middle passage his conversion to the culture and the sense of time of the Allmuseri stands as one of the most plausible options for Calhoun. In this way, Calhoun claims back that part of himself which was rooted out by the diaspora. Calhoun could, in fact, pass for African, just as Andrew Hawkins did pass for white in *The Oxherding Tale*. But *passing* in both cases implies an artificial dissolution of the diaspora implicit in the self. The contact with the Allmuseri thus places Calhoun in a rather unstable position. When Calhoun boards the *Republic*, he is retracing his steps in a kind of reversed middle passage. This process takes Calhoun back to a diasporan

world in which he finds himself trapped between the individualism of American society on one side of the ocean, and the sentimental envisioning of perfect African harmony and communal life represented by the Allmuseri, on the African side of the Atlantic.

Charles Johnson does not seem to favor an Afrocentric outcome for his novel, even though Calhoun at one point sees in the dead Allmuseri boy his own double, and even if after the mutiny breaks out Ngonyama assures him «these men are your brothers» (131). Calhoun never effects this passing over: he has turned into a middle passage man, placed in between the crew and the Allmuseri. He is an African American who cannot convert fully neither to Americanness nor to Africanness, for, he says, he cannot «claim something he had no hand in creating» (78). He is also a middle passage man in the sense that his passage to Africa is never complete, it stops just at the threshold of his Americanness. His identity as an African American does not stress either element; it lies in an uneasy balance. To use Du Bois's words, Calhoun has merged «his double self into a better and truer self» (1989, 3). Within the current critical debate about the possibility (or the desirability) to decolonize the colonial subject, Johnson seems to imply that colonization (in this case, internal colonization), is not a passing historical feature that can be left behind; quite the opposite, colonization is an inescapable condition which generates cultural syncreticity, the diaspora which confers African American literature a peculiar strength (Cf. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989, 29-30).

Calhoun's position as a middle passage man is yet favored by his development of a more realistic perception of the Allmuseri. If Calhoun initially recognized in the Allmuseri all he was not, soon enough, after the mutiny breaks out, he manages to see in Ngonyama's face his own image: «I saw displacement, an emptiness . . . to wit, I saw myself. A man made by virtue of his contact with the crew» (124). Calhoun realizes that the Allmuseri, like himself, are no longer participants of that «clan like culture.» They are not Allmuseri anymore. The Allmuseri, as Calhoun explains, had changed; they were «no longer Africans, yet not Americans either» (125). The Allmuseri become the children of the diaspora, African Americans, a diaspora—a dispersion—in terms. The Allmuseri become *diasporized*.

What effects this change in the Allmuseri is the intervention of Captain Falcon, who introduces hierarchies and dualisms in the perfect Allmuseri society. In the eyes of the captain, the Allmuseri are «a whole tribe . . . of devil worshipping, spell casting wizards» (43). The image of the African as conjurer is a stereotype which goes back to Herodotus himself when he wrote that Africans were «all inveterate conjurers, and given to the study of black art» (Jones 1971, 4). But of course this is Falcon (the bird of prey) speaking. Falcon is the empire maker, the man known for his exploitation and subjugation of the colored races from Africa to the West Indies. Forged on the principles of self-reliance and a puritanical work-ethic which would make Franklin's autobiography grow pale, Falcon is, in Calhoun's words, «a patriot whose burning passion was the manifest destiny of the United States to Americanize the entire planet» (30). This colonialist for whom, as he tells Calhoun, *the other* is not real (95), is a racist, as he hastens to inform Calhoun (30); he is the kind of traveller (or is it conqueror?) who widens the distance which separates him—his sense of self and his sense of culture—from the countries which he plunders. He is, as Calhoun remarks, living history. To justify his colonialist mind Falcon has developed an elaborate philosophy on dualisms which immediately establishes hierarchy upon whatever is different from the self: «Dualism is a bloody structure of the mind,» he says. «Subject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other» (98). For Falcon this «transcendental fault» (98) is the justification for murder and slavery. The pairs, carefully chosen in Falcon's account to

impress the necessary hierarchy upon difference, are another illustration of the *madness of multiplicity* which comes after *diaspora*. Captain Falcon is a theorizer and an imposer of multiplicity and individualism. Further, he imposes on the Allmuseri the colonialist mind based on hierarchies, in which the *thee* is subordinated to the *I*.

The captain, from the perspective of Ngonyama, had made the Allmuseri as bloodthirsty as himself, «thereby placing upon these people a shackle, a breach of virtue, far tighter than any chain of common steel . . . Whether he liked it or not, he had fallen; he was now part of the world of multiplicity, of *me versus thee*» (140). Nowhere else is this division—this effect of the diaspora—more evident than in Diamelo and his fundamentalism. Diamelo rebels not only against the crew but also against Ngonyama, whom he considers a traitor to his people. Diamelo falls into the colonial habits of the former captain. For him, «the master's house must be dismantled» (154), but he does so recycling the master's tools: «Only Allmuseri was to be spoken by the crew when in contact with the newly empowered bondmen . . . he forbade us,» writes Calhoun, «to sing songs in English, his oppressor's tongue, whilst we worked» (155). Influenced by Falcon, Diamelo engages in a colonialist-aggressive Africanism which duplicates Falcon's formula of the *I versus thee*. That is, Diamelo falls into reductive dogmatism.

On this floating *Republic*, Africans are influenced by Americans and viceversa. The fragmentation of the Allmuseri clan in this crisscrossing of identities allows Calhoun to awake from his sentimental depiction and appropriation of African harmony and stability as represented in his original vision of the Allmuseri. Calhoun acknowledges the mystification of his previous romanticizing: «Stupidly, I had seen their lives and culture as timeless product, as finished thing, . . . when the truth was that they were process and Heraclitean change, like any men, not fixed but evolving» (124). As a consequence of this realization, Calhoun does not convert to idealized Africanness. However, through the interaction with the Africans, he becomes aware of the past, not only of his collective past, of all those seas of suffering, but of his personal past. Calhoun, who had no sense of the past and felt completely unattached, sees his own past when he goes down to feed the Allmuseri god and finds the image of his father instead. This is the father who walked out of Calhoun's past in search of freedom leaving wife and children behind. Through his father Calhoun finds, moreover, that his personal past is bound to his collective past: «'We was kings once,' he would say, scrawling with one finger on the dusty porch a crude map of an African village he remembered vaguely. . . . 'We lost a war—naw, a battle. So now we are prisoners. And the way I see it we supposed to keep on fighting'» (170).

Even if he cannot belong to the Allmuseri clan and identify fully with this ancient people despite his being black, Calhoun is still going to participate in the Allmuseri clan state. After his visit to the god, and through his contact with the Allmuseri, Calhoun is going to find fulfillment not in individualistic self-gratification—like during his life in New Orleans, but through what Chinua Achebe calls «spiritual congruence with the other» (1989, 53), the direct opposite to Western individualism. Through his contact with the Allmuseri Calhoun will find that fulfillment is not self-centered but «other-centered» (1989, 53). Calhoun clearly transcends his previous individualism in favor of the community on board the *Republic*: «In the back space behind my eyelids I saw nothing, and knew I was dying, no doubt about that, and I did not care for myself anymore, only that my mates should survive» (181). It seems, moreover, that his own mates have become «other-centered»; Cringle, for example, volunteers to be eaten so that the rest of his mates and the survivors can be fed. In this movable *Republic* little or nothing stays stable for long. Calhoun, we read, lifts himself above his likes and

dislikes—and in so doing transcends the dualities of his mind—to solder and do away with that deep schism which, in Falcon's mind, bifurcated the mind.

Through his middle passage Calhoun discovers that his past experiences did not belong exclusively to him (as a unified individual) but were part of an intersubjective process of constant transformation, a diaspora. Any attempt at defining Calhoun's identity should contemplate and integrate self and other, past and present, not understood as excluding principles in Falcon's theory about the duality of everything, but as part of the same continuum. This process of assimilation of past and present is clear in Calhoun's writing of the captain's log. Calhoun separates from the typically Western dualism of true or false. He does not intend to write an objective account of what happened. He is aware of the subjectivity implicit in the writing of the historical record. The writing, which turned out to be therapeutic for Calhoun, was «a different, stranger compulsion—a need to transcribe and thereby transfigure all we had experienced, and somehow through all this I found a way to make my peace with the recent past by turning it into word» (190). When reading the log one would have the American African vision of the middle passage. The perspectives, like Calhoun's own identity, are not intended as dualistic and alternative, a matter of racial or biological nature, but as resulting from the flux of personality and history. A flux (or a continuum) from which no period can be completely bracketed out and excluded. Calhoun's previously elusive identity thus clarifies itself towards the end of the novel. As his proposal to Isadora demonstrates, Calhoun has forsaken his individualistic, unattached world forever. Past and present, self and other dissolve in their union and in their adoption of Baleka, the girl who brings forth the African heritage (and past) into the present and the future.

Finally, Calhoun (and the novel itself) overcomes both the compulsion to read dualities and polarities everywhere and the sentimental, neocolonial vision of communal life in a preindividualistic society. Calhoun is seen to inhabit a world in process, a middle passage which will never be finally closed in either American individualism or African idealized harmony. Similarly, Calhoun's writing of the ship's log, which coincides with Charles Johnson's novel, presents a deliberate contamination of Western historical reconstruction with mythic storytelling, of Western metaphysics with African trickster tales. This literary middle ground is implied in Calhoun's preference for a neverending middle passage, a constant crisscrossing of the Atlantic destined to never reach shore, as is hinted at in Peter Cringle's words: «we could steer the ship toward Africa during the day, as the blacks want, then toward the States at night when they're sleeping» (139).

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**Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin  
American Literatures**



## Introduction

OLGA BARRIOS

The second section offers a variety of places and writings. Fiction, poetry and criticism from the Caribbean, Puerto Rico and Colombia illustrate this section of the book. In contrast to the Caribbean, where it seems literature of the African diaspora has attained more acclamation and recognition, it is evident that Afro-Latin American literature still needs a lot of research and analysis. The contributors highlight the inadequate and often parochial attention to this area of study and demonstrate the promise of new and varied critical approaches.

This section opens with three essays on Jamaican writing. Ana María Bringas asserts that Jamaican history has been characterized by its women's activism and commitment to the struggle against imperialism from slavery on to the present. Bringas' essay «Searching Out the Link: Politics, Class and Gender in Contemporary Jamaican Women Writers» provides an historical background on Jamaican women's active and committed struggle against slavery and imperialism to reach the present time. Contemporary Jamaican women, she argues, are not allowed, however, to participate fully in the political arena, due mainly to three factors: race, class and gender. Bringas examines a few texts by contemporary Jamaican women writers and argues that these texts help women to canalize their political needs and to reject male-oriented traditional politics. These texts reveal the search for an alternative venue for women to create, according to Bringas, organizations that address their specific needs as women of a certain class and race. They also illustrate the need to find women's sisterhood and to create new spaces for dialogue among women.

Velma Pollard, the well-known, prize-winning Jamaican fiction writer, poet and scholar focuses on the issue of the *balm yard* in two Jamaican literary texts in her essay «Blurring Cultural Boundaries: The Balm Yard in Olive Senior's 'Discerner of Hearts' and Erna Brodber's *Myal*.» Examining the dialectics of Anglo-Creole and Afro-Creole, Pollard illumines the dichotomy and clash between European cultures of the elite and the suppressed African cultures of the underprivileged, revealing how literature has given an implicit support and value to the elite class. Pollard then examines the space of the *balm yard*, a significant location from the suppressed cultures, demonstrating what it symbolizes in Seniors's «Discerner of Hearts» and Brodber's *Myal*. Both texts, she maintains, show an inversion of the received reality as seen from the point of view of the suppressed discourse tradition previously reserved for the oppressor. She asserts that the yard, an extension of the house, is the site where activities such as recreation

take place. She insightfully compares the similarities of the Jamaican *balm yard* with those swept yards of Nigeria and those in Georgia in the United States, thus establishing a diasporic connection.

Departing from the analysis of a colonialist discourse and explaining the rise of postcolonial discourse, María Frías' essay, «Rites of Passage in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*,» concentrates on postcolonial feminism to approach Kincaid's novel. According to Frías, Kincaid is representative of a generation of postcolonial women writers in the manner that she constructs Lucy's experience in the novel as a metaphor for the African diaspora. In her analysis of the novel, Frías employs the theories of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep on the rite of passage as a critical model. Gennep's rite of passage theory includes three stages: Separation, Transition and Incorporation. Frías establishes a ritual parallelism between Lucy's final passage from the Caribbean to the United States and that experienced by African peoples at the time of the transatlantic slave trade.

Antonio Ballesteros González's «The Poetics of Diaspora: Derek Walcott or the Wandering Poet» continues with the diasporic experience and takes us to another literary genre: poetry. Ballesteros contends that the Antillean poet Walcott is a *divided poet* whose poetics shift between his postcolonial origin and his Western education. Ballesteros compares Walcott's journey as a wandering poet in search of his identity with that of Joyce, Yeats or Homer. According to Ballesteros, Walcott embodies the fate of peoples of the African diaspora, for «the multicultural mixture of the blood of slaves» who crossed the Atlantic is always evoked in the poet's work. He asserts that the West Indian poet is the product of multiculturalism and postcolonial fragmentation, combining in his works the Caribbean experience with classical Judeo-Christian elements.

Leaving traditional feminism aside and moving to Puerto Rico, Cornejo-Parriego, like Frías, focuses on postcolonial feminism as multiple and complex since it insists on including the issues of race, class, nationality, gender and sexuality. Cornejo-Parriego's essay «Female Difference and Colonial Experience in Rosario Ferré's 'When Women Love Men'» points out that women writers under colonialism need to be analyzed within the context of the «multiplicity of the female self.» Her essay centers on the female body and the female space to analyze how these two elements are shaped by «the impact which the African presence had on Puerto Rico's colonial history.» According to Cornejo-Parriego, Ferré presents the story of an obsession with the body of the *Other*, of one woman with another woman's body. The author delineates the dualities of race, sexuality and class by examining the two woman characters of the story—Black and White, lover and wife, body and soul respectively. She asserts that Ferré's story illustrates the necessity of integrating the impact of the colonial heritage and the African diaspora in literary analysis. Feminist criticism, in Cornejo-Parriego's opinion, needs to include analysis of the female *Others*.

The last essay in this section centers on Colombia and the issue of Afro-Colombian literature which, according to Laurence Prescott, needs a closer analysis. Prescott's essay «The Color of Literature: Afro-Colombian Writers and the Critics» opens with the author's examination of how the lack of analysis of non-white writers in many Latin American countries distorts or misrepresents the richness that constitutes the literature of the African diaspora. Prescott insists on the need to analyze the factors and conditions that undermine the development of black literature in Latin America. His article focuses mainly on the impact that the «critical establishment» has had upon

literature created by writers of African descent in Colombia. Prescott offers a geographical and sociopolitical background of Colombia to foster a better understanding and appreciation of the literary situation in this country. Jorge Artel, a well known Afro-Colombian writer, is taken as a major example of how critics have always tried to erase any concepts of *blackness* or racial differences in Colombian literature. Prescott argues that by negating the validity of creative writing by people of African descent, critics «undermine the legitimacy, acceptability and viability of black literature in Colombia.»

## Searching Out the Link: Politics, Class and Gender in Contemporary Jamaican Women Writers

ANA MARÍA BRINGAS LÓPEZ

The participation of Jamaican women in public and political life from the times of slavery has always been characterized by its activism and commitment. In her essay about women slaves in the British Caribbean *The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies during Slavery* (1975), Lucille Mathurin reveals the enormous relevance of the role played by women slaves in the conspiracies against white slavemasters, as well as in the organization of escapes and in the guerrilla fights, where women fought along with and in the same conditions as men. This was the pattern that the struggle against slavery and imperialism followed in other areas of the African diaspora, as historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn points out (1986).

After Emancipation in 1838 Jamaican women continued their fight both individually and collectively, and their activity was fundamental for the development of the labour movement in the Caribbean. Creole society excluded women from the public sphere, which was considered an exclusively male domain: women with a public compromise were considered rebels and their activity involved the loss of respectability. That is the reason why these so-called rebels were mainly women from the lowest social strata who valued justice and independence over social respectability. Meanwhile, middle- and upper-class (white) women, whose socialization conformed to European Christian criteria, generally performed the role of supporting male power, and their public commitment was reduced to charitable activities, the only aspect of public life to which they were allowed access (Senior 1991, 151).

In the 20th century, and owing to the influence of emigration and of international events such as the Suffragette Movement, Jamaican women started to develop a growing consciousness of the need for emancipation. This circumstance was no doubt also favoured by the increasing access to education and the labour market that women were beginning to enjoy. From that moment on, working-class women and also the most progressive women of the middle-classes started to participate in political and labour movements and, later, to exercise their right to vote with the achievement of universal suffrage in 1944.

Despite this history of public activity (to a great extent still unwritten and, therefore, invisible, as much of women's history), over the last few decades the participation of women in political life has often been regarded as disappointing: women are very

scarcely represented in the highest reaches of political power, and they almost always play subordinate or secondary roles in social and political organizations: as anthropologist Faye V. Harrison concludes, on the basis of a survey carried out in Oceanview, a slum in downtown Kingston, «women's power is largely confined to the lowest levels of political party structure and the inclusive state apparatus; they are not highly visible in the decision-making echelons» (1991, 185).

In her comprehensive study of Jamaican women's lives, Olive Senior, one of Jamaica's most acclaimed poets and short story writers, points out several reasons for women's absence from political life, all of which derive from the interaction of the two main categories that, together with race, shape the life of Caribbean women: namely, class and gender. In the first place, women's socialization does not favour their dedication to politics, since this is still considered a male activity involving the loss of femininity, as well as a certain danger for women; secondly, many women believe that public activity can affect their family life negatively; thirdly, the lack of economic independence hinders many women's access to politics; a fourth reason is the lack of support, both male (from their partners and their own colleagues, who relegate them to second-rate or irrelevant positions within the organization) and female (since many women still think that «men should be at the head» [1991, 163]); a final reason is, according to Senior, the lack of general consciousness about specifically female issues, a rather frequent circumstance in developing post-colonial societies, where nationalistic or socio-economic interests seem to demand greater and more urgent attention. Indeed, notions of social inequality appear to have greater impact on women's perceptions than gender inequality. Thus, women's concerns so far have not been with «gender issues» so much as with socio-economic ones, with improving the status of themselves and their children, i.e. they are more concerned with individual status than with women's status (1991, 164).<sup>1</sup>

But in spite of this apparent disappointment or lack of interest in political affairs, Jamaican women do have a political consciousness, although it is often manifested or canalized into activities other than those characteristic of conventional politics. We shall here propose a reading of a number of short stories by Jamaican women writers, focusing mainly on the fictionalised autobiographical testimonies of the Sistren Theatre Collective<sup>2</sup> collected in *Lionheart Gal* (1987), in order to show how women writers explore the interaction of class and gender as the main factors which delimit the role of women in public life, at the same time as they question the traditional concept of politics and re-define it in a way which feels more adequate to women's circumstances and real needs.

<sup>1</sup> This absence of women from the public and political arena contradicts the widely extended notion of Jamaican society as a matriarchal society, an idea based on false conceptions of the matriarch as holder of unlimited power by virtue of her role of mother. As some authors point out (Mathurin 1977), the whole power of Caribbean matriarchs is reduced to the domestic sphere, and even in that setting her power is only relative, being often undermined by the social oppression based on class and race prejudice and by her own economic limitations.

<sup>2</sup> The Sistren Theatre Collective, founded in 1977, is mostly made up of working-class women, drawn from the Emergency Employment Programme developed by the democratic socialist government led by Michael Manley between 1972 and 1980. From their start as an amateur theatre collective, Sistren have become an internationally well-known group, and their activist compromise is shown in several areas: a professional theatre group, a popular educational project, a research project, and a quarterly magazine, *Sistren*. The collection *Lionheart Gal* is made up of the autobiographical testimonies of the members of the group. The dual nature of the testimonies, as both true (autobiographical) and fictional, renders them an extremely valuable document from both the sociological and the literary point of view.

Only a few female characters in the stories are shown to have taken up a political commitment, like Foxy, who is an active campaigner in Sistren's «Foxy and di Macca Palace War». Even fewer hold positions of leadership or prominence within their organizations, and in all cases they do not usually go beyond the local domain, as is the case of Esther's grandmother in Sistren's «'Exodus' a Run,» who organizes PNP (Manley's People's National Party) meetings in her own home. On the whole, traditional politics proves to be a male world into which women are hardly welcome. Political organizations reproduce the hierarchies and prejudices of the patriarchal social order; thus, Foxy denounces the manipulation of women by her sexist male colleagues: «When dem waan we fi cook and run up and down fi dem, dem claim seh woman a di backbone a di political struggle. But when we waan more dan fi serve dem, dem no tek no interest» (1987, 276); and the narrator of «Red Ibo» also exposes the contradictions in men's behaviour towards women within her union, which is determined by the degree of conformity of those women to the masculine ideal of what a woman should be:

... because I was «strong,» I wasn't regarded as a normal human being who could need help from other human beings from time to time. Being a «strong, fighting woman» seemed to exclude me from the category of normal human being. Supportive action was reserved for helpless females who conformed to the traditional, dependent female image. . . . The whole thing seemed to me to explain why in the lives of these men there seemed to be one kind of woman for going to bed with and taking out, and another for working with in the struggle (Sistren 1986, 253).

Perhaps the most extreme example of the hardships of women within this male world can be found in Hazel D. Campbell's «Jacob Bubbles,» which presents a female protagonist taking over as a street gang leader when her brother is killed. This fact is in itself a challenge, since «she was said to be tough too but she was still a woman» (1991, 127), and women's role in gangs is limited to that of cooks or decoys. Inez's new role demands that she adopt the male values of this world: she must learn to be brave and tough, to avoid any compassion or weakness and, above all, to conceal her female sexuality becoming almost a sexless person in appearance and behaviour. This masculinization and her competence at the head of the gang grants her the respect of her subordinates, but her rivals feel humiliated: «She had proven herself to be more man than woman. No punishment was too harsh for her. No abuse too great» (Campbell 139). Rape and sexual humiliation are, of course, the worst punishment for this female incursion into a male world and the ultimate manifestation of its sexist character.

Class, as well as gender, appears as a determining factor in shaping people's concepts of what politics should be, and it even seems to superimpose itself on gender on some occasions, thus establishing severe differences between middle-class women, more concerned with theoretical aspects, and working-class women, whose compromise is directed toward more practical issues, as the narrator of «Red Ibo» manifests:

I remember how the middle class women who considered themselves highly conscious and versed in theory used to have these education sessions where they brought prepared documents that read like pages out of a Social Science textbook. They had to stop after every line to explain the terms. The women would fall asleep or just suffer it in silence. They came alive when Dorothy, a working class sister, proposed a campaign around condensed milk which they couldn't get at the time. It was Dorothy who saw the link between the condensed milk factory and imperialism, but the middle class sisters were terribly concerned that she might not call it by the right name (Sistren 1987, 248).

Other stories show how class determines not only the characters' different perceptions of political and social events, but also the way in which those events affect their everyday lives. Jamaican social and political life is recurrently present in the stories as the background against which the characters' individual lives are portrayed. The socio-political turmoil and the fights between rival bands, especially in the turbulent nineteen seventies, involve the characters to a greater or lesser extent depending on their social position. For the middle classes, social and political instability is generally very much an alien problem, except for those occasions when it challenges their economic privileges: thus, the character referred to as «the Lady» in Campbell's «See Me in Me Benz and T'ing» (1978) angrily complains from her luxury home about her inability to get what she considers essential commodities like nail polish or the latest car model; similarly, Ella, in Sistren's «Grandma's Estate,» lives «in a world of *Seventeen* magazines, Mills and Boon romances, hair rollers and continued fantasies of my movie star lovers» (1987, 207), in the safe knowledge that bars and dogs protect her family's Beverly Hills mansion from the eventual incursion of Kingston's violence. However, for characters of the lower classes social and political violence belongs very much to daily routine: in McKenzie's «Natasha,» the little girl's dreams of getting out of the ghetto are violently shattered when she is accidentally shot dead by a young neighbour; and in Sistren's «Foxy and di Macca Palace War» and «Veteran by Veteran,» violence is the setting where the childhood and youth of their two protagonists take place: gang fights and police abuses are both part of a routine of arrests and brutal assaults.

Women's general experience of institutionalised power is radically negative: traditional politics, that is, politics understood as a power hierarchy, is very often perceived as a corrupt game which is not to be trusted: «Dem no business bout di country. Dem a hustle fi demself. Dem tek politics as a bacra massa business, where certain people set up demself and give di rest a handout» (Sistren 1987, 125). This answers to their social experience of sexual inequality, shown in the high rates of female unemployment and underemployment, the discrimination in work retribution, and the total lack of official response to sexual violence against women like wife battering, as is the case in Sistren's «Ava's Diary,» where Ava is unable to take legal action against her husband since the police have not registered her case.

As a result of all the factors that have been mentioned, the stories seem to suggest a re-definition of the concept of politics, establishing a dichotomy between politics in its institutional dimension, that is, the traditional male concept of politics as institutionalised power, and politics in a rather more popular dimension, as the way in which social events affect everyday life and the actions that citizens themselves can take to improve their general status, either individually or collectively. This re-definition is derived from women's social experience and role within the family. The contrast between male and female perceptions is clearly illustrated in Campbell's «Supermarket blues» (1978), where Mrs Telfer, a lower middle-class woman who lives under the tension of fulfilling her female role of mother and wife in times of economic crisis, sees politics as the daily struggle of «haunting the supermarkets, three or four of them, three or four times each week, in the hope of filling her grocery needs» (Campbell 1985, 62), and complains that her husband and her two sons seem much more concerned with macroeconomics:

Men never understood, Mrs Telfer sighed. [Her husband] would talk for hours about the economic situation of the country, balance of payments problems, explain to his

bewildered friends that the bad planning in the past had brought the country to its present situation, but ask him to use newspaper instead of toilet paper as she had once suggested! Mrs Telfer could smile now as she remembered his comment on that suggestion (1985, 65).

This idea is articulated much more explicitly in *Sistren's* «Foxy and di Macca Palace War,» where Foxy's interaction with other women in the *Sistren Theatre Collective* leads her to re-shape her former attitudes as a political activist:

We discuss what is politics and how it affect woman. After we done talk ah get to feel dat di lickle day-to-day tings dat happen to we as women, is politics too. For instance, if yuh tek yuh pickney to hospital and it die in yuh hand—dat is politics. If yuh do something to yuh own child dat damage him or her fi di future, dat is politics too. If yuh man box yuh down, dat is politics. But plenty politicians don't tink dose tings have anything to do wid politics (1987, 273).

These words of Foxy's are especially interesting in the sense that they constitute a kind of manifesto which validates the feminist premise that the personal is political; this philosophy lies at the basis of women's liberation, since, as the line of the *Sistren Theatre Collective* itself proves, it is only a collective awareness of women's oppression that will lead to the dismantling of the social structures which perpetuate it.

Since traditional organizations fail to provide an answer to women's concerns or a solution to the situation of general inequality and discrimination, the alternative is for women to create specifically women's organizations which allow them to «explore women's issues without anyone breathing down our backs to tell us these things can wait because they are 'secondary' or that if we talk about how men oppress and exploit women, we are being 'anti-male' or 'dividing the struggle'» (*Sistren* 1987, 260). These organizations represent a space for discussion where women's issues can be brought up and analysed in the wider context of society, thus establishing the link between each woman's individual plight and the general gender-based oppression within the patriarchal social order.

These Jamaican writers express, through the female characters in their stories, the urgent need for sisterhood, so fundamental in Jamaican women's everyday lives (kin and friendship support networks<sup>3</sup>), to go beyond the limits of domestic day-to-day life and to extend also to the public and political field: «... one of our main aims is to make the private area of women's life a matter of political concern. Unless we do that we won't understand why women are oppressed» (*Sistren* 1987, 294). *Sistren's* autobiographical testimonies underline the importance of the group's support in the individual fight against oppression; this support, far from obscure ideological considerations that have little to do with women's daily lives, is rendered concrete as material, psychological or legal assistance, as is the case of Ava, who found refuge in the Collective after her partner's brutal aggression was ignored by the police.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Kin and friendship support networks have long been important means of enabling Caribbean women to handle their domestic responsibilities. These female networks provide assistance of various kinds, from general childcare to financial support.

<sup>4</sup> This is what Patricia Hill Collins, in her study of African American women's activism, calls «the struggle for group survival» (1991, 145). According to Collins, issues of race, class and gender have hindered Black women's access to traditional political activities, thus forcing them to engage in alternative strategies of resistance which, as in the case of Caribbean women, rely heavily on the extended family and the female community.



The fundamental role of women's organizations is, nevertheless, to provide women with a space of their own where they can articulate the causes of their oppression, only to find that the problems of individual women are but manifestations of a general oppression: in Foxy's words, «we actually deh pon di same ting» (Sistren 1987, 273). Consequently, it is within this female world and through the interaction with other women, that women are able to take the step from the individual to the collective, that is, establish the connections that lead to a consciousness of gender as an oppressing agent, as Honor Ford-Smith points out in the Introduction to *Lionheart Gal*: «Making their own position secure means understanding the link between women's personal experience and the social, economic and political forces in the wider society. It involves searching out the link between the subjective experience and objective reality» (Sistren 1987, 9).

The trajectory of the Sistren Theatre Collective clearly exemplifies a new feminist conception of the political struggle: overcoming Jamaican women's present social situation calls for the creation of spaces for dialogue and sisterhood, where women may be able to articulate the causes of their oppression by establishing the link between their personal situation and the social background. This starting point should not, however, be interpreted in terms of a renunciation to politics as a valid means of social change, as Faye V. Harrison warns when she observes that «sisterhood may also comprise elements of collusion and escapism. Some Oceanview women believe that politics is intrinsically 'wicked' and not a righteous means of meaningful change» (1991, 187). It should rather be seen in the terms established by Honor Ford-Smith: «... when women select their own creative organisational forms, they begin to build a base from which they do transform their lives. But this transformation is only secure in so far as it is guaranteed by the power relations in the wider society» (Sistren 1987, 9). The consolidation of this transformation demands, therefore, canalizing women's social demands politically, that is, participating actively in traditional politics as a valid means of social change, where women may develop their own strategies of struggle and contribute to the necessary feminization of the political world.

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## Blurring Cultural Boundaries: The Balm Yard in Olive Senior's «Discerner of Hearts» and Erna Brodber's *Myal*.

VELMA POLLARD

Edward Brathwaite, discussing the fate of African culture in the post-emancipation Caribbean, described it as coming under attack from several quarters including the missionaries and the education process. Of the latter in relation to the ex-slaves he comments: «. . . They began to learn to read and write so that they were diverted from the oral tradition of their inheritance; they became literate in a language which was foreign to them» (1974, 75). Thus, a dichotomy was early established between the spoken word of the Afro-creole culture and the written word of the Anglo-creole culture reflecting the dichotomy between the public Eurocentric and the private Afrocentric worlds in which the ex-slaves functioned. Within the cultural space of the Anglo-creole world, the received information with regard to African culture, was that Africans had lost it in the Middle Passage. The fact, in Brathwaite's words, was that «. . . African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, and creatively adapted itself to its new environment» (1974, 3).

It is important to note the received information and to appreciate the extent to which the African culture was either denied or simply overlooked by the brokers of power in plantation societies. It helps to explain the conflict of cultures, certainly in the personality of the educated descendants of ex-slaves, and their ambivalence towards things African. A century after emancipation, Edward Baugh, West Indian man of letters and literary critic, would comment on that dichotomy, including in it considerations of colour. He refers to a clash in West Indian writers between the publicised European culture of the elite and the suppressed native, African culture of the underprivileged; between literature and history on the one hand and the oral tradition on the other (1978, 10).

Creative literature gave implicit support to an improbable but politically real situation in which the language and culture of the numerically greater, was always less highly valued than that of the numerically smaller; the cultural artifacts of the minority considered mainstream, and those of the majority parochial. The critical literature eventually characterized it in the Prospero/Caliban dichotomy which became the commonplace for describing that reality.<sup>1</sup> But even in the acceptance of the

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed commentary on the treatment of the Caliban/Prospero paradigm in the literature of Post-Colonial Africa and The Caribbean see Nixon 1987.

Prospero/Caliban characterization there was a signal that the status quo could change. After all Caliban eventually learnt Prospero's language and was able to use it to his advantage.

The present paper isolates one significant location from the suppressed culture—the balm yard—and examines it within two texts, Olive Senior's short story «Discerner of Hearts» and Erna Brodber's novel *Myal*. Its treatment in these texts is seen as inversion of the received reality, subversion of the received texts, calibanizing of what has been Prospero's domain. In both texts a cultural coup is achieved by writing in the perception of the suppressed within a discourse tradition formerly reserved for the suppressor. In both the Euro tradition becomes *other* within deceptively ingenuous narrative and dialogue. Senior contrasts two views of the balmer and his balmyard in conversations which the audience overhears between the child whose socialization has been Euro-creole and the household helper whose socialization has been Afro-creole. In Brodber's work the comparison is less explicit, the centrality of the Afro culture taken more for granted. Some discussion on the yard in general, the Balm Yard in particular, and the Balmer/healer, is in order.

The yard, in the context of Caribbean poverty is an extension of the house. The house is small and used mainly for sleeping. Most other activity, of work as well as recreation, takes place in the yard. Anne Raver in an article in the *New York Times* compares the swept yards of Nigeria with those of Georgia in the south of the United States. The photographs accompanying that text could easily have been taken in the Caribbean. The clean swept yard, entirely bare of grass is represented in that article as part of «the tradition that the ancestors (of slaves) brought from the Gold Coast» (1993, 1).

The balm yard is clean swept like the yards of Nigeria and the American south. But it is more than just another yard. It is the residence of the man who heals. In English, *balm* is a noun that describes an ointment for soothing pain. In Jamaican it is, in addition, a verb describing the act of physical or spiritual healing. So the Balmer or Balm-man who operates in the Balmyard, balms the individual and makes him/her whole. The *Dictionary of Jamaican English* defines the balm yard as «The headquarters and ritual site of a Balm-man. . .» (Cassidy and LePage 1980, 22). It goes on to describe some of the ritual that may take place in a balm yard. In the further definition the balmer becomes a religious leader. This is interesting in the context of Afro/Caribbean culture. Brathwaite in the article referred to above makes some statements which might usefully be considered together here:

. . . (E)veryone agrees that the focus of African culture in the Caribbean was religious . . . . A study of African culture reveals almost without question that it is based upon religion—that, in fact, it is within the religious network that the entire culture resides. . . . (S)tarting from this particular religious focus, there is no separation between religion and philosophy, religion and society, religion and art. Religion is the form or kernel or core of the culture (1974, 73-74).

The balmer is a religious man (though not necessarily a Christian man). The balm yard is the centre of operation of this person who represents what remains of a cultural whole which came through the crucible of the Middle Passage as fragments. His location is centre for one part of the society, the part that has largely ignored the invitation of the cultural West.

Olive Senior's short story «Discerner of hearts» uses Mr. Burnham (Father) the balmer and his balm yard as symbols of the powerless black majority which must

function in the shadow of the powerful brown majority. She points also to the (doubtful) faith of that majority that things will, at some point, change. At the end of the first movement of the story Cissy, the helper in the house of the brown (mulatto) family, reprimands her charges for their disrespectful attitude to Father Burnham:

. . . Yu can gwan run joke. Think Father is man to run joke bout? Father is serious man. But yu is just like yu father. Have no respect for people. Unless their skin turn and they live in big house and they drive up in big car. But one day, one day the world going spin the other way though. And then we will see (1995, 7).

Divergent ways of seeing this man, as an illiterate trickster and as a great healer, supply the tension that informs this story. As with most of Senior's stories, the wisdom is given to the reader by children. In this case the children know that Mr. Burnham is illiterate because he brings documents for their father to read. Their father also is the scribe who writes his letters.

Once a month Mr. Burnham pays for his milk; always with bags of bright sixpences (an act which has a certain significance for those who know that spiritualists in Afro-Jamaica are paid in small silver coins). On occasion their father might laugh and quip «You old reprobate» and Mr. Burnham would laugh as well and say «Good day, Justice». While «Justice» is a term used to address the Justice of the Peace, the local representative of the law in a small village, it is semantically significant here, poised against «reprobate». Prospero jokes with Caliban addressing him with a negatively valued word, Caliban jokes back using a positively valued word.

Cissy, representing the black majority, describes Mr. Burnham (Father) as a great man, a famous healer and says that people come from all over the world to have him read them. The literary artist works a major pun on the item *read*. The illiterate Mr. Burnham *reads* people far and near. *Reading* here is about forecasting people's futures or telling them about past events he could not, under normal circumstances, know about. He is at worst a magician, at best a seer. Finally he is a physical and psychological healer.

Note the following significant dialogue between Cissy and Theresa, one of her charges, the little heroine of the story:

«What's a balmyard, Cissy?»  
 «Where people go for healing.»  
 «What is healing?»  
 «What people need when they have sickness.»  
 «Why they don't go to Dr.Carter?»  
 «There is sick and then again, there is sick.»  
 «But Mister Burnham isn't a doctor.»  
 «There is doctor and there is doctor» (1995, 3-4).

These views are so interesting to the inquisitive young mind that when at last the opportunity presents itself she visits Mr. Burnham's house which might have been described as a *lair* by those who call him «reprobate.»

Senior takes the opportunity to describe the artifacts in the surroundings including calabashes perched on top of bamboo poles, dovecots full of birds, plants growing everywhere. What attracts her most however, is a building in an area like that described in Raver's article mentioned earlier. The authorial comment runs: «But what really drew her was the building right behind the house, separated from it by a clean swept yard. It

was a rectangular structure, much bigger than the house itself. The narrow side nearest the house was walled in wattle-and-daub . . . » (1995, 21). The artifacts she could see inside the room, suggested a world entirely outside of her experience

. . . every inch of the wall behind it including the door cut into it was covered with paintings. She recognized scenes from the bible, Jesus and his disciples and signs and symbols like those in her church. But these didn't look quite like the religious scenes they got on their Sunday School picture cards. For one thing they all ran into one another with nothing to define each one, and they were much more colourful and lively. And all the people, Jesus included, were black . . . (1995, 21).

The last sentence is of great cultural significance and must be read bearing in mind Cissy's reference to the colour of those people who are considered to be anybody, in contrast with her own colour. Note for example: «Eh, just because *my skin black* people think I am idiot, eh. People think I fool. Just because I couldn't get to go to school like some *backra* people children» (1995, 4, emphasis added). Mr. Burnham's qualifications, written on a large board near to a platform, are impressive: Father Burnham. M.H.C., G.M.M.W., D.D., K.R.G.D., Bringer of Light. Professor of Peace, Restorer of Confidence, Discerner of Hearts, and his service «Consultation and Advice» (1995, 22).

The story «Discerner of Hearts» is about a young woman, Cissy, and her striving for and eventually obtaining, with the help of Father Burnham, a child by a man she loves who has another claimant to his affections. But the true text is the changed vision of an inquisitive young mind brought up with Euro-creole sensitivities, concerning a spiritual/cultural leader from within the Afro-creole world, the kind of leader usually ridiculed by her kind. In fact Theresa's interaction with Mr. Burnham has a positive effect on her. Although she had gone about Cissy's welfare, he took the opportunity provided by her visit, to build up her confidence. He told her to stop worrying that she was not pretty, pointing out that flowers, clouds and butterflies did not worry. He complimented her on her big heart and advised her to stop feeling negatively about herself. She lost her shyness and grew up overnight. And she was not ashamed to treat Mr. Burnham with the respect all adults deserve, whenever he came to pay for milk:

Much to their astonishment, when next Mister Burnham came to pay for them milk, she ran out from the side verandah where the girls usually hid to giggle as they watched him pour out silver sixpences, and rushed to greet him at the gate before he even opened his mouth. «Good morning Father Burnham» she called in her strong new voice (1995, 37).

If Theresa is the representative of a new generation, the story hints at hope that with exposure, might come respect of the Afro tradition by people socialized to the other tradition. Brodber's novel *Myal* goes further in the direction taken by Senior's story. The task of saving a nation is given to another balmer in another balmyard. Anna Rutherford includes Erna Brodber among those writers who «challenge the accepted histories and canons» (1992, vi). *Myal* is the story of a young brown (mulatto) woman who marries a white film producer. What he produces as a result of his entry, through her, into her cultural world is not a description to inform but rather something like a minstrel show for white people to laugh at. So upset is the young woman by the misrepresentation of her world that she falls seriously ill.

Helen Tiffin summarising the action in *Myal* notes that the heroine becomes ill with an «apparently incurable internal swelling» as a result of being «horrified by the violent misrepresentation, in which construction she can (now) perceive her own unconscious collusion» (1992, 434). Ella O'Grady, the young woman, is eventually cured «not by Western medicine but by the ancient Afro-Jamaican skills of Mass Cyrus who in another commentary is described simply as a «herbalist» (Puri 1993, 109). Brodber's conceptualization is elaborate. The swelling in the young woman's belly is the sum of the Euro-cultural baggage Ella must discard before she can be whole. She is the woman who as a girl had internalized the Euro-creole world of books and had genuinely identified with its contents. She had recited *take up the white man's burden* with no sense of the inherent irony in her presenting it. Until her Jewish husband misrepresented her people she was unable to see.

Ella is taken back to Jamaica from an America whose doctors had failed to cure her. As a last resort she is taken to Mass Cyrus, the Myal man, the Balmer man. Cissy's words to Theresa (quoted earlier) in the other story, come to mind: «There is doctor but then again, there is doctor.» Maas Cyrus is the representative of the cultural core of the Afro tradition. It is to him and his concerns that nature around his dwelling reacts. The coming of Miss Ella into his grove brings a dissonance in nature that man might dismiss at his peril.

Nature informs Mass Cyrus that what is in the belly of his patient is «the stinkiest, dirtiest ball to come out of a body since creation» (Brodber 1988, 2). So bad it is that he will not have it dislodged in his grove. Relatives are asked to come for the patient on the seventh day of treatment which is the day she is to pass the ball from her stomach. She will pass it «but not in this grove though. A man has a right to protect his world» (1988, 4). Maas Cyrus speaks loudly enough for all nature's creatures to hear. He needs to assure them that he is not about to contaminate their space with what will go from Miss Ella's belly in seven days. What is happening is so grave that it shakes up the whole place. An electric storm which is averted from Mass Cyrus' grove causes great quantifiable loss including «71, 488 coconut trees, 3470 breadfruit trees, 901 residences totally, 203 residences partially . . . , 1,522 fowls, 115 pigs, etc.» (Brodber 1988, 4). All this destruction is the result of a young woman having gone too far. Ella O'Grady *had tripped out* in a foreign country.

Pride of place is given in *Myal* to a space despised and indeed feared by people of the Euro tradition (identified here as in the other story by lightness of skin tone), which ironically is the world of writing, of books. The novel opens in the balm yard where Mass Cyrus, the balmer/healer is thinking about events which are explained as the story unfolds. Since much of the narrative is retrospective, the reader gets a chance to watch Ella's guardian Rev. William Brassington take her to the balm yard and to note the comment: «He did wonder as he made his way along the narrow track, his jacket entangled now and again with prickly tree limbs, about Saul and the witch of Endor» (Brodber 1988, 94). The reference is to an unsavory and suspect character of the Old Testament. It is the perception of the representative of the Afro tradition by the representative of the Euro tradition. The symbolism is similar to that represented where Justice jokingly refers to Father Burnham as «old reprobate.»

The thought does not prevent Reverend Brassington from approaching Mass Cyrus' grove. In fact he has no choice. It is his last hope. Western medicine in which his socialization has led him to have faith, has failed. And when the healing is effected he

rationalizes and describes what has been done in terms that would describe treatment within his Eurocentric world, using formal language usually accorded phenomena from that world. The author reports his thinking thus: «. . . And the cure? Obviously a herb cure. There was nothing unorthodox about that. The science of homeopathy was an old one. He did credit the herbalist though with a thorough understanding of his craft. . .» (Brodber 1988, 95). In the last of those sentences Brodber replicates precisely the grudging compliment, the condescending tone of the Anglican prelate, the pseudo Englishman.

It is that kind of talk, typical of *in-between colours people*, that irritates Mass Cyrus when the novel begins and he is asked to cure Ella of what they suggested might be worms and black boil. His meditation upon it runs: «Now if they think of worms and black boil, why come to me? I am not that kind of doctor. No. They know it is something else. . . . Another kind of people would have said ‘Mass Cyrus we need help’ Just that and shut up» (Brodber 1988, 1). Immediately the Euro arrogance is contrasted with the Afro humility. Even in a situation where he desperately needs the power and skill of the healer, the individual with a *bakra* orientation, is unable to use a vocabulary of humility.

The grey mass that is dislodged from Ella’s stomach lives up to Maas Cyrus’ expectation. People who feel impelled to comment on it compare its smell to intolerable rotting things. The healer has dislodged masses of white/Euro culture from this lady who after the experience will be able to see another reality and to interpret what she has learned from books in a new and acceptable way. Ella O’Grady becomes Miss Ella the dedicated teacher who no longer accepts unequivocally the perceptions offered by Western scholarly tradition. She spends her life reinterpreting stories where necessary so as to give the children she teaches truth, as she sees it. She wishes them to have positive images of themselves and confidence in what they are able to achieve. The reexamination of the behaviour of the characters in the readers provided for the primary school classes she teaches, as well as Miss Ella’s findings could be the subject of another paper. It is enough to say that Reverend Simpson, the leader of a group of characters whose concerns may be described as nationalist, is overjoyed at the critical turn Miss Ella’s consciousness has taken. Her question to him about one of the books is instructive: «The major problem is this; there are alternatives. Why are they never presented in this book?» (Brodber 1988, 105).

The activity in the balm yard is a metaphor for cultural healing; cultural restoration; its place in the novel represents the calibanization of Prospero’s literary space. It is instructive to look at this point at the representation of the balm yard and activity associated with it in an earlier text, one which conforms to the stereotype which the texts under review seek to destroy. Alice Durie in her novel *One Jamaica Gal*, published in Jamaica in 1936, describes the balm yard in which, the narrator comments, the domestic helper Icilda finds «spiritual comfort» and «escape from life’s realities»:

An enclosure fenced about with flattened oil tins adjoined her room. Here a priestess of a religious cult kept a «balm yard» where she *professed* to heal diseases and where those of more *primitive* instincts could find emotional relief in nightly shouting and dancing. . . . (1936, 59, emphasis added).

I have italicized the value-laden words which we might want to assess in the light of the possibilities to which Senior and Brodber have alerted us. The narrative voice in the text

speaks from the orientation which we have noted in *Justice*, the father of the child Theresa in Senior's story, and in Reverend William Brassington of Brodber's novel. Icilda the domestic helper is another version of Senior's Cissy.

The balm yard is not the main space of Durie's novel. It is part of a small comment on the life of the household helper. The further description of the balm yard focuses more on activities usually associated with worship involving spirit possession and the more dramatic representations of belief, than with healing. If there is confusion, this is not surprising since the narrative voice is clearly identified as that of the uninterested outsider. The central voice is Prospero's. Caliban's space is defined in terms associated with that voice.

In both the texts discussed in this paper, the central space, the balm yard, is Caliban's space. What these texts share with Durie's text quoted above, is the vehicle, the literary text, and that is part of Prospero's tradition. This then is the nature of the coup to which reference was made earlier. Caliban has become literate enough to challenge Prospero on his own turf and to win. The choice of the balm yard for the central position is in neither case accidental. That yard is the religious and cultural centre of the Afro-creole world. In the words of Cissy in «Discerner of Hearts» quoted earlier, «One day one day the world going spin the other way though.» The challenge that these two texts face and meet, is the beginning of the spinning to which Cissy refers.

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## Rites of Passage in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*: Leaving the Sunny Island<sup>1</sup>

MARÍA FRÍAS

In her work *Women and Change in the Caribbean*, Janet Momsen highlights that «in an already marginalized region/society such as the Caribbean, the subaltern voices of women were further marginalized by both gender and race» (1993, 7). However, in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Post-colonialism*, the author develops the theories of resistance and subjectivity as inherent to postcolonial feminism. Rajan states that colonialism subverts women's roles and creates imagined women. What postcolonial literature does, Rajan adds, is to resist those derogatory stereotypes and to claim, to re-write a real woman (1993, 142-43). Historically, colonialism both rejects and ignores the existential values (artistic, social, cultural, religious) of the colonized community. As Chinua Achebe states in her article «Colonialist Criticism»: «To the colonial mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: 'I know my natives,' a claim which implied two things at once: a) that the native was really quite simple and b) understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand» (Ashcroft 1995, 58). Postcolonial literature raises a voice of its own to reclaim a battered identity, to revolve around a discourse of resistance, and, above all, to dismantle «the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse» (Ashcroft 1995, 117). Since in many different societies women have been regarded as marginal citizens, it is no wonder then that from «the marriage of two margins» (Suleri 1995, 273) a new feminist critical theory arises: postcolonial feminism.

African American novelist Jamaica Kincaid who was born in Antigua—a British colony until 1967 and an independent nation within the Commonwealth since 1981—and who emigrated to the United States in her early teens might very well be representative of a generation of postcolonial women writers. In her novel *Lucy* (1990) Kincaid gives voice to a young Caribbean woman who is not a simple native, who angrily resists oppression, and who escapes from the Centre/Margin dichotomy of a postcolonial West Indian island. As a way of discursive contestation, Kincaid makes her West Indian female character the protagonist of the last move in the African diaspora,

<sup>1</sup> This article was possible thanks to a research grant from the John F. Kennedy Institut for North American Studies at Freie University in Berlin (Germany) in November 1996.

that is, the final passage. *Lucy's* final passage echoes the historical term «Middle Passage» which was given to the first passage made by slaves from their African homeland to the West Indies during earlier centuries. Descended from voyagers of the Middle Passage, [the female protagonist] now seeks a final passage that would put an end to centuries of voyaging and homelessness for her people (Birbalsingh 1991, 175).

According to Carole Boyce Davies the diaspora formulation responds to «the various resistances to Eurocentric domination and to the need to create an 'elsewhere'» (Davies 1994, 13). In *Lucy's* case—the protagonist of Kincaid's novel—her resistance is both to postcolonial pressure and to maternal oppression. By leaving the island she migrates towards an specific «elsewhere»: the United States. As an African American female migratory subject, *Lucy's* flight follows Davies' definition of the African Diaspora which «pursues the path of movement outside the terms of dominant discourses . . . and it is not so much formulated as a 'nomadic subject,' although it shares an affinity, but as a migratory subject moving to specific places and for definite reasons» (Davies 1994, 36, 37). In Kincaid's novel the rite of passage is represented by the always inevitably painful physical and spiritual journey from the Caribbean to the United States.

The purpose of this paper is to look at Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, in view of Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* (1960). This well-known anthropologist distinguishes three stages in any given rite of territorial passage: *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*. Following Gennep's theory, «the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages . . . Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life come to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings» (1960, 2-3). Throughout this paper I will suggest that *Lucy's* migration from an unnamed Caribbean island to an also unnamed East Coast American city articulates a figure that is «able to negotiate the sudden transitions and violent disruptions» (Scott 1995, 179) which permeate the African Diaspora. I will more specifically suggest that Kincaid deals with the final passage in the African Diaspora as a rite of passage, but the author approaches that particular life-crisis ritual as an act of resistance since the subaltern/heroine does speak out loud against colonialism—white imperialism, black nationalism, and mother/land discourses of domination.

By the time Jamaica Kincaid was nine, she added to her daily prayers the line: «And, please, God, let me go to America» (Kincaid 1976, 23). Kincaid, like *Lucy*—the protagonist of her novel—travelled to the United States to work as a baby sitter for a white family on a cold January day. *Lucy*, as Ferguson points out, is the semi-autobiographical narrative (1994, 107) of a Caribbean teenager who travels in the sixties from the West Indies to the United States, leaving behind her a «divided desire» (Murdoch 1995, 579) for an oppressive mother and a suffocating island.

In what he calls «territorial passages,» Arnold van Gennep distinguishes three stages: *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation* (1960, 15). By *separation*, Gennep understands that an individual or group of individuals move from a previous socio-cultural state or condition, to a new state or condition. There is usually a geographical movement from one place to another; there might be symbolic actions like, for example, the opening and/or closing of doors, the changing of clothes, the eating of unfamiliar food, the experiencing of a tunnel-state, and there might also be a long pilgrimage—crossing of frontiers included—until one reaches, to use Turner's words, his/her «sacred shrine» (Turner 1982, 25). The *transition* stage is also called liminal (from Latin: threshold, meaning «a transition between»), or marginal state. According to Gennep the

ritual subjects of this stage pass through a period of ambiguity—which he calls a «sort of social limbo,» and which has little to do either with the previous or with the future state. This stage seems to be negative because, in Victor Turner's words, «the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance» (1982, 44). That potentiality is finally achieved in the *incorporation* stage, also called the rite of re-aggregation, meaning «the return of the subject to his/her new relatively stable, well defined position in society» (Turner 1982, 24). It can be represented by a permanent change of residence or geographical location.

For the outspoken protagonist of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, her life-crisis ritual starts when, after leaving the island, she is welcomed in the United States as the immigrant/poor visitor, and perceived as the exotic *other*, perception which she systematically resists. In Michiko Kikutani's words, Kincaid's *Lucy* «is a story of goodbyes—the goodbyes of exile, adolescence and disillusionment. It is the sort of coming-of-age story that many people tell with a mixture of nostalgia, sadness, affection. Lucy, in contrast, tells her tale with unvarnished anger and despair» (1990, c31). Likewise, Leslie Garis agrees with Kikutani in that *Lucy* is «a poignant [story but] she doesn't treat these things in a sentimental or facile way» (1990, 42). Jamaica Kincaid herself is not shy when responding to these attacks: «I wanted to be very frank and to be unlikable within the story, to be even unpopular . . . I now consider anger a badge of honor . . . I've really come to love anger . . . Really when people say you're charming you are in deep trouble» (Perry 1993, 130-31, 138). Kikutani also sees *Lucy* as «the portrait . . . of a woman who experiences life as a succession of losses: sex means the loss of innocence; exile the loss of roots; growing up, the loss of family and friends» (1990, c31).

In *Lucy's* ritual passage, the stage of *separation* comes to her as a traumatic shock—she takes a plane which in a mere few hours separates her physically and psychologically from her entire life on the Caribbean island. To that dramatic sense of geographical displacement and rootlessness, we have to add another loss: the loss of an always ambivalent mother-daughter oedipal relationship, and Lucy's furious attempt at «separation and differentiation» from the mother (Murdoch 1990, 328). Murdoch's title «Severing the (M)Other Connection» (1990, 325), poignantly illustrates Lucy's attitude and seems a repeated trope in Kincaid's work. Echoing Murdoch's reading, Richard Locke states that: «the universal tragedy and triumph of maternal separation, with all the anger and horror of being abandoned . . . is the great obsessive subject of Ms. Kincaid's work» (1990, A24). Lucy's tragedy—that of separation and differentiation from her mother—is explained in her own words:

My past was my mother . . . I had spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother—I was my mother. I had, at that very moment, a collection of letters from her in my room, nineteen in all . . . unopened, I thought of opening the letters, not to read them but to burn them at the four corners and send them back to her unread. It was an act, I had read somewhere, of one lover rejecting another, but I could not trust myself to go near them. I knew that if I read only one, I would die from longing for her (Kincaid 1990, 91).

Curiously enough, Lucy's love-hate relationship towards her mother echoes her ambivalent feelings towards her island. Lucy misses the beauty of the island, a shining sun, and her favourite food—pink mullet and green figs cooked in coconut milk. But,

at the same time, Lucy hates the idea of a colonized island. Lucy cannot forget that at the age of ten she had to memorize Wordsworth's poem «I wandered Lonely Home as a Cloud,» but after reciting it in front of the Queen Victoria Girl's School audience «[she] was making a vow to erase from [her] mind, line by line, every word of that poem» (18). Lucy also remembers that in school choir practice some years later, at the age of 14, she shouted up that she was not going to sing «Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves; Britons never, never shall be slaves!» (Kincaid 1990, 135). In view of these colonial impositions, Lucy's perception of the colonizers is expressed negatively: «I dislike the descendants of the Britons for being unbeautiful, for not cooking food well, for wearing ugly clothes, for not liking to really dance, and for not liking real music» (136).

During the separation stage, Lucy leaves behind a paradoxical relationship towards both her mother and the island. As with other stages of separation in Gennep's theory on the rituals of passage, there are numerous symbolic actions. Among these, Lucy crosses some gates such as the door of the airport, the elevator door, and the apartment door; Lucy then changes her clothes from «a light gay dress made out of madras cloth» (5) to a warmer one; Lucy later tastes different food saying that «she was surprised at these people eating day-old food that had been stored in a refrigerator» (4); and she finally crosses a tunnel. This darkness is emphasized by the fact that she arrives in the United States late that evening «on a gray-black and cold night,» but despite the lights she «could not see anything clearly on the way in from the airport» (3). Later on, Lucy feels kind of trapped in her own room: «the ceiling was very high and the walls went all the way up to the ceiling, enclosing the room like a box—a box in which cargo travelling a long way should be shipped. But I was no cargo» (7). Significantly enough, images of suffocating walls/rooms permeate Kincaid's text, and highlight the sense of separation, displacement, isolation, and imprisonment more vividly. As Carole Boyce Davies puts it, «rooms in this context become metonymic references for reduced space, and the references to homes are therefore often within the context of alienation and outsidership. Homes here are contrasted with «home,» as in back home (Davies 1994, 102). Furthermore, Lucy's subconscious thoughts on claustrophobic rooms are reminiscent of the 19th century slavery times in the West Indies when slaves were carried either to England or to America as cargo. Although Lucy insists that «she was no cargo» (7), she graphically summarizes her tunnel state: «If I had to draw a picture of my future then, it would have been a large gray patch surrounded by black, blacker, blackest» (6). While Lucy's picture of her separation stage could not be darker, the following stage in her ritual process, though still ambivalent and undefined, is somewhat lighter.

Thulani Davies, in her article «Girl-Child in a Foreign Land,» claims that Lucy's story «is not about the shock of emigrating from one culture to another; it dwells in the psychological space between leaving and arriving» (22). And it is precisely this claiming of a liminal space what characterizes the transitional stage. Victor Turner, a disciple of Gennep who follows and develops his predecessor's theories on rite of passage, stresses the liminality and suspension between past and future during this stage. Lucy's thoughts, the morning after her arrival in the United States, very well summarize Turner's point:

I was no longer in a tropical zone, and this realization now entered my life like a flow of water dividing formerly dry and solid ground, creating two banks, one of which was my past—so familiar and predictable that even my unhappiness then made me happy now just

to think of it—the other my future, a gray blank, an overcast seascape on which rain was falling and no boats were in sight. I was no longer in a tropical zone and I felt cold inside and out, the first time such a sensation had come over me (6).

Apart from Lucy's physical and psychological coldness, she also experiences other symptoms of liminality such as disease, despair, breakdown, alienation, and *angst*: In Lucy's words this is how she experiences homesickness:

A person would leave not a very nice situation and go somewhere else, somewhere a lot better, and then long to go back where it was not very nice. How impatient I would become with such a person, for I would feel that I was in a not very nice situation myself, and how I wanted to go somewhere else. But now I, too, felt that I wanted to be back where I came from (6).

Although Lucy is «far from home but far from intimidated» (*The New Yorker* 1990, 122) by this dividing desire, she somehow blooms out of this ambiguous transitional stage and, as Turner claims, this stage serves as the breakthrough of chaos when one «transforms chaos into cosmos, disorder into order» (Turner 1982, 46). How does Lucy bloom? To start with—and with the help of an elder, as in most African rituals—Lucy develops an active intellectual life and an equally intense curiosity for things male. Guided by her elder—white Mariah—Lucy gets a library card and starts to read about French feminist Simone de Beauvoir; she then learns about painter Gauguin; and, later, Lucy develops a fancy for photographs in the style of Henri Cartier Bresson. As for Lucy's sexual curiosity, she seems to share Kincaid's own idea that «of course sex is everything. The world starts at essentially the crotch» (Perry 1993, 140). And Lucy eagerly applies herself; while still living on the island different incidents provoke her curiosity, as when she wants to know about the taste of a tongue (43), and she wishes that the old fisherman had stuck his middle finger into her sex, not her friend's (105); once in the United States, Lucy sensually lies naked on the grass under a full moon, she jumps remorselessly from one bed to the next, and tries to collect a wide sample of crotches of different sizes, textures and flavors to end up abandoning her lovers. As Lucy puts it: «the moment [the new lover] got the idea he possessed me in a certain way, that was the moment I grew tired of him» (155). Finally, Lucy's liminal limbo stage brings some kind of order to her nonetheless chaotic «bicultural schizophrenia» (Ismond 1990, 47), when she decides to move into her own apartment, and to live her own life. Or, as Moira Ferguson claims:

[By] stepping closer to the edge, Lucy realizes she can see forwards and backwards. Having refused enclosures built by others, she begins to forge a site (sight) of her own. She refuses assimilation and embraces cultural difference and an «alien status.» Lucy chooses her own margins . . . She creates a new postcolonial cartography (Ferguson 1994, 131).

The final stage in Gennep's ritual process is the so-called *incorporation* or *re-aggregation* stage. It takes Lucy a whole year to reach it and to realize that, although her looks have not changed much, her inner life has been dramatically altered:

But the things I could not see about myself, the things I could not put my hands on—those things had changed, and I did not yet know them well. I understood that I was inventing myself, and that I was doing this more in the way of a painter than in the way of a scientist

. . . I did not have a position, I did not have money at my disposal. I had memory, I had anger, I had despair (134).

What are some of the signs of Lucy's leap from the liminal stage to her incorporation stage? Again as with most African rituals, Lucy's final crisis echoes the symbolic cleansing ceremony associated with the obeah women in the West Indies culture. Lucy «wept and wept,» she indulges in a long, cathartic shower, and compulsively washes and scrubs things in the new house (164). Furthermore, Lucy breaks up with the white family she was working for, quits nursing school, starts a new job and, far from assimilating into American culture, she chooses her own Caribbean-like curtains: «The curtains at my windows had loud, showy flowers printed on them; I had chosen this pattern over a calico that the lady in the cloth store had recommended. It did look vulgar in this climate, but it would have been just right in the climate I came from» (144). Lucy's insistence on choosing bright Caribbean colors for her curtains could very well be a metaphor for Kincaid's treatment of colonialism. In Giovanna Covi's words, Kincaid's strength lies in her «capacity to resist all cannons . . . the theme of colonialism is treated by deconstructing the Master-Slave dialectics upon which it rests» (352).

Lucy re-writes themes of dependence not only by asserting her «restlessness, dissatisfaction with [her] surroundings, and skin-doesn't-fit» (145), but also when she insists on her separateness: «Everything I could see made me feel I would never be part of it, never penetrate to the inside, never be taken in» (154). It is no wonder then that Lucy chooses to take pictures of people walking: «Walking on the street . . . walking about, hurrying to somewhere» (160). Like her Bressonian photographic objects, Lucy's integration stage does not mean stillness. In Lucy's words, her aggregation passage is symbolized by her own image on the mirror: «I was twenty years old—not a long time to be alive—and yet there was not an ounce of innocence on my face. If I did not know everything yet, I would not be afraid to know everything as it came up. That life might be cold and hard would not surprise me» (153).

While Lucy's physical and spiritual journey from the West Indies to the United States, echoes Gennep's theories, Kincaid's ending of the novel has been considered quite controversial—pessimistic, for some critics, especially for African American critics. In response to these bitter criticisms, Kincaid herself says: «I have noticed that black people don't like unhappy endings. Perhaps we have too many» (Perry 1993, 130). What is it that makes a sad ending out of Lucy's rite of passage? It might be that Lucy neither wholeheartedly embraces her mother/land cultural values nor finds an integrated self in her new home. The reader is only left with the assertiveness of her Caribbean curtains but nothing else. This non-conclusiveness produces an emptiness in the reader that parallels her own anger, dissatisfaction, and raspy voice when Lucy echoes the ending of Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home*: «To die in the cold was more than I could bear. I wanted to die in a warm place. The only hot place I knew was home. I could not go home, and so I could not die yet» (Kincaid 1990, 141).

In my reading of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, the protagonist experiences a traumatic rite of passage. In the separation stage, Lucy leaves the sunny island, and she is torn apart from the mother, the land, and a whole set of cultural values. Far from a subaltern submissive voice, Lucy speaks up during the transitional stage, and struggles against white/capitalist/sexist, and racist modes of oppression. Once Lucy reaches the incorporation stage, and far from a monolithic cultural subsuming of identity, Lucy not only re-writes her Caribbean traditions, but she refuses to assimilate and angrily

resists discourses of domination and colonization. But Jamaica Kincaid makes Lucy pay a very high price. By portraying the ritual passage of an emigrant Caribbean woman who travels from the West Indies to the United States, Kincaid presents loss and deprivation as the metaphor for the African Diaspora.

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# The Poetics of Diaspora: Derek Walcott or the Wandering Poet

ANTONIO BALLESTEROS GONZÁLEZ

The following fragment of Derek Walcott's «The Almond Trees» represents some of the most important obsessions of the poet born in 1930 in the tiny Caribbean island of St. Lucia, and Nobel Laureate in 1992:

There's nothing here  
this early;  
cold sand  
cold churning ocean, the Atlantic,  
no visible history,

except this stand  
of twisted, coppery, sea-almond trees  
their shining postures surely  
bent as metal, and one

foam-haired, salt-grizzled fisherman,  
his mongrel growling, whirling on the stick  
he pitches him; its spinning rays  
«no visible history»  
until their lengthened shapes amaze the sun.

By noon,  
this further shore of Africa is strewn  
with the forked limbs of girls toasting their flesh  
in scarves, sunglasses, Pompeian bikinis,

brown daphnes, laurels, they'll all have  
like their originals, their sacred grove,  
this frieze  
of twisted, coppery, sea-almond trees (1992b, 30).

Walcott is essentially a *divided poet*, a man tied up to the dichotomous tensions provided by his postcolonial origin—that «further shore of Africa» where there is «no



visible history» except the sea-almond trees—and his European and Western education, always exemplified by his vast knowledge and able manipulation of classical literature and history. These tensions are even more vitally reflected in his spending one half of the year on his island and the other half in the States, where he teaches at Boston University. This accomplished scholar and magnificent poet embodies the fate of the African diaspora, the multicultural mixture of the blood of slaves coming from the other shore of the Atlantic, together with the European influences of an imperial and colonial past. Beside the recurrent allusions to the classical Mediterranean past and its mythologies—the Caribbean being related to the other fragmented geography of the islands of Greece—Africa is always an implicit or explicit presence haunting the complex lines of the poet's writings. As Stephen Breslow puts it, Walcott best expresses the «historical themes of the African diaspora» (1993, 268).

Walcott—like Joyce, Yeats, and supposedly Homer—is an inward and outward exile, a «homecoming without home» («Homecoming: Anse La Raye» 1992a, 128), a wandering poet in search of his own identity, that of his people, and ultimately that of the whole human race. As a product of multiculturalism and postcolonial fragmentation, there are in his poems the echoes of many voices, the heteroglossia of the inhabitants of the Caribbean, expressing their feelings in different languages and dialects: «the language is that of slaves,» he will state in «Gros-Ilet» (1988, 35). Walcott defends his split identity in poems like «The Schooner Flight»:

a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes  
 that they nickname Shabine, the patois for  
 any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw  
 when these slums of empire was paradise.  
 I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,  
 I had a sound colonial education,  
 I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,  
 and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation (1992a, 346).

But Walcott's nation has no written records, Caribbean history being an appropriation from the part of the colonial usurpers—Spanish, English and French: peoples and nations that on the other hand contributed to the linguistic and cultural *melting pot* of the archipelago. «The sigh of History means nothing here,» the poet categorically argues in his Nobel Lecture (1993, 262). He had priorly contended that «amnesia is the 'true history of the Caribbean'» (quoted in Minkler, 273), and emphasizes in «Origins» his absence of memory, pessimistically underlining later that nothing is known about his American ancestors, the victims of colonial silence:

Clouds, log of Colon,  
 I learnt your annals of ocean,  
 Of Hector, bridler of horses,  
 Achilles, Aeneas, Ulysses,  
 But «Of that fine race of people which came off the mainland  
 To greet Christobal as he rounded Icacos,»  
 Blank pages turn in the wind («I remember nothing» 1992, 11).

However, history appears and is recorded in the beautiful scenery of Caribbean landscape and seascape, the «archeology of fragments . . . from the broken African kingdoms» (1993, 265): the ocean, the trees, the colourful skies of «that other side» of

Africa. For, despite the systematic and inexorable diaspora of the past, «African memory cannot be erased» (1993, 266): it survives in the collective unconscious of a race and a multicultural people, the inheritors of slavery and empire, as can be seen in compositions like «Nights in the Gardens of Port of Spain» (1992a, 67), a city which is described in another poem (*Midsummer*, IV) as «piratical in diverseness» and becoming «more African hourly» (1984, 14).

As a wandering poet and a tiredless traveller—one of his books is precisely entitled *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), ironically punning on Thomas Nashe's Renaissance narrative, *The Unfortunate Traveller*—Walcott collects many literary and intertextual influences (he is also a painter, and many of his poems contain pictorial and artistic allusions [Benson 1986]). The poet combines the Caribbean experience with classical and Judeo-Christian elements: «Death of old gods in the river snakes dried from the ceiling,/ Jahveh and Zeus rise from the foam's beard at daybreak» («Origins,» 1992a, 14). It is not striking that the figures of Homer and Ulysses are the most significant embodiments of Walcott's multicultural portrayals, for they are not only literary parameters of a determinate place and time—however elusive this term may be when applied to both the Greek poet and the invented *persona*—but they belong to mankind in general. Seen in this perspective, Walcott's deployment of classical archetypes is not far from that of Joyce in his *Ulysses*.

In *Omeros* (1990), his great epic poem, a character identified as «the Vagrant Poet»—Walcott's *alter ego*—travels to a communal past via Africa, Europe and North America. According to Julie A. Minkler, Helen, the female protagonist of the poem, is a symbolic representative of the mother figure of Africa, that other continent which the poet explores in search of maternal roots (1993, 275). Ma Kilman, another strong female character in *Omeros*, is related to the African past as well, a mixture of folklore, superstition and unwritten and silenced history. Places—real or imaginary, as the poet encodes in his lines—resemble one another according to Walcott, as he underlines in «The Arkansas Testament,» the poem contained in the book bearing the same title—a collection divided into two parts: HERE (the Caribbean) and ELSEWHERE (other places), emphasizing the dual and complex nature of this kind of poetry. *Omeros* could be anyone as well; Ulysses, the great traveller, the almost perpetual exile, coincides in his wandering habits with the very essence of the Caribbean poet. In «The Hotel Normandie Pool» Walcott invokes the very epitome of the imperial exile, Ovid:

Turn to us, Ovid. Our emerald sands  
are stained with sewage from each tin-shacked Rome;  
corruption, censorship, and arrogance  
make exile seem a happier thought than home (1992a, 442).

Walcott, his inheritor, compares himself to the Roman poet, but he also emphasizes his African origins, his doubly social and racial otherness:

And I, whose ancestors were slave and Roman,  
have seen both sides of the imperial foam,  
heard palm and pine tree alternate applause  
as the white breakers rose in galleries  
to settle, whispering at the tilted palm  
of the boy-god Augustus. My own face  
held negro Neros, chalk Caligulas;

my own reflection slid along the glass  
of faces foaming past triumphal cars (19921, 443).

«A Far Cry from Africa» (1962), one of Walcott's most well-known poems, reveals his concern with the Continent where his ancestors inhabited and from which many of them were obliged to depart as slaves, the sad seed of the African diaspora. Wars, political and historical troubles in Africa, make the poet reflect upon his inner division and fragmentation as a dangling human being who shares a dual and complex essence:

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands  
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again  
A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,  
The gorilla wrestles with the superman.  
I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live? (1992a, 18).

Walcott is not primarily a political poet, and has unjustly been attacked for his lack of *compromise* in that respect (see Breslow 1993, 268). However, in my opinion, his denouncing the post-imperial condition—not devoid of acid and bitter irony—is the most lethal weapon against the sad fate of diaspora and the paradoxes of the divided Caribbean self.

The Nobel Laureate rejects many stereotypes and resents the negative aspects of the colonial past. In poem XXXI of *Midsummer*, whose setting is New England, Walcott criticizes the foundation of the United States by the Pilgrim Fathers, based on slavery and an obscure and uncharitable view of religion:

. . . Colonies of dark seamen,  
whose ears were tuned to their earringed ancestors' hymn for  
the Mediterranean's ground bass,  
thin out like flocks of some endangered species,  
their gutturals, like a parched seal's, on the rocks . . .  
A chilling wind blows from my Methodist childhood.  
The Fall is all around us—it is New England's  
hellfire sermon . . . (1984, 44).

«Victoria's orphans» (*Another Life*, Chapter XII, 1992a, 219), dispossessed and envious Calibans, have to face ultimately the rage of Prospero after their desire for their «master's gown/ of ersatz ermine» («Gib Hall Revisited,» 1992b, 116). Empires resemble one another, and the Caribbean writer depicts the violence and misunderstanding that wiped out those other Africans, the black people inhabiting Carthage when the Romans decided that their community and forms of life had to be destroyed: *Delenda est Carthago*, in Cato the Elder's words.

The Spanish colonization is also grotesquely depicted in poems like «The Liberator» (1992a, 430), where—as in many other compositions with the background of South

American history—dictatorial situations and cruel guerrilla wars seem to be the inevitable consequences of historical injustice. However, Walcott knows that he is part of the empire too, in spite of the fact that it has already been fragmented and destroyed: «. . . I accept my function/ as a colonial upstart at the end of an empire,/ a single, circling, homeless satellite» («North and South,» 1992a, 405). Walcott is glad to have received the only legacy that really matters: language, the instrument with which to forge and model the discourse of the other: «It's good that everything's gone, except their language,/ which is everything» (1992a, 405).

The poet cannot help being an exile, «a shivering exile from his African province. . . I am thinking of an exile farther than any country» (1992a, 406), the wandering and multicultural writer who admits his being «(maybe) part Jewish» (1992a, 408) and identifies himself and makes common cause with the sufferings of his own race, those people devoid of *prestigious* history that shared the fate of diaspora: «The ghosts of white-robed horsemen float through the trees,/ the galloping hysterical abhorrence of my race-/ like any child of the Diaspora . . . » (1992a, 408). Rejection is for Walcott the unfair retribution from the part of an empire (the States in this case) which still relegates them as cultural slaves and inferiors, in spite of the contributions of the black diaspora to American artistic representations:

. . . and when/ I collect my change from a small-town pharmacy,  
the cashier's fingertips still wince from my hand  
as if it would singe hers—well, yes, *je suis un singe*,  
I am one of that tribe of frenetic or melancholy  
primates who made your music for many more moons  
than all the silver quarters in the till (1992a, 409).

Walcott is concerned about black identity, mostly centred upon autoctonous cultural forms, a past of slavery and colonial aggression, and common African origins. The reader can find in the poet's lines allusions to, for instance, black musical ways of expression, like jazz, blues and reggae («The Light of the World,» 1988, 48, is preceded by a citation from a song by Bob Marley, who is later mentioned in the poem).

Walcott's poetry—the heteroglottic configuration of the voices haunting it—conveys a music of its own, cadences of those different places he inhabits and revisits, both factually and metaphorically. It is the music of many geographies, the score of exile and diaspora, a mixture of multicultural and intertextual elements. But it is principally the music of those slaves coming from Africa to the New World—*tristes, tristes tropiques*—where they encounter humiliation and injustice: «B. reputedly galloped his charger through the canes,/ pointed his whip at nubile coolie girls, 'Up to the house',/ *droit de seigneur*, keeping employment in the family» (1992a, 180). Walcott attacks any kind of colonization, although he accepts the languages and accents conveyed by them, no matter whether they were priorly the instruments of alienation, authority and enslavement. The poet takes advantage of the languages imposed by proud empires, and reconstructs his identity and that of his people without getting rid of any of those linguistic and cultural influences which contributed to the configuration of their identity.

Walcott is intertextually obsessed with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a motivated choice if we take into account the colonial and African frame of reference of this narrative. The same as his island and the Caribbean are still indebted to imperial history, Great Britain was once a colony as well, a remote, unknown and uncanny (etymologically speaking) place, the site of exile for those out of courtly favour in

imperial Rome. Walcott repeats the same idea in «Ruins of a Great House,» a poem about «The leprosy of empire»: «Ablaze with rage I thought,/ Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake,/ But still the coal of my compassion fought/ That Albion too was once/ A colony like ours, 'part of the continent, piece of the main'. . .» (1992a, 20). The same interpretation is applicable to poem IV in *Midsummer*: «. . . and Mr. Kurtz on the landing. Stay on the right bank in the imperial dream—/ the Thames, not the Congo» (1984, 14). Intertextual echoes of *Heart of Darkness* are also found in «The Fortunate Traveller,» where the poet connects with adequate synthesis the African and the Jewish diasporas in a world in which God is dead:

Through Kurtz's teeth, white skull in elephant grass, the  
imperial fiction sings. Sunday  
wrinkles downriver from the Heart of Darkness.  
The heart of darkness is not Africa.  
The heart of darkness is the core of fire  
in the white center of the holocaust.  
The heart of darkness is the rubber claw  
selecting a scalpel in antiseptic light . . .  
I write now,  
not Anno Domini: After Dachau (1992a, 461).

This is just an example of Walcott's manipulation of intertextual materials, for his poetry is extremely rich in this respect, picking up echoes from many different literary and artistic traditions.

It is precisely this melting pot of influences, languages, folklore and historical traditions that conform the complex identity of the Caribbean and are faithfully represented in Walcott's writings, both poetical and dramatic. As he portends in his Nobel Lecture, «Caribbean culture is not evolving but already shaped» (1993, 264), and this is undoubtedly a magnificent point of departure for Caribbean people to be proud of their kaleidoskopic richness. In his self-development as a poet integrating different multicultural perspectives, Walcott—that wandering poet—coherently depicts the preoccupations of the inheritors of the African diaspora to fulfil in the end Terence's aphorism: *Humanus sum et nihil humani a me alienum puto* («I am human and I consider nothing human to be alien to me»).

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## Female Difference and Colonial Experience in Rosario Ferré's «When Women Love Men»

ROSALÍA CORNEJO-PARRIEGO

Traditional feminism<sup>1</sup> has emphasized women's oppression and lack of voice, and has defined the feminine in relation to the masculine. More recently, however, some feminist sectors have embraced a postcolonial position. This position, which has been inaugurated by marginalized groups of the female population, denies and is deeply suspicious of an essential feminine experience (*the* female experience) established by a *privileged* feminism—white, middle-class, First World. According to postcolonial feminism, the dissociation of issues of race, class and nationality from that of sexuality leads only to a distorted view of the *women's question*, and to a neo-colonialism which imposes ethnocentric categories of analysis. «[N]o one 'becomes a woman',» Chandra Mohanty states, «purely because she is a female. Ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have to do with sex . . . . It is the intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation, then, that position us as 'women'» (1991, 13). Because of the impossibility of defining it in a unitary way, *gender* becomes a problematic notion which from a postcolonial perspective is characterized as multiple and complex.

Among the elements that shape identity, postcolonial feminism deems imperialism to be of key importance. The colonial system led to a hierarchical multiracial society where individuals were mainly defined by their location with regard to the white masculine self that embodied the imperial law. But this conception of imperialism as an essentially masculine project requires a revision. As Laura Donaldson suggests in *Decolonizing Feminisms*, it is necessary to examine the role of women in the consolidation of the Empire (1992, 89). Although it is true that the direct control—military and economical—of the colonizing nations was masculine, imperialist power is not exclusively defined by that control. Imperialism, according to Donaldson, «also penetrated colonized societies by means of signifying *practices*, or the production of meaning-effects, perceptions, self-images, and subject positions necessary to sustain the colonial enterprise» (1992, 89).

In Spanish America, the context of this paper, the dichotomies European/non-European, black/white, which originated during the Conquest and the ensuing

<sup>1</sup> By *traditional feminism* I refer to a Western Euro-American discourse which has supported the notion of a distinctly universal feminine essence (see Donaldson 1992, 33-4).

dispersion of African peoples throughout the Americas (the so-called African diaspora), crystallized during colonization in a *pigmentocracy* which classified people according to their skin color and located the white master at the top (Mörner 1967, 54). Independence consolidated the above mentioned dichotomies when it gave power to an elite constituted by *criollos* (American born white individuals of Spanish descent), which has survived till the present. This *pigmentocracy* reveals, as bell hooks has indicated, that colonizations take place «on a racially imperialistic base and not on a sexually imperialistic base» (1992, 122). Thus the racial component becomes the main defining factor of the relationships between the colonizer and the colonized, and renders the creation of female bonds based on sex difficult or impossible. All of this confirms the need, expressed by Donaldson, of reevaluating the role of women and, especially, the relationships among women under colonialism, which are unavoidably shaped by their diverse positions and the different values, meanings and images attached to each position.

Therefore, any exploration of literary texts by women and about women, produced in an environment with a history of colonialism, which fails to take into account the multiplicity of the female self and focuses exclusively on gender, will be incomplete. My analysis of the short story «When Women Love Men» (Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres)<sup>2</sup> by Rosario Ferré, a leading contemporary Puerto Rican writer, is an attempt to show this insufficiency. I will focus on two of the main elements in this story, the female body and the female space, hoping to show how these elements, so frequently explored within traditional feminist criticism, are shaped by the impact which the African presence had on Puerto Rico's colonial history.

«When Women Love Men» narrates the gradual symbiosis between Isabel Luberza and Isabel la Negra (Isabel the Black), two women who have shared the same man, Ambrosio, who died long ago. Both also share their Puerto Rican nationality, but are separated by race and class: Isabel Luberza is the white upper class wife of Ambrosio, while, Isabel la Negra is a black prostitute and the lover of this man. In his will, Ambrosio determines that both women, his legitimate wife and his lover, share not only his monetary inheritance but also, the marital house. The climax of the short story is the first encounter of these women, when the lover goes to claim the part of the house that belongs to her, and the subsequent fusion of both.

Ferré's narrative is the story of an obsession with the body of the *Other*, which both women can only imagine, since they have never met. While Luberza's fixation is exclusively on the prostitute's body, la Negra's is a little more diffuse, oscillating between her former lover's wife and *little white girls* in general. Their imaginary voyeurism shares, however, a strong racial consciousness which resorts to a mutual comparison, as we see in the following excerpt where the wife thinks of Isabel la Negra:

I imagined her to be bewitchingly beautiful, her skin so absolutely black as mine was white, her hair braided into a thick rope, fat and stiff, falling to one side of her head, when I wrapped mine, thin and ductile like a watch-chain about my neck. I imagined her teeth, large and strong . . . hidden behind her thick lips and then I thought of mine, small and transparent like fish scales . . . I imagined her eyes, soft and bulging like hicaco seeds,

<sup>2</sup> This short-story belongs to the collection *Papeles de Pandora* (1976). I will be quoting from Cynthia Ventura's translation (Meyer and Olmos 1983, 176-85).

placed inside that yellowish egg white that always surrounds Negroes' eyes, and I thought of mine, restless and hard like emerald marbles . . . (1992, 185).

As Isabel Luberza imagines Isabel la Negra she foregrounds the features that differentiate them racially: skin, hair, teeth, lips, eyes. When they finally meet, they experience a similar reaction: confirming the physical appearance of their rival becomes a priority. They touch and feel the need of kissing precisely the differentiating corporeal features (180-81, 182), but, in spite of the homage they pay to each other's body, it is exactly the acute awareness of the body which is going to turn admiration into anger. Luberza's sudden perception of la Negra's «smelly hole of her armpit» (185) rapidly transforms her desire to forgive her into hate.

Difference, nevertheless, is not only acknowledged in the exteriority of the other woman's body, but also in her erotic dimension. Isabel la Negra knows that she embodies the *prohibited* eroticism—«in the arms of Isabel la Negra everything is allowed . . . nothing is forbidden» (182)—and that this distinguishes her from the *little white girls*: «because it is not proper for a good girl to thrust her pelvis, because good girls have vaginas of polished silver and bodies of carved alabaster, because it isn't right for good girls to mount on top and gallop for their pleasure nor for the pleasure of anyone» (181). Isabel Luberza, on the other hand, senses the prostitute's eroticism with the sad awareness that it is denied to a proper lady like her: «I imagined her then in the cot with you, adopting the most vile positions . . . letting you do things to her a proper lady would never allow» (184-85). As she confesses to Ambrosio, she cannot avoid thinking that she, the legitimate wife, is only «the doormat you used this morning to clean your shoes, the body where you scrubbed your penis quickly to have an almost pure orgasm, as clean as a butterfly's, so different from those you have with her when the two of you wallow in the mud of a slum . . .» (184). The strict opposition between prohibited and pure eroticism only confirms my point of departure, since these two women not only differ racially, but they do not even have a common sexuality. Gender is precisely produced by the intersection of sexual and racial difference and by the role of this intersection during colonial history. In this regard, Fernández Olmos states:

The theme of the Black or mulatta mistress can be found throughout Caribbean literature and is related to the historical difficulty persons of different races had in legalizing a marital union. Not until 1881 was it possible for a white man to marry a woman of color in Puerto Rico without securing special permission. The laws, and the ideology that created them, forced Black and mulatta women into the role of mistress and contributed to the myth of the dark-skinned woman as the sensual, forbidden fruit (1982, 46).

Therefore, the dichotomy virgin/prostitute from Western patriarchal thought was transposed to the colonial world, but, as a result of what Mohanty calls a process of «racialization and sexualization of colonized peoples» (1991, 15), this binarism emerged in racial terms: the virgin and prostitute roles were assigned respectively to the *criolla* and the woman of color.

For the critics who have analyzed Ferré's story, it is a narrative about women's alienation and fragmentation, always divided between body and spirit, a division that is represented by Isabel la Negra and Isabel Luberza (Fernández Olmos 1983, 78-90; Vega Carney 1987, 183-91). According to these critics, in spite of obvious social and racial differences, both share the condition of victims in a patriarchal society represented by



Ambrosio.<sup>3</sup> The use of the figure of the double and their final fusion is, according to this interpretation, the integration of body and soul to which each woman should aspire (Vega Carney 1987, 187). Thus for these critics it is a question of the female self in its relationship and opposition to the male self, where the differentiating factors of race and class become irrelevant. These factors, however, are not only key elements, as we have seen in the construction of the characters' gendered identity—by opposition to a woman and not a man—but they have also conditioned the representational choices of the author, as we will further see.

In spite of the triumphal fusion that seems to erase the borders between black/white, upper class/lower class, and respectable wife/lover-prostitute, the truth is that Ferré has chosen a cultural representation of women stemming from a history of colonialism. In her attempt to vindicate female eroticism, the author has been trapped by the above-mentioned racialization of the dichotomy virgin/prostitute. The white woman is, once more, asexual, pure spirit devoted to philanthropies, while the black woman emerges as a symbol of passion and sexual power (115). The *Negra's* fragmentation in «okra flesh,» «grapefruit tits» and «monumental ass» (178) only proves the continuity of the *negrista* tradition with its demeaning representation of black women. Ferré was unable to escape, what Abdul JanMohamed calls «the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation: the manichean allegory» which constitutes a «field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality . . .» (1986, 82). Consequently, «Isabel la Negra's sense of mission as liberator of sexuality,» and Ferré's «intention of total rupture» claimed by Vega Carney are problematic and questionable (1987, 190). If it is certainly true that there is a rupture, since Ferré dares to vindicate female eroticism, it is also true that it is only a partial one. As we have seen, the author fails to destroy the hierarchical and binary representation of the white and the black woman. Thus the existence in the story of elements of sexual but not racial subversion makes us wonder with Debra Castillo «whether or not the 'white,' indefectibly, returns in [Ferré's] work» (1992, 163); in short, if the author's own white location or subject position does not interfere with her writing.

Along with the body, space becomes in «When Women Love Men» another inscription of *Otherness*. Its configuration points out the need of revising the parallel oppositions—so abundantly used by feminist criticism—of public/private, domination/subordination and male/female. In the context of these binary oppositions, the house represents the prime feminine space and a clear proof of women's subordination: confined by patriarchy to the private realm, they are denied access to the public territory, which is that of the male.<sup>4</sup> If this is certainly true to a great extent, it is also true that the simplification contained in every dichotomy is problematized when, in addition to gender, we take into account race and class in assessing the women's question. Space, then, as we shall see in «When Women Love Men,» acquires a polysemic quality which corresponds to the multiplicity of female identity.

<sup>3</sup> For Fernández Olmos, for example, «Ferré demonstrates how wives and mistresses are inextricably related, both deriving material benefits in exchange for their subjugation, both exploited by a man of power (power acquired on the basis of his sex and control of capital). That they are portrayed as mirror images underscores the commonality of this female victimization beyond the apparent socioeconomic and racial differences between the two» (1983, 84).

<sup>4</sup> For a study of *the angel of the house* and of women's real and textual confinement, see Gilbert and Gubar 1984, 20-24, 83-92.

In Ferré's story, space is problematized by the mere existence of two female domains: Luberza's house and the ranch/brothel where Isabel la Negra lives and sexually initiates the sons of Ambrosio's friends. Both are, no doubt, female spaces of subordination and oppression assigned by a patriarchal society represented by Ambrosio, who is free to move between both. However, in spite of this common trait, Luberza's house and la Negra's *rancho*, signify precise differences regarding their occupants' values, meanings and social and sexual locations. These differences manifest the insufficiency of the binarism of the public/private opposition.

Isabel Luberza's house, where she is locked up during most of her husband's life and death, represents the spatial prototype of women's literal and figurative confinement. It is a space of solitude, passivity and erotic *castration* where the only available option for women is the cult of domesticity. Vis-a-vis this private realm, Isabel la Negra's is a foremost public space and the prostitute is well aware of this essential difference: Luberza has never penetrated the public domain, she has never owned a private space. La Negra is also aware of the indissoluble ties which exist between space and body, between the dichotomies of public/private space and that of public/private body. We may recall, in this regard, her reflections when they are about to bury the widow:

that body which nobody had ever seen exposed to this day in the smallest sliver of her white buttocks, in the most tenuous shavings of her white breasts . . . renounced at last that virginity of a respectable mother, of a respectable wife that had never before stepped into a brothel, that had never before been slandered in public as I have been so many times, that had never before left uncovered, food for the ravenous eyes of men, any part of her body except her arms, her neck, her legs from the knee down (179).

Against what traditional feminist analysis maintain, *public* and *private* do not equal *male* and *female* in Ferré's story, since the black woman occupies the *masculine* position.

La Negra's realization of this difference is followed by her yearning for Luberza's house. This might seem, at first, paradoxical, because she has achieved a certain social and financial mobility compared to the total immobility and seclusion which have defined Luberza's life. Her social origin justifies, however, this yearning, since it answered

to a profound nostalgia that had become more inflamed over the years: the desire of finding a substitute in her old age, for the memory of that childhood vision, which visited her whenever she walked past that house, barefoot and dressed in rags, the vision of a man dressed in white linen, standing on that balcony, next to a blond woman, incredibly beautiful, wearing a dress of silver lamé (180).

The house symbolizes for Isabel la Negra a social status from which she has been excluded. Her final access to it, parallels her appropriation of objects belonging to Ambrosio's wife: her perfume Fleur de Rocaille, her dress of silver lamé and her powder, Chant D'Aromes, with which she whitens her breasts (32). This attempt to whiten her body, which is simultaneous with her taking over the house, is also an expression of the awareness that the prohibited space and the status it connotes have been denied to her precisely because of her racial origin: for not being like the «blond woman, incredibly beautiful» on the balcony. House and body confabulate in this story to plot Isabel la Negra's *flight from blackness*, a general tendency in Spanish America

which constitutes, as Richard Jackson writes, «a direct reflection of this low status of blackness on the spectrum of racial color in Latin America» (1976, 11). The powder with which Isabel la Negra wants to lighten up her skin symbolizes a broader *whitening* process which mirrors the Spanish American device of *improving the race* in order to achieve social ascent.

Why then does Isabel la Negra transform Luberza's house into a more prestigious brothel than the one she previously owned? This could be interpreted as another manifestation of the final symbiosis of both women; their bodily fusion is accompanied by the spatial one, when house and brothel merge. But rather than with a real fusion, we are dealing with the degradation of the *official* space which also entails that of the *official* woman. To transform the seat of the pure and chaste *criolla* in a place of female sexual exploitation and exhibition represents a subversive act where race and class privileges are invalidated. Thus the subversion of space implies at the same time the degradation of the privileged body through prostitution. The new brothel indicates, then, that body and space are not only texts where *Otherness* is inscribed, but also where *Otherness* can be subverted.

All of this leads us to consider the limited validity of the metaphor man=colonizer, woman=colonized that has so often been used to characterize female oppression. This metaphor, according to which the colonizing Father assigns roles and distributes spaces colonizing the woman, lacks, according to Donaldson, «any awareness of gender—or colonialism, for that matter—as a contested field, an overdetermined sociopolitical grid whose identity points are often contradictory» (1992, 6). Historical colonialism, Donaldson continues, shows the political and theoretical necessity of abandoning the notion of feminine (and masculine) identity as something fixed and coherent (1992, 6). «When Women Love Men» certainly confirms this metaphor's insufficiency if we consider la Negra's multiple colonizations (race, class, gender) and Luberza's double contradictory position. Her contradiction being that of the *criollas*, who are simultaneously «colonized patriarchal objects and colonizing race-privileged subjects» (Donaldson 1992, 6). In this story, then, the concept of *the* female identity breaks, because the result of the combination of differences is the multiplicity of identities, as the two protagonists of the story illustrate.

The study of the body and the spatial location of the black and the white woman in Ferré's story shows the necessity of integrating the impact of the colonial heritage and the African diaspora in literary analysis. Because of this heritage, it is impossible to dissociate feminism and colonialism and to forget the constant intersection of gender, race and class. In this regard, «When Women Love Men» also constitutes a warning to the white author (and critic) about the dangers and difficulties that haunt her/him in the textualization of the *Other*, and serves as a reminder to examine her/his own location. On the other hand, the characters' problematic communication and the fact that *Otherness* does not originate from the opposition man/woman, but white woman/black woman, indicate the urgent task for feminist criticism to deal in depth with the relationship between women, and to broaden its analysis to include the female *Others*.

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## The Color of Literature: Afro-Colombian Writers and the Critics

LAURENCE PRESCOTT

In recent years, the term *African diaspora*, which in this paper refers to the forced dispersion and settlement of African peoples throughout the Americas primarily as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, has acquired greater usage and gained more adherents among academics internationally, as various recent international symposia have illustrated. In the United States, for example, scholars and students of African American Studies have begun to broaden their scope to encompass more areas, peoples, and cultures that fall under the heading of African or black diaspora. For a variety of reasons, however (e.g., common language, geographical proximity, family and spiritual ties, and academic politics), the few courses not centered on the United States tend to deal mainly with the English-speaking countries of the Caribbean and Africa. While there has been much attention, traditionally, to Brazil, Haiti and, to some extent, Cuba—all areas considered useful if not indispensable to understanding the African presence in Latin America, the contributions of most other Latin American nations to the rich and varied mosaic that constitutes the literature of the African Diaspora, that is, to literary works by peoples of African descent of the Americas, have been largely unknown, overlooked, or underappreciated.

In the 1950s and 1960s German literary critic and scholar Janheinz Jahn did much to reveal the geographical breadth and historical constancy of creative writing in the Black world (1965; 1968). More recently, studies by several North American professors (e.g., Jackson 1979; 1988; Lewis 1987; 1990; Smart 1985) have enhanced significantly the academy's awareness of literary texts by peoples of African descent in Spanish-speaking America. Relatively little scholarship exists, however, to explain the factors and conditions which hinder or undermine the development of black literature in that region and which also impede greater awareness of Afro-Hispanic writers.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the impact that just one particular factor—the critical establishment—has had upon literature created by individuals of African descent in the South American nation of Colombia. Understanding how the opinions and pronouncements of that country's dominant critical discourse have influenced the perception and direction of black writing there may very well enhance our appreciation of the struggles of Afro-Hispanic authors in general.

First, a few general words about Colombia are in order. Bogotá, the political capital,

is also the nation's cultural and educational hub. Its location in the cool Andean highlands and its deeply rooted Hispanic and indigenous heritages contrast markedly with the warm, sunny lowlands and firmly implanted African cultural roots of the nation's Atlantic and Pacific coasts, the homelands of most Afro-Colombian writers. Although Colombians have been taught to believe that a fruitful amalgamation of indigenous, European, and African elements has given them a unique tri-ethnic identity, the nation's political and cultural elites have sought to impose their values, interests, and perspectives upon the country's institutions. The legacy of colonialism with its privileging of the national center and Eurocentric models, tastes, and manners, has usually resulted in a supercilious disregard for the coastal margins and a haughty ignorance of the experiences of Afro-Colombians.

Second, although about one fourth of Colombia's population is considered to be of African origin, a much lower proportion of its recognized authors are from that group. Equally significant is the virtual absence of a consistent, assertive discourse of blackness among Afro-Colombian writers. While these realities undoubtedly result from the interplay of various factors, including socioeconomic differences, distance from centers of production, and the relative absence of racially motivated violence, I believe that critics, too, have played a significant role in hindering the development in Colombia of a literature that espouses blackness, promotes a fervent racial consciousness, and projects a strong identification with the African heritage. As Edward W. Said has pointed out, and as I intend to show here, «. . . critics create not only the values by which art is judged and understood, but they embody in writing those processes and actual conditions in the *present* by means of which art and writing bear significance» (1983, 53). The case of Jorge Artel, Colombia's most prominent twentieth-century poet of African ancestry, offers an apt example.

In 1940 Artel published in Cartagena his first and long-awaited volume of poetry titled *Tambores en la noche* (Drums in the Night). The collection marked a milestone in Afro-Colombian writing precisely because it appropriated the shameful history of slavery, dignified blackness, and extolled the spiritual legacy of African resistance, music, and dance. While critical reaction to Artel's verses was generally favorable, acceptance of the racial import of his poetry was more problematical. In fact, there ensued an intermittent yet almost decades-long debate on the existence of *black poetry* in Colombia and the correctness of labeling Artel a *black poet*. One reviewer of Artel's book scoffed at what he considered a vain and useless attempt to divide poetry into Negro and Aryan components («*Tambores en la noche*»). Another in nearby Panama also rejected the concept of black poetry, asserting, «The insistence on songs characterized as black is disturbing and adds nothing to the intrinsic poetic value» (Ruiz Vernacci 1941, 2). Resistance to accepting the validity of a black poetic art seemed to stem, in part, from a covert desire to avoid any racial expression which arbitrarily separated the art of poetry, gave the impression of discrimination, or contradicted the ethos of *mestizaje* (racial and cultural blending). As one poet and fellow *costeño* (coastal dweller) declared: «Artel is a poet like any poet. The fact that he exploits the Negroid theme in his poetry does not justify calling his poetry black . . . . Poetry is one and unique» (Nieto, 1942, 11).

With the emergence in the late 1940s of younger Afro-Colombian poets and writers and the approach of the centennial of Candelario Obeso (1849-1884), generally considered the country's first black poet, the debate about Artel's work and the issue of black poetry in Colombia gained additional stimulus. In a review of Eugenio Darío's

collection of love poems, *Mi hacha y tu cántaro* (My Hatchet and Your Pitcher), critic Antonio Cardona Jaramillo acknowledged the black poet (*el poeta negro*) as a living, creative entity, but he rejected and assailed the notion of black poetry, reiterating a common argument: «Poetry is simply poetry. Because of its qualities and mysteries it is certainly equal in the white, in the mestizo, and in the black» (1948, 5). That did not prevent him, however, from criticizing Darío for failing, as he says, to confront life and for «losing himself in a voice of hysteria»; that is, for writing boldly amorous verse that did not exhibit an obvious identification with blackness. On the other hand, only a few months later Hugo Salazar Valdés, a poet of the Chocó region, received dubious praise from a reviewer of his first opus, *Sal y lluvia* (Salt and Rain), precisely because he did not express a poetics of blackness. Salazar Valdés, the critic stated, «. . . does not seem to be a man of the black race because in his song there is not the tendency to express the violence of his ardent and voluptuous flesh, as writers of his racial ilk do in order to stand out» (Raffán Gómez 1948, 535).

Although these attitudes toward the creation of a distinct black poetic expression may reflect apprehensions about possible racial discord in Colombia resulting from ethnic tensions of World War II and black-white conflict in the United States, they also reveal a subtle intertextuality with critical opinions and theoretical statements by the influential Cuban poets Nicolás Guillén and Emilio Ballagas. In the prologue to his 1931 book *Sóngoro Cosongo*, Guillén had expressed a staunch commitment to the realization of a united Cuba, one which, by acknowledging its biracial roots and identity, would one day achieve its «definitive color,» that is, «Cuban color» (1986, 75). For Guillén, Cuba's color was neither black nor white but *mestizo*, that is, *mulatto*, as he described his own poems. Speaking in Bogotá years later, he flatly rejected the label of black poet, repudiated the idea of black poetry and, insisting on the biracial heritage of his homeland, dismissed the term Afro-Cuban as redundant (Fuenmayor 29, 69).

Ballagas, paradoxically a leading exponent of the literary tendency known as *black poetry* (*poesía negra*), also objected to the categorization of poetry as black and white, stating in an essay republished in Colombia in 1938 that such divisions emerged only with the entry of black racial motifs into Western art (1937, 5). For Ballagas and others, what distinguished so-called *black poetry* was the presence (and treatment) of the black person as theme, which outweighed any considerations of the racial background or ethnic identity of a given author.

The critical stance and poetic example of Guillén and Ballagas, I submit, not only helped to set the tone for writing about black people in much of Spanish America in the 1930's and 1940's, but also shaped critical thinking about poetry centered on black people. For example, Guillén's insistence on mixed-race identity as a basic characteristic of Cuba struck a familiar chord with many Colombian critics, reinforcing their own mestizo outlook. Thus while it was common for critics to refer to Artel as a *negro* (i.e., Negro, black man), they also emphasized his mixed-race background in order to explain the thematic variations of his poetry or to minimize its racial content (e.g., Camacho Carreño 1940, 4; Nieto 1943, 2).

Other critics, without exactly denying the racial dimension of Artel's poetry or his identity as a black poet, complicated matters further by implicitly classifying his poems either as *black* (i.e., racial) or as *universal*. This tacit categorization gave the impression that poetry dealing with race—and with black ethnicity in particular—was, like the poets identified with blackness, narrow in scope and limited in significance, whereas poetic expression that supposedly was *colorless* or race-neutral (i.e., *white*), was

unlimited in its appeal and value. In 1943, for example, Otto Morales Benítez, then a young writer from Caldas, wrote of Artel's work:

One part of his poems is not essentially black poetry. It has a universal air, of human emotions cordial to all racial conglomerates, wherein a love without nostalgia makes itself felt, and a full ecumenical shiver begins to traverse the vision of the city: the song to the universal matters which arrest the heart (1943, 5).

Although apparently well-meaning, these and similar remarks by other commentators (e.g., Moreno Blanco 1944, 2; Palés Matos 1950, 2) suggest that blackness (*lo negro*) is somehow divorced from the broad concerns and values which all human beings are thought to share. It is clear, too, however, that what passed as black poetry was largely of momentary interest, or considered insular, marginal, or separate from the mainstream poetic discourse of Spanish America which, presumably, had a broader, more generic base and supposedly was devoid of ethnic considerations and free from racial constraints.

On a related note, it is strangely ironic and yet perhaps illustrative of the confusion and complexity of racial matters in Colombia, that the term *racista* (racist) was frequently applied to literature—and, especially, to poetry—by persons of African descent which affirmed black identity and expressed pride in African heritage. For example, speaking of one promising poet's recent production, a commentator wrote in 1946: «In spite of repeated demonstrations of faith and racist lyric poetry . . . , Natanael Díaz—our admired and admirable poet of color—offers us on this occasion a poetry oriented into the purest and finest courses of 'white poetry'» (Payán Archer, 8).<sup>1</sup>

While this application of *racista* does not appear to have been limited to Colombia (Piquion 1940, 77; Ferguson, 1961, 79-80), it is not difficult to imagine the possibility of confusion with the word's more familiar reference to the doctrine of racial superiority and the institutionalized policy of hatred of racial groups (Jones 1972, 117). In fact, writer Manuel Zapata Olivella was using *racista* in this latter sense to describe the censorship exercised by Creole elites against black cultural expression (1947, 8). The likelihood, then, of ascribing to racially assertive Afro-Colombian poetry characteristics and intentions it did not have would certainly seem to have been greater because of this ambivalence.

The mixed-race view of national art and identity espoused by Guillén and others clearly opposed the existence or creation of a specifically black-centered literature. Thus, for a would-be Afro-Colombian poet to win favorable attention from the centrist and metropolitan-oriented critics often meant adopting Eurocentric styles of discourse and avoiding a vigorous assertion of black identity.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, as Cardona Jaramillo's criticism of Eugenio Darío shows, failure to express blackness according to the manner deemed essential by the dominant poetic discourse could also be interpreted as a sign of racial self-denial.

<sup>1</sup> This peculiar usage of the words *racista* and *racismo* paralleled the terms *indigenista* and *indigenismo*, which were applied to literature that exposed the exploitation and suffering of the Amerindian masses and championed their rights and recognition.

<sup>2</sup> For writers of prose fiction, however, endorsement by a respected and internationally known writer-critic could be helpful. Manuel Zapata Olivella, for example, benefited from the prologue to his first novel, *Tierra mojada* (1947), written by the celebrated Peruvian novelist Ciro Alegría.



In sum, by negating the validity and appropriateness of poetry by people of African descent which addresses and communicates something of their unique experiences, human concerns, and cultural heritage, critics undermined the legitimacy, acceptability, and viability of black literature in Colombia. Furthermore, their opinions strengthened the perception that a genuine black literature, that is, one committed to dignifying black life and culture, reevaluating slavery and race relations, and questioning—even implicitly—the social and economic status of people of African descent, posed a threat to artistic integrity and even to national unity, by engendering racial tensions and reviving old rifts. Acting not merely as interpreters but as guardians of national culture, many Colombian critics, too often representing and owing allegiance to elitist interests and ideals, have customarily privileged those experiences considered to have legitimate literary significance and relevance to a narrow reading public. As a consequence of their own ethnocentrism, aesthetic assumptions, Eurocentric orientation, and insistence on a harmonious mixed-race Colombian identity (with its subtle depreciation of the African presence), critics, in concert with other factors and conditions mentioned above, served to obstruct the potentially liberating benefits of Artel's poetry; to hinder the emergence of a strong scribal tradition of black pride and racial consciousness; and to consign Afro-Colombian writing to the margins of national literature.

Despite the efforts of the critical establishment to deny the existence and to prescribe the nature and direction of black literary discourse in Colombia, Afro-Colombian writers have carried on a constant, yet unchronicled struggle to create a recognized body of literature that not only expresses their individual feelings, ideas, and perspectives, but also conveys some measure of the collective black experience in their country. In doing so, they have enriched the literature produced by Africa's dispersed peoples and illuminated some of the conditions and challenges which diasporic writers have had to confront and overcome in order that their voices too might be heard, acknowledged, and appreciated.

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# **African Literatures in English**

## Introduction

OLGA BARRIOS

The last section of this book focuses mainly on fiction and theater from various African countries: Senegal, South Africa and Sierra Leone. This section presents different works that, although written on African soil, still maintain diasporic elements. Colonialism has contributed to the dispersion and blending of African and Western traditions within the African continent itself, and the dialectics of both traditions are shown in conflict within the literary works written by contemporary African writers.

In the first essay, «Negotiating between the Tomb and Womb: Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*,» Katwiwa Mule reflects upon what he considers the novelist's simplistic, reductive depiction of the opposition between Western and African values, arguing that the writer depicts the Western world as a *womb* and Senegalese tradition as a *tomb*. According to Mule, because the novel belongs to the neocolonial phase of African literature, it has been criticized from two different extreme positions—from a strong masculinist and anti-feminist perspective on the one hand, and from a typical Western feminist perspective on the other. Consequently, Mule attempts to move beyond those two currents in his examination and demands a more complex reading of Bâ's work. He suggests that Bâ's feminist poetics «fails to capture the importance of the heterospacial, transcultural aspects of African womanhood,» and insists that the novel demonstrates that «colonialism still maintains ambivalence in African people.» Mule argues that contemporary literature by African women faces «the challenge of confronting the ideologies of patriarchy, colonialism and neocolonialism.»

Olga Barrios' «Black Consciousness Theater in South Africa and the Committed Artist: Maishe Maponya's *Gangsters*» starts with a reflection on the Black Theater Movement of the 1960s in the United States and underlines the influence this Movement exerted on Black Consciousness South African Theater. Barrios' analysis focuses on the important role that the black audience played in black theater both in the United States and in South Africa, and on how black artists were committed to the task of addressing the needs of the black audience and of creating a theater that paralleled the black liberation struggle in the respective nations. Because of its effective dramatization of the death of the main leader and philosopher of the Black Consciousness Movement, Stephen Biko, while he was held in prison, Maponya's *Gangsters*—produced at the beginning of the 1980s—is the best exponent of committed theater in South Africa. Barrios argues that Maponya also dramatizes the dynamics of black/white and black/black relationships and that black theater during apartheid must

be examined in the light of its sociopolitical and historical components. Political forces such as the Black Power Movement in the United States and the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa highly inspired and informed the plays of the Black Arts Movements in both countries.

Taking South African theater under apartheid also as the basis of his analysis, Kriben Pillay—playwright, director and theater lecturer—analyzes *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* not as a literary text, but as performance. His essay «Narrative Devices, Time and Ontology in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*» points out that this play has been highly praised for its sociopolitical content and powerful performance elements. However, Pillay examines the narrative devices of the play, showing that it has two distinct kinds of storytelling techniques, each of which manipulates story time and audience participation in specific ways. He graphically and analytically reveals how the play is a good example of the blending of a Eurocentric tradition (Athol Fugard, the playwright) and an Afrocentric tradition (the actors Winston Ntshona and John Kani). Pillay argues convincingly that *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* «is a product of diasporic forces, except that these forces took place on African soil» and that the play, although written in English still keeps African traditions.

Continuing with the genre of theater but shifting to Sierra Leone, Iyunolu Osagie in her essay «The Amistad Affair and the Nation of Sierra Leone: The Dramatic Return of Memory,» like the two previous authors, insists on the importance of theater in a sociocultural milieu. Osagie asserts that theater in Africa today is an important means of transmitting information mainly to the vast rural communities of the continent. Consequently, theater has become an important vehicle to denounce social injustice. This type of theater in Sierra Leone is called *theater for development*. Focusing on the successful revolt of enslaved Sierra Leoneans, especially their leader Sengbe Pieh (Americanized as Cinque), aboard «La Amistad,» the essay examines Charlie Haffner's *Amistad Kata Kata* and asserts the play has changed the future of theater in Sierra Leone. It has helped Sierra Leonean people to recover not only their national hero Sengbe Pieh and their consciousness of an historical past, but also to develop a radical political commitment to social change. According to Osagie, the structure of the play collects patterns of oral tradition in which Haffner reconstructs the *rememory* and validation of the past as well as the promise of the future.

## Negotiating between the Tomb and Womb: Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

KATWIWA MULE

In an essay entitled «In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists,» Frieda High W. Tesfagiorgis observes that

Black women artists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean acknowledge and respond to their historical crisis of victimization, defiance and self-determination . . . Black women artists globally, diachronically, and synchronically are linked through colonialism, slavery, racism and capitalism and in their various countries confront the international transgressive art network that is characterized by eurocentrism, sexism, elitism, imperialism and capitalism (229).

Tesfagiorgis' observation provides a nexus for us to examine issues that are important to black women's writing in cross-cultural contexts.

Nowhere are the complexities generated by the collective history implied by Tesfagiorgis' observation more apparent than in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. The issue here is the extent to which the novel reflects the influence of colonialism, rather than any opposition to colonial values, in the intimate epistolary narration by the main character Ramatoulaye, henceforth referred to as Rama. Bâ, like most other women writers in Africa and the Diaspora, is defined by the consciousness of an African past, a gendered history of slavery, fragmentation and dispersal on the one hand, and colonialism on the other. Colonialism, according to Martinican psychiatrist and materialist theorist Frantz Fanon «is not merely satisfied with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. . . [but] turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it» (1973, 176). Since their context(s) and consciousness are defined and informed by their position of difference, marginality, and otherness, their identities and «the words they use,» according to novelist and critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, «are a product of collective history» (1986, 30). The trajectory of the collective history that Ngũgĩ refers to implies the complex dynamics of the relationship of Africans to Africans in the Diaspora, and suggests a specific socioeconomic, racial, political, and cultural relationship to colonialism. This complexity, as African American critic Bernard William Bell argues convincingly, is best expressed through some rigorous, interrogative form of oppositional discourse(s) or dialectics as each individual writer attempts to construct his or her vision of «the human

condition as filtered through the prism of their particular time, place, and ethnic group» (1987, xii).

As I shall demonstrate, Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* provides a rich textual example of the complexities that I have just mentioned. Published in 1981, *So Long a Letter* has perhaps attracted more criticism from both male and female critics than any other text of its time. Much of this criticism oscillates between two extreme positions. On the one hand, is the vilifying, deeply masculinist, anti-feminist cultural criticism of the Nigerian critic Femi Ojo Ade; on the other is the typically Western feminist *authorizing* approach by Katherine Frank (1987, 15). But the privileging of an incompletely theorized cultural criticism and/or feminism(s) has tended to obscure the problems that this semi-autobiographical novel entails as a text written in the neocolonial phase of African literature (Ngugi 1986, 1). For example, in her desire to authenticate a feminist perspective without due regard for what the (con)text actually says, Frank reads Bâ in terms of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Frank suggests that *So Long a Letter* is an exact confirmation of this French theorist's notion of womanhood (1987, 3). Such notions and paradigms are generated by the desire to valorize what has come to be known in some Western feminist critical practices as *immanent femininity* in female-authored narratives. The result of such colonizing critical (mal)practice<sup>2</sup> is an insensitive misreading, and misinterpretations, of the text as a historically constituted «aesthetic and ideological product unique to portrayal of specific conditions,» themselves products of dynamic processes (Odamtten 1994, 3). This approach at the same time masks what I consider to be Bâ's ambiguous representation of Africa as a *tomb* and the West a *womb* as far as womanhood is concerned.<sup>3</sup> Critical approaches such as Frank's and Ade's also lead to what literary critic Kofi Owusu refers to as «the symptomatic failure to connect various critical discourses to informing systems» (1989, 739). Even more passionate and prescriptive is critic O'molara Ogundipe-Leslie's argument that the Third World woman writer should be committed in three ways: «as a writer, as a woman and as a third world person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all the three» (1994, 63).

Ogundipe-Leslie charts the ideological itinerary for African women writers when she asserts that

<sup>1</sup> Katherine Frank in her essay «Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa» makes a claim that some African novels «embrace a solution of a world without men: man is the enemy, the enemy, the exploiter and oppressor» (whatever she means by this!) and further goes on to assert that «given the historically established and culturally sanctioned sexism of African society, there is no possibility of a compromise, or even truce with the enemy» (1987, 15). Frank's ostensibly authoritative statement about the feminist project of African women authors echoes the arrogance and anachronism of some Western feminists toward women from the economically depressed parts of the world and clearly positions the separatist approaches espoused by some brands of Western feminisms as the norm for all women. See also Femi Ojo Ade's essay «Still a Victim? Mariama Bâ's *Une si long lettre*» (*African Literature Today* 12, 1982) where he views Bâ's feminist poetics as «bastardization» of African cultures. With his emphasis on the communal aspect womanhood, Ade fails to appreciate the fact that his approach does indeed mask the lived realities of women's lives in contemporary African societies.

<sup>2</sup> See Chinua Achebe's powerful essay «Colonialist Criticism» in *Morning yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975) as well as Chandra Tapalde Mohanty's «Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.» (*Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> I am using the phonemic as well as metaphorical elements of the words *tomb* and *womb* as discursive tropes in order to problematize Mariama Bâ's dubious representation of reductive and simplistic depiction of the opposition between Western and African values.

being aware of oneself as a third world person implies being politically conscious, offering readers perspectives on and perceptions of colonialism, imperialism and neocolonialism as they affect and shape our lives and historical destinies . . . any true intelligence in Africa must note the circumscription of our lives here by the reality of imperialism and neocolonialism (1994, 64).

Examining Mariama Bâ's view of colonialism therefore entails interrogating the alternative world view and symbolic universe she constructs since we as readers look at her narrative as a counter-narrative or what Abdulrazak Gurnah calls the *native account*.

The project of the *native account*—also known as literature of the oppressed—is to «challenge the imperialist narrative» in an effort to subvert and resist Europe's misrepresenting discourse (Gurnah 1993, ix). In order to challenge European masters and white supremacy, writers have to be aware of both their historical and literary past. But as Bernard W. Bell states, «whereas awareness of the oral and literary traditions is helpful for the novelist and readers, it is the novelist's [read writer's] reconstruction of the world or reality from a particular vantage point or point of view that constitutes the special meaning of imaginative narrative» (1987, xv). This approach to literature calls for an ideological slant which concomitantly implies a political, social and moral imperative for writers from Africa and the diaspora because of the precarious positions from which they write. Historical memory, in Toni Morrison's words, «the deliberate act of (re)membering . . . [and] a form of willed creation,» is therefore part and parcel of the war against the deleterious and ubiquitous effects of colonialism and neocolonialism for people of the diaspora (1984, 385).

*So Long a Letter* is a realistic portrayal of the problems that women face in Bâ's Senegalese society, especially in the area of male-female relationships as they function in an African and Islamic cultural environment. These relationships are explored through the experiences of Rama and Aissatou and their husbands Modou Fall and Mawdo Bâ respectively. In her treatment of Rama and Aissatou, Bâ seeks to foreground the importance of female choice. These two characters make choices that have far-reaching implications in their lives, especially when their husbands decide to take second wives, a practice sanctioned by Islamic religion and custom. Repulsed by Mawdo's act of taking a co-wife in a marriage based on a tacit assumption of monogamy, Aissatou divorces her husband, travels to France and later to Washington DC, where she works as a translator in her country's embassy. Rama, on the other hand, chooses to swallow the bitter pill and share her husband with her daughter's-friend-turned-co-wife. Since the main focus in this essay is Bâ's representation of colonialism, I will focus on Islamic polygyny only as far as it relates to the question of colonialism.

One aspect of colonialism as a *womb* that features prominently in this novel is colonial education. In the novel, Bâ creates a generation of characters who are culturally reborn through colonial education. Bâ, through Rama, presents Western education as a womb, a liberating force from the metaphorical tomb of African custom. Since Rama is now educated, she is «free from the frustrating taboos» and is «now capable of discernment.» She sees no need to follow her «mother's finger pointing at Daouda Dieng» (Bâ 1981, 16). This is the kind of education that she and her compatriot Aissatou have acquired from their surrogate mother, the French headmistress, of whom she has



very fond memories. It is only after acquiring Western education, which in the text is placed in direct opposition to Senegalese traditional education, that one can be capable of making choices. Thus, she writes to Aissatou:

Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an uncommon destiny . . . we were true sisters destined for the same mission of emancipation. To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, *to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without denouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, to strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us*: These were the aims of our admirable headmistress (15-16).

In order to appreciate the ambiguity of this position, we need to bear in mind that the project of colonialism, especially the French policy of assimilation, was never to accommodate presumed *primitive native* cultures. Civilization for the colonizer meant becoming a white man in black skin (with due respect for European sexual politics). Morality, in the mind of the colonizer, was something alien to the African. Africans were defined and represented as immoral and corrupt through and through. The Western inverted moral narrative of the *white man's burden* was therefore to lift the African from the colonial construction of the imprisoning darkness of his past.

It is from this perspective that I look at the representation of Aunt Nabou, whose role in the lives of Rama, the narrator, and Aissatou is deliberately juxtaposed to that of the French headmistress. Rama tells us that Aunt Nabou «lived in the past, unaware of changing world. She clung to old beliefs.» While the headmistress instills a liberating education, Nabou indoctrinates them with an education that imprisons their minds. Thus, in contrast to the headmistress, under the starlit sky, Nabou's

expressive voice glorified the retributive violence of the warrior; her expressive voice lamented the anxiety of the Loved One, all submissive. She saluted the courage of the reckless; she stigmatized trickery, laziness and calumny; she demanded care of the orphan and respect for old age. Tales with animal characters, nostalgic songs kept young Nabou breathless . . . (47).

This relationship between Western and traditional education is presented in the contrast between Rama, Aissatou and young Nabou in their relationships with the white headmistress and Aunt Nabou respectively. Contrasted with the Nabou, the white headmistress becomes a womb, a surrogate mother who resurrects and nurtures to maturity her female students from the confining narrow tomb of African cultures in which they are buried by women like Aunt Nabou. The obvious ambiguity is that the headmistress is part of what Rama herself calls the «assimilationist dream of the colonist . . . which drew into its crucible our mode of thought and way of life» (24). With their emphasis on assimilation, French colonialists used education as a tool for psychological emasculation of the colonized in order to conquer and exploit them. Viewed from this perspective, Bâ's implicit representation of European colonial culture as a *womb* and African culture as a *tomb*, is a problematic metaphorical dichotomy that obscures the complexity of African resistance to French colonialism. By depicting the colonizer/white woman as a surrogate mother to African women, Bâ clearly projects a feminist poetics that advocates transferral of identical meanings

rather than a simultaneous maintenance of complex distinct identities. Bâ's feminist poetics, thus, fails to capture the importance of the heterospatial, transcultural aspects of African womanhood (Steady 1981, 7). The fictive representation of the white headmistress clearly obscures the perversity of colonialism, Euro-American racism, imperialism and paradoxes of double consciousness. It therefore ends up projecting the African as an object of European desire. This problematic representation of colonialism in the French headmistress's role in shaping the destinies of the two women is a reflection of the way in which the legacy of colonialism continues to inform the consciousness of African people and to maintain or foster ambivalence in their cultures.

Ironically, the deleterious impact of colonial education is clearly manifested in the life styles of Modou Fall, Mawdo, Rama and Aissatou, among others. They pilfer money from the starving public and spend it extravagantly on Christmas parties and luxurious vacations on beaches, while the rest of the population wallows in poverty (20). Bâ unsympathetically represents malnourished «naked and snotty» children gazing at Rama and her elitist class at the beach as they «undress without embarrassment, tempted by the benevolent caress of the iodized breeze and the warmth from the sun's rays» (21). Rama, the narrator, basks in the affluence of the wealth that Modou Fall amasses by abusing his position in the government. This estrangement is further exemplified by Rama's contemptuous attitude toward the sweat and eating habits of mourners who come to offer their condolences upon her husband's unexpected death. She is more concerned with cola nut stains on her house tiles than with the ritual of bonding at time of death in the community. There is no doubt that Bâ recognizes the fact that there are useful elements in the past and others that ought to be discarded. However, her simple contrast of the roles of Aunt Nabou with the white headmistress obscures rather than illuminates this position.

If Mariama Bâ's textual practice and politics in *So Long a Letter* seeks to mediate, transform, and reinvent the African women's experience through a different imaginative plane, then another problem arises in the progressive representation of Aissatou. Her symbolic journey to the United States—into «the beast's belly» in which she acquires enough wealth to be able to buy her friend a new car—is ostensibly presented as a journey to freedom. Ironically, because of black people's experience with racism in the United States, Washington, DC is not a haven for black women, especially migrants.

Rama and Aissatou are presumably the fictional representatives of the *new* African woman. Through their consciousness we see Bâ's vision of a new social order as they «emerge from the narrow tunnel of custom, tradition and gender stratification with the realization that all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation has sealed» (Abubakr 1993, 29). In Rama's complaints, there is no overt questioning of Western values. Indeed, Western values are seen as liberating, while traditional and Islamic/African values are seen as oppressing. This ambivalence is implicit in Rama's declaration that «[w]e all agreed that much dismantling was needed to introduce *modernity* within our *traditions*. Torn between the past and the present, we deplored the 'hand sweat' that would be inevitable . . . *we were full of nostalgia but were resolutely progressive*» (54, emphasis added). This is one of the many passages in the novel in which Bâ's concept of colonialism comes closest to Booker T. Washington's view in *Up From Slavery* as a womb for Africans. In contrast, Frederick Douglass sees slavery in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as a tomb that

deforms the construction of African American identity. The simple oppositional positions of *nostalgia* (African/tradition) and *progressiveness* (Western/Modernity) that Rama and Aissatou find themselves in is foregrounded as a position of choice and competition between the African tomb of tradition and the Western womb of modernity. Where tradition (African ways) and modernity (Western ways) are placed in a state of conflict and choice, then Bâ, through Rama, prefers Western values and practices. In this construction, I believe, Mariama Bâ's concept of gender liberation is simplistic and reductive especially in view of Nnaemeka Obioma's observation that African oral traditions reveal the axial roles of women as subjects. In fact, as she observes, «the oral tradition is peopled with heroines . . . [W]omen have been frequently identified as founders of dynasties and civilizations, as is evident in the Kikuyu creation myth cited by Margaret Stroebe» (139). This presence of astute, strong, and powerful women in African oral traditions offers us other useful ways of looking at issues of gender roles and power for African women.

But since we are dealing with a world turned upside down by colonialism, there is also the need to interrogate the impact of European sexual politics on the lives and roles of women in Africa. As contemporary critic V.Y. Mudimbe asserts, «Although the colonial experience in history represents but a brief moment from the perspective of today, this moment is still charged and controversial, since, to say the least, it signified a new historical form and the possibility of radically new types of discourses on African traditions and cultures» (Mudimbe 1988, 1). Questioning and confronting the colonial imagination and vision enables us to understand the history of women in African literature, and the way in which contemporary African literature by women reconstructs *African realities* through an interplay between the verbal and the social (con)text. In order to fulfill this function, literature by contemporary African women writers faces the challenge of confronting the ideologies of patriarchy, colonialism, and neocolonialism. If we take the view that the need to interrogate the colonial experience is linked to an author's desire to imagine a future beyond colonialism, then neither Rama nor Aissatou, nor even Daba, can effectively carry this role. Rama cannot, for example, imagine how her future would have been without her white headmistress.

By disabling traditional education, Bâ ostensibly valorizes colonial discourses. Since, as Ogundipe-Leslie convincingly argues, the post-independence project of the African writer is to devalorize ecumenical colonial discourses, the neocolonial narrative becomes what post-colonial critic Edward Said refers to as «an opposing view, perspective, consciousness,» pitted against the «unitary web of vision» embedded in dominant discourse (1978, 240). Rather than looking back to her own society and offering an alternative world view to the dominant colonial discourse, Bâ ridicules and ultimately rejects traditional Senegalese culture through her depiction of Aunt Nabou and her mentoring of young Nabou while uncritically celebrating the role that the white headmistress plays in the lives of Rama and Aissatou. For many progressive African cultural workers, Bâ's representation in *So Long a Letter* of European colonization as a womb rather than a tomb of cultural development for contemporary African women is at best a problematic emancipatory narrative.

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# Black Consciousness Theater in South Africa and the Committed Artist: Maishe Maponya's *Gangsters*

OLGA BARRIOS

The Black Theater Movement that originated in the United United States during the 1960s and 1970s, and in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s is probably one of the clearest illustrations of diaspora. Black people in the two different nations suffered similar racial oppression, cultural disruption, social fragmentation, and economic exploitation but within different sociohistorical and political contexts. The African ancestors of black Americans had been taken by force as slaves to the United States three centuries earlier, whereas black South Africans were dominated by white British and Dutch colonial rule in their own country. The Black Theater Movement developed in the United United States as a complement in drama to the political struggle of African Americans in the 1960s against white racism and for the social justice and equality guaranteed to all citizens in the United States Constitution; whereas the Black Theater Movement in South Africa developed in response to its racial apartheid system.

It is important to point out that during the 1960s and 1970s South African and African American plays were successfully produced in the United States and African American and African plays were introduced to South Africa. Wole Soyinka's plays were produced in both countries. Similarly, Athol Fugard's *The Blook Knot* or *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* (these two latter plays written in collaboration with Winston Ntshona and John Kani) were successfully performed in the United United States. In South Africa, plays by Ed Bullins, Douglas T. Ward and Amiri Baraka were equally well known and popular on the stage.<sup>1</sup> The South African critic Mshengu has observed many similarities between African American and black South African theater. Both theatrical expressions—African American and black South African—were political in subject matter and exclusively urban in idiom. Mshengu has insisted that because African American theater had «a far greater impact than the rest of Africa» on black South African theater, theater in South Africa was quite different from any other theater in Africa (Mshengu 1977, 64).

Questioning the relevance of Western theater and greatly activated by the Black Power Movement in North America and the Black Consciousness Movement in South

<sup>1</sup> Western plays were also produced in both countries in the black community, among them, plays by Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Antonin Artaud, Jean Genet and Bertolt Brecht.

Africa, black theater emerged to celebrate the black community as the protagonist of this new born theater. Western theater artists, such as Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, had already observed the need to create a new theatrical language and asserted the importance to engage the theater audience in a dialectical process with the action taking place on the stage. The artists of the Black Theater Movement were aware not only of the passivity played by the audience but especially the passive role imposed on the black community in a society governed by white rule. Black artists initiated then a double task: the revival of a black theater audience and acknowledgement and celebration of black culture against Western imperialism—both political and intellectual—which negated its existence. The artists of the Black Theater Movement in the United States and in South Africa launched a number of artists who were completely committed to becoming voices for the needs of their black communities.

Black artists took a political stand which was inextricably connected to their commitment to the liberation struggle and to the creation of Black Consciousness Art. Black South African playwright Maishe Maponya in his play *Gangsters*, written and performed in South Africa at the beginning of the 1980s, condemns the South African penal system by dramatizing the murder and death of the Black Consciousness Movement's main philosopher and leader, Stephen Biko, while he was in detention. Through the main character, the poet Rasechaba, Maponya dramatizes his own experience, as well as that of others who had been arrested for opposing the oppressive regime of apartheid in South Africa. *Gangsters* then is one of the most evident manifestations of theater committed to the Black Consciousness Movement didactic goals of making black people aware of their oppressed situation and encouraging them to take action and to struggle for their self-assertion and freedom. This essay will briefly examine the connections between the Black Theater Movement in the United States and in South Africa to focus subsequently on the South African Black Consciousness and Black Theater Movements. I will also analyze Maponya's play *Gangsters* as a distinct expression of the Black Consciousness theater in South Africa, showing the relationship between art and the artist's commitment under the apartheid system.

As Genevieve Fabre claims, the emergence of African American theater is «above all a sociocultural phenomenon and must be examined as such» (1983, 1). And Fabre's assertion can be equally extended to the emergence of Black theater after the 1960s in South Africa. In her opinion, African American theater in the 1960s restored the lost link between theater and black community, and gave the central roles not to the bourgeoisie but to common people (1983, 8). The Black Theater Movement in the United States originated parallel to the political and freedom movements and to the declaration of independence of many African countries during the 1950s and 1960s. According to Amiri Baraka, its main leader, the Black Arts Movement

[was] radically opposed to any concept of artist that [alienated] him from his community. Black arts [was] the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it [envisioned] an art that [spoke] directly to the needs and aspirations of Black Americans. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement [proposed] a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It [proposed] a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology (1985, 165).

In a few lines, Baraka summarized the main goals of the Black Arts Movement as the conjunction of art and community; the philosophy of Black Power; and the creation of art for the specific needs of the African American community. Baraka advocated the development of a completely different aesthetic that reordered the Western canonical

theories and literary expressions which conveyed racist symbols and stereotypes in their portrayal of blacks.

Larry Neal, another primary African American writer of the era, emphasized that the artist needed to create a national consciousness and purpose in order to rise above the Western tradition and create a more humanistic attitude about the «relationship of art and society» (1968a, 9). The aesthetics of the Black Theater Movement envisioned art as functional. Art and life, according to Neal, were separated in the Western tradition, and for the Movement they needed to be together: «Art and life are . . . integral to each other and since life is change in this cosmological view, art must be change» (1968a, 9). Inspired by *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, a Martinican psychoanalyst and radical social theorist, African American artists began to incorporate his ideas on the need to decolonize the minds of Third World peoples through revolutionary action.

When examining the Black Theater Movement both in North America and in South Africa, however, it is crucial to consider a fundamental difference between the situation of African Americans and that of blacks in South Africa. Although blacks in both countries appraised the need to fight imperialism and colonialism, the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, led by Biko, established that the creation of a society based on African cultural systems was the Movement's fundamental and ultimate goal because they were living in Africa, not in Europe. These geographical conditions differentiated the goals of Black Power in the United States from those of Black Consciousness in South Africa. In Biko's words: «Black Power is the preparation of a group for participation in [an] already established society, and Black Power therefore in the United States operates like a minority philosophy. Like, you have Jewish power, Italian power . . . and so on in the United States» (quoted in Millard 1978, 99).

Mosibudi Mangena described what was understood by Black Consciousness in South Africa:

We understood Black Consciousness as a new way of life, an attitude of mind which would enable Blacks to rid themselves of the inferiority complex accruing out of living in a racist country that [had] brutalised them for centuries. It was a frame of mind through which Blacks would reject all value systems that [made] them foreigners in a country of their birth. It was held that psychological liberation was an important component of the process of physical liberation. Thus, our African names which were hidden and were capable of sparking light, if used became the pride of the day (1989, 12).

Black Consciousness in South Africa, like the Black Power Movement in the United States, sought self-determination for blacks and proclaimed black pride and assertion of their South African traditions. The Movement had a major impact within the Black community between 1968 and 1976, especially the youth of the 1976 Soweto uprising.

The Black Consciousness Movement intended to confront the fragmentation that had resulted from the apartheid policy (which maintained people separated according to the categories of coloreds, Indians or Africans) by attempting to involve all of them in the same struggle for liberation. The final aim of their struggle would be in Biko's own words: «an open society, one man, one vote, no reference to color» (quoted in Millard 1978, 42). Biko viewed black people as *the dispossessed*—the term that black South African playwrights Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya would adopt to

define black South African theater—because he realized that blacks were a disinherited group and historically, economically and politically dispossessed.

According to Biko, the method used by Black Consciousness to mobilize black people, gave them hope by making them aware of their oppressive situation (1989, 115). In, *I Write What I Like*, Biko recalled the importance of the *soul* rhythms by African Americans that had been a hit in the 1960s and had excited millions of blacks all over the world, for they could read a truthful meaning in that music that proclaimed: «Say it aloud: I am Black and I am proud (1989, 25).»<sup>2</sup> Biko, however, underlined that what had really influenced the liberation and artistic movements both in the United States and in South Africa had actually been the independence achieved by different African states in a short time (Mangena 1989, 54). Like the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the United States, it was the Black Consciousness Movement that prompted the formation of theater groups<sup>3</sup> in the early seventies in South Africa, which unfortunately were continuously harassed and destroyed by government action (Orkin 150-51). The Theatre Council of Natal (TECON) published in the black theater magazine *S'kets* underlining their pride in black culture and the need of black theater organizations, which should no longer «hang onto another culture for survival or growth» (quoted in *TQ-Theatre Quarterly* 28: 61).

Hope and celebration of blackness, together with the activation of the audience's consciousness on their sociopolitical conditions, became pivotal elements of a new theater aesthetics which totally rejected the demarcations dictated by the Western canon. African American artists spoke of the creation of black aesthetics; black South Africans spoke of black consciousness aesthetics and the Theater of the Dispossessed. However, in contrast to the Black Theater Movement that emerged in North America, the targets and artistic goals of the Black Theater Movement in South Africa could not be transferred into a written pronouncement, due to the continuous censorship and imprisonment of theater artists.

In spite of the lack of a written manifesto, the plays produced from the 1970s through the 1980s reveal clear characteristics that link all of them to a Black Consciousness aesthetics. Although the Black Consciousness Movement was banned in 1977, another organization created in 1978 (the Azanian People's Organization—AZAPO) inherited the ideology of the former Movement. The best two exponents of commitment to this ideology, were the playwrights Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya. Manaka explained the type of theater they produced:

Our theatre is here to search for the truth about the history of the dispossessed and see how freedom can be accomplished. Our creative thoughts shall, all the time, focus on the life of our people, as seen through our own lives—and obviously, the politics of this country cannot be avoided because they constitute part of our lives. . . . Our people are engaged totally by resistance struggles—the liberation of the mind and the liberation of the being (quoted in Larlham 1985, 86).

<sup>2</sup> Two important recordings were James Brown's «Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud,» and Nina Simone's «To Be Young, Gifted and Black.»

<sup>3</sup> Groups such as the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), founded in 1969, aborted in 1973; People's Experimental Theatre (PET), founded in 1973 in the Indian location of Lenasia, outside Johannesburg, ended with the assassination of the author of *Shanti*, performed by the group; or Workshop '71, whose members decided to remain abroad after a world tour, due to continuous persecution by the Police Security. For further information on these theater groups, see Martin Orkin, *Drama and the South African State* (1991).



To a great extent, Maponya supported Manaka's ideas: «My theatre is the theatre of the dispossessed. Theatre educates and enlightens—in this case heightens the awareness of Black consciousness» (quoted in Larlham 1985, 90). Both playwrights' works attempted to be a manifestation of social commitment and art as inseparable elements; and both believed that as artists they needed to commit completely in the liberation struggle through theater, i.e., Maponya's *Gangsters*. The artist's political activism is very important in African societies; and theater, more than any other genre, encompasses a fundamental social function within African societies.

Black Consciousness theater artists were distinctly influenced by the «didactic thrust in oral poetry performance as well as by the interaction between poet/performer and audience» (Orkin 1991, 155). Maponya has successfully combined his theatrical skills with his poetic style in his works, especially in *Gangsters*, whose protagonist, the poet Rasechaba, recites his poetry during the course of the play. *Gangsters* reflects how the Black Consciousness artists, infuriated by the blood shed by the children of the Soweto uprisings in 1976 and Stephen Biko's death in prison, dramatized that rage and the spirit of the dead into their artistic work. Maponya's *Gangsters* is the testimony of his anger and denunciation of Biko's murder.

Maponya himself had been detained and interrogated on various occasions by the Security Police, and after *Gangsters* was produced in 1984 Maponya received a restriction order that prevented him from producing it in township cinemas and halls (Orkin 1981, 214). *Gangsters* is focused on Maponya's own experience as a poet, writer and activist who had been in detention. He uses that experience to dramatize Biko's imprisonment, subsequent torture and murder. Referring to *Gangsters*, Maponya stated that his play was *theater in the fist*, like the poetry written by the poet character, Rasechaba. In the play the police officer, Major Whitebeard, tells Rasechaba: «We feel your poetry is inflammatory . . . [Y]ou stand in front of a hall full of people and you've just recited one of your poems and the people start screaming and waving their fists in the air» (1986, 63). This reference is reminiscent of Larry Neal's words referring to the poem «Black Art» by Amiri Baraka: «Poems are physical entities: fists, daggers, airplanes and poems that shoot guns» (1968b, 32). Thus, poetry, becomes one of the main characters and liberating tools within *Gangsters* to reach the audience and call for their action.

Maponya's dramatic expression of anger in confronting the forces of oppressive white domination (Major Whitebeard) and the oppressed (Rasechaba), is similar to Baraka's presentation of racism in the United States in plays such as *Dutchman* and *The Slave*. *Gangsters* is direct and aggressive in confronting those forces in poems that Rasechaba addresses directly to the audience. The triangle formed by Major Whitebeard (white police officer), Jonathan (black security policeman) and Rasechaba (black poet) is symbolic of the situation created by apartheid. It is not only the oppression suffered under white rule (Major Whitebeard); it is also the problem of black South Africans defending the same system that oppresses them (Jonathan). These Africans are called sell-outs by other Africans, and Rasechaba, the poet, acts as the mediator to present the whole picture of the situation in South Africa.

Maponya's attempt to raise the consciousness of South Africans contemplates not only a black/white but also a black/black dialectic. Jonathan is therefore portrayed as a traitor to his own people. The playwright is saying that everybody needs to be involved in and committed to the same struggle for freedom. Excuses such as the one given by Jonathan to Rasechaba are highlighted as acts of moral cowardice and racial betrayal:

JONATHAN: Remember Rasechaba that I'm doing a job like any other person who wakes up in the morning to go to town for a white man.

RASECHABA: . . . the difference is that your salary is dirty. It is enveloped with the blood of your own brothers . . . . You're a sell-out . . . , who has no conscience (68-69).

Jonathan's character conveys the contradiction the apartheid system expresses in itself as he says: «I'm also convinced that we must stand aloof from politics. We are servants of God, and God does not wish for us to enter the political arena» (69). Jonathan represents the self-destruction perpetrated by a regime that kept blacks as illiterate people so that they could easily be brain-washed to obey blindly the rules that oppressed them.

One of the differences between Manaka's and Maponya's theater is that Manaka's theater is more lyrical and metaphorical; Maponya's deals more specifically with facts (Seligsohn 1986, 15). A few examples of these facts reflected under apartheid rule are the squalid, demeaning, brutal conditions under which blacks live in South Africa. As Rasechaba recites:

Look deep into the ghetto . . .  
 And see the modernized graves  
 Manacled with chains  
 So as not to resist . . .  
 Others are undergreed  
 Unread, underpaid  
 And deprived of the rights to quench  
 Their education thirst.  
 . . . The motto reads thus  
 Divide and rule (72-73).

The poet passionately denounces these brutal facts and conditions directly to the audience with the intention of making them aware of the unfair system that rule their lives under the motto *divide and rule*, which was keeping blacks apart and rewarding them for turning on each other rather than turning on their oppressors.

The poems used in the play become a way of showing self-assertion under a system that was eroding people's dignity and humanity. When Whitebeard asks Rasechaba why he does not write poems that do not make people feel angry and violent, Rasechaba responds: «The manner in which I write my poetry is decided by the situation and inspiration at a given time. . . . If the spirit of the nation moves within [the poet], he will write about the nation. . . . If I don't feel anything, I don't write anything» (64). Like humor, poetry becomes the liberating force through which the poet denounces his oppression.

Although Maponya's work focuses mainly on the specific issues of transmitting the principle of Black Consciousness to his community, he was aware of the exposure that black South Africans had had to Western cultures and forms. He not only realized that both Western and traditional South African forms are combined in his country, but also acknowledged the impact that Brecht's political theater had on his development as an artist. Maponya's plays, like Brecht's, intended to be not dogmatic but didactic in reaching the black audience and making them aware of a situation they needed to change. Also like Brecht's characters, Maponya's characters, according to South African theater

critic Ian Steadman, do not convey any moral or psychological complexities, since Maponya «concerns himself with themes which affect the black working class in general» (1985, 497). The characters in Maponya's plays, like those in Brecht's, are types found in their societies rather than characters with an individual and more developed psychology.

The production of *Gangsters* requires performances in two different staging areas. One of the areas is used for the prison cell, and the other one represents various settings. A red crucifix the size of a person is set on a platform in the cell. In the opening scene, the audience sees a man—the poet Rasechaba—dead on the cross, dressed in black, including a black hood. The biblical image of the cross and Christ's blood are also used by Maponya in *The Hungry Earth*, in which one of the characters states: «But our Black blood will flow to water the tree of freedom» (1987, 155). Thus, like Christ's blood redeemed human beings, the blood of heroes such as Biko would be the black South African sign of sacrifice for the liberation of Black South Africans. Blood always conveys a double meaning: death and life. And the blood shed by innocent people, such as the Soweto children and Biko, had aroused the passions of the masses and enraged them to continue struggling for their freedom.

As previously mentioned, in his plays, Maponya, like Brecht, uses a clear didacticism, character types, as well as a small cast of actors who each enact different characters or directly address the audience in monologues. In *Gangsters*, though, there are two main techniques that engender the Brechtian alienation effect in the audience: flashback and poetry. The use of flashback comprises a double function as well. On the one hand, the flashback moves the audience back and forth from present to past and viceversa, disrupting a linear action which could leave room for the audience's empathy with the characters. For instance, after having seen Rasechaba dead on the cross at the beginning of the play, the audience later sees how he is being interrogated. They also can hear Jonathan referring to the day he met Rasechaba at church, before his present interrogation. On the other hand, the flashback displays a present which is the result of a past that needs to be understood and reconstructed in order to create a new future. Therefore, the content and form of the play are attuned to express the need of black South Africans to become self-aware, self-determining subjects of cultural and social change.

In addition, the use of flashback provides the playwright with the opportunity to create a play of circular structure—which is reminiscent of such African American plays such as Baraka's *Dutchman* and *The Slave*. The play begins and ends, for example, with the poet dressed in black clothes and hood hanging from a red cross. This circular structure suggests a ritualistic effect that serves to display a repetitious quality within which the need for change is implied. Change is in the audience's hands to be carried out through their actions. Yet, change is also suggested in the double connotation of the red cross seen at the beginning and the end of the play. Whereas the man who is hanging from the red cross at the beginning symbolizes the blood shed by the victims of the brutal, oppressive system of white supremacy and subjugation, the man and red cross at the end symbolize the blood of the tree of life, the blood shed by the martyrs of apartheid who, like Rasechaba's impassioned poems, have regenerated the social consciousness of the black community.

By using biblical mythology, Maponya discloses the treachery of apartheid system in order that people can understand the need to tear off the disguise which has distorted religion and African history. Maponya exposes the truth and opens the audience's eyes by directly addressing them and reciting poems that denounce their situation in South

Africa. Although in most of Maponya's plays there are neither music nor songs, poems like the following by Rasechaba, replace these two elements to become the aching cry and sorrowful laments uttered by black South Africans:

They broke one window first  
 then on all windows played sounds  
 Made by the drums of wars.  
 Both doors joined the chorus  
 The front emitting quick soprano notes  
 The back a slow dub-dub-dub.  
 . . . This is the music  
 That has become notorious  
 It plays at the first hour of the day  
 . . . While you open the front  
 within seconds  
 the musicians spit their songs into every room  
 while others guard the doors for escapers.  
 Torches flashing all over!  
 And the poet is TAKEN (81-82).

Although the songs and music of freedom were confined behind bars, they never stopped breathing in the spirit of the black community. Maponya's commitment as a black Consciousness artist is evident in his works, especially in *Gangsters*. The torch of black liberation kindled by Stephen Biko has been kept lit in Maponya's works. The playwright knew that freedom was in the hands of the people who needed to strengthen their solidarity and brotherhood. The distinct message of *Gangsters*, then, is that, as Rasechaba asserts, the martyrs, the singers, and the poets are always led «by the people» (75). Like the artists of the Black Arts Movement, Black Consciousness theater dramatized the power of the voices and struggle of black people for dignity, freedom and justice.

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## Narrative Devices, Time and Ontology in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*.

KRIBEN PILLAY

In its twenty-four years of existence, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* has gained the status of a theatre classic in drama studies. But much of this attention is now no longer focused on the play in performance, but either on its textual attributes and the literary concerns of character, plot, theme, structure, imagery, and historical situation; or on the more anthropological investigations of the origins of its narrative devices, especially within the strong legacy of the African oral traditions (Shunmugam 1995). This article will not attempt to tread on similar paths of exploration, but to show that the great worth of the piece can also be accounted for in the performance *dynamics* of its narrative devices where these effect an actor/audience relationship which is possibly the subliminal ground in which the play is deeply rooted and which is the source of its performance magic. This analysis then is concerned with the play as a performance rather than as a literary text. In the context of African literature we have to acknowledge the great oral traditions as probably being more vital than literary ones, and in the context of African diasporic literature, this orality is the mother of the written word. With this in mind, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, although accessible as a literary work, must be given more attention to what it reveals of itself in performance.

Before we come to the main thesis of this article, it is only appropriate that we come to an understanding of how a play like *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* fits into the category of African diasporic literature when it could be argued that rather than being from the African diaspora, it is, first and foremost, a product of Africa. The only guide here has to be in the nature of diasporic literature itself, where we find that it is a product of people whose origins are in Africa but whose settlement elsewhere has led to a transformation of their original modes of storytelling, both in form, content and language through an engagement with another culture or cultures. In the light of these criteria, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* is certainly a product of diasporic forces, except that these forces took place on African soil. The language of the play is essentially English, its narrative forms derive from both Western theatre and African oral traditions, and its concerns, broadly speaking, are the experiences of oppressed African people in a society not quite of their own making. These characteristics of the play are also the characteristics of much of the literature from the African diaspora.

Also, before we can proceed, we need to understand that the concept *ontology* is not used here in its normally accepted sense of relating to *metaphysical* or *transpersonal*

*being*. Rather, the term is used here to refer more to our *psychosocial being*, although, philosophically, there may not be neat razor-sharp distinctions between the two. This usage, while not widespread because performance theory is yet to grapple significantly with the concept and its implications for understanding performance and its reception, is not without precedent in theatre criticism. Richard Hornby, in his discussion on role-playing, perhaps is the first to use the term in formal performance analysis (Hornby 1986, 87).

The examination of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* in this article derives its methodology more from performance theory than literary discourse. While the former is still a fledgling critical activity compared to literary analysis, it is the most appropriate critical medium for analysing the merits of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. The reasons why performance theory is the most appropriate critical approach are that the play was created through improvisation in the Grotowskian tradition of working with the actors first and then the story (Stone and Scorer 1977, 122), and has some of its roots in the black oral traditions of South Africa (Morris 1989, 96). The fact that the play was only committed to paper a year after its première in 1972 also clearly shows the oral basis of the work (Vandenbroucke 1986, 158).

While this article will attempt to engage in an analysis of performance acts specifically as they relate to actor/audience relationships, it is not to be concluded that other studies do not acknowledge the play's immense effectiveness in this area. Two very early, minor studies comment on important performance acts (Stone and Scorer 1977; O'Sheel 1978). In particular, Patrick O'Sheel in his article on «Athol Fugard's 'Poor Theatre',» points to «the strain in the text [that is] in performance «bearable (and fruitful)» (O'Sheel, 74). This is a recognition of the primacy of the live performance, and an early indication only four years after the play's inception where any meaningful examination should take place.

It is also significant to note that the insights pertaining to the main thesis of this article arose after this writer's active involvement with the play as director, when it played in a slightly adapted form (it was given a South African Indian setting) for over a year during the period 1987-1988. This production, which was sanctioned by the creators—Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona—and seen by the latter two, provided first-hand observations of the performance dynamics to be discussed in this article. This experience strengthened my view that a theory of performance has to arise from actual performances and not literary models of critical activity which reduce performances to what is finally captured in the written text. However, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* as a literary text is nevertheless adequate in providing the reader with a clear indication of the different performance acts which it demands of its actors, even if the quality and effect of these acts can only be experienced in a live performance. It is these clearly defined acts indicated in the text which are under scrutiny here and which allow us to explore the play as one of the great achievements of South African Theatre.

Theatrically, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* is a one-act play. Its action is not broken by any pause, either for dramatic effect or for the traditional purpose of giving the audience a break. But structurally, the play has two different narrative modes which, it is suggested, constructs the play's theatrical *presence*. This in turn creates the *ontological matrix* where both actors and audience participate in a heightened sense of *being-in-the-here-and-now*.

*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* opens with a monologue by the character Styles, which in the published version is almost one third of the script (about twenty-five minutes in

performance time). In performance, however, the actor John Kani sometimes speaks for as long as one and a half hours (Vandenbroucke 1986, 167). This occurs because its improvisatory, storytelling character of the monologue allows him to feed off the day's news and to interact with his audience in the tradition of indigenous storytellers.

The plot of the play only begins with the introduction of the character Sizwe in the duologue section. At this point we have a different performance mode more akin to traditional Western theatre. But it is not wholly Western, even though the actors engage with each other as characters rather than with the audience. Even here storytelling in the manner of the opening monologue occurs, with the actor playing Styles now also playing the character Buntu who in turn plays a number of different roles as he narrates a story or cajoles the unsophisticated Sizwe Bansi into giving up his identity for the sake of survival in a dehumanising bureaucratic system. The following schema outlines the structure which is important for an understanding of the dynamics which take place and which, it is argued, gives the play its special place in world theatre.

PERFORMANCE ACTS	PERFORMANCE MODE	CHARACTERISTICS
<p>MONOLOGUE Styles talks to audience</p>	<p>DIRECT ADDRESS <i>PAST TIME STORY</i> Telling</p>	<p>Storytelling, role-playing directly for the audience. Breaking down the metaphoric fourth wall (Shunmugam 1995, 103).</p>
<p>DUOLOGUE Styles/Buntu interacts with Sizwe</p>	<p>THEATRE THROUGH THE FOURTH WALL INDIRECT ADDRESS <i>PRESENT TIME STORY</i> Showing</p>	<p>Showing unfolding action of characters and situations. Includes storytelling, role-playing for the other character, but at times directly includes the audience as the other character.</p>

The thrust of this article's thesis is that *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* displays innovative uses of two distinct narrative devices; *past time story* and *present time story*. The former is a performance act in the present, but delivered (tells) the story by actively engaging with the past through memory. The latter, also a performance act in the present, unfolds (shows) its story in the present. In world theatre, *past time story* would be associated with traditional storytelling, and *present time story* with Western theatre. The characteristics of these two narrative devices are presented schematically further below, where we note that *past time story* and *present time story* manipulate audience participation in two different ways. In the former the audience is *actively* participating in the given action through the *imaginative* construction of physical properties, that is, constructing their own colours, textures, physical features, etc., in their mind's eye. In the latter the audience are *passively* witnessing the action unfolding before them.

Aston and Savona, in their semiotic study *Theatre as Sign-System* (1991, 27-29), delineate various kinds of time in a performance, but there is no specific conceptual



identification of story time as past or present. Similarly, Bernard Beckerman in his analysis of the potency of direct presentation in audience engagement (1990, 110-127) makes no reference to story time as described here. This omission is not so much a matter of poor theory but of cultural situation; storytelling as in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* is just not culturally available in Western society to the extent that it is in Africa. This lack in Western society has got to do with the development of individualism and cultural products which cater for the individual as compared to communal societies in Africa where telling stories is a natural sharing, participatory activity. Their theory is thus based on Western models of theatre which are essentially *present time story* without the improvisations and role-playing in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, which overlap with both *past time story* and *present time story* in the play and which sustains the constant movement from one mode to the other.

*Past time story* would have been the legacy inherited by co-creators John Kani and Winston Ntshona from their oral culture. The switch to *present time story*, where the audience no longer imaginatively constructs the story but watches it unfold, would be the Western, Eurocentric theatre legacy of Athol Fugard. Their coming together—and any careful analysis of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* will show a constant switching from one mode to the other—allows for the creation of an *ontological matrix* which, more than just the sociopolitical content of the work, heightens its reception and provides the performers with tools to engage the audience in deeply rewarding ways.

By *ontological matrix* it is suggested that the audience in a performance of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* are not only presented with a story that reflects their sociopolitical reality and their psychological responses to this reality, but are also presented with a construction of reality that mimics their *psychosocial being*. This element is the deep structure of the work that allows for a resonance to be created between performer and audience in a way that nourishes the surface story in a totally holistic way.

To understand this clearly, one has only to reflect on how we receive reality from moment to moment. Without being consciously aware of the process, every human being is constantly switching from *past time story* to *present time story*, from telling/listening to showing/witnessing. Our normal witnessing of daily events could be said to be our engagement with *present time story*, but this is not the whole truth. There are rapid switchings to *past time story* as we encounter others who narrate past events, or as we, in imagination, use memory to make sense of experiences. So, our psychosocial being is founded upon perception which is both direct and outer (i.e. directly perceiving the outer world) and indirect and inner (i.e. indirectly perceiving the world through an imaginative construction of it).

It may not be true to say that one narrative mode operates to the total exclusion of the other, in the same way that listening does happen independently of seeing. But it is accurate to say that where there is just predominantly one mode it engages the audience either directly or indirectly. *Past time story* will engage you directly in the imagination and with the performer, but indirectly with the physical properties of the story; while *present time story* will engage you directly with the unfolding action, but indirectly with the imagination and the performers.

When *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* made its appearance in Europe and America, there was an overwhelmingly positive response, culminating in the Tony awards for actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona for their roles in *The Island*, the sister piece to *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. It was therefore automatically assumed that this response was founded on the surface content, which is sociopolitical and deals with a country whose

Draconian laws and their effects could only be emotionally articulated through the powerful medium of the theatre. But this, as it is suggested here, is only half the story. The other half is in the way the story was told. There is a delicious irony here that a land that was so divided could give rise to a theatre that was so whole. And when we confront wholeness we respond to it from our depths because our *being* is so constructed. When Richard Hornby writes that «the weaknesses in American acting are a reflection of our national ‘ontological insecurity,’ the weak sense we have of who we are as a people» (1986, 87), he is in fact supporting the thesis of this article. In other words, the wholeness of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* arose from a land divided and yet whole because it contains cultures and cultural forms which complement each other, as they actually did in the collaboration of Athol Fugard with John Kani and Winston Ntshona.

As the schematic representation above shows, there is much role-playing in the monologue as there is in the duologue. The role-playing by Styles/Buntu, which ranges from portraying an aggrieved cockroach to a variety of black and white characters, anticipates the *real* social role which Sizwe must assume in order to survive the iniquitous social system. It is thematically significant that it is the Styles/Buntu character who does the role-playing as part of his storytelling because physically it suggests action, doing, and this iconically represents the ideal of the active creator as opposed to the passive witness, the victim who has to be shaken out of his lethargy. In the same way that Buntu shakes Sizwe out of his passivity and gives him the opportunity to act, so audiences were shaken out of their passive witnessing and made to co-create a story using their imaginations.

Role-playing, while serving a dramatic, storytelling function, also serves a structural one. In the creation of another character and his/her environment with simply the body and not much else by way of costume, make-up and props, there is the fusing of *past time story* and *present time story*. The audience is asked to both witness present time action *and* co-create through the imagination (which is memory, the past) the details to embellish the present time action. This is a significant performance act in the play because it prevents the dominant mode from being static and allows subtle changes to occur. Like real life and our rapid switching between witnessing and creative imagination, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* constantly shifts the demands on its audience's perception so that it becomes poised between mental activity and passivity. This is a state of equilibrium highly regarded in such spiritual disciplines as Zen Buddhism because it is the state of being closest to our ontological identity. It is a state of both deep receptivity and deep, creative action which Fugard highly values in the collaborative approach in play-making, saying «you've got to keep company with actors who are capable of something that almost approximates to Zen spontaneity» (Anon 1977/78, 84). It stands to reason, then, that the creators of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* began with an ontological sense that infuses the work and manifest itself in the many layers of form and content.

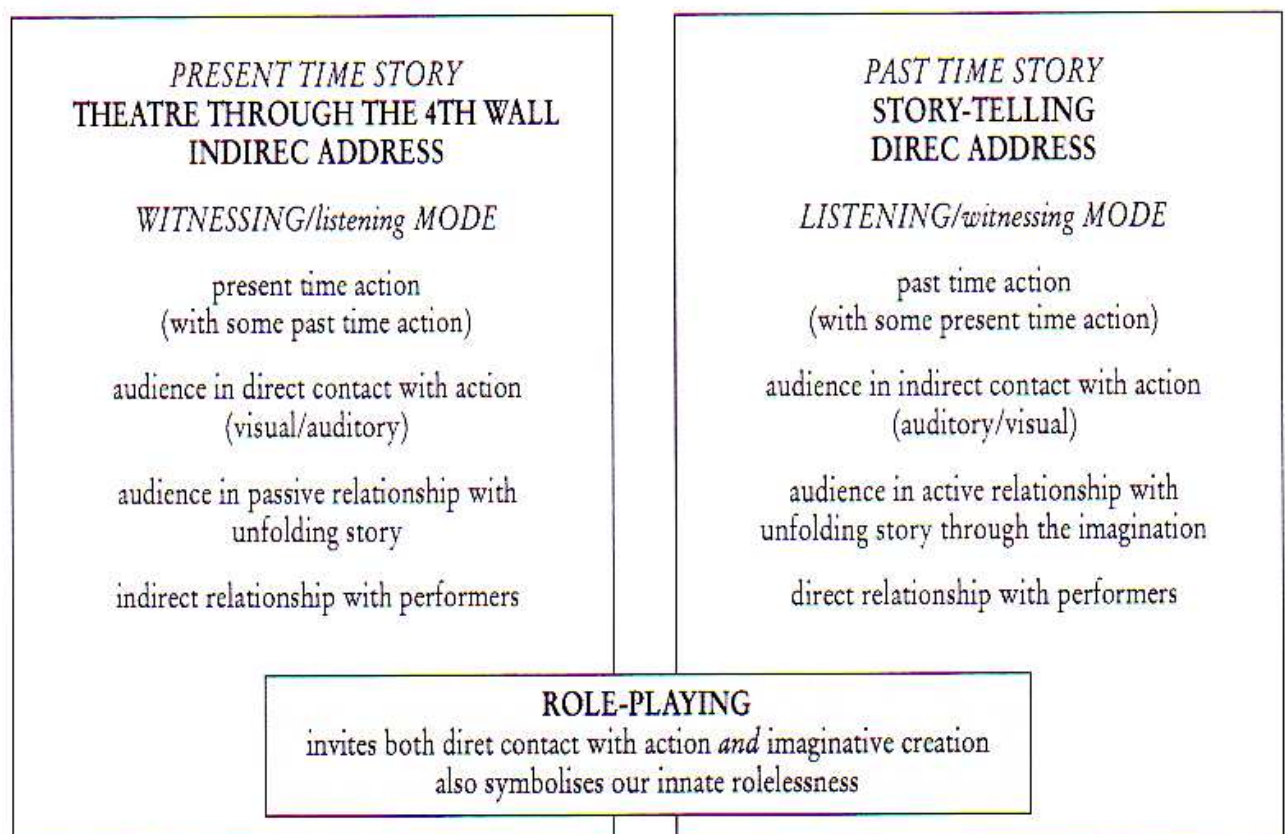
A further consideration of role-playing in relation to the ontological matrix is the one given by Richard Hornby:

Role playing within the role sets up a special acting situation that goes beyond the usual exploration of specific roles; it exposes the very nature of role itself. The theatrical efficacy of role playing within the role is the result of its reminding us that all human roles are relative, that identities are learned rather than innate (1986, 72).

The above is an important observation of the other ontological dimension of role-playing in the play. Beyond fusing the two presentation/reception modes through this performance act, the switching of roles is an iconic statement about social identity to which the audience in the *here-and-now* can subliminally relate. This occurs because in the act of aesthetic engagement they are temporarily being transported out of their ordinary social roles by the power of theatre (Hornby 1986, 73).

Also, a fact which is little realised in a reading of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, is that the opening monologue, where the character Styles speaks to the audience, telling them how he became a photographer (and in so doing he presents a poignant picture of working-class black South African life), was created like a jazz arrangement. Around a set theme the actor John Kani would weave the day's sociopolitical events into his narration, using improvisation and role-playing to blur the distinction between the real and fictional worlds. At times he would even respond to what the audience had to say and, in so doing, bring the audience into direct, intimate contact with himself as a performer. He thus becomes an icon of the traditional storytellers of African cultures as well as an icon of himself as he deftly incorporates personal experience into his improvisations. Where there were working-class black audiences, Styles was also an icon of the members of the audience, now linked more solidly with his audience because as a representative of the whole, this icon was also metonymic in character. In fact, there would be a double metonymy. The actor John Kani would share the same background as the character he portrayed, giving the audience the tangible sense that both actor and role represented them.

### THE ACTOR / AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP AND THE TWO NARRATIVE DEVICES



This analysis, however, is no claim for a unique theatre form, but rather a resurfacing of a form that one could argue is evident, however obliquely in modern interpretations, in the classical Greek plays and to some extent, Shakespeare.

A good example is Sophocles' *Antigone*. Its structure, like many of the plays of that period, displays both *present time story* and *past time story*. In *The Island*, the other acclaimed workshopped production by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, one sees the natural integration of the Sophocles play into the action. The play-within-the-play reflects the challenge to authority which the inmates hope to effect subversively through the enactment of the ancient story, very much as the co-creators wanted to effect a challenge to the repressive political authority of the day. Already the dividing line between outer reality and fictional reality is dropped, so creating a powerful meta-theatrical context for the audience to participate in. But all this is subsumed by the ontological matrix of ancient Greek modes of narration being refined and given new life in a modern story which not only shows black political reality being supported in its quest for meaning by an ancient European story, but also being supported *in the way the story is told*.

*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, contrary to the impression given by this analysis about the complex dynamics of its performance acts and their ontological meaning, is far from being a self-consciously *clever* play. It is only upon closer examination of its deep structures that it can be seen that its broad appeal and genius is founded on its presentational techniques. The dance between *past* and *present time stories* allows the audience not only to see themselves in the events on stage and the stories told, but to resonate with the ways we actually perceive and make sense of the world, which are the ways, the dance, of time and perception. In his *Notebooks 1960/1977*, Fugard asks: «can there be an action (the telling of a story) which, if informed with love and an attempt at the truth, is without significant consequences?» (1983, 223). This question is answered by *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. Its significance, as I have tried to demonstrate, is its dance with the primary modes of presentation/reception in the theatrical event—*past time story* with its evocation of the imagination in the act of listening, and *present time story* with its emphasis on simply witnessing. This dance then becomes the subliminal dance between the actors and the audience, with narrative devices providing the music and the actual stories giving us the lyrics. All these come together in a wholeness which not only reflects ontological potential, but awakens it. *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* has given the world a theatre of wholeness that is as much located in the story as it is located in the way the story is articulated.

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# The Amistad Affair and the Nation of Sierra Leone: The Dramatic Return of Memory

IYUNOLU OSAGIE

In Africa today, theater serves as a significant medium in transmitting information to the continent's vast rural and urban populations. Theater has become a potent force in many African countries. It is viewed by politicians, for example, as a double-edged sword: it can work as an effective campaign tool but can also be used by opposing parties or radical students to expose social injustice and other corrupt practices. Many international agencies are also appreciating theater's pedagogical reach in third world nations. For instance, world agricultural and health organizations are by-passing ineffective government efforts and using local theater groups as a vehicle for reaching the masses with their programs. Theaters with such social purposes have generally come under the rubric *theater for development*. Theater for development is proving effective in many communities in Africa. In a study conducted by Joy Morrison in the West African nation of Burkina Faso, she concludes that

[t]he role of performance is central to all African cultures, and for generations Africans have been communicating with each other in this way. African performance differs from that in the West because it is part of the whole fabric of African life and culture, existing as part of the larger communication environment which includes dance, drama, storytelling, music, games, and visual arts (1991, 31).

It is this communication environment which playwright Charlie Haffner of Sierra Leone exploits fully in his improvisatory play, *Amistad Kata Kata*. Very much a participant in the theater for development practices, Haffner knows the value of anchoring his plays in the cultural traditions of the people.

He therefore employs traditional processes of social learning in his play *Amistad Kata Kata* and, in the process, contributes to the cultural awakening of a nation undergoing a crisis of identity. I myself was awakened from historical slumber when I discovered the Amistad story via two Americans who have been inspired by the subject, Charles Johnson in his novel, *Middle Passage*, and Robert Hayden in his poem by the same title. I was as impressed by the Amistad Africans' revolt as I was stunned by their citizenship. Although I was born in Sierra Leone and received my formal education there, I never once heard or read about the Amistad Africans (Sierra Leone's colonial educational system made no such provision) until I stumbled on the story in the United States as recently as 1992. Haffner, however, was fortunate enough to hear the story in

Sierra Leone. In 1986, as a student at the University of Sierra Leone's African Studies Department, Haffner heard an inspiring American anthropologist, Joseph Opala, lecture on Sengbe Pieh's role as the leader of a revolt of African captives on board a Spanish slave ship called «La Amistad» (Friendship). Profoundly affected by what he heard, he was inspired to write the play *Amistad Kata Kata*. This play has changed the future of theater in Sierra Leone in that it has forced the historical past of the nation into the consciousness of the Sierra Leonean people.

The Amistad affair goes back to 1839 when fifty-three Africans, out of an initial shipment of six hundred from a slave holding port South of Freetown owned by the Portuguese slave trader Pedro Blanco, were sold to two Spaniards, Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montez after their arrival at a barracoon near Havana, Cuba. Ruiz and Montez chartered the schooner Amistad to transport their slaves from Havana to a port near Puerto Principe. On board were the fifty-three slaves, including a boy, Kali, and three young girls. The crew included the captain of the ship, Ramon Ferer, his half caste cook, Celestino, his African cabin boy, Antonio, two Spanish crew men, and the slave owners Ruiz and Montez.

It was supposed to be a routine trip, but a storm at sea stretched the journey into a least suspected adventure. The Africans, who naturally disdained their enslavement and personally despised Celestino, who had jokingly told them that they would end up in the white man's pot for dinner, managed to free themselves and attack their enslavers with cane knives which they found in the hold of the ship. In the struggle that ensued, the captain, his cook, and two of the African captives lost their lives. Montez was wounded. The two Spanish seamen escaped over board in a small boat. Sengbe Pieh, who emerged as the leader of the revolt, and whom American authors call Joseph Cinque, ordered both Ruiz and Montez to navigate the ship back to Africa in the direction of the rising sun. Montez and Ruiz obliged, but at night they piloted north and west, hoping to return to sympathetic lands. After months at sea, the schooner was taken into custody near Culloden Point, Long Island, New York. The ship was towed to New London, Connecticut, and the Africans were arrested and charged with murder and piracy. Helped by the abolitionists, who saw this arrest as emblematic of their struggle against injustice and slavery, the Africans' case went from the lower court to the Supreme Court. In the end, with former United States President John Quincy Adams working for the defense, the Africans and the abolitionist cause won a major victory. The Africans were able to return to Africa in 1842.

Although this case was closely followed by three major Western powers of the day—Spain, England and the United States—the emerging colonial nation of Sierra Leone was largely ignorant of the event. Even after the captives arrived in Sierra Leone, along with some American missionaries who set up a mission in South Western Sierra Leone in an area known as Kaw Mendi, their dramatic and triumphant return did not enter the annals of the country's history. In fact, most of what is known today of the story of the Amistad survivors after their return to Sierra Leone are culled from letters written by American missionaries to their home base. Even such letters suggest that the victories of the court trials in America were somewhat beclouded by the difficulties of returning to a land still afflicted by a slave market economy. The return was an uneasy one fraught with danger and the unexpected.

Sengbe Pieh, for instance, returned to a land that no longer was. His village, which was supposed to be the rallying point for the Amistad survivors to remain together as a group as well as a place from which they could each find their bearings to their past lives, had been charred to the ground. The battle between villages and between ethnic groups for peripheral control of the slave markets (the Portuguese, followed by the Spanish, were largely responsible for directing and centrally controlling the slave

markets) resulted in the devastation of whole villages and ethnic groups of people. Pieh's wife and two children, who he had not seen since the day he was kidnapped and sold into slavery, had also become victims of the peculiar trade: they had been either killed or captured. This was the story for most of the Amistad returnees. The landscape they remembered had changed. The reality was that they themselves were in peril of being taken, and several of them were in fact captured, and their freedom had to be negotiated for by the American missionaries. The vicissitudes of negotiating their every day existence delineates not only the Amistad Africans' reality but also delineates the traumatic reality of a nation in peril. The nation could ward off slavery only at the expense of falling under British colonial *protection*.

Hearing the story of the Amistad in 1986 from John Opala, the American anthropologist, was a rude awakening for playwright Charlie Haffner. He pondered over the extent to which he, like others around him, had been alienated from some of the most significant moments in his country's history. He had wept when he first heard the story. Haffner was so affected by the Amistad story that his concept of theater took on a whole new meaning. Disregarding an education that had taught him more about the Industrial Revolution than about his own history, he and his professional theater group, The Freetong Players, began building what he called *a theater of relevance*, a theater that would raise the consciousness of the people by making them more aware of their own history. The play, *Amistad Kata Kata*, a product of this new thinking, premiered at the British Council in Freetown, the capital city, in May of 1988. The play produced the same shock in the audience that Haffner himself had first experienced. Why had they never heard of the heroic ventures of the Amistad captives? Haffner addresses all this important question at the very beginning of his play.

The play opens with a research student of history, pen and paper in hand, questioning an old woman—*Gramma* in Sierra Leone's major lingua franca, krio—as they walk along a footpath to an ancestral ceremony being held for Sengbe Pieh, one hundred and fifty years after his Amistad experience in the Americas:

GRAMA: Soon we shall be at KawMendi, the home of Sengbe Pieh... It is along this same path that Sengbe was captured 150 years ago. We are quite early, in time for the ceremony.

STUDENT: Yes the ceremony is tonight. I am happy I made it afterall.

GRAMA: Are you? (*laughter*) Please help me with some tobacco (*student helps to fill and ignite pipe and Grama makes a few satisfying puffs*). You see, my son, our people have a tradition which is based on the belief that a person survives after death, and it is the surviving personality spirit that enters the land of the dead.

STUDENT: I agree with you Grama. From my readings I have discovered that nearly all African tribes have some kind of ancestral culture. I think I remember reading about eh... I think the Mendes call it *tindyamei* or so...

GRAMA: You are quite right my son. In order for the spirit of the dead ancestor to «enter» his «new country» that spirit has to first cross a river. It is here that the *tindyamei* or crossing rites come in.



STUDENT: Ehn... I see. Grama, let me take these points down (*as he writes down the information laughter by Grama*)... please... Grama...

GRAMA: Ah you people! You are always writing. Our bookmen of today (*laughter*).

STUDENT: Grama, please don't laugh. You have just made a relevant point. Continue Grama. Please... go on Grama.

The opening scene presents the tensions that exist between two kinds of knowledge: indigenous African knowledge on the part of the old woman, a form of knowledge that preserves the history of indigenous peoples in the oral tradition, and Western knowledge, exemplified by the university scholar who seems to have learned only the stories about Africa that were sanctioned by the colonial educational system. This scene is crucial because it sets the tone for the rest of the play; it directs the audience to appreciate the whole play through the filters of such conflicts.

The crisis of modernity is also depicted in this first scene. As Grama continues to explain ancestral customs to the student, he questions the validity of her claims:

GRAMA: You ask me if that is true? Can your Grama tell you a lie? Well, even if it is a lie, you can still write it down... go on, write this one down... Our ancestors can be angry with us and as a result become very vengeful towards us because they were wronged during their lifetime or after...

STUDENT: Hmmm. (*writing, takes a deep breath*) I see...

GRAMA: What do you see? You see nothing son. You bookmen and leaders fail to see that it is our ancestors that offer us guidance and counselling throughout our never ending stream of life. But when a child is well fed does he not look upon a grave as an ordinary heap of earth?

STUDENT: Surely, Grama, ever since I was far younger than this I have heard of names like Shaka the Zulu, Sundiata Keita, Mansa Musa, Osei Tutu, yes the Samoris and the Lion of Judah who pitched their strength against the whites and boldly attempted to keep them away from African...

GRAMA: Well, we too had our Bai Burehs, our Manga Sewas, our Ndawas and Kai Londos, our Alimamy Solokos, not to mention Sengbe Pieh... It is a tragedy. But the truth will be out tonight. A snail may run but it cannot avoid its shell. The truth never falters. As from tonight, this country will know who Sengbe Pieh was. Come my son, you must be hungry. Come, let's go. (*Exits*).

STUDENT: Grama, please wait for me. Wait, let me check what I have written down so far. (*He begins to read but Grama does not wait*).

Although the play seems to focus on the all-important cultural asset—the reverence of ancestors as the key component in the memory patterns of Africans—Haffner questions the method in which such memory patterns are maintained. The confident,

relaxed laughter of Grama as she criticizes the student, whose absolute faith seems to be in the written word, is one indication why the Amistad story has failed to enter the nation's psyche. Grama not only indicts the nation for forgetting the heroic story of the Amistad Africans but also, through her reaction to the student's obsession with writing, suggests that the transmission of memory is effective only when the most viable cultural channels are employed.

Haffner confronts a major problem in the African condition today: the tendency to elevate the written word to the place of *fact* and the oral to the place of *fiction*. This form of hierarchization comes with the power and privilege of Western education. The irony is that only a few Sierra Leoneans have had adequate access to the privileges of Western education. The vast majority of Sierra Leoneans today are still functionally illiterate, and the oral tradition remains the primary medium of effective communication. That is why in most African countries the theater for development has become the significant way of communicating with its mostly rural population. Besides, a colonial education left little room for indigenous histories to be accommodated and transmitted. The obvious «guiding pattern» through which Sierra Leoneans transmit commemorative rites to «subsequent generations» (Schwartz 1991, 222) therefore remains the oral tradition. It is interesting to note that on this particular night in the play, when the memory of Sengbe Pieh is ritualized, it is done not through a traditional educational format, but through the performative act of the oral tradition. The people see and know through hearing, not through reading words on paper.

Indeed, if written words were enough, there were already many books written in the United States on the Amistad. Such books had been sitting on the shelf in the library at The University of Sierra Leone for many years. Moreover, a stamp dedicated to the Amistad event was added to the Sierra Leone stamp collection in 1985, but all of these written records had no real impact on the psyche of the nation. On the contrary, it was Opala's excellent use of the oral tradition in his academic lecture which led two Sierra Leonean playwrights, Charlie Haffner in *Amistad Kata Kata* and Raymond Desouza George in *The Broken Handcuff*, to channel the story through a performative route. It was also Haffner's repeated production of the Amistad play for the different economic and social strata in a variety of settings (formal theater house, market places, schools and street settings) in Freetown that finally disseminated the story of the Amistad.

In the next scene, when the commemorative rites to which Grama and the history student are participants begin, Pieh's ghost is resurrected. This ghost is angry with the living for forgetting their ancestral duties to the dead. The ghost's refusal of the libation offered by one of the ancestral priests on behalf of the people registers the impact of their failure to remember their past. Sengbe's ghost is finally appeased by the rhythm of drums, and he finally decides to share with the living the memorable events of his life. His recall of events, starting with his capture on the farm to the trip across the seas to the court trials in the United States, are performed through a series of flashbacks. These flashbacks enable the audience to see beyond the ghost to the Sengbe Pieh that once was.

He is presented as a hero who fights not just for his life but for the freedom of his people. Asked why he had revolted against his captors, Sengbe replied: «I was not born to be a slave. It is better for me to die fighting than live many moons in misery. And if I am hanged, I will die happy if that will save my people from bondage» (16). In the last scene of the play, Adams, in his final submission to the court, presents Pieh as a hero: «. . . had he lived in the days of Greece or Rome, his name would have been handed down to posterity as one who had practised the most sublime of all virtues—

disinterested patriotism and unshrinking courage» (17). This return of memory, reproduced within the confines of a familiar cultural space, effectively impacts the audience's psyche, as they begin to see themselves against the backdrop of one glorious moment from their past. Being a people with no celebrated legacy of patriotism, Sierra Leoneans encounter a fresh experience of national pride and historical awareness in the play. For a people who seem to have traditionally inherited a spirit of cynicism from their colonial past, they are truly grateful for the illuminating encounter with the past, a past which has produced an alternative definition of their national identity. This flood of memory has also encouraged identification with other patriotic heroes who lived and died fighting a variety of oppressive institutions within the colonial and postcolonial eras.

It should, however, be understandable why Sierra Leone as a nation has been forgetful of the few bright moments in its past. Like Pieh and the other Amistad returnees, who had to face many traumatic experiences after the victorious verdict of freedom in a foreign land, the disappointment of independence from colonial rule has produced in Sierra Leoneans a collective amnesia. Their indifference to the political life of the nation, in which they have been barred from meaningful participation by the political elite, dramatically expresses their acceptance of captivity as the ineluctable sign of their national character. Working against this negative thinking, Haffner adopts a tripartite narrative structure in the play to heighten the meaning of the Amistad story. The three concentric layers in the story start with Grama's conversations with the history student; this serves as the outer frame. It is followed by the traditional rite segment in which Sengbe's heroic role is re-enacted. In the third concentric layer, the inner frame, Pieh himself tells the story of the Amistad revolt. By utilizing the repeating patterns of the oral tradition through the concentric layering of the plot structure, Haffner attempts to ensure both the *rememory* of the past as well as the validation of that past.

It is also worth noting that Haffner's effort to awaken the national unconscious of the people was finally rewarded through an almost incidental happening in the politics of the nation. After years of misrule by the government, a group of young, undernourished soldiers overthrew the then Momoh government in a military coup on April 29, 1992. Opala reports in his book *Ecstatic Renovations* that

[t]he April 29 coup occurred during a symposium at City Hall, named for the Amistad Revolt, and when young people took to the streets to celebrate [the coup], they found a ready-made symbol of their liberation in the form of a twenty-foot model of the ship Amistad on the City Hall steps. They paraded it through the streets, chanting praises to the soldiers and to Sengbe Pieh (1994, 10).

This was indeed a dramatic moment as the iconographic power of the occasion elevated Sengbe Pieh to the symbol of the revolution, a revolution with which the people wholly identified. Seeing a reflection of part of themselves in the struggles of Sengbe Pieh and the other captives, the people appropriated the Amistad story with an awareness of their own historical agency in the life of the nation. This renewed sense of agency has liberated the people's mind to explore the neglected ghosts of history within the context of the present. Just as the memory of home kept alive the hope of return for the Amistad Africans, so also the return of memory for the citizens of present day Sierra Leone will secure a home worth living in the present.

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