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**Spectres of the Shore: The Memory of Africa in
Contemporary African-American and Black British
Fiction**

by

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Declaration and Inclusion of Published Work

Chapter Six includes elements from the following previously published articles:

“Circular Talk”: The Social City and Atlantic Slave Routes in S.I. Martin’s *Incomparable World*, New Formations, 55 (Spring 2005), pp 142-58.

‘S.I. Martin, April 24, 1961- ’, in Contemporary ‘Black’ British Writers, ed. R. Victoria Arana (Dictionary of Literary Biography series, Brucoli Clark Layman, Inc., *forthcoming*).

This thesis is the work of Leila Kamali, and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

This study considers the approach in recent African-American and Black British fiction toward the cultural memory of Africa. Following a brief consideration of the relationship between contemporary conceptions of African-American and Black British cultural identities, I examine the ways in which the imaginative journeys and geographies, evoked by the ideals of Africa and 'Africanness', are employed in the negotiation of historical memory, and in the endeavour to situate black identity in the context of contemporary American and British society.

My discussion addresses these questions, initially, in four novels by African-American writers: Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983), and John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* (1990). I argue that African-American writers situate a memory of an African past within an African-American present, through a form of historical memory which is sensitive not only to tradition, but also to the practice of 'possession'. This fluid form of memory, characteristic of a voodoo tradition, and also, these writers suggest, of a diversity of African-American artforms, allows knowledge of African tradition to be situated within the American present, but is broadly denied by an American trend of forgetfulness toward the past, and devalued by institutionalised racism. African-American texts present uses of language in which the linguistic and the pre-linguistic realms are felt to be continuous with one another, in response to an American language which is centrally occupied by the fraught relationship between black and white Americans.

The second half of this study examines the memory of Africa in three Black British works, including Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1991), S.I. Martin's *Incomparable World* (1996), and Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* (1997). I suggest here that Black British authors employ the cultural memory of Africa not as an inheritance which is connected to a known 'tradition', but as one of a diverse number of inheritances which are negotiated as part of the process of situating identity as flexible, individual, and unfinished. The memory of Africa is figured as frozen in the past, along with a range of other cultural inheritances, which are taken up and redramatised in the present as part of an attempt to recover the inherent diversity at the heart of an oppressive British fiction of linearity, and of uniform 'whiteness'. Where Britain, historically, has been silent on Britain's black presence, Black British writers simply speak into that silence.

Emerging from this fruitful comparison between the two literatures is a sense of the contrasting approaches which are made by black writers toward notions of tradition and the performance of identity, in the context of two very different national histories, and as part of fundamental strategies of survival employed in contemporary social settings. These dramatisations are interrogated against continuous issues of race and racism, but also as diverse solutions for identity where national contexts bear a contrasting significance in an age which is increasingly globalised, and in which imperial power has shifted, and continues to shift, between Britain and America.

Introduction

This study considers the approach in recent African-American and Black British fiction toward the cultural memory of Africa. As journeys, geographies and identifications are evoked by ideals of Africa and 'Africanness' in seven contemporary novels, I examine the effects of these approaches upon the negotiation of identity for black authors writing in the context of American and British experience. The 'memory of Africa' functions as a concept in this study which covers a range of narrative approaches toward the continent, encompassing instances of travel to Africa, epistolary narrations of Africa, myths of African ancestry, of ancestral return to Africa, artistic African inheritances, the name 'Africa', a sense of time represented as 'African', symbolic personifications of Africa, self-consciously literary constructions of Africa, and patently fantastic images of Africa which are used to stand for something else. Through the course of this study, I suggest that African-American writers seek to establish their sense of a memory of Africa which resides within a coherent African-American tradition, while for Black British writers, the memory of Africa is felt not in terms of its appearance in a discrete tradition, but instead as one of an increasing number of traditions which are encountered and adopted as a means of performing identity on an individual basis. Before I turn to an analysis of the particular function of the cultural memory of Africa in a selection of recent fiction, however, I would like briefly to explore the relationship between African-American and Black British subject positions during the era in which this writing emerges.

The Sweet Part and the Sad Part: The African-American/Black British Relationship

“Many of my positive black role models came from *Ebony* – people like Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, Quincy Jones. [...] That encouraged me, because I could see that there were and are successful black people. That was the sweet part of it. The sad part of it was they were all American. They were untouchable in that sense.”¹

– Lord Taylor of Warwick

This project’s overarching aim is to draw a comparison between African-American and Black British literatures by means of examining the gaze from each of these standpoints toward that third position – the memory of Africa. The interrogation of expressive identifications between African-American and Black British positions is a primary motivation of this work, and what is particularly intriguing, to me, is the way in which this relationship is perceived to function as a one-way stream of influence. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. identifies the most obvious cause for this conception, as he cites Ekow Eshun’s assertion that “I love going to New York because I can walk down the street and the place is full of black people,” and comments, “part of the romance with America that you find in black Britain has to do with a sense that America has, racially speaking, a critical mass.”² I would like to suggest, however, that there are other important reasons for the frequent conception of a Black British subjectivity as being in passive ‘receipt’ of a dominant African-American tradition.

¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ‘A Reporter At Large: Black London’, in *Black British Culture & Society: A Text Reader*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), pp 169-180 (p 179). Reprinted from *The New Yorker* (28 April & 6 May 1997).

² *Ibid.*, p 177.

Though “black people [...] have been living in Britain for close on 500 years”,³ the beginning of a more significant presence is marked by 1948, the emblematic moment when the *Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury, bringing 492 people from Jamaica, in response to the British appeal to its colonies, following the end of the Second World War, for workers to fill its labour shortage. James Procter emphasises that “it is important to distinguish between 1948 as an *initiatory* rather than an *originary* moment, in terms of black settlement in Britain[, particularly since] the narration of that year has tended to erase a black British presence before it.”⁴ Because African-Americans “kn[o]w that their race ha[s] an American lineage at least as long and comprehensive as any white American could boast”,⁵ African-American writers are able to feel that they write from within an established history of their presence in America, even if that history has always been characterised by American racism. Part of the difficulty that might occur as black people in Britain attempt identification with an African-American position, then, occurs as a result of a perceived sense that black people in America, while always being faced with challenges by the white hegemony, have at least always been a presence that was undeniable, and that is not constantly subject to historical erasure.

A sense of that historical erasure is palpable when we consider Margaret Thatcher’s famous pronouncement, given in January 1978, thirty years after the 1948 Nationality

³ Peter Fryer, ‘Preface’, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), pp ix-xi (p ix).

⁴ James Procter, ‘General introduction: ‘1948’/‘1998’ Periodising postwar black Britain’, in *Writing black Britain 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. James Procter (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp 1-12 (p 3).

⁵ Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (London: Picador, 1995), p 5.

Act, which recognised commonwealth citizens as British subjects with the right of entry into the United Kingdom:

People are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture... The British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and done so much throughout the world, that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.⁶

If Britain has been forgetful about its black presence, and its hybrid history in general, the relationship between Black British and African-American perspectives is similarly affected by an American tendency toward forgetfulness, of which African-Americans themselves are far from innocent. Ann Douglas writes:

America itself was an orphan of sorts. Severed by its own act from its mother country, long disdained and disowned by its European forebears, America was proving just how powerful orphans could be[;...] disinherited, perhaps, but free.⁷

In this historical context of an Americanness which seems often to be defined by an impulse to distance itself from a relationship with people living outside of America, Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, curator of a 1997 exhibition in New York, of black artists working in Britain, comments that:

there remains, here in North America, a tremendous lack of knowledge about the history of people of color living in Britain, and hence a particular unfamiliarity with visual artists living and working in England. [...] My [...] discussions with other Americans about my ideas for this project were often met with the following recurrent and resounding question: “Are there many black people in England?”⁸

⁶ Fryer, p 397. As quoted, Daily Mail, 31 January 1978. p 1.

⁷ Douglas, p 27.

⁸ Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, ‘Introduction’, Transforming the Crown: African, Asian & Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966-1996, ed. Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd (New York: The Franklin H. Williams Caribbean

This study shows that African-American writers and artists tend to foreground a dynamic relationship with an African-American artistic tradition, and to emphasise a sense of a past which is felt to be alive in the present. Yet when it comes to conceptualising a relationship with life outside the American nation, a sense of the contemporaneity of diverse experiences seems rather more difficult for African-American writers to fathom. This emphasis upon the productive relationship with the American past, in contrast with a more troubled relationship with life past and present outside of America, we will see, is a characteristic of African-American writing in general, and largely defines the African-American gaze toward Africa.

Typically, whenever black writers in Britain have approached the question of identification with African-American perspectives, they have encountered the most visible manifestation of that position – that which emerged with the Civil Rights movement and its aftermath. From the late 1960s onwards, black people in Britain would have witnessed African-American identity through the highly visible narrative of Black Power. Lauri Umansky writes:

Black nationalism had emerged across a wide spectrum of organizations and ideologies by the late 1960s and early 1970s[,] from the eclectically Muslim and black separatist Nation of Islam, to the militant and socialist Black Panthers, to the cultural nationalist US Organization headed by Ron Karenga[...] Soured on the dynamics of an integrationist

Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute, 1997), pp 10-14 (p 12). Alan Rice accuses film director Spike Lee of “willful ignorance” for his rhetorical question “How many years have black people been here? Fifty?”, and cites Tara Mack’s comment that, “It always amazes me how much black people in Britain seem to know about and identify with black Americans. Sometimes I want to say, you do realise that black Americans are barely aware you exist.” [Alan Rice, ““Heroes across the Sea”: Black and White British Fascination with African Americans in the Contemporary Black British Fiction of Caryl Phillips and Jackie Kay’, in *Blackening Europe: The African-American Presence*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), pp 217-231 (p 217).]

approach to racial justice, many of the younger Black participants in the Civil Rights movement had begun, by the mid-1960s, to endorse a philosophy of self-determination. [...] Energized by the directive of the recently slain Malcolm X to attain liberation “by any means necessary,” the Black Power movement began to gain momentum in 1966.⁹

The Black British writers considered in the second half of this study grew up in a very slightly later historical period than the African-American writers discussed in the first half, and in fact frequently characterise themselves as readers of the African-American novels discussed here. All the authors I critique here make some commentary, explicit or implicit, upon the Black Power era, the African-Americans regarding it as their contemporary scene, and the Black Britons as a dominant received image of blackness. Yet when Black British writers comment upon the ‘influence’ of African-American writers upon them and their work, there is frequently the sense of an identification which is wished for, but which is somewhat blocked by the fundamental difference between the two experiences. Caryl Phillips has written:

Given the fact that in the seventies there was not, in this country, what we might term a black British literary tradition, I looked to the United States[...] I could connect with the frustrations of the African-American writers, and I could certainly identify with the dark faces that stared out from their book jackets. [...] However, [...] the simple fact was, I was not an American. African-American writers [...] were, at least to my eyes, from a different world.¹⁰

Implicit to the experience described by Phillips is the sense that identification with an African-American position is limited by the perception of a tradition to which Black

⁹ Lauri Umansky, Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties (New York & London: New York University Press, 1996), pp 79-80.

¹⁰ Caryl Phillips, ‘Following On: The Legacy of Lamming and Selvon’, Wasafiri, 29 (Spring 1999), pp 34-36 (pp 34-35).

Britons do not belong. To black people in Britain, denied a sense of any history of Britain's black history, an African-American position, then, can be just as alienating as a narrative of Britishness can.

There is a language epitomised by an African-American activist tradition which is inherently attractive and exciting to Black British writers, but which nevertheless also leaves them at something of a loss, because it does not speak to their own lived experience. Sharae Deckard has noted that:

On 5 December 1964 Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., visited London en route to Stockholm. [...] Dr King urged [...] representatives to publicize Britain's deteriorating racial relations and employ non-violent strategies of direct action to combat discrimination. [...] However, Britain lacked a tradition of philosophically driven direct action such as existed in the southern churches of the United States [...] As Farrukh D[h]ondy states, British Black Power leaders preached apocalyptic US rhetoric: "When the time comes we have to organise". We thought the time had come but nobody was offering us an organisation to join.'¹¹

The almost laughable sense of anachronism which flies up from a comment such as Dhondy's is testament to the depth of the contrast which emerges between the historical African-American and Black British experiences, and which means that even as African-American performances of black identity may be inherently attractive to Black Britons, they simply fail to communicate in such a way that is wholly useful to the British situation. The same is seen, memorably, in a novel by Sam Selvon, who arrived in

¹¹ Sharae Deckard, 'United States of America, Britain, and the Civil Rights Movement', in The Oxford Companion to Black British History (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp 494-98 (pp 496-97).

Britain from Trinidad in the 1950s, and was one of the earliest writers to be referred to as 'Black British'. Moses Ascending opens with protagonist Moses in bemused confrontation with his friend Galahad, who is preaching Black Power:

'It is good for Our People to make progress. But you must not forget the struggle.'

'I'm glad you appreciate that I struggled to get where I am,' I say.

'Not that struggle,' he wave my words away. 'I mean *the* struggle [...] The revolution has come. At last the Black man is coming into his own.'

'Exactly,' I say. 'I am coming into my own, and I just want to be left in peace.'¹²

The black subject in Britain who seeks an identification with an African-American position is left with a sense of the incongruity of his own experience in relation to what is presented as an assertive, powerful narrative of blackness; a palpable sense of his own lack of a discernible tradition, and above all a sense of his own alienation *as an individual* from traditions and political movements which seem to be sedimented in a history which is not his own. As Mike Phillips writes, this "concept of blackness [which] has roots in the experience of the Civil Rights struggle in the USA [contributes to] a notion which has been partly constructed in Britain, but not for Britain".¹³ This sense of an image of 'blackness' received from the US, managed in Britain, but not wholly satisfactory for the British experience, occurs in the context of a tendency in Black British writing which is, in general, this study shows, thoroughly preoccupied with the need to adopt and adapt diverse cultural inheritances in order to fit what is frequently presented as a quite individualised experience.

¹² Sam Selvon, Moses Ascending (Oxford: Heinemann, 1984 [1975]), pp 11-12.

¹³ Mike Phillips, London Crossings: A Biography of Black Britain (London & New York: Continuum, 2001), p 143.

If Black British writers feel that the narrative of Black Power fails to speak explicitly to their experience, what is equally noteworthy is the fact that the African-American novelists discussed in this study are just as critical of that narrative of Black Power, but for different reasons. The African-American writers considered here are all concerned, at one level or another, that the politics of Black Power is neglectful of the African-American past, in which a coherent African-American tradition, linked to an African tradition has been established, and is felt in contemporary forms of expression. This position is neatly summarised by Adolph Reed, Jr.:

Black Power consumerism (as distinguished from Black Power ideology) [...] was regularly criticized as superficial, an inadequate proxy for concerted political thought and action. [...] The critics nearly all insisted that claims to serious commitment or sophisticated analysis be judged in relation to an objective of changing social conditions affecting black people.¹⁴

The four African-American writers discussed here seek to resituate the relationship of the present to the past against this Civil Rights-era context. As they figure performance (in terms of speech, music, dance, etc) as a signature of African-American tradition itself, these writers imagine memories of African traditions, adapted to contemporary needs, to be characteristic of African-American tradition. The problem with the narrative of Black Power, to them, is that it frequently failed to acknowledge the fluid relationship between African-American and African tradition, frequently characterising an 'African' aesthetic as something which should be embraced *as an alternative* to African-American tradition. This severance of the relationship to the memory of the African-American past, these

¹⁴ Adolph Reed, Jr., 'The Allure of Malcolm X and the Changing Character of Black Politics', in Malcolm X: In Our Own Image, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), pp 203-232 (p 209).

writers might help us to see, is an effect of the trauma of the racist denigration of African-American culture.

The Memory of Africa in African-American Fiction

The four African-American novels discussed in this study all emphasise a memory of Africa which is known through a distinctive African-American tradition, and which is familiar to everyday life in African-American communities. The dramatisation of a memory of Africa occurs here as continuous with the memory of an African-American past, to situate a worldview, loosely figured as linked to a remembered African tradition, in which the past is felt to be alive in the present. In Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo, for instance, a memory of Africa is figured through the kind of possession by spirits which is characteristic of a vodoun tradition, which occurs on a momentary basis, and is also characteristic of an African-American past. In Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, the memory of Africa is strongly suggested by the figure of a slave who is supposed to have flown back to Africa, and whose memory is repeated again and again in diverse forms throughout the narrative of an African-American urban experience. For Alice Walker, in The Color Purple, a memory of Africa is suggested as specific parallels are drawn between ways of life in an African-American Southern tradition, and in an imagined African tradition. And for John Edgar Wideman, in Philadelphia Fire, a sense of an African tradition, in which the present is ordained by the past, is summoned simply by using the language which recalls the experience of an intimately-known African-American community.

In all of these novels, the process of gaining knowledge of the African-American past, in which the memory of Africa is shown to be inherent, is positioned against the specific challenge of American racism, and against a broader American obsession with a present which ‘progresses’ away from the past. This American tendency is seen in Fredric Jameson’s characterisation of postmodernism, in which, as he would have it, “linguistic malfunction” can be compared to “the psyche of the schizophrenic [...] by way of a twofold proposition”:

first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one’s present; and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.¹⁵

As Jameson witnesses what he calls a “weakening of historicity”,¹⁶ he perceives a separation between the past, present and future of signification in postmodern aesthetic forms, which assumes that a historical consciousness can only be made comprehensible if signification occurs in a linear manner. The African-American writers discussed in this study, however, emphasise a restitution of the past through the present *without* the need for signification to be constructed according to a strictly linear temporality. All four

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London & New York: Verso, 1991), pp 26-27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 6.

writers emphasise the way in which writing can evoke, or be ‘possessed’ by, voices from the past, and can therefore allow the past to be continuous with – an integral part of – the present. Their understanding of the relationship between writing and speech, then, and equally between language and memory, more closely corresponds to the perspective suggested by Julia Kristeva, which is summarised here by Susan Huddleston Edgerton:

Kristeva disputes the absolute separation of signification from the presymbolic, maternal function. She calls this already-signifying space of the mother the ‘semiotic chora’, which is also ‘the place of the maternal law before the Law’. ‘Before it enters the Symbolic and encounters the No/Name of the Father, the infant has already lived with maternal regulation, the mother’s “no”’. That is, the mother has already been regulating the child’s body with her own. She gives and takes away her breast and ‘oversees what goes into, and what comes out of, the infant’s body’ such that the child has already learned signifying patterns, though unconsciously – patterns that reflect paternal law as well, but which come from uniquely maternal relationships. [...]

The semiotic and the Symbolic are in a particular (Kristevan) dialectical relationship to one another. Maternal signification is chaotic, fluid, involving sound as echolalia, a kind of *music* between mother and child. This unique mother-child relationship [...] threatens the Symbolic order by threatening to do away with difference. The one becomes the other and the word becomes the thing.¹⁷

The importance of Kristeva’s perspective, to the ways in which the African-American novelists discussed in this study express the memory of Africa, lies in her ability to dispute the absolute authority of the present over the past, and of language over the pre-

¹⁷ Susan Huddleston Edgerton, ‘Re-memembering the Mother Tongue(s): Toni Morrison, Julie Dash and the Language of Pedagogy’, in *Cultural Studies*, 9.2 (May 1995), pp 338-63 (pp 350-51). [Huddleston Edgerton cites Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p 46.]

linguistic realms in which memory frequently resides. In Kristeva's understanding, memory is not necessarily separate from language, and the past is not necessarily separate from the present – the relationship between these realms is that of a “a difference but [...] not a distinction”.¹⁸ What Kristeva recognises, which Jameson does not, is a historical consciousness which is not necessarily undermined if signification is not felt to proceed in linear fashion from the past towards the present – the past can be alive in the present and this can provide a powerful alternative historical consciousness. Such a perspective is seen in these novels as knowledge of the African-American and African past is shown to be communicated most effectively in the present when language and memory, the past and the present, as well as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ economies, are discernibly continuous with one another. For instance, John Edgar Wideman talks about the

primal language, [...] the language I learned feeling through. [...] That for me is the basis of African-American culture in general – that speaking voice, the voice of the mothers *and* the fathers.¹⁹

The relation to memory here, as it is felt *in* language, not necessarily as a past which is complete before it encounters language, provides a real alternative to the economy of authority which is so easily put in place by an American ideal of ‘progress’, which has of course been inextricably linked to a history of separatism and racism.

All the African-American writers considered here raise some objection to the performance of ‘Africanness’ epitomised by the black nationalism of the late 1960s and 1970s, which, far from being characterised by a ‘semiotic’ sense of continuity between

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ In Black and White: Conversations with African-American Writers – Part Six: John Wideman, dir. Matteo Bellinelli, 1992 (RTSI-Swiss Television). Emphasis added.

the sign of ‘Africanness’ and the memory of Africa, is more typical of an American aesthetic of performance. Jameson’s observations, it seems to me, are founded largely in a critique of American culture, which is of course increasingly a global culture, but which, it should also be remembered, occurs against a particular historical backdrop. Americanness itself is broadly characterised by a tendency to emphasise ‘progress’ away from the past, and central to this preoccupation is a theatrical aesthetic, which itself embodies a sense of a fractured temporality. Ann Douglas writes:

Constance Rourke, the finest cultural historian of the [1920s], saw all American culture past and present – politics, religion, advertising, *everything* – as “theatrical”; “Everybody doubled. Everyone had precarious adventures.” [...Dorothy] Parker wrote of that “accursed [American] race that cannot do anything unless they see, before and after, a tableau of themselves in the deed”²⁰

As this citation would seem to suggest, the theatrical engenders a sectioning of time between the ‘before’ and the ‘after’ of representation, in which signification, therefore, does not necessarily refer directly to the memory of the past. In fact, representation in this case does not depend *at all* upon history – it will occur regardless of whether the past is known or not. This separation from, or suppression of, the past, I suggest, is a consequence of a kind of trauma typical to the American scenario – a preoccupation with separating the present from the past which, as it has occurred alongside the oppression of African-American, Native American and other communities, is conveniently forgetful of the losses of the past. Jameson’s notion of postmodern ahistoricism centres on a sense that signification which is nonlinear must be forgetful of the past. This positioning of the present in ascendancy over the past, however, I would suggest, is itself a function of

²⁰ Douglas, p 55.

trauma – the trauma characteristic of an American approach toward history and the past.

As Susan Buck-Morss points out, in her gloss of Walter Benjamin's work:

Freud was concerned with war-neurosis, the trauma of "shell shock" and catastrophic accident that plagued soldiers in World War I. Benjamin claimed this battlefield experience of shock "has become the norm" in modern life.

[...] Under extreme stress, the ego employs consciousness as a buffer, blocking the openness of the synaesthetic system, thereby isolating present consciousness from past memory. Without the depth of memory, experience is impoverished. The problem is that under conditions of modern shock – the daily shocks of the modern world – response to stimuli *without* thinking has become necessary for survival.²¹

If, as Jameson seems to see it, identity itself, and a consciousness of history, must be understood to adhere to linear time in order to be meaningful at all, this suggests a real lack of sensitisation to memory, and the unexpected ways in which it can function to connect consciousness with knowledge of the past. So, as Benjamin suggests, modern life is characterised by this desensitisation, which occurs through trauma, and through which "experience", as well, surely, as our understanding of experience, is "impoverished". Benjamin, furthermore, makes the interesting suggestion that "Proust's work [...] may be regarded as an attempt to produce experience synthetically, as Bergson imagines it, under today's conditions, for there is less and less hope that it will come into being naturally."²² The perspective which Benjamin advances is, like Kristeva's, sensitive to the power which is so easily, often so unthinkingly wielded as we use language to describe or to 'capture' the memory of the past. Unlike Kristeva's extremely

²¹ Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', *October*, 62 (Fall 1992), pp 3-41 (p 16).

²² Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, Random House, 1999 [London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1970]), pp 152-96 (p 154).

democratic view of signification, however, in which language and the pre-linguistic exist in equal and fluid relation, Benjamin registers an awareness that we do not live in an ideal world, and that the voices of memory often *are* marginalised by dominant discourses. Benjamin, in short, is sensitive to the effects of trauma upon the relationship with memory, particularly prevalent to the experience of modernity, and which may be intensified by an American attitude of forgetfulness toward the past.

The Memory of Africa in Black British Fiction

If some confrontation is dramatised in African-American literature, then, between a performance of blackness which forgets the past, and a perspective which insists upon the presence of a distinct African-American tradition within the present, all this occurs simultaneously with an increasing American political dominance on the world stage, and the 'performance' of blackness which, from the Civil Rights movement onwards, was transmitted to the world via a global media:

As the United States moved increasingly to the forefront of world affairs, assuming the leadership of the West in the emerging Cold War contest, it drew considerable attention to itself, thereby exposing its domestic practices as never before in its history.²³

The internal wrangling between diverse African-American cultural factions over the representation of tradition would not be all that significant to Black British witnesses of African-American culture, as, clearly, most Black Britons would not have an intimate knowledge of the difference between African-American cultural expressions which

²³ Paul Gordon Lauren, 'Seen from the Outside: The International Perspective on America's Dilemma', in Brenda Gayle Plummer (ed.), Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988 (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp 21-43 (p 26).

remember tradition and those which do not. So it is not important for Black British writers if Black Power is mere performance – they maintain a freedom to adapt, and so receive that inheritance as subject to adaptation like any other. The debate over tradition central to the African-American scenario, then, is collapsed in this context – all African-American culture is approached merely as a received inheritance.

Where African-American writers emphasise the importance of understanding the voices of African-American experience as rooted in communities, Black British writers are able to adopt those sounds and styles away from those communities and apply them to new situations – to give them new meaning. Paul Gilroy comments:

The style, rhetoric, and moral authority of the civil rights movement and of Black Power [...] were detached from their original ethnic markers and historical origins, exported and adapted, with evident respect but little sentimentality, to local needs and political climates. Appearing in Britain through a circulatory system that gave a central place to the musics which had both informed and recorded black struggles in other places, they were rearticulated in distinctively European conditions.²⁴

Having remarked upon this tendency of Black British artists to appropriate and ‘rearticulate’ African-American and other cultural products, however, Gilroy goes on to collapse, rather than to explore, this dynamic relationship:

How the appropriation of these forms, styles, and histories of struggle was possible at such great physical and social distance is in itself an interesting question for cultural historians. It was facilitated by a common fund of urban experiences, by the effect of similar but by no means identical forms of racial segregation, as well as by the memory

²⁴ Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness (London & New York: Verso, 1993), p 82.

of slavery, a legacy of Africanisms, and a stock of religious experiences defined by them both.²⁵

Gilroy notes the difference between the African-American culture developed in the African-American context, and its appropriation by Black Britons, but then entirely collapses this tension into a notion of the “similarity” of the two experiences. My own study certainly situates itself against the backdrop of Gilroy’s productive notion of a ‘Black Atlantic’ space, the “rhizomorphic, fractal structure” which refers to a historical “circulation of ideas and activists as well as [...] cultural and political artefacts” “across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean”.²⁶ My study also, however, seeks to revitalise that tension, noted by Gilroy and then discarded, between the African-American and the Black British situations, at least to the extent which would allow us to remark upon both similarities and differences without a great concern for the collapse of an ideological construct placed upon the relationship. This, Laura Chrisman has noted, is typical of a 1990s moment fixated upon ‘hybridity’,²⁷ – this concern with hybridity might at times be seen to have exerted similar stresses upon representation as the ‘burden of representation’ did in the preceding era. This study situates itself subsequent to that moment, where we can recognise a situation where identities may be hybrid and also situated within one or more national scenarios.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., pp 82-83.

²⁶ Ibid., p 4.

²⁷ Laura Chrisman, ‘Journeying to Death: Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*’, in *Black British Culture & Society: A Text Reader*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 453-64 [Reprinted from *Race & Class*, 39.2 (1997), pp 51-64].

²⁸ Mark Christian’s *Black Identity in the 20th Century: Expressions of the US and UK African Diaspora*, as much as its title might promise as a resource for the current study, is a collection of essays “from the perspectives of Black British and African American experiences”, [Mark Christian, ‘Introduction’, pp xvii-xx (p xviii)] and does not attempt serious comparison of these cultural standpoints. Furthermore, it is entrenched in the perspective that “there is something in ‘essence’ about being of African descent in this postmodern world”. [Mark Christian, p xviii.] Worryingly, Christian suggests that because “African, European and Asian peoples and their specific cultures have intermingled during the eras of enslavement,

Black British writers typically receive African-American ‘influence’ as something initially to aspire to, subsequently to reject as inappropriate, and finally to appropriate and manipulate to their own ends. Bernardine Evaristo notes with characteristic wit:

I’d ask myself who on earth would want to read about a mixed-race girl growing up in a devastatingly dull suburb of Woolwich in south east London as I did, when they could read Morrison, Naylor or Walker, with their steaming swamps, slaves escaping through forests, smouldering hick towns and dusty roads cutting through corn fields, rickety-shack houses peopled with ghosts and secret family histories, and their downright cool colloquialisms? [Eventually, however,] I wrote *Lara*, a novel-in-verse about seven generations of a mixed-race English-Nigerian family (yes, living in the wonderful steaming swamps of Woolwich) with roots in Ireland, Nigeria, Brazil and Germany.²⁹

Even as Evaristo registers a striking anachronism inherent to the inheritance of this American version of ‘blackness’ in a Black British experience, she shows how it may be adopted, alongside a multiplicity of other cultural influences, and adapted or performed anew, in order to dramatise a notion of individual identity, which is the way that Black British writers find self-expression to be most useful.

Histories of the term ‘Black British’ have in general identified three broad historical moments, which is really a move from one position which identifies non-whites in Britain with ‘blackness’ as it is defined by America, to a position which finds that label and

colonisation and beyond”, “spurious, avant-garde, hybridity theories” are “neither original nor something to culturally celebrate.” [Mark Christian, ‘The Black Intellectual/Activist Tradition: Notes on the Past, Present and Future’, in Mark Christian, pp 119-36 (p 127).]

²⁹ Bernardine Evaristo, ‘New Writing Worlds: Writing and the Past’, at www.newwritingpartnership.org.uk/fp/asp/public/getFile.asp?, p 2.

identification less useful than the effort to represent individual experience. Alison Donnell identifies 1970 as “a historical moment from which black as an identificatory category began to establish itself within Britain”,³⁰ and as Mark Stein notes, “it was deployed by the Caribbean Artists Movement in the late 1960s, a movement which, in the words of its chronicler, Anne Walmsley, ‘bridged the transformation of Britain’s West Indian Community from one of exiles and immigrants to black British’.”³¹ During this period the term ‘black’ is described by Stuart Hall as ““hegemonic” over other ethnic/racial identities”,³² and by Kobena Mercer as a moment “When various peoples – of Asian, African and Caribbean descent [...] invoked a collective identity predicated on political and not biological similarities [..., signalling an] alliance and solidarity among dispersed groups of people sharing common historical experiences of British racism.”³³ In the 1980s, Alison Donnell writes, “The need to acknowledge multiple perspectives and the pluralisation of cultural forms and positions within the arena of black British culture was an almost inevitable consequence of the growth of interest and work being done in this area.” As James Procter puts it, “what Kobena Mercer refers to as ‘the burden of representation’ has created a desire to ‘say it all’”, where attempts at theorisation of ‘blackness’ are constantly, inevitably, disrupted by a “kind of politicised, untidy, ‘lived’ version of blackness”.³⁴

³⁰ Alison Donnell, ‘Introduction’ to *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture*, ed. Alison Donnell (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), pp xii-xvi (p xii).

³¹ Mark Stein, ‘Cultures of Hybridity: Reading Black British Literature’, *Kunapipi*, 20.2 (1998), pp 76-89 (p 79). Citing Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement* (London: New Beacon, 1992), p xviii.

³² Stuart Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara & Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp 163-72 (p 164). Reprinted from *ICA Documents. Black Film British Cinema* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 7 (1988), pp 27-31.

³³ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (London: Routledge, 1994), p 291.

³⁴ Procter, p 6, citing Mercer, pp 233-58.

The shift from the 1980s to the 1990s may broadly be represented by Stuart Hall's contention that, "People don't use 'black' in quite that way any longer, because they want to identify more precisely where they come from, culturally."³⁵ James Procter comments:

[The] 'burden of representation' lifted during the 1980s and 1990s as certain black cultural formations became 'centred' [...] What is also striking about the literature of this period is its new attention to the *historicity* of the black British experience[...] testimony to the fact the black British past is not simply an amoral site of postmodern play but also a politically loaded, politically active site of remembrance from which we all must learn.³⁶

Where the burden of representation positioned one rarified speaker (the artist or writer for instance) to speak on behalf of whole, disparate and shifting communities, there is a sense of a false notion of representation being imposed upon the word spoken, a false 'frozenness' upon diverse and living histories, an inevitable consequence of a culture where non-white is equated with 'other'. When all this is taken into account, the term Black British is most usefully identified for me as functioning, in relation to these contemporary novels, as

a collective term that covers an imagined experiential field of overlapping territories.

While at its narrowest it merely refers to writers with an African-Caribbean background, at its widest, it can include writing that takes recourse to domains such as Africa, Asia or the Caribbean and attendant cultural and aesthetic traditions. [...] [the] space denoted by the label in question is far from homogenous; on the contrary, its heterogeneity is one of its defining features.³⁷

³⁵ Gates, 'A Reporter At Large', p 178.

³⁶ Procter, pp 194-96.

³⁷ Stein, p 80.

Procter's allusions to the burden of representation 'lifting', to a *new* historicity, and to the 'postmodern', are instructive here, inasmuch as they encourage us to imagine that with the burden of representation came a death of history – a suppression of historical voices with the sense that *the* unrepresented community had to be represented. This periodisation would concur with the periodisation of postmodernism. The notion of the death of history, I suggest, may be more applicable for Black British writers than it is for African-Americans. For African-Americans the postmodern notion of the death of history was never convincing because they felt the past to be alive in the present, even as the attempt to deny the past was recognised. In the Black British context, however, there *is* some sense that history disappeared for a while – but this is not necessarily attached to the postmodern moment – it is figured more as the colonial/postcolonial moment. Jan Vorwoert identifies a recent historical moment in which this 'disappearance' of history is felt to have come to an end, and figures this moment as very much felt in the language of art:

The re-emergence of a multiplicity of histories in the moment of the 1990s, then, resembles the return of [...] ghosts to the centre of the discourse and equals the sudden realisation that the signs speak as multiple echoes of historic meaning that begin to reverberate in their hollow body – the insight that what was deemed dead speech has indeed manifest effects on the lives of the living.³⁸

This sense of a death of memory, and its spectacular revival, applies in a special way to the context of Black British fiction. Where African-Americans enter into a 'semiotic' realm where the prelinguistic is immediately accessible in the linguistic present, for

³⁸ Jan Vorwoert, 'Apropos Appropriation: Why Stealing Images Feels Different Today', Tate Triennial 2006: New British Art, ed. Beatrix Ruf & Clarrie Wallis (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), pp 14-21 (p 19). Also at <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/triennial/catalogue.shtm>

Black British writers, memory is certainly made accessible, but attention is also drawn to the specific role of the textual and the archival in evoking, and equally, obscuring memory. So we will see, for instance, Caryl Phillips's ingenious and yet equivocal negotiations of textuality in the approach toward historical memory, S.I. Martin's juggling of archival material with imaginative invention in order to manage and draw attention to history's broad silences, and Bernardine Evaristo's use of speech to overcome the alienating and exclusionary effects of a hegemonic history. Black British writers occupy language more centrally, as an assertive act against a moment where memory was 'frozen' out, but paradoxically, they occupy that language centrally *precisely by* drawing attention to the fractures which have occurred in their narrativisation – by drawing attention to how their passage into narrative has been blocked. Where African-Americans had to escape a dominant language by recourse to a realm where language and memory are continuous (the semiotic), there is not such a need in Black British writing to appeal to this realm, because Britain's black presence has *precisely not* been defined in language – the language of the dominant British history has instead left huge spaces and silences, into which Black British writers must simply speak. This corresponds to what Jan Vorwoert identifies as a

sudden realisation that words and images, as arbitrarily construed they may be, produce unsuspected effects and affects in the real world that could be said to mark the momentum of the 1990s. A key consequence of this momentum is the shift in the critical discourse away from a primary focus on the arbitrary and constructed character of the linguistic sign towards a desire to understand the *performativity* of language and grasp precisely how things are done with words, that is, how language through its power of

injunction enforces the meaning of what it spells out and, like a spell placed on a person, binds that person to execute what it commands.³⁹

However, this dynamic is not as innocent, in the British scenario, as Vorwoert's commentary might suggest. If the era in which the generation of Black British writers I consider grew up was 'historyless', this was not principally to do with the fall of modernism or the onset of the Cold War. It was due, rather, to the dominance, through mainstream British society, of *one* history of nationhood. Interestingly, Ishmael Reed makes a comment at one point in Mumbo Jumbo which specifically foregrounds this contrast with the comment that, "If in the 1920s the British say "The Sun Never Sets on the British Empire," the American motto is "There's a Sucker Born Every Minute."",⁴⁰ evoking a historical context in which a sense of linear time, in one way or another, dominates a hegemonic cultural sensibility – in the American case denoting an obsession with escaping the past, in the British case an elevation of the past. Where black writers in America have had to assert a sense of their tradition against the insistence upon a lack of tradition in America, the land where everything is imagined to have begun anew, as black writers in Britain approach historical memory they have had to resist something like the opposite scenario – a hegemonic British insistence upon tradition which is so omnipresent that it threatens to eclipse all other histories.

The British colonial and 'postcolonial' historical moment is a moment which the Black British writers in this study recognise as significant – a period when history was submerged. This is a moment which is ever-repeated, in effect, in every encounter

³⁹ Ibid., pp 19-20.

⁴⁰ Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1972), p 16.

between Britain and its non-white past, which may be seen to be *equivalent*, in the context of this study, to the era of the postmodern, but whose political premise is vastly different from that of the postmodern. Margaret Thatcher's significant pronouncement may be seen to constitute the epitome of a forgetful tendency, the supreme example of a narrative of Britishness which seems to forget all stories other than that which it finds most useful to believe. This is what Benita Parry calls

re-presenting the British Empire as a virtuous and successful project – which [can only be done] by deliberately neglecting that imperial conquest meant dispossession, the abuse of human labour and the pillage of natural resources, the political subordination of indigenous populations, and the racist denigrations of their cultures.⁴¹

Black British fiction, by filling in the spaces and silences of a dominant British history, seems to inflect that dominant history with a knowingness about what it has left out – to flag up its lack of innocence. This is not exactly a case of the past being alive in the present as in the African-American scenario, which evokes African tradition in that way – it is more inclined to foreground the very function of language to evoke or suppress the past. There is a sense with these Black British writings that Britain has employed *language* to erase historical presences, and so language must be used to re-member them. Hence, there is a continuing preoccupation in these texts with historical documentation.

In this context, the memory of Africa is not signified through a perceptible continuity of distinct African traditions in the contemporary context, as it is in the African-American scenario. Instead, African identity is approached and held in balance alongside a diversity of other cultural inheritances. Africanness is remembered, crucially, as

⁴¹ Benita Parry, address at the University of York upon receipt of Honorary Degree, 12 July 2006.

fractured and hybrid within itself, distinctive when it is discovered in these novels, but crucially, also bearing distinct *similarities* to other cultural inheritances. It is similar to Stuart Hall's notion of Africa in the Caribbean imagination – “return[ed] to but “by another route” [...] as we retell it through politics, memory, and desire.” Yet Black British uses of any ‘memory of Africa’ seem to regard that memory solidified in the past as even more redundant. The memory of Africa in Black British fiction is not so hemmed in to the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed in the domestic situation as we see in the African-American scenario. In fact, Black Britons *must* account for diverse cultural inheritances in order to understand their identities in the context of Britain, where identity is not so shored up by the presence of a distinct community with a history and a culture rooted in this country. Black British concern with historicity offers a meaningful reply to old-fashioned British nationalist fears that British traditions are lost as the culture diversifies – Black British writers are actually all about *retaining* history – but *all* histories, not just one, and more than that, recognising that traditions are not pure – that mongrelisation is and always has been inherent to them.

Despite the fact that Black British writers register an interruption (or multiple interruptions) in the transmission of historical memory, they present the capacity of historical memory to ‘possess’ the present in the same way that African-Americans do. African-American texts make a strong suggestion that this is a distinctively African trait which is felt in African-American culture, through vodoun or other traditional forms (but which can also be felt simply as ‘memory’). Black British texts do not link this to any

particular tradition – it is figured more as simply a function of language/text, and a figure of historical memory.

Chapter One

'Fits For Your Head': The Memory of Africa in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*

Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel Mumbo Jumbo mobilises a history of culture which recognises African antecedents to a specific African-American tradition, but as this history of culture focuses on the notion of 'possession', as exemplified by the Afro-diasporan system of voodoo, the notion that an African history could constitute a history of 'origins' is revealed to be rather ridiculous. The figure of being 'possessed', or of 'going out of one's head' is used equally well in this novel to indicate vodoun rites as it is to signify the function of memory, and similarly, emphasises the fluidity of any perceived 'difference' between these concepts. Reed's figure of 'Jes Grew' may be imagined to be a collective term for possessive forces, as well as for the state of being possessed, and while it is linked to a tradition specific to African-American, Caribbean and African cultures, it is also a state which may be known to anyone who is able to present the right frame of mind to receive it. As a memory of Africa can be 'remembered' within the terms of a linear history, then, memory also functions as 'possessive' action, allowing a connection to Africa to arise at any given moment. Reed draws a history of culture back to Ancient Egypt in this novel, thereby presenting a tradition, but at the same time sends up any tendency to attach this tradition to the sign of 'blackness', as indicative of a narrow, "Atonist", notion of signification which perceives the relationship between language and memory as purely linear. Reed makes a profoundly comic commentary upon the notion of African 'origins' here, as he situates Africa not as the site of the

origins of African diasporan culture, but of the 'Atonist' perspective itself which he figures as a particularly Euro-American neurosis toward tradition and the past.

As the novel's "anti-plague",¹ Jes Grew is figured in the novel as both a distinct tradition *and* a possessive force which appears in discrete historical moments, and Reed "turn[s] to Egypt *not just* as proof of a black African past but as a *model* for contemporary spirituality and culture", and imagines "each moment [...] in a kind of continuous awareness of and interdependence with the others".² In this novel which spoofs the hard-boiled detective story genre,³ not least by drawing 'back to Africa' an extremely convoluted history of a plague which manifests itself in instances of "suggestive bumping and grinding" and "wild abandoned spooning" (22), Reed must be seen to be responding with laughter to earnest attempts to discover something 'meaningful' about culture by way of deciphering histories of 'origins'. So Jes Grew is shown to characterise the 1920s 'Harlem Renaissance' – "The Blues is a Jes Grew, as James Weldon Johnson surmised. Jazz was a Jes Grew which followed the Jes Grew of Ragtime. Slang is a Jes Grew too." (214) It is also shown to be both a repetition of and a parallel to previous eras, as the end of the novel also depicts the 1970s as a time when "Jes Grew was [again] latching onto its blood" (216), and its lineage is furthermore charted to an Ancient Egyptian "theater

¹ Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1972), p 6. All further page references will be given in parentheses.

² Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2001), pp 116, 119. Emphasis added.

³ For discussion of *Mumbo Jumbo* as detective story, see Helen Lock, *A Case of Mis-Taken Identity: Detective Undercurrents in Recent African American Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994); Lizabeth Paravisini, 'Mumbo Jumbo and the Uses of Parody', *Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review* (Spring 1986), 113-127; Richard Swope, 'Crossing Western Space, or the HooDoo Detective on the Boundary in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*. *African American Review*, 36.4 (Winter 2002). pp 611-28; Joe Weixlmann, 'Culture Clash, Survival, and Trans-Formation: A Study of Some Innovative Afro-American Novels of Detection', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 38.1 (Winter 1984-5), pp 21-31.

accompanying [...] agriculturalists' rites" (161). Even as *Jes Grew* is shown to be illustrative of an African-American and African tradition, it is also a possessive force – “*Jes Grew is life*” (204) itself – and the novel shows that it can arise at any given moment, and is available to anyone who presents the frame of mind to receive it. The memory of Africa is thus felt to be intrinsic to an African-American tradition, to be the site of a form of life depicted as ‘natural’, and yet also to be the site of a confrontation between a fluid form of memory, and what is presented as the ‘unnatural’ attitudes toward the past represented by Atonism.

Reed’s perspective in this novel is rooted in a tradition he calls “Neo Hoodoo because it doesn’t begin with me”,⁴ and which is related to voodoo, which Reed regards as a “common language” which “not only united the Africans but also made it easier for them to forge alliances with those Native Americans whose customs were similar”.⁵

Explaining that “hoodoo involved art [...], dancing, painting, poetry, it was multi-media”,⁶ Reed understands it to be “what Black Americans came up with”, “as opposed to Obeahism in Jamaica and other islands and Voodooism in Haiti”,⁷ but that it is still “based upon African forms of art”.⁸ For Reed, Helen Lock explains,

Neo-HooDoo’s purpose is to give new life to marginalized and apparently moribund cultural sensibilities, as *Jes Grew* had become, by fusing African and Euro-American

⁴ Gaga [Mark S. Johnson], ‘Interview with Ishmael Reed’, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, ed. Bruce Dick & Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), pp 51-58 (p 54). Reprinted from *MWENDO*, 4 (Fall 1973), pp 32-35.

⁵ Ishmael Reed, ‘Foreword’ to Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990 [J.B. Lippincott, 1938]), p xiii.

⁶ Gaga, p 54.

⁷ Al Young, ‘Interview: Ishmael Reed’, in Dick & Singh, pp 41-50 (p 45). Reprinted from *Changes*, 12-13 (November 1972), p 33.

⁸ Joseph Henry, ‘A MELUS Interview: Ishmael Reed’, in Dick & Singh, pp 205-18 (p 209). Reprinted from *MELUS*, 11.1 (Spring 1984), 81-93.

aesthetic traditions into a new African-American aesthetic, according to which orality and literacy, past and present, form and spirit are all equally privileged, and cultural integrity both preserved intact and enriched. “This is what my writing is all about. It leads me to the places where I can see old cultures resurrected and made contemporary. Time past is time present”.⁹

As well as being situated in this specifically African-American and African tradition, the phenomenon known as *Jes Grew* may also be understood to resemble the realm of Julia Kristeva’s ‘semiotic’, in which “meaningful but nonsignifying aspects of language – rhythm, tone, music – are just as important in poetry as the signifying elements of language.”¹⁰ As in the semiotic, *Jes Grew*’s appearance in ‘text’ or language is entirely continuous with its appearance in the pre-linguistic. Where Fredric Jameson’s understanding that the “temporal unification of past and future with one’s present [...] is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time”,¹¹ Reed, like Kristeva, “disputes the absolute separation of signification from the presymbolic”.¹² *Jes Grew*, therefore, may be recognised by its ‘texts’, like “Ragtime. Jazz. Blues.” (152), but may also be felt in its pre-textual “bleeblop essence; [...] the unknown factor which gives the loas their rise.” (152) Just as signification in this scenario does not imagine a moment when the pre-linguistic, proceeding steadily through time, might enter the linguistic realm, so African ‘antecedents’ do not, in Reed’s novel, bear a strictly linear relationship to African-

⁹ Helen Lock, p 71. Lock cites Ishmael Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978), p 2.

¹⁰ Kelly Oliver, ‘Introduction: Julia Kristeva’s Outlaw Ethics’, in *Ethics, Politics and Difference in Julia Kristeva’s Writing* ed. Kelly Oliver (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), pp 1-22 (p 2).

¹¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), pp 26-27.

¹² Susan Huddleston Edgerton, ‘Re-memembering the Mother Tongue(s): Toni Morrison, Julie Dash and the Language of Pedagogy’, *Cultural Studies*, 9.2 (May 1995), Special Issue: “Toni Morrison and the Curriculum”, ed. Warren Crichlow & Cameron McCarthy, pp 338-63 (pp 350-51).

American culture. If Jes Grew, which recognises a fluid relationship between language and memory, is life itself, Reed figures “the Atonist Path” (18), the architects of ‘Western civilisation’, as suffering from “Vital Resistance” (18). While ‘atonal’ can be understood to indicate ‘tone-deafness’, Henry Louis Gates observes a mischievous joke of Reed’s by noting that while ““Atonist” signifies multiply here[...],one who lacks physiological tone, especially of a contractile organ, is an Atonist.”¹³ While some may be “twisting they butts and getting happy” (34) as “Jes Grew spreads through America” (13), the ‘Wallflower Order’ – Reed’s caricature of the American political establishment – is described as the “Atonist Path[’s...]administrative backbone” (212), and is epitomised by its ‘creed’ which asserts grumpily, “*Lord, if I can’t dance, No one shall*” (65). The Wallflower Order is bent on trying to control or “curb Jes Grew” (64), and where Reed’s animated descriptions of “Jes Grew Carriers” show them “rubberlegging for dear life; bending over backwards to admit their loa” (49), Atonists are caricatured as wholly inflexible, “*the marrow of my spine, plaster, my / back supported by decorated paper*” (65). In Harlem, the novel’s “astrodetective” (64) PaPa LaBas is shown working in the Hoodoo tradition at his “Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral”, as he and his attendants “serve the loas” (40) – the voodoo/Hoodoo term for gods or spirits – ensuring that each loa “is fed, celebrated, drummed to until it deserts the horse and *govi* of its host and goes on about its business.” (50) “PaPa LaBas’s name”, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes, “is a conflation of two of the several names of Esu, our Pan-African trickster [...] and his presence unites “over there” (Africa) with “right here”.”¹⁴

¹³ Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p 225.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp 222-23.

McAlister observes that “Reed establishes the[...] three narrative times [of the novel – the 1920s, the 1970s and Ancient Egypt –] as allegorical transpositions of each other”,¹⁵ and Walter Benjamin understands the practice of allegory, which takes signs from one historical era and applies them to a separate context, to work as follows:

the words and the names remain behind, and, as the living contexts of their birth disappear, so they become the origins of concepts, in which these words acquire a new content, which is predisposed to allegorical representation; such is the case with Fortuna. Venus...and so on.¹⁶

Craig Owens reads Benjamin’s notion of allegory in a similar way to Jameson’s notion of ‘pastiche’ as “a shabby composition” of “dead symbols”.¹⁷ But quite contrary to Jameson’s notion that Reed should be listed among “producers of culture [who] have nowhere to turn but to the past [and] the imitation of dead styles”,¹⁸ Reed explains that:

People go back into the past and get some metaphor from the past to explain the present or the future. I call this “necromancy,” because that’s what it is. [...] Necromancers used to lie in the guts of the dead or in tombs to receive visions of the future. That is prophecy. The black writer lies in the guts of old America, making readings about the future. That’s what I wanted to do in Mumbo Jumbo.¹⁹

As both Jameson’s and Owens’s notions of the “dead” indicate a past which has simply disappeared, leaving behind only its “dead language”²⁰ (one way in which we may imagine the dates which are so desperately desired in order to reconstruct history as linear

¹⁵ McAlister, p 119.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977 [1963]), p 225-26.

¹⁷ Jan Vorwoert, ‘Apropos Appropriation: Why Stealing Images Feels Different Today’, Tate Triennial 2006: New British Art, ed. Beatrix Ruf & Clarrie Wallis (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), pp 14-21. Also at <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/triennial/catalogue.shtml>, p 18.

¹⁸ Jameson, pp 17-18.

¹⁹ John O’Brien ‘Ishmael Reed’, in Dick & Singh, pp 14-24 (p 16). Reprinted from The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers, ed. Joe David Bellamy, 1974, pp 130-41.

²⁰ Jameson, p 17.

narrative), Reed's conceptualisation of the "dead" clearly figures the past communicating through the present and the future, and language as one of the tools which enable this communication. Jeffrey Ebbesen remarks that "voodoo and western poststructuralist theories are not really based on the same beliefs",²¹ and "in Reed's case [Jameson's] global claim [...] forgets African-American artistic history".²² Yet Jameson, if the worldview dramatised by Reed's novel is to be credited, would be far from alone in taking such a position of historical amnesia.

Reed's allegorical positioning of different historical moments alongside each other allows the different eras to interpenetrate, and even might be imagined to figure the trauma of a perceived "death of the past" enacted by 'postmodernism' itself. He comments, in a 1974 interview:

[In Mumbo Jumbo] I wanted to write about a time like the present, or to use the past to prophesy about the future – a process our ancestors called "Necromancy." I chose the '20's because [that period was] very similar to what's happening now.²³

The novel, published in 1972, is a response to this 'postmodern' climate, and also figures the Black Arts and Black Power movements as using blackness as a sign which separates the symbolic from pre-symbolic, and denies the continuity of tradition. The Black Arts movement of the late 1960s was "in many respects [...] the cultural wing of the Black

²¹ Jeffrey Ebbesen, *Postmodernism and Its Others: The Fiction of Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker, and Don DeLillo* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), p 168.

²² *Ibid.*, p 171.

²³ Ishmael Reed, 'The Writer as Seer: Ishmael Reed on Ishmael Reed', in Dick & Singh., pp 59-73 (p 60). From Black World, June 1974. Also published in Shrovetide in Old New Orleans as 'Ishmael Reed – Self Interview,' 1978, pp 129-44.

Power Movement”,²⁴ which promoted the “self-conscious construction of a *new* black aesthetic” and which, not coincidentally, also nurtured a belief in an “original black culture in ancient Egypt”.²⁵ Reed himself emerged as part of the “vanguard”²⁶ of the Black Arts Movement, and pays tribute to two of the movement’s older guard – Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal – respectively as “revolutionar[y]”²⁷ and as “the impetus for my Neo Hoodoo Manifesto”.²⁸ He has also, however, always “battle[d] for artistic independence and integrity”,²⁹ and his revision of Black Arts movement ideology is to dispute its “attempt to construct a new black culture”.³⁰ As Mumbo Jumbo evokes the contemporary 1970s scene alongside the ancient Egyptian moment, then, he also evokes both of these within the setting of the 1920s, to emphasise the fraudulence of any notion of black arts as ‘new’, and to signal the cyclical quality of such historical debates.

McAlister reminds us that:

Part of the continued currency of the claim that Africans had never managed to create “real culture” before European colonization depended, among other things, on the conscious exclusion of North Africa, including Egypt, from the “real” Africa – sub-Saharan Africa. [...] The argument that Egypt was a black, or African, or Negro, nation had a long history in the African American community.³¹

²⁴ James Smethurst, ‘Black Arts Movement’, Africana: The Encyclopaedia of the African and African American Experience, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah & Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), pp 239-40 (p 239).

²⁵ McAlister, pp 104, 116. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Ibid, p 116.

²⁷ Gaga, p 56.

²⁸ Joseph Henry, p 209.

²⁹ Dick, Bruce Allen & Singh, Amritjit, ‘Introduction’, in Dick & Singh,, pp ix-xx (p xiv).

³⁰ McAlister, p 104.

³¹ McAlister, pp 143-44.

Reed negotiates the question of the ancient Egyptians' 'blackness' with characteristic composure, by beginning his Egyptian history as follows:

A certain young prince who was allergic to thrones attended a university in Nysa, a town in Arabia Felix (now Yemen). It was a land of dates coffee goats sheep wheat barley corn and livestock. Across the Red Sea were Ethiopia and the Sudan where the young man would commute bringing his knowledge of agriculture and comparing notes with the agriculturalists of these lands. There were agricultural celebrations; dancing and singing, and in Egypt this rhythm was known as the Black Mud Sound. (161)

If we fall into the trap of attempting to map Reed's cartography here, we suddenly discover the general meaninglessness of the exercise. As Reed narrates the history with an easy acceptance of the circulation of culture across the whole region, stretching from the Middle East to North and East Africa, he is relaxed about the question of attaching his history of culture to particular gradations of skin-colour. While the blackness of the ancient Egyptians may not necessarily be in question – and is evident, dubiously enough, when Isis's "firm black breasts" (181) are mentioned – Reed does not enter into the lengthy discussions about this. As McAlister puts it, he may "see[...] Egypt as a black African heritage", but also "undercut[...] a reading of the Egyptian myth as a seamless story of essential, resistant blackness."³²

Michael Chaney, then, is somewhat off the mark when he suggests that for Reed, "blackness is not simply an effect of shared performative affectations, as Reed seems to indicate elsewhere, but it is also endogenous – originating internally", and furthermore, that the novel "registers a central anxiety regarding the decoupling of blackness from

³² Ibid., pp 118, 121.

black bodies.”³³ For Reed the very perception of blackness as “endogenous” to black bodies occurs as a result of racism and the impulse to destroy the fluid connection of signification to the pre-symbolic. In fact, Reed offers an outrageous send-up of the fetishisation of black bodies by a white cultural establishment with the anecdote given by “Von Vampton’s nosy landlady” who “peers through his keyhole and finds the man [...] kissing some ugly nigger doll” until he “utters a strange cry [and] in reverie leans back into his chair.” (55) Rather than perceiving what Chaney calls an “essence [...] linking the deep structures of African Americans to Jes Grew and antediluvian Africa”,³⁴ which “is transmitted and transformed by culture into a code that can then be mimicked or reproduced”³⁵ (and we will hear the influence here of Jameson’s contention that with the death of the past “Modernist styles [...] become postmodernist codes”³⁶), Jes Grew is simply life itself. If Jes Grew is better invoked by black arts, the reason for this is that black arts frequently, as Reed sees it (but by no means always) acknowledge their place within tradition, and are open to the possessive quality of memory. There is not internal origination to this, then, it is simply an openness to apprehending memory as fluid, rather than bound by linear time. Blackness as a sign has been essentialised by black nationalist and dominant white cultures alike, in order to subordinate tradition to the short-term goals of selling art, or even a particular perspective.

Beyond a specific protest aimed at the Black Arts movement, Reed must also be seen to be satirising, more broadly, the culture of ‘Black Power’ which was widespread at the

³³ Michael A. Chaney, ‘Slave Cyborgs and the Black Infection: Ishmael Reed’s Cybernetic Aesthetics’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 49.2 (Summer 2003), pp 261-83 (pp 275, 280).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p 280.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Jameson, p 17.

time of his writing, and whose use of black aesthetic or black style was a use of signs often divorced from any real meaning, let alone an African-American or African tradition, and which were thus easily appropriable out of their historical context:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the proliferation of Black Power *chatchke* washed out the boundary between ideology and fad and exposed the inherent limitations of inferring outlook from either choices made among the artefacts of mass consumption culture of the vagaries of tonsorial and sartorial style. Anyone could cultivate an afro, listen to the Last Poets, wear a dashiki or red, black, and green button, and doing so was in no way a reliable indication of any concrete views concerning political, social, or economic life.³⁷

This situation is indicative of what occurs when the sign is treated as separate from the 'presymbolic', or the memory of what it might once have indicated. As Kobena Mercer suggests:

the fate of the Afro in particular might best be understood by an analogy with what happened to the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s.[...] When rich white patrons descended on Harlem seeking out the salubrious spectacle of "the New Negro," it became clear – to Langston Hughes at least – that the Africa being evoked was not the real one but a mythological, imagined "Africa" of noble savagery and primitive grace.³⁸

It is the culture of the 1960s and 1970s that Reed is sending up, as much as the Harlem Renaissance, as the novel opens with the symptoms of Jes Grew being described with overblown theatricality expressive of the 1920s moment:

He said he felt like the gut heart and lungs of Africa's interior. He said he felt like the Kongo: "Land of the Panther." [...] He said he felt he could dance on a dime. (5)

³⁷ Adolph Reed, Jr., 'The Allure of Malcolm X and the Changing Character of Black Politics', in Joe Wood (ed.), *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp 203-32 (p 209).

³⁸ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p 113.

The 1920s, according to Ann Douglas, was characterised by a perspective that “looked histrionically to the imminent end of Western civilization” but chose a “route there [that] was pure theater”.³⁹

Reed’s intense scepticism of any rubric in which black artforms are positioned as ‘new’, or which divorces blackness or Africanness as a ‘sign’ from a discernible tradition, is galvanised by his strong suspicion of a less than innocent profit motive attached to such a move. “Talented Tenth” is a term frequently adopted by Reed when he speaks about a select few black artists groomed by a dominant (white) cultural establishment in the 1970s and 1980s. This term was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in a 1903 essay,⁴⁰ and used during the 1920s to describe the small number of black artists groomed by white patrons for the ‘Harlem Renaissance’, and in Reed’s use refers to the way in which black artistic movements have worked, in both eras, with a dominant capitalist establishment, to endorse what he perceives as a forgetfulness of tradition. Encouraging a notion that this unhappy co-option of African-American and African arts by the moneyed establishment continues in a virtually unbreakable cycle, Reed writes, in 2003:

in what may be the greatest irony of all, an institute named for DuBois has become a center for the creation and promotion of multimillion-dollar cultural products based upon DuBois’s ideas. [... A] new Talented Tenth, which blames the black underclass for its

³⁹ Douglas, Ann, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (London: Picador, 1995), pp 39, 55.

⁴⁰ Du Bois refers, with this term, to “bolder and brighter minds [...] among Negro youth” who “demand [...] higher training” [W.E.B. Du Bois, ‘Of the Training of Black Men’, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1996 [1953]), p 105-06].

problems, is making deals with megacapitalists like Microsoft while the DuBois museum in Accra, Ghana, is running out of resources.⁴¹

Reed's objection, then, is to any perspective in which he perceives a forgetfulness of the fluid nature of tradition and memory, and its capacity to occur in 'possessive' form at any given moment, as well as its role in a linear history. For Reed both a dominant entertainment industry and a black nationalist "claim to ancient Egypt" which, McAlister notes, "would eventually fuel the rise of Afrocentrism in the 1980s",⁴² are potentially guilty of this.

Afrocentrism promoted the notion that "If ancient Egypt was reclaimed as a black civilization, then "civilization" could be claimed for blacks. And this was not just *a* civilization, but *the* foundation of "Western civilization."⁴³ Far from expressing "a vision which is not confined within ideological bounds",⁴⁴ this perspective instead, Paul Gilroy notes, asserts the "anteriority of African civilisation to western civilisation [...] not in order to escape this linear time but in order to claim it and thus subordinate its narrative of civilisation to a different set of political interests without even attempting to change the terms themselves."⁴⁵ Afrocentrism, and its concern with ancient Egypt's 'blackness', then, functions within the same logic as the Euro-American impulse to

⁴¹ Ishmael Reed, 'Booker Versus the Negro-Saxons', in Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War (New York: Basic Books, 2003), pp 76-91 (p 87).

⁴² McAlister, p 149.

⁴³ Ibid., p 142.

⁴⁴ R.M.V. Raghavendra Rao, 'Afrocentricity in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The System of Dante's Hell*, The Literary Griot, 5.1 (Spring 1993), pp 17-32 (p 21).

⁴⁵ Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness (London: Verso, 1993), pp 190-91.

“construct[...] an Africa that is a “nullity,” a “blank slate” void of culture”,⁴⁶ and might more specifically be seen to constitute a part of the broad American neurosis over claiming newness and linear progress away from a moment fixed in the past.

“My 2 Heads”: Memory and Trauma

Jes Grew, however, is also said to be “yearning for The Work of its Word or else it will peter out as in the 1890s, when it wasn’t ready and had no idea where to search.” (33-4) While the presymbolic is not necessarily separate from the symbolic in Jes Grew, the phenomenon also seems to register a traumatic moment, or repeated moments of trauma, which might interrupt its fluid entry into language or text. This may be imagined to correspond to the scenario illustrated by Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history”:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the

⁴⁶ Keith Cartwright, p 5. Citing Christopher Miller, Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French (1985), p 23.

future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

This storm is what we call progress.⁴⁷

The notion that the Text's mysterious disappearance may be read as a metaphor for the trauma of the Middle Passage is suggested as Richard Swope comments that one of the "anonymous [...] Jes Grew Carrier[s]" says "We had invented our own texts and slang" (194), meaning the Text's absence does not close the book on signification, but actually opens a space in which Jes Grew can continue to signify indefinitely.⁴⁸ Indeed, what happens when texts are developed away from the site of their earlier history is found simply to be what has happened through the process of diaspora, as LaBas's sidekick Black Herman comments:

That's our genius here in America. We were dumped here on our own without the Book to tell us who the loas are, what we call spirits were. We made up our own. The theories of Julia Jackson. I think we've done all right. The Blues, Ragtime, The Work that we do is just as good. (130)

The text, as Robert Elliott Fox puts it, is "not a literary artifact; it is, rather, an ongoing process",⁴⁹ and Black Herman's words are designed to encourage a sense of the validity of African-American cultural forms, which even as they may be entirely separate from an African 'text', can nevertheless be seen to work in the same tradition which is open to possession, and which also recognises the fracture which has been engendered by trauma.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, Random House, 1999 [London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1970]), pp 245-55 (p 249).

⁴⁸ Richard Swope, 'Crossing Western Space, or the HooDoo Detective on the Boundary in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*', *African American Review*, 36.4 (Winter 2002), pp 611-28, p 618.

⁴⁹ Robert Elliott Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Samuel R. Delany* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), p 52.

By evoking 1920s America, Reed dramatises a moment in which, Ann Douglas has identified, “America-at-large was separating itself culturally from England and Europe, [while] black America, in an inevitable corollary movement, was recovering its own heritage from the dominant white culture.”⁵⁰ An American unwillingness or inability to be ‘possessed’ by the fluid form of memory which negotiates easily between past and present, then, is figured by Reed as a bodily inflexibility, governed by a neurotic fear of losing control. This is recognised as PaPa LaBas and his sidekick Black Herman meet Benoit Battraville, and he asks them:

What *is* the American fetish about highways?

They want to get somewhere, LaBas offers.

Because something is after them, Black Herman adds.

But what is after them?

They are after themselves. They call it destiny. Progress. We call it Haints. Haints of their victims rising from the soil of Africa, South America, Asia. (135)

PaPa LaBas himself epitomises a more relaxed attitude to historical memory:

Some say his ancestor is the long Ju Ju of Arno in eastern Nigeria [...] Whoever his progenitor, whatever his lineage, his grandfather it is known was brought to America on a slave ship mixed in with other workers who were responsible for bringing African religion to the Americas where it survives to this day. (23)

The narrative’s relaxed attitude toward whatever LaBas’s “lineage” might have been suggests that he may in one sense be connected to African tradition via the specifically historical routes negotiated across linear time and through geographical space by the slave ships; he may also, however, be connected to Africa by a less linear route – that of

⁵⁰ Douglas, p 5.

possession. This is made even more clear as LaBas is accused by his assistant, Earline, of “conspiratorial hypothesis” because he does not show “empirical evidence” (25) for the history he tells:

Evidence? Woman, I dream about it, I feel it, I use my 2 heads. My Knockings. Don't you children have your Knockings, or have you New Negroes lost your other senses, the senses we came over here with? (25-26)

The memory of Africa, then, may be known in ways which recall the Middle Passage, *and* in ways which bypass it, and these may also recall each other in loose combination.

If “New Negroes” have lost any connection to memory, this is as a result of trauma, a trauma which the novel shows, through the concept of “Atonism”, is repeated through historical time, and through everyday experience, in the manner of the “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” for Benjamin’s angel. As Reed’s characterisation of Atonism has been called, by critics, a “shibboleth for white hegemony”,⁵¹ and a “parable of intolerance of intolerance”,⁵² it has been perceived as promoting the very binary Reed refutes. But as Reed sends up the very practice of tracing histories, the novel shows this binary itself to have been created by the traumatic encounter which was the origin of Atonism itself. Reed is not proposing the kind of hierarchisation suggested by Richard Hardack, who finds him to be “obsessed with [...] tracing language and concepts back to African and non-Western sources”.⁵³ Quite on the contrary, and laughably enough, it is *Atonism itself*, the impulse to “Knock [Jes Grew]

⁵¹ Chaney, p 275.

⁵² Richard Hardack, ‘Swing to the White, Back to the Black: Writing and ‘Sourcery’ in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*’, in Tracy Mishkin (ed.), *Literary Influence and African-American Writers* (New York: Garland, 1996), pp 271-300 (p 282).

⁵³ Ibid.

Dock It Co-opt It” (118), which is shown to have ‘originated’ in ancient Egypt, as the young Osiris’s jealous brother Set, who “establish[ed] his own religion based upon Aton (the Sun’s flaming disc)” (174).

Spoofing the convention of the detective story as an easily fulfilled quest for a linear history and a unitary ‘truth’, Reed has his detective PaPa LaBas open his ‘history’ of Jes Grew, in what Joe Weixlmann calls “a hyperbolic parody of the traditional detective novel’s scene of confrontation and disclosure”,⁵⁴ with the words “it all began 1000s of years ago in Egypt” (160). As he proceeds through no less than 34 pages of Ancient Egyptian history, explaining that the dances of Osiris begin to “hit [people] at all times of the day” and “interrupt their tilling of the soil” (164), he tells how Osiris’s scribe Thoth suggested that “the outbreaks occurred because the mysteries had no text to turn to. No litany to feed the spirits that were seizing the people” (164). In this history, the inscription of Jes Grew’s ‘Text’ “originates in the dancer’s body [so that] it was never the page as read, but the page as danced that conferred meaning”,⁵⁵ and the linearity of signification is thus entirely undermined. Sending up the convention of the history textbook,⁵⁶ which betrays a desire to ‘read’ memory in only one way, through text itself, LaBas introduces the story of Osiris with the laughably non-specific words, “At this time in history” (161), and then goes on to play absolutely freely upon temporal indeterminacy, marking various events as having occurred, for instance, on “midsummer, the 10th day of July” (165) – without mentioning the year to which he apparently refers –

⁵⁴ Weixlmann, ‘Culture Clash’, pp 25-26.

⁵⁵ Donald L. Hoffman, ‘A Darker Shade of Grail: Questing at the Crossroads in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*’, *Callaloo*, 17.4 (1994), pp 1245-56 (p 1253).

⁵⁶ See Beth McCoy, ‘Paratext, Citation, and Academic Desire in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 46.4 (2005), pp 604-35.

then, on “October 24th” (166), on “October 31st” (166), and finally, ridiculously enough, at “12:00 midnight June 26, 363” (171). The neurotic desire to attach dates to an African history in order to locate its ‘origins’ is not pandered to here by Reed. While loas are characterised as “Multitudinous, individual – like the 1000 1000000000 stars of a galaxy” (204), the Atonist mind which might seek such a linear history is described as “a mind which sought to interpret the world by using a single loa. Somewhat like filling a milk bottle with an ocean” (24). Memory itself, then, may be known through the signs mapping linear time on a calendar, but it may also be known in ways which are indifferent to calendar-time. Reed frustrates, evades, and laughs out loud at the nagging insistence upon a history which can only be ‘known’ if it is attached to a calendar date system, and figures this tendency as symptomatic of the American neurosis toward the past. Such a preoccupation, the novel suggests, is characteristic of repeated historical attempts to deny the past, and the fluid nature of memory.

Ending up “in such a state that he believed that the Sun was dependent on him and thus he would walk around in circles all day thinking that when he walked the Sun made its course about the planet” (174), Set is identified as “the 1st man to shut nature out of himself” (162). Yet even this appellation may reveal a sardonic approach toward the naming of ‘firsts’, as Reed spoofs the obsession with identifying origins. Set’s friends, the “legislators, an unpopular group of poets” are for instance “sarcastically called [...] The First Poets because in Egypt at the time of Osiris every man was an artist and every artist a priest” (164). An African history, then, may be identified, a history of African ‘origins’ may even laughingly be posited, but the possibility of such a beginning is at the

same time entirely undermined with the knowledge that history, memory, and life itself, will not submit so easily to linear measures of time. The expectation that it would do so is seen to arise as a result of historical moments of trauma which encourage a distancing from the past.

As the 'original' text written by Thoth in Ancient Egypt is said to have made an epic journey through the hands of, among others, Moses and Jethro, it is brought to America by Hinckle Von Vampton, yet when LaBas comes to reveal the text, the box containing the text is anti-climactically found to be "empty!!" (196) The repeated trauma of Atonism, then, is related to the claim made by Walter Benjamin, as Susan Buck-Morss notes, that following World War I, the "battlefield experience of shock "has become the norm" in modern life":

In industrial production no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos, shock is the very essence of modern experience. [...] The motor responses of switching, snapping, the jolt in movement of a machine have their psychic counterpart in the "sectioning of time" into a sequence of repetitive moments without development. [...] Perception becomes experience only when it connects with sense-memories of the past [...] and] as the synaesthetic system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock[...], its goal is to *numb* the organism, to deaden the sense, to repress memory⁵⁷

Mumbo Jumbo figures the 1920s itself as a struggle for historical memory, "Picture the 1920s as a drag race whose entries are ages vying for the Champion *gros-ben-age* of the

⁵⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', October, 62 (Fall 1992), pp 3-41(pp 16, 16-18).

times, that aura that remains after the flesh of the age has dropped away.” (20) Reed explains that “They have in Voodoo a thing they call *gros-bon-ange*, and the *gros-bon-ange* is that which separates from the person after death. It carries all of his essential elements, the qualities that make him unique”.⁵⁸ Yet Reed also invokes what Walter Benjamin refers to as the desire, “related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life”, to “overcom[e] the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction”, and thus “destroy its aura”, “its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”⁵⁹ As Reed sees it, every historical moment is unique, but also continuous with tradition. The shock of modernity is that it positions every moment as new, but also as infinitely reproducible, as potentially identical to the last, so that history is no longer properly thought of “in the unfolding sense,”⁶⁰ but instead, as a “continuous present, [...] a beginning again and again, the way they do in making automobiles.”⁶¹

Reed, then, lampoons the Harlem Renaissance, a moment when, as Ann Douglas puts it, the term “New Negro” was used to “signal[...] a fresh beginning”,⁶² as imposing a false break upon black artistic tradition, and as Robert Elliott Fox comments, “attempts to create discontinuities in the tradition may provide the reason for the apparent put-down of the New Negro in Reed’s novel [...] What is really “new” about the New Negro?”⁶³ It is with an emphasis upon the presence of a tradition and its live functioning through

⁵⁸ John O’Brien, p 35. .

⁵⁹ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Illuminations*, pp 211-44 (pp 217, 214).

⁶⁰ Ebbesen, p 165.

⁶¹ Cited in Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, p 121. Originally Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937).

⁶² Douglas, p 4.

⁶³ Fox, p 2.

memory, that the notion of a 'renaissance' in black art is thoroughly ridiculed in the novel, as a 1920s society party is described:

Princes of Europe rub elbows with Harlem poets, tycoons from Tin Pan Alley have brought their stables, playwrights, painters, publishers, producers, sports figures, Negro delineators, middle-aged Byron-Shelley-quoting Negro professors thrilled by their newly found Negroness and who remember when this particular revelation occurred, the time the day and what they were doing. (156)

Ann Douglas comments that the 1920s was "the first age of the media, [and] the first generation to grasp the supremacy that mass culture would acquire".⁶⁴ The 1920s, according to Douglas, was a moment in which America became obsessed with the 'new', betraying a rather neurotic approach toward the past indicative of a "mother complex":⁶⁵

The two movements, cultural emancipation of America from foreign influences and celebration of its black-and-white heritage, had for a brief but crucial moment a common opponent and a common agenda: the demolition of that block to modernity, or so she seemed, the powerful white middle-class matriarch of the recent Victorian past.⁶⁶

This notion of a mother complex, which is characterised by a love for the mother which nevertheless operates concurrently with an impulse to destroy her so as to claim one's autonomy, is tied up with the American obsession with progress, and is dramatised by Reed in a highly irreverent commentary upon art and the relationship to Europe:

in America it's different. There is no royalty in the European sense. Only money counts. Guggenheim, Astor, Ford, Carnegie ... people you would spit upon if you had them at home in Europe. [...] We've learned to bullshit the way you do, build up an aura of sacredness about the meanest achievement [...] 1 of these days 1 of our sons, perhaps the

⁶⁴ Douglas, p 20.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p 145.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p 6.

son of a Polish immigrant, will emerge from some steel town in Pennsylvania and mount a turd on the wall of a museum and make it stick ... and when you ask him what it is he will put on his dark glasses and snub you the way you did us. And on that day we will have overtaken you. (112)

The imposition of a break in the tradition of black art functions in this American context which shows grudging admiration for the 'aura of sacredness' surrounding European culture, alongside the desire to create a distance from that inheritance, by figuring it as dead. So Reed perceives the Harlem Renaissance moment as similarly characterised by a denial of a continuity of black arts with an African-American tradition, let alone any African tradition. As Jes Grew indicates that signification (language) is not in fact separated from the presymbolic (memory), but that these quantities exist in a semiotic continuity, the notion of the 'New Negro' figures a break with the past which separates signs from memory, and artforms from their live tradition. The separation of signs (of blackness, for instance) from tradition occurs as the traumatising effect of 'Atonism', which for instance led Ragtime, which Ann Douglas notes, was the "predecessor" of jazz, "developed in the late nineteenth century among blacks in the cities of the Mid- and Southwest",⁶⁷ to fail to take as firm a hold as jazz did in the 1920s: "*In the 1890s the text was not available and Jes Grew was out there all alone [...] broken-hearted and double-crossed*" (6).

Reed's *Mu'tafikah* is a direct response to the phenomenon which McAlister calls "Tutmania", which itself offers an example of an ancient Egyptian history situated within the cultures of the 1920s and the 1970s, and an illustration central to contemporary

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp 74, 364.

culture of the way in which a memory of Africa has been divorced from tradition by American interests. McAlister recounts “the fascination with the ancient Egyptian king Tutankhamun that swept the United States from 1977 to 1979, when a collection of objects from Tutankhamun’s tomb toured six American museums.”⁶⁸ These objects were discovered by the English archaeologist Howard Carter in 1922, [and] had created a sensation when [they were] found, inspiring a craze for ancient Egypt that influenced fashion, art, and architecture in the 1920s. After the excavation, most of the objects from the tomb – the richly inlaid coffins, the elaborate furniture, the royal death mask of solid gold – became the property of Egypt’s Cairo Museum.⁶⁹

Controversy surrounded the objects from the moment of their ‘discovery’ by Carter, who “came in for some criticism” for his “arrogant belief that he really did “own” the Tut tomb”, and whose “attitude created an adversarial relationship with the Egyptians”, leading him to “los[e] all rights to the Tut objects.”⁷⁰ Accompanying the 1970s tour of the objects, McAlister notes, was:

The “official” Tut narrative – as produced by museum curators, Egyptologists, and the mainstream press – [which] aestheticized the Tut treasures, constructing them as “universal” art, something too ennobling and too precious (too “human”) to belong to any one people (Arabs) or any one nation (Egypt). Instead, Tut was presented as part of the “common heritage of mankind” – a heritage that would be owned and operated by the United States. [...] The Tut exhibit expanded the appeal and reach of that

⁶⁸ McAlister, p 125. Though, clearly, the tour itself occurred after *Mumbo Jumbo*’s publication, McAlister’s report that Thomas Hoving, the man who “was originally unsuccessful in making a bid to Egypt for a loan of the Tut objects”, was “director of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1967 to 1977” [McAlister, p 127] suggests that negotiations for the Egyptian treasures were well underway at the time that Reed was writing.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p 127.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p 131.

aestheticization, not least through the commodification and mass marketing of Tut objects.⁷¹

As Reed's novel calls America "the protector of the archives of "mankind's" achievements" (15), it is the specific discourse, called "imperial stewardship"⁷² by McAlister, and the total disregard for the tradition within which the artefacts functioned, which is being satirised. As McAlister puts it, "the logic of imperial stewardship depended on combining universalist rhetoric with a presumption of American and Western superiority so profound that it remained unspoken."⁷³

If the fact that it was when the *Mu'tafikah* "met at the University at the Art History class that we decided to do this" (89) is not a clear sign that Reed is lampooning the ideas upon which the *Mu'tafikah* is based,⁷⁴ the "pun[...] on "motherfucker""⁷⁵ observed by Gates and others, most certainly is. Reed makes satirical commentary upon the mother complex affecting America, and might also be said to look pointedly in the direction of 'postmodernist' pronouncements of the death of the past. Where the *Mu'tafikah* intend to "send the[...] loot back to where it was stolen and await the rise of Shango, Shiva and Quetzalcoatl" (89), their purpose of using text to summon the gods may sound like they are "provid[ing] a metaphor for Reed's own attempts to render a true black aesthetic by rescuing it from co-option, misunderstanding, and dogmatism",⁷⁶ as Robert Elliott Fox

⁷¹ Ibid., p 129 & p 132.

⁷² Ibid., p 129.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Reed is habitually wary of affording the academic establishment too dominant a role in his life and work, having dropped out of his undergraduate degree because "I just didn't want to be a slave to somebody else's reading lists" (John O'Brien, p 28), and having also turned down the offer of tenure at Berkeley, where he continues to work as a Senior Lecturer.

⁷⁵ Gates, p 225.

⁷⁶ Fox, p 51.

deduces. But in fact, their practice is entirely antithetical to that which is more broadly endorsed in the novel – as the history of Osiris, and especially Moses’s misadventure in Egypt, has shown, a text should not be simply taken and played in a different context – it needs to play through the sounds embodied by the times. The *Mu’tafikah*’s strategy fails to account for the traumatic history of diaspora.

In the history which McAlister describes, the forgetfulness of the tradition in which the objects became ‘artefacts’ is seen to initiate a discourse whereby the objects themselves are transformed from their function in one role, and put to an entirely new purpose. This is a process similar to that observed by Walter Benjamin:

Works of art are received and valued on different planes. Two polar types stand out: with one, the accent is on the cult value; with the other, on the exhibition value of the work. Artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult. One may assume that what mattered was their existence, not their being on view. The elk portrayed by the man of the Stone Age on the walls of his cave was an instrument of magic. He did expose it to his fellow men, but in the main it was meant for the spirits.⁷⁷

The aestheticisation of artefacts allows a universalising discourse which separates them from a tradition in which they held ritual significance. The emphasis on “exhibition value” over and above “cult value”, in other words, transforms the transmission of cultural artefacts from a process which is communicative of tradition, to a process which denies all knowledge of tradition – that is, from a creative to a destructive act.

⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*., pp 211-44 (p 218).

It is this allegorical relationship which the *Mu'tafikah* strategy fails to recognise. In this scheme which actually argues *against* a return of artefacts to “Africa, South America and China”, then, Reed comes head-to-head with Afrocentric arguments, and shows that neither artefacts nor people necessarily can or should travel to a place separate from their existence in the present, but can instead evoke Jes Grew, which is, in its own way, an African inheritance, in their own time with their own texts. As Benoit Battraville, a “high up member of the Haitian aristocracy”, says to Nathan Brown, an African-American poet: “Open-Up-To-Right-Here and then you will have something coming from your experience that the whole world will admire and need.” (152) The *Mu'tafikah*, as Erik Curren comments,

practice the instrumental and violent morality developed by Atonism itself. Thus discredited, violent separatist cultural activism takes a back seat to an explicitly non-instrumental practice whose [...] model is the synchronic practice of Reed's own novelistic strategy in *Mumbo Jumbo*.⁷⁸

The *Mu'tafikah* are clearly indicted as “They pass a drinking vessel shaped like an Inca warrior's head and filled with good old California vermouth” (84). McAlister writes:

In the dominant construction of the Tut exhibit as “art,” Tut could not be owned, only managed. As commodity, however, Tut became purchasable. The explosion of inexpensive Tut items, from desk calendars to coffee mugs, posited access to a symbol of riches in affordable terms. The Tut paraphernalia made it clear that Tut *could* be bought, and that if his treasures were a “common heritage of mankind,” they were also just another one of the infinitely reproducible commodities of popular culture.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Erik D. Curren, ‘Ishmael Reed's Postmodern Revolt’, in Simons, John D. (ed.). Literature and Film in the Historical Dimension: Selected Papers from the Fifteenth Annual Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), pp 139-48 (pp 144-45).

⁷⁹ McAlister, p 139.

As the possibility is presented of selling replicas of historical objects, the work of art loses its ritual value as it gains commodity value – as Benjamin puts it, “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual”.⁸⁰

Postmodernism and the politics of Black Power are both centrally concerned with aesthetics, to the exclusion of tradition. The politics of Black Power can be seen to have used the notion of a return to Africa in a manner that did not take account of African tradition or the history of diaspora, as William Van Deburg shows when he quotes some people who ‘returned’ to Africa and complained that

one couldn’t “crack a joke and have someone ... *really* understand it.” [...] Upon reflection, some concluded that cultural misconceptions had contributed to their sense of alienation. As one expatriate confessed, their concept of Africa all too often was formed in America – an Afro-American Africa “based primarily on a reaction to the white man’s Africa and what we thought Africa would be like.”⁸¹

Even (or especially) the Black Panthers, as Nikhil Singh notes, engaged in a deadly serious kind of guerrilla theater, in which militant sloganeering, bodily display, and spectacular actions simultaneously signified their possession and yet real lack of power. The Panthers’ emphasis upon self-presentation, in this sense, provided a visual vocabulary that was a key component of their politics. The leather, the clothing, the celebration of black skin and “natural” hair, and, above all, the obtrusively displayed guns were all part of a repertoire of styles, gestures, and rhetorical equations like “black is beautiful” and “power to the people” that at once revalued blackness positively, while

⁸⁰ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, p 226.

⁸¹ William L. Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 151.

at the same time drawing on its threatening powers within the dominant U.S. racial imagination.⁸²

If the practice of trying to reverse a historical migration of culture cannot approximate the creative potential of improvisation, neither can the “Griffin politics” (39) of Abdul Sufi Hamid. Although it has been argued that “the collage effect of Abdul Hamid’s education and technique [...] mirrors Reed’s own”,⁸³ Hamid does not respect rules as Reed insists is necessary. Hamid’s tale of educating himself in prison following the abuse of his mother is strongly reminiscent of the life of Malcolm X,⁸⁴ who toward the end of his life was known as El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. Yet Hamid seems also to “predict[...] the coming of Malcolm X”⁸⁵, as he says “Maybe I won’t be around but someone is coming. I feel it stirring. He might even have the red hair of a conjure man but he won’t be 1. No, he will get it across. And he will be known as the man who “got it across.” (39) As Hamid both prefigures Malcolm X and *is* Malcolm X, similarly, Hamid and Malcolm X are both allowed to cascade into the memory of Osiris, as “In the Sudan and Ethiopia he became known as “the man who did dances that caught-on” (162).

⁸² Nikhil Pal Singh, Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p 203.

⁸³ Slappey, Lisa, ‘Nature as Sacred Text: An Ecocritical Reading of *Mumbo Jumbo*’, in The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed, ed. Bruce Allen Dick (Westport CT & London: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp 41-46.(p 45).

⁸⁴ Santiago Juan-Navarro: “Some religious and political leaders of the time are represented by the dogmatic Abdul Sufi Hamid. Abdul’s career primarily recalls that of Malcolm X. [...] However, all of Reed’s critics overlook the fact that a Sufi Abdul Hamid actually existed.” Santiago Juan-Navarro, Archival Reflections: Postmodern Fiction of the Americas (Self-Reflexivity, Historical Revisionism, Utopia) (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2000), p 141.

⁸⁵ Slappey, p 45.

“Back to Guinee”: Reed’s African History

Reed comments that “Malcolm X was a universality, a humanist, and a global man.”⁸⁶

As Malcolm offers Islam as an alternative, as “a special religion for the black man”,⁸⁷

Reed suggests that Malcolm X might have forged the most powerful of connections between everyday African-American life, and African and Middle-Eastern culture.

Reed’s first criticism of the Hamid/X figure in the novel is that his perspective is limited by a tautological teaching (reminiscent of the teachings of the Nation of Islam). The limitation of Hamid/X’s perspective is particularly highlighted in his assertion that

I believe that you 2 have something. Something that is basic, something that has been tested and something that all of our people have, it lies submerged in their talk and in their music and you are trying to bring it back but you will fail. It’s the 1920s, not 8000 B.C. These are modern times. These are the last days of your roots and your conjure and your gris-gris and your healing potions and love powder. I am building something that people will understand. This country is eclectic. The architecture the people the music the writing. The thing that works here will have a little bit of jive talk and a little bit of North Africa, a fez-wearing mulatto in a pinstriped suit. A man who can say give me some skin as well as Asalamilakum. (38)

As Hamid recognises the need to engage with the contemporary, he does not, however, see that the past can possess the present, and does not recognise, therefore, the link with an African tradition which is present through contemporary forms. Malcolm X can be seen to have been quite disparaging about black Christians ‘getting out of their heads’,

⁸⁶ Walt Shepperd, ‘When State Magicians Fail: An Interview with Ishmael Reed’, in *Dick & Singh*, pp 3-13 (p 7) Reprinted from *Nickel Review*, 28 August-10 September 1968, pp 4-6.

⁸⁷ Malcolm X & Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin Books, 1968 [1965]), p 320.

when he mentions the “little evangelical storefront churches”, whose “congregations were usually Southern migrant people”: “three or four nights a week, they were in their storefront rehearsing for the next Sunday, I guess, shaking and rattling and rolling the gospels with their guitars and tambourines.”⁸⁸ As Reed would see it, Abdul/Malcolm X fails to recognise the value of a tradition of possession, which far from simply being co-opted from the white man, is *specifically African-American*, and as Reed shows through his genealogy, also specifically African. Reed’s Abdul character treats time as linear, and traditions as mutually exclusive, one simply taking over from another which is no longer relevant:

Hopefully, one day all of us shall be able to express a variety of opinions, styles, and values, LaBas, but for now we need a strong man, someone to “whip these coons into line.” Let the freedom of culture come later! I know this sounds contradictory but I don’t have God’s mind, yet!” (201)

Hamid does not see the fluidity of the process, that black culture already *is* employing diverse inheritances. Cornel West observes that “like most Black nationalists, Malcolm X feared the culturally hybrid character of black life,”⁸⁹ and Reed, while largely impressed with Malcolm X’s international vision for African-American identity, pulls him up on his tendency to see African-American tradition as simply a countrified folk art,⁹⁰ rather than seeing the web of transnational, diasporic connections it may embody. As Lisa Slappey comments: “Although Abdul Hamid, who predicts the coming of Malcolm X, is in general an admirable character, here Reed criticizes the Black Muslims

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp 318, 319.

⁸⁹ Cornel West, ‘Malcolm X and Black Rage’ in *Malcolm X in Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), pp 48-58 (p 54).

⁹⁰ Reed’s satirisation of this is seen in the figure of W.W. Jefferson’s Reverend father – Reed hyperinflates the way in which Malcolm X is disparaging of country ways.

for departing from what he considers the original African spirituality by submitting to yet another form of institutional monotheism, and as Black Herman warns, “That bigoted edge of it resembles fascism” (40).”⁹¹

Though linear time is not the dominant order in which Reed’s memory of Africa appears, as we have seen, it is still able to function, alongside other notions of time, in order to suggest a clear Afro-diasporan tradition of possession. Benoit Battraville seems to suggest a linear sense of history, along which a relationship to Africa occurs *before* other sites of diasporic identification, as he comments that “we Haitians...[are] closer to Africa than yourselves.” (198), and furthermore, “We do not work the way you do. You improvise here a great deal; we believe in the old mysteries.” (134) Yet, even in the Haitian context, the connection to Africa also works through a distinctly possessive force:

You actually have been talking to a seminar all night. Agwe, God of the Sea in his many manifestations, took over when I found it difficult to explain things. (138)

The historical and the possessive nature of the relationship to Africa is implicitly recalled by a vodoun perspective, as Barbara Browning reminds us:

Haitians figuratively link mortality to Africa by saying that when a member of the vodun community dies, his or her spirit goes “back to Guinee.” Brazilians similarly speak of death as a passage “back to Luanda.” Such statements are not merely poignant or nostalgic; they mark a political, historical affiliation that transcends the life of the individual.⁹²

⁹¹ Slappey, p 45.

⁹² Barbara Browning, ‘Babaluaiye: Searching for the Text of a Pandemic’, in Nelson, Emmanuel S. (ed.), AIDS: The Literary Response (New York: Twayne, 1992), pp 76-87 (p 85).

It might be noted at this stage that none of the novels I discuss in this study display anything approaching the nostalgia that is evident in Jameson's postmodernism. Interestingly, when the past is figured as alive in the present, as it is in all of these works, to one extent or another, nostalgia as a concept and as a feeling becomes entirely redundant, because the past is not lost. As Browning's point suggests, the relationship of the individual to the collective is also instrumental in this traditional process of remembering Africa, since possession occurs on an individual basis, linking the individual to a tradition. Just as Set may be understood as "a frustrated control freak who epitomizes the constraints of a civilization invested in promoting only a single vision",⁹³ a certain amnesia with regard to the multiplicity of experience and the plurality of historical memory is regarded as symptomatic of American neurosis.

Major Young, Reed's figure of a Harlem Renaissance poet, says:

'Is it necessary for us to write the same way? I am not Wallace Thurman, Thurman is not Fauset and Fauset is not Claude McKay, McKay isn't Horne. We all have our unique styles.' (102)

The threat to individuality is another aspect of the exploitative erasure of the sense of a black artistic tradition which Reed observes as enacted by the American culture and entertainment industry – for the tradition of possession allows for a proliferation of styles and forms – "Multitudinous, individual – like the 1000 1000000000 stars of a galaxy" (204).

⁹³ Slappey, p 42.

As Reed's novel focuses largely on the notion of possession in a tradition linked to the Ancient Egyptian past, it does, however, also make commentary upon African-American identification with a contemporary Africa. Almost buried amid the multiple actions of the *Mu'tafikah*, and therefore showing the ease of slippage between a destructive and a constructive internationalist perspective, there is:

Another man, a South African trumpeter, "Hugh," is in L.A. transmitting Black American sounds on home. He realizes that the essential Pan-Africanism is artists relating across continents their craft, drumbeats from the aeons, sounds that are still with us. (83)

This reference to South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela, who settled in the United States, corresponds with an understanding of the communication of African-American expression with a contemporary Africa which is similarly suggested when Black Herman comments that "I'll bet later on in the 50s and 60s and 70s we will have some artists and creators who will teach Africa and South America some new twists." (130) However, Reed is not so vocal in the novel on what contemporary influence may be coming *from* Africa. A clue to his approach may be perceived when PaPa LaBas visits Abdul Sufi Hamid, and comes across

the figure of a monkey-like Portuguese explorer, carved by an Angolan. He is obviously juiced and is sitting on a barrel. What side-splitting, bellyaching, satirical ways these ancient craftsmen brought to their art! The African race had quite a sense of humor. In North America, under Christianity, many of them had been reduced to glumness, depression, surliness, cynicism, malice without artfulness, and their intellectuals, in America, only appreciated heavy, serious works. (96)

Reed appears to be satirising the tendency to perceive Africa *only* in the past, in an ancestral relationship to African-Americans, or as a linear precedent to African-American

culture. However, just because Reed satirises this perception which is limited to the linear, it does not necessarily follow that he offers an alternative means by which *contemporary* Africa might be perceived in relation to contemporary America. The problem may be what Johannes Fabian has called ‘allochrony’:

Anachronism signifies a fact, or statement of fact, that is out of turn with a given time frame; it is a mistake, perhaps an accident. I am trying to show that we are facing, not mistakes, but *devices* (existential, rhetoric, political). To signal that difference I will refer to the denial of coevalness as the *allochronism* of anthropology. [...] Just because one condemns the time-distancing discourse of evolutionism[, one] does not abandon the allochronic understanding of such terms as *primitive*. On the contrary, the time-machine, freed of the wheels and gears of the historical method, now works with “redoubled vigour.” The denial of coevalness becomes intensified as time-distancing turns from an explicit concern into an implicit theoretical assumption.⁹⁴

If anthropological analysis tends to situate the present of the people under scrutiny as if it occurs somewhere in the temporal past of those doing the scrutinising, even, Fabian suggests, when every attempt is made not to do so, the African-American scenario dramatised by Reed’s novel offers little sense of how African-Americans might engage with a contemporary Africa. As a result of the novel’s focus on the notion of ‘tradition’ as an African past felt in an American present, one might argue that the premise of African ‘backwardness’ is incorporated into the analysis. Reed’s “historical method”, even as it makes every attempt to undermine the notion of an African past existing in a purely linear relationship to the African-American present, nevertheless struggles to visualise a contemporary Africa in the same temporal realm as America.

⁹⁴ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1983]), pp 32, 39.

Chapter Two

'Solomon's Leap': The Memory of Africa in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

At the beginning of *Song of Solomon* (1977), Toni Morrison presents us with an image of a man flying through the air. The novel opens with “the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent[’s] promise[...]¹ to “take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings” (3), as the agent Robert Smith “leap[s] from [the] cupola” of the “charity hospital” (4), in the fictional Michigan town of Mercy. Smith’s flight recalls a complex perspective on the notion of flight to Africa in African-American cultural memory, a history in which, in the case of both the trope of the Flying African and the entry of African-Americans into aviation, the hopes and fears of the community seem to be pinned upon the figure in flight, who is nevertheless working under the watchful, and frequently dismissive, gaze of a white hegemony. In this chapter, I argue that Morrison uses the sign of flight specifically, and language itself, in order to indicate a cultural memory of Africa prevalent in African-American tradition, in the most ambivalent of ways. The trope of flight in Morrison’s novel is situated within a return journey to the South, and as I draw a comparison between Morrison’s treatment of the memory of the South and the memory of Africa, I find that where both excavations into the past are wrought with pain, the exploration of the memory of the South is able to revive a lost inheritance through language, while the approach toward the memory of Africa is more broadly engulfed by silence.

¹ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Random House, 1998 [1997]), p3. All further page references will be given in parentheses.

Like Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history', who is speechless as he apprehends historical memory as "wreckage upon wreckage", Robert Smith's flight remembers, without specifically naming, repeated instances from African-American history in which the trope of flight has been associated with the notion of 'return' to Africa, and acts, Michael Rothberg suggests, as part of the novel's "textualizing [of] the trauma of slavery".² In Morrison's scheme, while speech and silence are certainly figured as complementary parts of language, speech is most frequently positioned as having the capacity to preserve tradition, while silence occurs in the face of traumatic memory. In these terms, Benjamin's angel may be imagined to have been rendered silent by the repeated traumas of history, illustrating effectively a memory which cannot be narrated, which can barely be figured in language. Elaine Scarry shows that "Not only is physical pain enormously difficult to describe in words – confronted with it, Virginia Woolf once noted, "language runs dry" – it also actively destroys language, reducing sufferers in the most extreme instances to an inarticulate state of cries and moans."³ The trauma of painful memory can have a similar effect, and while the memory of an African-American history situated in America can, it seems, be assimilated into language in Morrison's novel, the memory of Africa, which exists, as it were, 'beyond' the lives losses of the Middle Passage, and implicated as it is within a complexity of imperialist dynamics, is less easily spoken.

² Michael Rothberg, 'Dead Letter Office: Conspiracy, Trauma, and *Song of Solomon*'s Posthumous Connection', *African American Review*, 37.4 (Winter 2003), pp 501-16 (p 502).

³ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), book jacket. Scarry cites Virginia Woolf, p 4: "let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry." [...] Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it. bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned." [Woolf, 'On Being Ill', in *Collected Essays*, vol. 4 (New York: Harcourt. 1967). p 194].

The insurance agent's flight is figured long before Morrison's protagonist Milkman identifies the story of a "flying African" (322) in his ancestral past. The trope of the flying African is a cultural memory which Olivia Smith Storey notes "specifically refers to African born slaves flying from slavery in the Americas".⁴ Morrison comments, "my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts."⁵ The trope is repeated in a number of late twentieth-century African-American and Latin American novels, short stories, musical recordings and films, but also "manifest[s] a recurrent pattern of imagery that is more vast and less knowable in oral genres".⁶ It was first recorded in print in Drums and Shadows, a compilation of interviews with the Gullah residents of the Georgia coastal Sea Islands, whose cultural memory of Africa was retained in language for longer than in many African-American communities. One of the testimonies, given by an individual named as Prince Sneed of White Bluff, reads as follows:

"Muh gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slabes wut wuz climatize an he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an duh dribuh come out an two un um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, and duh hoes wuz wukin by demsef. Duh dribuh say 'Wut dis?' an dey say, 'Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe,' quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye."⁷

⁴ Smith Storey, Olivia, 'Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans', Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History, 5.3 (2004). Accessed via Project Muse http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/v2005/5.3storey.html, paragraph 3.

⁵ Thomas LeClair, 'The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison', in Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp 119-28 (p 122). Reprinted from New Republic, 184 (21 March 1981), pp 25-29.

⁶ Smith Storey, paragraph 3.

⁷ Georgia Writers' Project, Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986 [1940]), p 79.

This trope most often figures “The African, the American born or Creole, and the Overseer[...] look[ing] at each other from the three points of a triangle [...], examining and defining each other. [...] The African [...] runs away from a future limited to hard labor and to the psychological terror of becoming accustomed to slavery, a future represented by the Creole figure in the trope.”⁸ Robert Smith’s flight, in the opening scene of Morrison’s novel, is accompanied by a narrative which traces the unofficial naming of “Doctor Street”, its renaming by white city legislators as “Mains Avenue”, and a further ironic counter-naming, on the part of the black community, as “Not Doctor Street”. Michael Rothberg comments that “the novel’s canny narrative voice threads its way through [...] the disjunctive relations of this community with the anonymous white town legislators”.⁹ The trope of the flying African, in its traditional use and also in dramatisation here by Morrison, evokes a dynamic of entrapment within a tortuous and inescapable relationship with white oppression, and the hope and hopelessness of ever escaping it.

When the narrative comments that “Mr. Smith didn’t draw as big a crowd as Lindbergh had four years earlier” (3), it signals that Smith’s flight may also recall the figure of the aviator Hubert F. Julian, “dubbed the “Lindbergh of His Race””,¹⁰ who “in the spring of 1924, [...] announced he would pilot a plane alone from New York to Liberia.”¹¹

⁸ Smith Storey, paragraph 5.

⁹ Rothberg, p 503.

¹⁰ Douglas, Ann, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (London: Picador, 1995), p 458.

¹¹ Jill D. Snider, “Great Shadow in the Sky”: The Airplane in the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and the Development of African American Visions of Aviation, 1921-1926’, in Dominick A. Pisano (ed.), *The Airplane in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp 105-146 (p 130). “Stating as one purpose of the jump to draw attention to the imminent closing of the black-owned A.I. Hart Department Store in Harlem, Julian urged the crowd to patronize Hart’s business.” (Snider, p 126). The possibility that Morrison may be signifying on this historical moment presents itself strongly as she

Smith's "wide blue silk wings curved forward around his chest" seem to recall the occasion of Julian's "first leap over Harlem, [when] the daring parachutist had worn a bright red devil suit, complete with horns and tail",¹² and as "Julian in many respects had become merged in the public mind with [Marcus] Garvey",¹³ who was similarly mocked for his "donning of academic robes".¹⁴ As "white journalists [...] cast even [Julian's] most heroic exploits in terms of updated minstrel comedy",¹⁵ and after his highly-publicised 1924 attempt to fly from New York "around the world and to Africa" ended as the "plane... 'hopped off' for four miles and then 'flopped' right down into Flushing [B]ay",¹⁶ even the black newspapers made comments such as "No old boat and no defective airplane will ever take them to Africa – or to Flushing Bay."¹⁷ The sad feeling of hope cut through with hopelessness, epitomised by the figure of the African-American flyer, is evident as Betty Gubert notes that "African Americans hoped to enter this new arena [of aviation], in part to put to rest society's deeply held belief that blacks were an inferior race".¹⁸ It is an emotional tone which is particularly resonant with Abraham Chapman's description of the African-American predicament:

The Negro in America has been denied a proper location and place, has been in perpetual motion searching for a proper place he could call home. During slavery, the flight to freedom was the goal – the search for a home, a haven, the search for a possibility of

mentions, in the middle of the scene of Robert Smith's flight, "Gerhardt's Department Store", an establishment which "Everyone knew" (5), and which, significantly, recalls the name of the store which Julian was endorsing.

¹² Snider, p 128.

¹³ Ibid., p 132.

¹⁴ Ibid., p 129.

¹⁵ Douglas, p 457.

¹⁶ Snider, p 132.

¹⁷ Ibid., p 133.

¹⁸ Betty Gubert, "Aviators, African American", in *Africana: The Encyclopaedia of the African and African American Experience*, eds. Kwame Anthony Appiah & Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), , p 152.

secure belonging. After the Civil War, and to this day, this historical reality has expressed itself in the great migration from the South to the North and the patterns of flight and migration which are inherent in the spatial and plot movements in the novels of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. This opposite reality, of uprooting and dislocation, gave the Negro writer, to use the language of [Cleanth] Brooks, a different “special focus upon the world,” a focus of *denial* of a place, which we hear so clearly as far back as in the spirituals.¹⁹

The “possibility of secure belonging”, set against the “opposite reality”, of “denial of a place”, is the dynamic which informs both the trope of the Flying African, and the history of African-Americans in aviation, and which is also seen in a history which Milkman learns when he travels South and learns about his grandfather Macon Dead, who “had come out of nowhere, as ignorant as a hammer and broke as a convict”, who “with nothing but free papers, a Bible, and a pretty black-haired wife” (235), had managed to cultivate “one of the best farms in Montour County. A farm that [his community remembers] colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon” (235). The message which Macon Dead’s farm seems to impart to his African-American community is this:

Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. [...] We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this county right here. *Nowhere* else! We got a home in this rock, don’t you see! [...] Grab it. Grab this land! (235)

These words echo those of a traditional Negro spiritual called “I Gotta Home in Dat Rock”, which is cited by Chapman to show that the tension between security and insecurity in the American landscape is a “theme [which] is expressed time and again in

¹⁹ Abraham Chapman, ‘Introduction’ to Black Voices: An Anthology of African-American Literature, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: Signet Classic, 2001 [1968]), pp 40-41.

[...] different spirituals”.²⁰ The poignancy that is felt in this song is similar to that which is seen as the story of Macon Dead unfolds to reveal his ultimate defeat by whites: “But they shot the top of his head off and ate his fine Georgia peaches. And even as boys these men began to die and were dying still.” (235) Yet even as the men tell stories, “they came alive [...], they hooted with joy.” (236) Memory of the African-American past may be suffused with sadness, but can at least, it seems, be sung or spoken about.

Even as Morrison’s novel opens by remembering the basic trope of the Flying African, however, it does not at this early stage explicitly narrate a link to that memory. While the possibility of the mythical flight’s African destination is mentioned by Prince Sneed in his rendition of the oral history, Morrison’s opening tableau mentions only “the other side of Lake Superior” (3) as Smith’s destination, and even in her own separate critical commentary upon the novel, Morrison claims that Smith’s “flight [...] toward asylum” may be toward “Canada, or freedom, or home, or the company of the welcoming dead”.²¹

²⁰ I got a home in dat rock,
Don’t you see?
Poor man Laz’rus, poor as I,
When he died he found a home on high,
He had a home in dat rock,
Don’t you see? (Chapman pp 40-41).

Sterling Stuckey even seems to make the suggestion that Paul Robeson’s rendition of the spiritual “I Gotta Home in Dat Rock” may have been expressive of his consciousness of a relationship with African culture – it was, Stuckey writes “an ideal vehicle for that view [...] constructed from a sense of the value of communal being, [...] that won easy affirmation from the African, who came from cultures in which the community held primacy over the individual.” [Sterling Stuckey, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & The Foundations of Black America (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p 316]. As Sterling Stuckey traces African sensibility in this Negro spiritual, ‘Africanness’ is seen to be evoked in the same way as it is by the figure of Pilate – an association with communal values. The spiritual does not name Africa as a home, seems to refer more to heaven, but Morrison’s co-option of the spiritual to refer *specifically* to the American land *redoubles* the effort *not* to name a memory of Africa.

²¹ Toni Morrison, ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature’, Michigan Quarterly Review, XXVIII.1 (Winter 1989), pp 1-34 (p 28).

If the novel is, as John N. Duvall would have it, “obsessed with names and naming”,²² Morrison’s opening scene is nevertheless characterised by a clear reluctance to name any memory of Africa, the narrative paying a great deal of attention, instead, to the “half a hundred or so people gathered there” (6) to watch Smith’s flight, from the “unemployed” (4), to the “very young children” (5), to the “dark-jacketed business and personnel clerks” (6). Michael Rothberg notes that the first paragraphs of the novel provide “a mini-genealogy of street names that [...] references [...] the northerly migration of African Americans in the early part of the century, [providing] not only a history lesson [but] a synecdochal version of the narrative as a whole”.²³ If this novel’s “favoured ontology” is, as Linden Peach alleges, “distinctly African”,²⁴ the figure of Robert Smith’s flight is representative of the novel’s tendency to remember the trope of the flying African in such a way as to make any associated memory of Africa entirely *indistinct*.

Similarly, when Milkman tells his lover Sweet that Solomon “went back to Africa” (328), her immediate response is “Who’d he leave behind?” (328). This reaction is most frequently read by critics as drawing attention to a gender question – the fate of women left behind to care for children. Hovet and Lounsberry comment that “Morrison persistently...forc[es] the reader’s eye back down to those the flyer left behind”,²⁵ highlighting the author’s effort to draw attention to the broader effect of the African’s

²² John N. Duvall, The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p 74.

²³ Rothberg, p 503.

²⁴ Linden Peach, ‘Competing Discourses in *Song of Solomon* (1977)’, in Harold Bloom (ed.), Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon (Modern Critical Interpretations, Chelsea House Publishers, Philadelphia, 1999), pp 159-176 (p 159). [Reprinted from Modernist Novelists: Toni Morrison (St. Martin’s Press, Inc.), 1995.]

²⁵ Grace Ann Hovet & Barbara Lounsberry, ‘Flying as Symbol and Legend in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*’, CLA Journal, XXVII.2 (December 1983), p 134.

flight upon the African-American community. Even when Milkman is told the story of Solomon's flight, by his distant cousin Susan Byrd, the memory of Africa, to which Solomon may or may not have flown, is barely hinted at before the narrative focus is once again bounced back, almost compulsively, toward the African-American community:

“He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from. There's a big double-headed rock over the valley named for him. It like to killed the woman, the wife.” (323)

Even as Susan Byrd speaks, a vast unexplored imaginative space beyond the “double-headed rock” is palpable; attention is almost drawn to it by the refusal to name it. Yet the possibility that the “wherever it was he came from” might encompass an ancestral Africa is barely mooted, as the attention is drawn back immediately to the wife left behind. What we see here is, again, the preoccupation with the condition of oppression which the wife, and the rest of the African-American community, cannot escape as easily as the flying African seems to.

Commenting on another recorded version of the trope of the Flying African, Julius Lester's “People Who Could Fly”, Michael Awkward notes that

[A] young witch doctor is himself struck by an overseer [and then] instructs “Everyone” to escape: “He uttered the strange word, and all of the Africans dropped their hoes, stretched out their arms, and flew away, back to their home, back to Africa.”

What is striking about this traditional version of the myth, particularly in comparison to its updating in Song of Solomon, is the communally beneficial nature of the witch

doctor's employment of the (liberating black) word. [...] In Song of Solomon, the empowered Afro-American's flight, celebrated in a blues song whose decoding catapults Milkman into self-conscious maturity, is a solitary one; in other words, the discovery of the means of transcendence – the liberating black word – is not shared with the tribe.²⁶

Morrison, *Awkward* suggests, offers “a radically transformed version of this legend which suggests the immense, and in many respects injurious, changes that have occurred over the course of the history of blacks in America.”²⁷ Robert Smith is shown to have been known by his community – “He came to their houses twice a month to collect one dollar and sixty-eight cents” (8), but like Benjamin's speechless angel, his presence is apparently shrouded in silence – he “said nothing in church but an occasional “Amen.” He never beat anybody up and he wasn't seen after dark, so they thought he was probably a nice man.” (8) Even in her critical commentary upon the novel, Morrison seems to suggest that Smith's flight is accompanied by a failure of language:

The note [Robert Smith] leaves asks for forgiveness. It is tacked on his door as a mild invitation to whomever might pass by, but it is not an advertisement. It is an almost Christian declaration of love as well as humility of one who was not able to do more.²⁸

As Smith's silent flight leaves memories of 'return' to Africa figured, but not openly named, the notion that Smith also regards his community with a sense that he was “not able to do more” suggests a language traumatised by a historical memory which only begins to become clear as the novel proceeds.

²⁶ Michael Awkward, “‘Unruly and Let Loose’: Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*”, in Harold Bloom (ed.), Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, pp 95-113 (p 97). [Reprinted from Callaloo 13.3 (Summer 1990).]

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p 96.

²⁸ Morrison, ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken’, p 28.

The memory of flight, even before it develops into any memory of flight to Africa, in Morrison's novel, is repeatedly approached with this sense of a language fractured and traumatised by historical memory. Consider a scene in which Milkman, at the age of thirteen, is thrown out of "Feather's pool hall" (56) with his friend Guitar, for being "Macon Dead's boy" (57):

The half-dozen men there playing pool turned around at the sound of Feather's voice.

Three of them were air force pilots, part of the 332nd Fighter Group. Their beautiful hats and gorgeous leather jackets were carefully arranged on chairs. Their hair was cut close to the skull; their shirt cuffs were turned neatly back on their forearms; their white scarves hung in snowy rectangles from their hip pockets. Silver chains glistened at their necks and they looked faintly amused as they worked chalk into the tips of their cues.

(57)

These men represent African-American aviators during the Second World War, who are described by Von Hardesty and Dominick Pisano as follows:

Between 1941 and 1945, the "Tuskegee Experiment," as the training of black fighter pilots became known, was proof that blacks in great numbers could be trained and mobilized for the sophisticated task of combat flying. In the air war over Europe, the 99th Fighter Squadron joined three other all-black fighter units to compose the 332nd Fighter Group.²⁹

The admiring terms in which Morrison describes these pilots evokes the sense of the excitement which she claims to associate with the notion of black male 'flight':

²⁹ Von Hardesty and Dominick Pisano, 'Introduction', Black Wings: The American Black in Aviation (Washington D.C.: National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, 1983), p 3.

that has always been to me one of the most attractive features about black male life. I guess I'm not suppose to say that. But the fact that they would split in a minute just delights me. It's part of that whole business of breaking ground, doing the other thing.³⁰

Yet in recognition of the fact that the Tuskegee Experiment was conducted in a climate where "those in charge both expected and wanted African Americans to fail",³¹ the pilots are again commented upon shortly after their appearance, as the young Guitar and Milkman, dejected, encounter "the owners of the barbershop, Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy" (58), and Guitar complains to them that Feather "wouldn't even let me have a bottle of beer." (59) Railroad Tommy, as part of an exquisite litany of "some other stuff you are not going to have" (59), says:

"and you can join the 332nd if you want to and shoot down a thousand German planes all by yourself and land in Hitler's backyard and whip him with your own hands, but you never going to have four stars on your shirt front, or even three[...]"

Guitar opened his eyes wide with horror and grabbed his throat. "You breaking my heart!"

"Well, now. That's something you will have – a broken heart." Railroad Tommy's eyes softened, but the merriment in them died suddenly. (60-61)

Railroad Tommy reflects, as Philip Page argues, "the pervasive sense of denial of access, hope, rights, and privileges that dominates the black community",³² the knowledge that regardless of what the African-American airmen might achieve, the possibility of a sense of "secure belonging" will never be available to them. With the voicing of this painful truth, Railroad Tommy's speech, appropriately enough, falters and dries up.

³⁰ Robert Stepto, 'Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison', in Danille Taylor-Guthrie, pp 10-29 (p 26). [Reprinted from Massachusetts Review, 18 (1977), pp 473-89.]

³¹ 'Tuskegee Airmen', in Appiah & Gates, Africana, pp 1902-03 (p 1902).

³² Page, Philip, Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), p 91.

“The Whole Truth”: Narrating the African-American and the African Past

What *does* accompany Smith’s flight in the opening scene, instead of a named memory of Africa, or even a “liberating black word” issued by the flyer, is a “singing lady”’s lyric:

“*Sugarman cut across the sky / Sugarman gone home...*” (6) This lady, wearing “a knitted navy cap” (5) and “wrapped [...] up in an old quilt instead of a winter coat” (5-6), is, we later discover, Milkman’s aunt Pilate, and her song, together with Smith’s “leap from [the] cupola” (4) of Mercy Hospital, heralds the protagonist’s birth. Pilate has a “brass box dangling from her ear” (36), with her name “copied [...] out of the Bible [and] folded up in that earring” (53), and as Anne Pankhurst argues, the “earring [as] the means of identifying Pilate”, can be understood “as a metonymic means to identify a person”.³³

Metonymy may also be understood as the way in which the insurance agent’s flight is associated with the snippet of a story told by Pilate’s song, which is “listened [to] as though it were the helpful and defining piano music in a silent movie” (6). Pilate’s name is ‘housed’ in her earring, and the novel goes on to show that she carries around a bag of bones without fully understanding whose bones they are. Morrison draws attention to the relationship between signs (both linguistic and symbolic) and historical memory in this novel as highly problematic – a separation often appearing between the two.

³³ Anne Pankhurst, ‘Recontextualization of Metonymy in Narrative and the Case of Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*’, in Klaus-Uwe Panther & Günter Radden (eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999), pp 385-399 (pp 394, 387). Chris Baldick defines metonymy as “a figure of speech that replaces the name of one thing with the name of something else closely associated with it.” [Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1991 [1990]), p 135.]

As in Reed's novel, the relationship between language and memory in Song of Solomon may well be imagined to correspond with Kristeva's notion of the semiotic. Susan Huddleston Edgerton, in her critique of Morrison's later novel Beloved, draws upon this realm where "the semiotic and the Symbolic are in a particular (Kristevan) dialectical relationship to one another", and reminds us that the power of the semiotic is that it "threatens the Symbolic order by threatening to do away with difference. The one becomes the other and the word becomes the thing."³⁴ Morrison has commented that "I want [the reader] to respond on the same plane as an illiterate or preliterate reader would",³⁵ and Song of Solomon is constantly negotiating a realm of knowledge which is conscious, which is continuous with language, but which is not always openly identified through acts of naming, reflecting a relationship between language and memory which is fluid and mobile.

Milkman is later shown journeying to the South on a quest for the gold he imagines to be his family "inheritance", but what he discovers instead is a history of his ancestral past. As this history begins to be revealed to him, through stories about a half-Indian grandmother called Sing, and of course the 'flying African' Solomon himself, Milkman reflects upon what he has found: "real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning." (329) However, as a history begins to be told through these names, what follows, in the text, does not resemble what Jameson describes as the "temporal unification of past and future with one's present" through "the sentence, as it moves

³⁴ Susan Huddleston Edgerton, 'Re-memembering the Mother Tongue(s): Toni Morrison, Julie Dash and the Language of Pedagogy', Cultural Studies, 9.2 (May 1995), Special Issue: "Toni Morrison and the Curriculum", ed. Warren Crichlow & Cameron McCarthy, pp 338-63 (pp 350-51).

³⁵ Toni Morrison, 'Memory, Creation, and Writing', Thought, 59.235 (December 1984), pp 385-90.

along its hermeneutic circle through time”,³⁶ but is something altogether more remarkable:

Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty-Dumpty, Blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoonbread, Ice Man, Dough Belly, Rocky River, Gray Eye, Cock-a-Doodle-Do, Cool Breeze, Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Leadbelly, Bo Diddley, Cat-Iron, Peg-Leg, Son, Shortstuff, Smoky Babe, Funny Papa, Bukka, Pink, Bull Moose, B.B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Lemon, Washboard, Gatemouth, Cleanhead, Tampa Red, Juke Boy, Shine, Staggerlee, Jim the Devil, Fuck-Up, and *Dat Nigger*. (330)

With this litany of names, Morrison gives a palpable sense of a sweep of history spanning African-American life in the Southern states of America, through the Great Migration, and into the Northern towns, a history in which, as the First World War led “northern industry [...] on a massive campaign to recruit black workers[,] emigration from the Deep South jumped from 200,000 in the decade 1890-1900 to half a million in 1910-1920”, and grew “during the twenties and thirties” to “about 1,300,000”, until “by 1940, over 2,000,000 blacks had migrated”.³⁷ Concurrent with this massive movement of people is a history of trauma and bitter injustice, palpable in the novel in a manner suggested by Melissa Walker:

The year 1931 appears in the opening lines of the novel. That year nine African-American youths boarded the Chattanooga-to-Memphis freight train only to find themselves accused of rape and their lives in jeopardy. The Scottsboro case [...] became

³⁶ Jameson, pp 26, 27.

³⁷ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (Penguin Books, London, 1969 [1967]), pp 156-57.

a cause celebre of the 1930s, keeping the issue of racial injustice before the public for years. [...] Though [such] outside events are not specifically mentioned in the text, [...] they inform the context and have consequences in the novel.³⁸

Morrison's list of names, as Walker's commentary seems to suggest, indicates a history which is *known* in the novel, but which is not openly narrated. A whole African-American history, stretching back at least through the twentieth-century, if not earlier, is seemingly contained in names whose meaning is felt even as the memories of their lives remain unspoken. If such a 'sentence' constitutes what Jameson calls "the breakdown of the signifying chain", it does *not* seem to "reduce [...] experience [to] a series of pure and unrelated presents in time".³⁹ Jameson's contention that "If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life",⁴⁰ in this case, simply does not apply. Nevertheless, as linear narration becomes interrupted in the face of traumatic memory, there is indeed discernible in Morrison's rollcall of names the quality described by Jameson as:

[a] heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity.⁴¹

Such "intensity" is in evidence as Morrison approaches the memory of the African-American past, but this does *not* arise from the evocation of the past as "speech in a dead

³⁸ Melissa Walker, Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966-1989 (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991), pp 135-36.

³⁹ Jameson, p 27.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp 27-28.

language”,⁴² as Jameson imagines it. Despite its only partial signification in language, the past in Morrison’s novel is vibrantly alive.

The functioning of historical memory in a way which resembles Reed’s positioning of the trope of ‘possession’ alongside more linear means of knowing history, is apparent in a scene where Macon Dead introduces a history to his son, explaining “if you want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth.” (70) In an instance of what Philip Page identifies as “individual characters fail[ing] to interpret things around them”,⁴³ Macon proceeds to give a strictly linear account of his relationship with his wife, beginning, ironically enough, with “I married your mother in 1917” (70), and ending with “Tonight” (74). Like the unfortunate “Atonists” of Reed’s novel, Macon can be seen to misidentify the “whole truth” as a history which is constrained within the bounds of linear time. As Joseph Skerrett comments, “Macon [...] thinks that Milkman’s access to his “information,” his rational, cause-and-effect “tale of how come and why” will clarify reality for Milkman. But Milkman [...] sees no place for himself in this history.”⁴⁴ Part of the “truth” which is revealed in this scene, in fact, appears not in the words which Macon speaks to his son, but in the narration which accompanies his tale, and which works in a manner in the text which is entirely *nonlinear*, to reveal a memory of Africa.

⁴² Ibid., p 17.

⁴³ Philip Page: “Macon widely misinterprets Pilate, thinking of her as a snake who bites the man who feeds it (54). Guitar wrongly concludes that Milkman’s desire to go to Danville is designed to betray him and then erroneously assumes that the box Milkman helps load onto the train must contain the gold (259 and 299). Even Pilate, despite her sensitivity, misinterprets her father’s ghost when he bids her to remember Sing, and she draws the wrong conclusion about the bones she finds in the cave.” (Page, p 95)

⁴⁴ Skerrett, Jr., Joseph T., ‘Recitation to the *Griot*: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*’, in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse & Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp 192-202 (p 194).

Some pages before this scene takes place, Macon is shown to have said to Milkman: “If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans. A Pennsylvania African. Acted like one too. Close his face up like a door.” (54) At one point during Macon’s telling of the tale of his marriage, then, the omniscient narration comments that “his face looked like Pilate’s. He closed the door.” (70) And again, a few pages later: “Macon looked up at his son. The door of his face had opened; his skin looked iridescent.” (74) What Morrison achieves here, while appearing to offer a simple narration of the past as recalled by the character’s telling, is also what she calls “urg[ing] the reader into active participation in the non-narrative, nonliterary experience of the text”.⁴⁵ While witnessing the character’s interpretation of the past, Morrison is simultaneously able to manipulate the reader’s own memory, positioning the faces of Pilate, then of Macon Dead Sr., and then even of the second Macon Dead, as a succession of “doors” which lead to some sense of a memory of Africa. Morrison constructs her text here in a way which offers the reader a sense of creating links in his own memory, because, as she says, “I want to subvert [the reader’s] traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one: that of being in the company of his own solitary imagination.”⁴⁶ Macon may be the embodiment of patriarchal values, and yet, Morrison’s narration suggests that attention to another narrative, beneath and behind his spoken words, points toward the “presymbolic”, in which difference between patriarchal and other ways of ‘knowing’ may be done away with, in which the very perspective of patriarchal power that Macon appears to represent when he says, “Own things. And let the things you own own other

⁴⁵ Morrison, ‘Memory, Creation, and Writing’.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p 387.

things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too." (55), may be discredited. Milkman, of course, betrays little sensitivity to this realm, coming away from the conversation saying to himself "“What the fuck did he tell me all that shit for?” He didn't want to know any of it. There was nothing he could do about it. The doctor was dead. You can't do the past over.” (76)

As Melissa Walker suggests, the novel's approach to the African-American domestic history might be seen to be characterised by historical traumas which can barely be narrated:

Walking through the streets meditating on what he has been told, he suddenly notices that hordes of people are walking on the other side of the street in the opposite direction. Readers will soon know what Milkman does not know, that crowds are gathering to protest the murder of Emmett Till, an event that has the black community in an uproar. Though history has impinged on his world, affecting his community and the thoughts and actions of his friend Guitar, Milkman remains absorbed in his own personal world, in this scene literally walking against the tide of history. [...] When Milkman finally tells his friend what he has discovered, Guitar, uninterested in his relatively trivial personal problems, tries to turn the conversation back to Emmett Till, only to hear Milkman's egocentric retort: "I'm the one in trouble" (88).⁴⁷

The memory of Africa in the novel is positioned in a related way. On one of only three or four occasions in which the novel actually *names* a memory of Africa, Milkman and his friend Guitar are described as "Breathing the air that could have come straight from a marketplace in Accra" (185). If Karla Holloway and Gay Wilentz claim, respectively,

⁴⁷ Melissa Walker, p 139.

that Pilate is “reminiscent of an African queen”,⁴⁸ and is a “female “ancestor” [...] whose scent is of African ginger”,⁴⁹ such critiques betray a failure to register the fact that Pilate’s characteristics are rarely, in the novel itself, openly *named* as African. Where a memory of an African-American history, spanning the history of slavery and the move from South, then, is seen to be contained in names whose meaning is felt without always being spoken, the memory of Africa is similarly discernible in the text, but is even less frequently named.

Early in the novel, Morrison throws down the gauntlet for her questing hero Milkman, with his father Macon’s sad contemplation of a lost ancestral connection: “Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. [...] But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name.” (17-18) This wished-for onyx-skinned ancestor is endowed with sufficient ambiguity for him to represent either an Afro-Southern *or* an African past, and as Milkman journeys into the Southern past, he finds that the memory of where his ancestor Solomon flew *from* is triumphantly signalled, as “the whole damn town is named after him” (328). By contrast, the question of where his legs might have carried

⁴⁸ Karla F.C. Holloway, ‘The Lyrics of Salvation’, in Bloom, pp 57-71 (p 68). [Reprinted from New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison, Karla F.C. Holloway and Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT, 1987).]

⁴⁹ Gay Wilentz, ‘Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*’, in Jan Furman (ed.), Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*: A Casebook (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp 137-63 (pp 141-42). [Reprinted from African American Review, 26 (1992), pp 61-76.] Wilentz continues, “African values and African culture, exemplified in Pilate, are privileged in the text [...] Pilate has all the qualities Morrison associates with an ideal African woman: She has stature, strength, presence. [...] she constantly has a “chewing stick” between her lips, much like a West African market woman [...] Pilate’s house resembles one in an African village compound” (p 145).

him *to* remains, by the end of the novel, only half-answered. If Milkman discovers, in the South, “Names that bore witness” (330), the witnessing that is being done is largely of an American history of hardship and survival – that memory of Africa, which defines the ever-present trope of flight, remains largely unnamed. Similarly, as Pilate is described at one point “decid[ing] how she wanted to live” (149), we are told that “Her mind traveled crooked streets and aimless goat paths” (149), in a phrase which is a clear echo of a line from Jean Toomer’s novel Cane: “The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa.”⁵⁰ Yet as recourse is made to information both intertextual and extratextual to suggest Pilate’s Africanness, it is noticeable that Toomer’s explicit reference to Africa is, in Morrison’s text, omitted, leaving a phrase which, like “true to the palm oil that flowed in her veins” (149), is suggestive rather than descriptive of Africanness.

Where, in the approach toward an American memory, a certain rupture occurs between one name and the next, preventing a spoken narration of the total history in which they reside, in the approach toward the memory of Africa, the rupture more frequently occurs somewhere between language and the pre-linguistic. The difference between a memory which can be named, however provisionally, and a memory whose naming appears more difficult, is, as Susan Huddleston Edgerton puts it, “a difference but, Kristeva argues, not a distinction”,⁵¹ in the same way that the “already-signifying space of the mother[,] the ‘semiotic chora’, [...] is also ‘the place of the maternal law before the Law’.”⁵² Morrison recognises this ‘difference without distinction’ when she comments:

⁵⁰ Jean Toomer, Cane (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1993 [1923]), p 10.

⁵¹ Susan Huddleston Edgerton, ‘Re-membering the Mother Tongue(s): Toni Morrison, Julie Dash and the Language of Pedagogy’, in Cultural Studies, 9.2 (May 1995), pp 338-63 (pp 350-51).

⁵² *Ibid.*, citing Kelly Oliver, Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p 46.

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It's bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one's ever assumed responsibility for. They are those that died en route. Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived in the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people. The people who arrived – there is lore about them. But nothing survives about ... that.

I suspect the reason is that it was not possible to survive on certain levels and dwell on it. People who did dwell on it, it probably killed them, and the people who did not dwell on it probably went forward.⁵³

A whole history of an African-American past, then, may be contained in songs, dances or tales, and although stories are lost with the Africans who are lost, their memory is still present, but must be engaged with through what Morrison describes as “assuming responsibility”.

This assumption of responsibility for the past is an action which must be made ‘against the tide’, as it were, as Morrison, like Reed, recognises that:

We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over [...] The Culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past.⁵⁴

The sense which Morrison expresses, of ‘bridging a gap’ with the past by assuming responsibility for the dead, speaks to Walter Benjamin's notion of historicity when he

⁵³ Marsha Darling, ‘In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison’, in Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie, pp 246-54 (p 247). Reprinted from Women's Review of Books, 5 (March 1978), pp 5-6.

⁵⁴ Rebecca Ferguson, ‘History and Memory and Language in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*’, in Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice, ed. Susan Sellers (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p 109.

claims that “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.”⁵⁵ Jürgen Habermas has commented upon this statement of Benjamin’s:

there exists a solidarity of those born later with those who have preceded them, with all those whose bodily or personal integrity has been violated at the hands of other human beings; and [...] this solidarity can only be engendered and made effective by remembering. [...] It is no longer only future generations, but past generations as well, that have a claim on the weak messianic power of the present.⁵⁶

As Morrison sees it, African-Americans are in a position where they might repudiate the American tendency to leave the past behind in a rush toward the future, and choose instead to live with a knowledge of the past, which, though lost, might perhaps live again as part of the future. However, the attention which Morrison draws to those who were “probably killed” by dwelling on the past speaks to another point made by Benjamin:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. [...] Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.⁵⁷

There is here, in Benjamin’s historicism as in Morrison’s, an element of choice in deciding how important the act of remembering the past really is – hence the “*weak* messianic power”, which might be subdued by the impulse to forget that is frequently

⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, Random House, 1999 [London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1970]), pp 245-55 (p 246).

⁵⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge MS: MIT Press, 1987), pp 14-15.

⁵⁷ Benjamin, ‘Theses’, p 247.

established with traumatic experience. That is, to Morrison, many African-Americans have made a *choice* not to remember those who died on the Middle Passage, in order to enable their own survival, which was already threatened by the oppressive conditions they struggled with in America. So, just as a choice may be made to remember certain elements of the past, an equal choice may be made to forget other elements. And both of these choices are fundamentally influenced by questions of survival. So even though Morrison says that the “gap” between Africa and Afro-America “does not exist”, this is a matter of what is chosen to be remembered – it also *does* exist, memory and forgetting may be used alternately according to what is required by survival in the present. So Rothberg comments:

Morrison suggests the degree to which the textualization of history produces contradictory effects. “Fanning the spark of hope in the past” involves risk and danger – danger that the past will be “wiped out” at the same time it is “articulated historically.” [...] Memory both “wipes out” and preserves, negates and affirms the past.⁵⁸

Where we see this ‘choice’ operating most strikingly with regard to memory in the novel, I have been arguing, is in the decision to dramatise a memory of the African-American past through language, while the memory of the African past is left to reside in a pre-linguistic realm.

This choice is made, indeed, as the exercise of using the present as redemption for the past is indeed distinctly ‘dangerous’, and may only be managed successfully in the broader interest of the present. Taking responsibility for the past may only occur, for Morrison, for the African-American past and the past of those lost on the Middle Passage

⁵⁸ Rothberg, p 509.

– the African past or present cannot be known about through the American present or future – it is completely other, and any assumption of responsibility for it implies too difficult an identification with ‘traumatised otherness’. If such a space is present in the novel, it is figured as “what there was before language” (278), which the speaking characters might discover if only they were to allow themselves to listen. Just as Pilate claims that “Don’t nobody have to die if they don’t want to” (140), the knowledge of Africa, though it may have “died” like those lost on the Middle Passage if history is regarded in a strictly linear sense, can remain, if we choose to allow it to, living in the novel’s present.

“I Loved You All”: Morrison’s Cultural Nationalism and the Gaze toward Africa

Robert Smith’s flight is also watched by a “cat-eyed boy [who] listened to the musical performance with at least as much interest as he devoted to the man flapping his wings on top of the hospital.” (8) This boy is Guitar, “five or six years old” (7) at the time of Smith’s flight, and later a member of the same secret organisation, the Seven Days, which we discover motivated Smith’s leap. According to Guitar:

It’s made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks... [W]hen a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. (154)

Guitar’s equal attention to the song sung by Pilate, the novel’s “culture bearer”, and to the function of Smith’s flight, may be seen as indicative of his attention to two different forms of work that are carried out to try to protect the African-American community

against the diverse forms of violence which are perpetrated against it. As Smith's flight remembers the tale of the flying African through unspeaking action, Pilate remembers the tale through speaking song, and Guitar, along with the rest of the community, is shown to witness the function of speech to enact a preservation of tradition, alongside the function of the unspoken to register trauma. These are the two functions of memory in Morrison's communities.

Guitar explains: "if it ever gets to be too much, like it was for Robert Smith, we do *that* rather than crack and tell somebody." (158) In spite of an alarmingly dismissive tendency in much Morrison criticism toward Guitar's political stance,⁵⁹ I suggest that Morrison is inquisitive toward the perspective represented by the Seven Days, which she clearly positions as having learned something from both the nurturing matriarch who incorporates the past by speaking about it, and the militant patriarch who acknowledges the unspeakable nature of the past through silence. After all, as Pilate's dying words, at the end of the novel, are "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more." (336), Robert Smith declares "I loved you all." (3), and Guitar himself cries "It's about loving us. [...] My whole life is love." (159) Love is shown to inform both a nurturing protectiveness *and* a defensive violence in this novel, and the two are of course shown to overlap at times – for instance, as Pilate is

⁵⁹ Critics remark, variously, that "Although he is a self-declared avenger of his people, the love of black life is eventually twisted into a love of power." [Jan Furman, 'Male Consciousness: *Song of Solomon*', in Bloom, , pp 195-207 (p 201). Reprinted from Furman, *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (University of South Carolina Press, 1995).]; that Guitar is "driven mad by material greed for gold and by internalized racism." [Joyce Irene Middleton, 'From Orality to Literacy: Oral Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*', in *New Essays on Song of Solomon*, ed. Valerie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp 19-39 (p 36).]; that "Guitar's claim to kill for love [...] is not about love but something else indeed – male power and possession." [Duvall p 89 & 91]; that "Instead of love, Guitar becomes co-opted by his hate into the evil practices of the dominant social system he wishes to escape (V. Smith, *Self-Discovery* 152) and therefore, like Macon, Guitar exemplifies the dialectical reversal." [Philip Page, p 93].

shown stabbing a man who harms her daughter Reba (93). Love, in this novel, is shown to inform both communicative speech, *and* shocked silence. Ralph Story comments:

For black folk “to love so much they would kill” is a profoundly radical idea yet one which can be clearly discerned in the poetical works of the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s, especially the writings of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka.⁶⁰

Like Harry Reed I consider Morrison’s position to be “a simultaneous affirmation and criticism of black cultural nationalism”,⁶¹ and would suggest that Guitar’s position is not opposed to Pilate’s, but rather continuous with it, just as silence is continuous with interrupted speech. To note that this is the condition that Morrison observes in her characterisation of Guitar and the Seven Days is not to say that she endorses violence. Morrison, writing in the middle of a period of American history which saw considerable violence, is doing something more important than showing approval or disapproval of violence – she is showing *how* violence comes about under conditions of oppression, and its *effect* upon the survival of a culture and a community. Guitar is like Frantz Fanon’s “native who [...] is ready for violence at all times”, for whom “from birth it is clear [...] that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence.”⁶²

If Reed’s flexible scheme falls short of offering any representation of contemporary Africa, Morrison can be seen to show the circumstances in which African-American writers find themselves in this position. For Reed, though the sign of blackness has,

⁶⁰ Ralph Story, ‘An Excursion into the Black World: The “Seven Days” in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*’, in Bloom, , pp 85-93 (p 86). Reprinted from Black American Literature Forum 23.1 (Spring 1989).

⁶¹ Harry Reed, ‘Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* and Black Cultural Nationalism’, in Bloom. pp 73-83 (p 75) [Reprinted from The Centennial Review 32.1 (Winter 1988).]

⁶² Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (London & New York: Penguin, 1990 [1961]). p 29.

through trauma, often been divorced from a memory of Africa, while for Morrison this trauma is more obviously dramatised in language. The relationship between language and the memory of Africa functions in this novel to reflect the author's conceptualisation of African-American identity which, despite first appearances, and unlike that broad American trend which forgets the past and forgets all that is outside of the American territory, is keenly aware of its problematic relationship with life outside of America.

As Pilate speaks an ancestral memory of an African past, Guitar may be understood to represent a gaze toward a more contemporary Africa. The staging of Guitar and Pilate as diverse witnesses to Smith's flight might be considered to dramatise a particular historical confrontation which occurred in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, between the politics of Black Power, and the politics of black feminism. While Black Power was frequently focused upon building ideological coalitions with African and Asian nations in the midst of decolonisation, black feminists more frequently emphasised the value of African-American culture nurtured through the course of an American domestic history, in a manner which valued an African heritage in an abstract, matriarchal way. The relationship between these diverse historical manifestations of cultural nationalism in the Civil Rights era, which will be discussed further in Chapter Three, was characterised by a particular tension around the subject of ancestry, as described by William Van Deburg:

Instead of treating members of this group, out of hand, as "the enemy", it was suggested that they be seen as potential allies. Perhaps these oldsters weren't very well versed in the latest styles, but they understood adversity and could relate countless stories of the struggle against it. None could deny that they composed a fair share of the "black

masses” for whom the revolution was being waged. Moreover, they were to be valued as living repositories of African-American folk wisdom. As noted by poet Alice Walker, they “knew what we / *Must* know / Without knowing a page / Of it / Themselves.” If, on the surface, some might seem a bit Tomish, it nevertheless was possible that they could become invaluable assets to the movement, instructing the younger generation in familial love. Certainly, the capacity “to love, to protect, to cherish, our young, our old, our / own,” could not be considered the least important attribute to any activist seeking to promote group solidarity and empowerment.⁶³

The criticism implicit to this is that ‘oldsters’ may not situate themselves in the context of relating African-American oppression in relation to global, and particularly African struggles against colonial and former colonial powers. When Guitar, as a twelve-year-old, approaches Pilate with his young friend Milkman, she admonishes him for not “say[ing] what you mean” (36), so that he “ha[s] to pay careful attention to his language.” (37) The tension between Guitar’s perspective and Pilate’s is palpable as he witnesses Pilate’s “Aunt Jemima act” (209) for police, Milkman “remember[s] how Guitar glared at her as she walked away from the car” (208), and “anger [is] like heat shimmering out of his skin” (207).

We have already seen that Morrison takes ample opportunity to evoke socio-political history in the novel, but it must be said that these evocations lie largely in the African-American domestic realm. On perhaps the only occasion that a perspective showing awareness of the world outside of the United States is explicitly evoked in the novel, it is

⁶³ William L. Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 271.

articulated, significantly enough, by Guitar. An exchange between Milkman and Guitar bears extended citation:

“...Bet you thought tea grew in little bags.”

“Oh, Christ.”

“Like Louisiana cotton. Except the black men picking it wear diapers and turbans. All over India that’s all you see. Bushes with little bitsy white tea bags blossoming. Right?”

“Gimme the tea, Guitar. Just the tea. No geography.”

“No geography? Okay, no geography. What about some history in your tea? Or some sociopolitico— No. That’s still geography. Goddam, Milk, I do believe my whole life’s geography.”

[...]

“Oh, Jesus.”

“He’s a Northerner too. Lived in Israel, but a Northerner in His heart. His bleeding heart. His cute little old bleeding red heart. Southerners think they own Him, but that’s just because the first time they laid eyes on Him, He was strung up on a tree. They can relate to that, see. Both the stringer and the strung. But Northerners know better....”

(114-15)

Guitar’s speech pattern here is wholly fractured here, into questions which he answers himself, and parts of stories which never come to resolution. Though this speech pattern may be expressive of the fact that Guitar is trying, in veiled ways, to raise his friend Milkman’s awareness of his secret membership of the Seven Days, it is also indicative of a certain failure of language which arises when a perspective on the world outside of the United States is sighted. Melani McAlister explains how the Middle East as a figure of identification appeared in African-American popular expression as “the story of the biblical Exodus was actively invoked as part of the civil rights struggle from the 1940s

on”⁶⁴ but that “black culture in the United States turned toward other models, beyond the exodus/Zionist model, attending particularly to the complex religious affiliations that also linked African American identity with the Arab and Islamic Middle East.”⁶⁵ As Guitar refers to Jesus and Israel, with some perceptible lack of faith, he may be seen to signal a turn toward the Islamic identification, particularly as Milkman comments: “You sound like that red-headed Negro named X.” (160)

Guitar’s broken speech pattern in the approach toward a contemporary identification with the Middle East is indicative of a reluctance on Morrison’s part to situate a memory of Africa squarely at the centre of her language. This begins to be explained as the author comments that in the early part of her writing career, she “would do no research”⁶⁶ in the area exploring links between African and African-American literatures, “because [she] distrusted the sources”,⁶⁷ which to her contained a “scholarly vocabulary used [...] to describe *how* we say and how we are [which] is a code designed for destruction”.⁶⁸ In light of the historical role played by Africa, as a canvas upon which various imperial projects have been drawn, and the uncomfortable resonance between such projects and what has been, in effect, an American imperialism at home, Morrison identifies language itself as one of the sites in which such imperialism has occurred. For the African-American writer, then, language becomes a troublesome currency with which to deal with the memory of Africa. Morrison writes, in Playing in the Dark:

⁶⁴ Melani McAlister, Epic Encounters: Culture, Media and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000 (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2001), p 87.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p 123.

⁶⁶ Christina Davis, ‘An Interview with Toni Morrison’, in Danille Taylor-Guthrie, Conversations with Toni Morrison, pp 223-33 (p 225). [Reprinted from Presence Africaine: Revue Culturelle Du Monde / Cultural Review of the Negro World, 1145 (1988), pp 141-50.]

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

I am using the term “Africanism” [...] as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people. As a trope, little restraint has been attached to its uses.⁶⁹

Just as Stuart Hall comments that “Africa [...] remained and remains the unspoken unspeakable ‘presence’ in Caribbean culture[,... while] Europe was a case of that which is endlessly speaking – and endlessly speaking *us*”,⁷⁰ the suspicion of a neo-colonial taint to any scholarship which might claim to identify the ‘African’ in African-American culture, Morrison comments, has led her to

rely heavily and almost totally on my own recollections and, more important, on my own insight about those recollections, and in so doing [I] was able to imagine and to recreate cultural linkages that were identified for me by Africans who had a more familiar, an overt recognition (of them).⁷¹

As Morrison makes clear her intention to name only that which she knows – the stories and songs of her own African-American community – the act of naming for her performs the important function of acknowledging that which has too often been perceived as a ““discredited knowledge” that Black people had”.⁷²

The approach toward naming a memory of Africa, meanwhile, is stalled by the complexities of an African-American sensibility which feels its ‘third world’ status in the

⁶⁹ Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (London: Picador, Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1993 [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992]), pp 6-7.

⁷⁰ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (eds.), Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp 392-403 (pp 398-99). Reprinted from Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (1990).

⁷¹ Christina Davis, p 225.

⁷² Morrison, ‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation’, in Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation, ed. Mari Evans (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), p 342.

midst of the first world. As Morrison writes, in her 'Introduction' to Camara Laye's The Radiance of the King:

Such a beautiful word, Africa. Unfortunately its seductive sound was riven by the complicated emotions with which the name was associated. Unlike starving China, Africa was both ours and theirs; us and other. A huge needy homeland none of us had seen or cared to see, inhabited by people with whom we maintained a delicate relationship of mutual ignorance and disdain, and with whom we shared a mythology of passive, traumatized otherness⁷³

The African-American gaze toward a memory of Africa, as Morrison sees it, struggles, through language alone, with the demands of two equally pressing, and almost impossible tasks; first, to differentiate itself from the mythology promoted by a hegemonic and imperialistic Euro-American perspective toward Africa, and second, to avoid the confirmation of *African-American* "otherness" which such a perception of Africa would encourage. The memory of Africa is approached in Song of Solomon, I suggest, in ways which attempt transcendence of these extremely troubled politics of language. Language has to be negotiated, because much of the historical trauma has occurred *in* language. Guitar's view reveals a whole internationalist spectrum to the novel, which Morrison would be uncomfortable broaching through the language of the coloniser. Like Guitar himself, she encodes it.

If Morrison can be understood to be signifying on Malcolm X's contribution to history, such a move is once again enacted by the sign of flight. As Milkman takes an aeroplane, from Michigan to Pittsburgh, the text reads as follows:

⁷³ Toni Morrison, 'Introduction' to Camara Laye, The Radiance of the King (New York Review Books, New York, 2001), pp xi-xxiv (p xi).

The airplane ride exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability. High above the clouds, heavy yet light, caught in the stillness of speed (“Cruise,” the pilot said), sitting in intricate metal become glistening bird, it was not possible to believe he had ever made a mistake, or could. Only one small thought troubled him – that Guitar was not there too. He would have loved it – the view, the food, the stewardesses. But Milkman wanted to do this by himself, with no input from anybody. This one time he wanted to go solo. In the air, away from real life, he felt free, but on the ground, when he talked to Guitar just before he left, the wings of all those other people’s nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him. (220)

In contrast to Milkman’s experience of air travel, which he luxuriates in for its capacity to make him feel his solitude and independence, Malcolm X, in his Autobiography, describes a key, and unprecedented, experience of community for him as he flies from Cairo to Jedda, to take the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca :

The co-pilot was darker than [the captain] was. I can’t tell you the feeling it gave me. I had never seen a black man flying a jet. That instrument panel: no one ever could know what all of those dials meant! Both of the pilots were smiling at me, treating me with the same honor and respect I had received ever since I left America. I stood there looking through the glass at the sky ahead of us. In America, I had ridden in more planes than probably any other Negro, and I never had been invited up into the cockpit. And there I was, with two Muslim seatmates, one from Egypt, the other from Arabia, all of us bound for Mecca, with me up in the pilots’ cabin. Brother, I *knew* Allah was with me.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Malcolm X & Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (London: Penguin Books, 1968 [1965]). p 436. As impressive as Melissa Walker’s charting of the historical context of the novel is, which positions Guitar as a figuration of Malcolm X and Milkman as representative of Martin Luther King, I am less inclined to understand Morrison as positioning her characters each as a unified representation of one of these historical figures. I am more inclined to imagine that both characters are ‘ridden’ by elements of both historical figures, amongst others, in a manner that allows Morrison to problematise what are often perceived to be ‘opposed’ impulses, such as the violent and the non-violent.

If we can imagine Morrison to be Signifyin(g) on Malcolm X's jubilant experience of flight, some subtle conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, as Malcolm depicts a flight which occurs completely outside the United States – in fact, *from* Cairo in Africa, toward Jeddah – Milkman's experience of air travel, by contrast, represents a domestic flight within the United States. Significantly, Malcolm's experiences on the flight teach him something about how the common faith of Islam can enable community across national, racial and linguistic boundaries, and as he is shown "honor and respect" he has never known before, the possibility of life outside of American racism. If Milkman experiences "honor and respect", it is, by contrast, of the variety which is provided upon payment of an airfare – the solicitations of air stewardesses.

Of particular interest in this intertextual dialogue which may be perceived between Morrison's novel and Malcolm X, is the way in which the ending of Morrison's novel may be read as responding to that concept of "brotherhood" which was in the end central to the perspective which was revealed to Malcolm X toward the end of his life. The notion of 'brotherhood' is a feature which, of all the flights depicted in Song of Solomon, is introduced only by Milkman's final flight at the end of the novel. Milkman says "Over here, brother man! Can you see me?" (337), and the narration tells us that as he flies "toward Guitar", "it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother." (337) It may not be true that Guitar "cannot progress beyond th[e] "fascist" [...] position and remains fixed in pain, anger, exasperation, and racial hatred",⁷⁵ for after all, as Morrison has commented, he does put down the gun. Malcolm

⁷⁵ Page, p 105. Page is citing William E. Cross, Jr., Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American Identity (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991), p 205.

X, during his stay in the Middle East, penned an open letter in which he wrote the following:

America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered 'white' – but the 'white' attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen *sincere* and *true* brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.⁷⁶

He goes on to comment: “the single worst mistake of the American black organizations, and their leaders, is that they have failed to establish direct brotherhood lines of communication between the independent nations of Africa and the American black people.”⁷⁷ Here is the possibility of visualising a relationship with Africa in the present, that does not treat Africa allochronically.

But this is not to say that Morrison espouses Islam as the solution. Nada Elia displays a preoccupation with what she perceives as Morrison's failure to name African resources for her story, as she suggests some serious implications to Morrison's “poetic liberty” as she remembers the stories told in Drums and Shadows, inherited from “Muslim Africans who lived in Sapelo Island off the coast of Georgia”.⁷⁸ Elia notes a “confluence of names”⁷⁹ between those remembered in one interviewee's narration of the Flying Africans trope, and those which Morrison represents as the names of Solomon's

⁷⁶ Malcolm X & Alex Haley, p 454.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p 461.

⁷⁸ Nada Elia, “‘Kum Buba Yali Kum Buba Tambe, Ameen, Ameen, Ameen’: Did Some Flying Africans Bow to Allah?”, Callaloo, 26.1 (Winter 2003). pp 182-202 (p 183).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

numerous children, which include “*Belali Shalut / Yaruba Medina Muhammet [...] / Nestor Kalina*” (303). If Kimberly Benston says the song “allud[es] to a crazy-quilt of cultures, regions, religions, and affiliations”,⁸⁰ Elia’s objection relates in particular to Morrison’s perceived failure to acknowledge the Islamic (and African) etymology of the names of Solomon’s children, and of the occurrence of the Flying Africans trope itself:

a nod of acknowledgement remains insufficient, especially if [the Islamic genealogy is] used primarily to lend one’s narrative a touch of the exotic and mysterious. [...] Morrison does not address the Muslim genealogy, and is, at best, “curiously coy” about her borrowing the stories of Belali’s descendents⁸¹

However, any “coyness” which Elia may perceive in Morrison’s refusal to ‘name’ cultural sources, may not, I suggest, be unique to the author’s approach to Islam – it is, rather, a feature of her approach toward the memory of Africa in general. Morrison is not inclined to name the memory of Africa in the way that Elia suggests she should, because of the very great difficulty in the relationships with language. To Morrison, an African Islamic inheritance may be just as patrilineal as an American imperialist inheritance. Keith Cartwright’s attention to the presence of Islam in the ancient Senegambian context itself, however, may give us a clue as to why Morrison does not rush to acknowledge an Islamic connection:

Practitioners of indigenous African religions – and women in particular – found themselves excluded from the new literacy, and as illiterates, found access to authoritative readings of power increasingly limited to realms marginalized by orthodox Islam... Griots’ strategies of conserving a core Mande tradition and their own authority

⁸⁰ Kimberly W. Benston, ‘Re-Weaving the “Ulysses Scene”’: Enchantment, Post-Oedipal Identity, and the Buried Text of Blackness in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, in Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex and Nationality in the Modern Text, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), p 104.

⁸¹ Elia, p 189.

as its sanctioned ancestral voices led them to preserve and reforge an aesthetic complementarity of gender, expressed in the epic as an assimilated Muslim patrilineage and an often feminized Mande tradition.⁸²

If Islam may once, in the African context, have constituted a “new literacy” which threatened traditional forms of oral storytelling, so we might see replayed that scenario set out at the very beginning of Morrison’s novel – of “city legislators” writing over a black community’s own oral history – and it is therefore no wonder that Morrison hesitates to champion the Islamic genealogy of her tale. If Cartwright is correct, then this move would in fact position Morrison’s evocation of the Flying Africans trope as working in a matrilineal African tradition.

If Morrison does not openly embrace Islam in her novel, then, the notion of brotherhood which Islam reveals to Malcolm X might nevertheless be seen as infinitely attractive to her. Brotherhood, this vital concept arising for the first time in the flight which characterises the novel’s ending, is something which is capable of completely dismantling the endlessly oppressive triangular dynamic which ordinarily typifies the African-American trope of flight, and which keeps the African-American male, in particular, in that terribly vulnerable position. William Van Deburg writes that “during the Black Power era, pan-Africanists of all stripes echoed the Muslim leader’s view that black Americans had erred in neglecting to establish “direct brotherhood lines of communication” with African peoples.”⁸³ While memory persistently fails to evoke a contemporary Africa throughout the novel, Morrison’s play upon this perspective

⁸² Cartwright, p 29.

⁸³ Van Deburg, p 149.

introduced by Malcolm X can reveal her sensitivity to the space that might have been opened up, in that 'blind spot' in African-American memory, to enable a clearer view of Africa, if the more international basis of identification recommended by Malcolm had been espoused, a relationship with Africa which moves free of the tensions of imperialism.

Chapter Three

‘While I Sat With My Back To It’: The Memory of Africa in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

As we turn to Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, a similarly continuous relationship between speech and writing may be understood to be enabled by the semiotic, and is ultimately extremely important for figuring a memory of Africa in a way which is helpful not only to a positive perception of the role of the cultural memory of Africa for African-Americans, but also for an open, flexible and humanistic worldview which is strong enough not to be threatened by notions of ‘difference’. However, this is a form of consciousness which Walker is unable to sustain through the whole course of her novel, and particularly in the approach to Africa, which positions difference in such a way as to undermine identification at every stage.

The novel opens with protagonist Celie, aged 14, appealing to “God”: “Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.”¹ Routinely raped by the man she believes to be her father, Celie is experiencing the first of two pregnancies, and after her babies have been taken from her and, as far as she knows, “kilt [...] out there in the woods” (4), she is married off to a man initially referred to as only “Mr. _____”, who beats her and treats her as a servant. Celie’s younger sister Nettie runs away from home to join her, but is quickly thrown out by Mr. _____ when she does not reciprocate his amorous attentions. Celie makes a new friend, however, when Shug Avery, singer and

¹ Alice Walker, The Color Purple (London: The Women’s Press, 1983), p 3. All further page references will be given in parentheses.

long-time lover of Mr. _____, comes to stay. It is Shug who makes the discovery that Mr. _____ has been hiding a stash of letters written by Nettie, from a missionary posting in Africa. The letters reveal that following separation from Celie, Nettie found her way to the home of a preacher and his wife, who took her in, and asked her “if I would come with them and help them build a school in the middle of Africa” (112). Nettie writes to Celie as she travels first to New York, then to London, then to “Monrovia, Liberia” via “Lisbon, Portugal” and “Dakar, Senegal” (117), and finally to “Olinka, some four days march through the bush.” (127) Nettie’s narrative describes the encounter with the Olinka, Walker’s “imaginary African people”,² amongst whom the missionaries make their settlement. As Robyn R. Warhol comments, “Nettie’s existence as [addressee] becomes the textual sign of Celie’s relief from isolation, her coming into community as she comes out into her lesbian sexuality with Shug”.³

The central impulse of this novel is to bring to life the voices of a suppressed history. Walker has said: “One of the things I love about The Color Purple is that no matter what happens I can go to that book and, if I read the language to myself, I can hear my grandmother speak. That is the gift of the book to me.”⁴ The language which Walker uses in the majority of the novel enacts an imaginative rescue of the generations of her mother and grandmothers, black women who either lived in the South or had migrated from the South to the North, and who, as Barbara Smith puts it, “appeared able to do

² Kadiatu Kanneh, ‘‘Africa’ and Cultural Translation: Reading Difference’, in Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History, eds. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry & Judith Squires (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), p 285.

³ Robyn R. Warhol, ‘How Narration Produces Gender: Femininity as Affect and Effect in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*’, Narrative, 9.2 (May 2001), pp 182-87 (p 185).

⁴ Christopher Bigsby, ‘In Conversation with Alice Walker’, in Writers in Conversation, Volume Two, Christopher Bigsby, (Norwich: Arthur Miller Centre for American Studies, University of East Anglia, 2001), pp 213-23 (p 217).

everything, at least everything necessary to maintain a home. They cleaned, cooked, washed, ironed, sewed, made soap, canned, held jobs, took care of business downtown, sang, read, and taught us to do the same.”⁵ They are the same black women ‘left behind’ by the men in flight in Morrison’s novel, and their rescue is enacted here as Walker engages their speech through the reconciliatory process which Mae Gwendolyn Henderson has called ‘speaking in tongues’ – “a kind of internal dialogue [...], a dialectic neither repressing difference nor, for that matter, privileging identity, but rather expressing engagement with the social aspects of self (‘the other[s] in ourselves’)”.⁶ Named after the practice “in the Holiness church (or as we called it, the Sanctified church), speaking unknown tongues (tongues known only to God) is in fact a sign of election, or holiness”.⁷ The practice of speaking in tongues may be imagined as the practice of hearing the voices of others (ancestors, gods, or those whose access to speech is restricted) through one’s own speech. Speaking in tongues, as it stages active forms of communication between language and the pre-linguistic, then, and uses this vibrant connection to muddy the sense of ‘difference’ between self and other, accesses something resembling the realm of the semiotic.⁸

⁵ Barbara Smith, ‘Introduction’ to Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000). [Originally published New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983.], (p xxii).

⁶ Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn, ‘Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition’, in Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (eds.), Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp 257-67 (p 264). [Reprinted from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (ed.), Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology (New York: Meridian Press, 1990), pp 116-25, 136-40, 142.]

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 262.

⁸ I suggest that Walker’s evocation of the grandmothers’ voices through the practice of ‘speaking in tongues’ is reasonably successful, in spite of Ishmael Reed’s disingenuous comment, “in The Color Purple Alice Walker has this poor, illiterate sharecropper woman using images like “her face gleamed like good furniture” and words like “ruddy.” You only have to spend a couple minutes with a Mississippi sharecropper to know they don’t speak like that.” [Lee Bartlett, ‘And That History Is Subject to the Will: Ishmael Reed’, in Dick & Singh, Conversations with Ishmael Reed, pp 258-270 (p 268). Reprinted from Talking Poetry, ed. Lee Bartlett (University of New Mexico Press, 1987), pp 167-78]. Reed appears to be

However, this fluid process of speaking in tongues does not, in the novel, extend to the representation of African speech or experience as continuous or identifiable with the African-American present. When Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes that Walker “avoid[s] standard English almost totally in Celie’s narration [and] has written a novel in dialect, in the black vernacular”,⁹ the caveat “in Celie’s narration” should be noted. Anyone who pays significant attention to the function of Nettie’s letters from Africa in the novel (and most critiques of the novel do not) will find that these particular letters make a fundamental difference to the novel’s ability, as a whole, to evoke historical memory as accessible, and useful, in the present. In a rare sustained analysis of the novel’s ‘African letters’, Brita Lindberg-Seyersted notes:

After the[...] early messages sent from a nearby Georgia town, Nettie’s letters are written in Standard English with only an occasional [non-]standard phrase, like the common “he don’t,” reminding us that these letters replace speech. By the time Nettie arrives in Africa together with her missionary employers, her language has become thoroughly standardized.¹⁰

If, as Gates alleges, the language of Celie’s letters demonstrates a form of writing which is continuous with speech, thus encouraging a sense of the close identification between the writer and those written about,¹¹ Nettie’s letters, as Lindberg-Seyersted’s observation

referring to the following excerpt from *The Color Purple*, where Celie is describing Sofia: “Clear medium brown skin, gleam on it like on good furniture. Hair notty but a lot of it, tied up on her head in a mass of plaits. She not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork.” (29-30).

⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, p 251.

¹⁰ Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, ‘Who is Nettie? and What is She Doing in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*’, *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 24.2 (1992), pp 83-96 (p 89).

¹¹ Gates writes: “through Celie’s mode of apparently reporting speech, underscored dramatically by her written dialect voice of narration, we logically assume that we are being shown discourse, when all along we never actually are. Celie only tells us what people have said to her. She never shows us their words in

emphasises, introduce a form of discourse in which difference between speech and writing is all of a sudden foregrounded, and what is more, the conventions of a hegemonic 'writerly' discourse are thoroughly embraced.

Walker goes to extraordinary lengths to prevent actual communication between the African and American realms, and to keep the novel's Africa in the narrative past. For instance, as Celie and Shug purposely remove all Nettie's letters from their envelopes before beginning to read them, and "put the envelopes back inside the trunk" (106), Nettie's narrative is explicitly separated from the stamps and postmarks which would act as markers to locate it temporally and socially, in order that the pages might be read as those of a storybook. The epistolary form itself is described by Linda Kauffman as a form which expresses precisely the potential *failure* of speech, in which information or 'knowledge' may be lost in transmission:

Letters are repeatedly lost, withheld, seized, misdirected, or misplaced [...] An addressee who is absent, silent, or incapable of replying is one of the distinguishing characteristics of epistolarity.¹²

Nettie writes to Celie with a suspicion that knowledge of her African experience may not be successfully transmitted through her epistles, but nevertheless affirms the importance of the dialogic engagement which the act of writing represents:

direct quotation. Precisely because her written dialect voice is identical in diction and idiom to the supposedly spoken words that pepper her letters, we believe that we are overhearing people speak, just as Celie did when the words were in fact uttered. We are not, however; indeed, we can never be certain whether or not Celie is showing us a telling or telling us a showing, as awkward as this sounds." (p 249). For Gates to allege that because Walker does not use quotation marks she is not citing speech is indeed to make too rigid a differentiation between speech and writing, even as he attempts to show how these two 'quantities' merge into each other.

¹² Linda S. Kauffman, Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp 195, 166, 186. Kauffman is quoted by Carla Kaplan in The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p 131.

Albert is not going to let you have my letters and so what use is there in writing them.

That's the way I felt when I tore them up and sent them to you on the waves. But now I feel different.

[...] when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. (110)

Communication with Africa, then, is entirely interrupted by the epistolary form. Where letter-writing is for Celie about her ability to represent herself, in the dialogue with Africa it is manipulated so that it shows "failed exchange", whereby "the ideals represented by social exchange are, in fact, effaced by the practice of exchange itself."¹³ Celie's letters "are written not to communicate so much as to express what the soul cannot hold within",¹⁴ and similarly, after saying that writing is better than not writing, Nettie is never again troubled by the thought that she may not have a reader. This may partly account for the sense the reader has that it is not always clear *why* her letters are there.

As the letters written by Celie are contrasted with Nettie's 'African' letters, the implicit contrast which is drawn between a 'speakerly' and a 'writerly' language begins to institute an inverse snobbery about language which may, even if unintentionally, begin to privilege the presence of some ancestors over others. Deborah McDowell alleges that with Nettie's narrative, "Walker admits that her need to know the oral stories *told* by her female ancestors [...] was equal to her need to know the stories *written* by nineteenth-century black women."¹⁵ The novel, however, does not show any evidence that Walker

¹³ Kaplan, p 126.

¹⁴ Cheryl A. Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p 153.

¹⁵ Deborah E. McDowell, "'The Changing Same: 'Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists'", in Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York &

“conjoins [the oral and the literate] in the Celie and Nettie letters”,¹⁶ as McDowell would have it, in any way which might allow Nettie’s narrative of Africa to inhabit a realm in which the presymbolic and the symbolic are continuous, as in the semiotic, and which would thus allow a memory of Africa to emerge powerfully in the novel’s American everyday. In fact, Walker admits being more concerned to posit a contrast between the two:

I know that there are people who don’t like [Nettie’s] letters as well, but that, too, in a way is part of the plan. I was trying to show the reader that standard English, missionary English, does not hold a candle to the southern, country vernacular which Celie speaks, and her letters, which you would think people would puzzle over, are always the letters that are the vibrant ones.¹⁷

As pleased as McDowell appears to be that through their respectively “oral and literate”¹⁸ narratives, “each sister is [...] allowed to speak in her own voice without apology, mediation, or derision”,¹⁹ the separation between the oral and the literate which the novel enacts through Nettie’s letters means that the same may hardly be said for the Africans whom Nettie represents. Where Walker is thoroughly concerned that her representation of the grandmothers’ speech is utterly authentic – that “you can actually hear them speak when the novel is read aloud”,²⁰ her approach toward depicting Africans shows no such concern for authenticity, as is evident when she writes, in a note ‘To The Reader’ at the end of Possessing the Secret of Joy, ‘sequel’ to The Color Purple:

London: Meridian, Penguin Books, 1990), pp 91-115 (pp 104-05). [Reprinted from New Literary History, 18 (Winter 1987), pp 281-302.]

¹⁶ Ibid., p 105.

¹⁷ Bigsby. p 220.

¹⁸ McDowell, p 106.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lannan Literary Videos 14: Alice Walker (1989).

Tsungu, like many of my 'African' words, is made up. Perhaps it, and the other words I use, are from an African language I used to know, now tossed up by my unconscious. I do not know from what part of Africa my African ancestors came, and so I claim the continent.²¹

In this almost unbelievably misguided statement, Walker imposes her own representational terms upon an experience of which she admits total ignorance, and even 'claims' ownership of a continent through the imposition of her own language, thus subordinating the history of her ancestors to the privileged goal of representing her own experience. While Walker's practice of 'speaking in tongues' is supposed to enable effective representation of the under-represented, her language in this case works to effect the opposite – to even more fully *erase* African historical experiences which pass into invisibility. This, incredibly enough, typifies Walker's approach toward Africa in The Color Purple. What is more, as the narrative approach toward Africa undermines the novel's more central attempt at positing a continuity between writing and speech, and between speech and the unspoken, the portrait of Africa is reduced from something that might have constituted a cultural memory useful to the African-American situation, to the status of staged stereotype, which even helps to turn the historical memory of the lives of Walker's grandmothers, for a number of readers, into "fairy tale".²²

²¹ Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (London: Vintage, Random House, 1993 [1992]), pp 267-68.

²² Catherine Colton: "While "many reviewers" criticize Walker for being too imaginative – criticize the last third of the book because "the narrator-protagonist Celie and her friends are propelled toward a fairytale happy ending with more velocity than credibility" (Hite 103), others recognize the powerful possibilities of such a "fairytale" or "mythic" ending. Mary Daly offers *The Color Purple* as one of three examples of a Fairy Tale, as it is defined in her *Wickedary*: "an Archaic story that transports the Hearer into Fairy Time," which is defined, in part, as "Time that moves Counterclockwise and is accessible to those who ask Counterclock Whys" (123), questions taking the questioners beyond the boundaries of the patriarchal world. Thus, Walker's story is empowering, for it enables the reader to transcend the patriarchy's boundaries for a while, in order to begin questioning its vision of the world. While the story itself might be "unrealistic," it can serve, in the terms set out by Daly, to bring readers into a more critical relationship with the "real world." [Colton, Catherine A., 'Alice Walker's Womanist Magic: The Conjure

An African-American identification with Africa is approached in this novel first through a profound sense of identification between black women in Georgia, and a roughly-sketched African people, through what Deborah McDowell calls “correspondences between the sisters’ experiences [which] are striking, even strained and overdetermined”.²³ Until the point when Walker attempts to represent African speech, however, I suggest that the drawing of such correspondences is reasonably successful – or perhaps I should say, not utterly objectionable – functioning much in the manner that Pilate’s ‘Africanness’ was established in Song of Solomon. For instance, as Nettie depicts the Senegalese people she encounters upon arrival in Africa as being “so black...they shine” (119), Celie describes “Shug’s bright black skin [...] Her hair shining in waves.” (64) Similarly, Nettie’s hut in Africa, which is “round, walled, with a round roofleaf roof” (134), and upon which she comments, “My only desire for it now is a window!” (135), is mirrored by Shug’s dream house: “It a big round pink house, look sort of like some kind of fruit. It got windows and doors and a lot of trees round it.” (177)²⁴ The kinds of identification with Africa which are shown here accord with Barbara Christian’s observation, outlined by David Cowart, that Walker’s ideal of the value of an African inheritance, to African-Americans, lies particularly in its practical use in daily life:

as Barbara Christian observes, a “heritage must continually be renewed rather than fixed in the past” (87)... [T]he idea of heritage is perpetually subordinate to the fact of a living tradition, a tradition in which one generation remains in touch with its predecessors by

Woman as Rhetor’, in Ikenna Dieke (ed.), Critical Essays on Alice Walker (Westport CT & London: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp 33-44 (p 40)].

²³ McDowell, p 105.

²⁴ Wall, McDowell and Lindberg-Seyersted all note these parallels.

means of homely skills – quilt-making and butter-churning, among others – that get passed on. The quilts remain appropriate for “everyday use” so long as the art of their manufacture remains alive.²⁵

For Walker a sense of African ‘tradition’ is identified in a most useful way as it is felt through everyday African-American practice. These kinds of parallels restrain the African past in the realm of the “overtly mythologizing”,²⁶ for use as an inheritance whose purpose is to provide a genealogy for an African-American tradition, and whose main interest lies in the fact that it lives in the African-American scenario. Whether these traditions exist in an African present or not is, in Walker’s scheme, unimportant.

Another way in which a specific parallel is drawn between the African-American women’s experiences in Georgia and the African situation is through a comparison made between racial injustice in America (albeit in the very proscribed domestic space), and colonialism in Africa. For instance, when Nettie recounts, in one of her letters to Celie, meeting “the mayor’s wife and her maid” (111) prior to her departure for Africa, it is Sofia of whom she is speaking:

she suddenly sort of erased herself. It was the strangest thing, Celie! One minute I was saying howdy to a living woman. The next minute nothing living was there. Only its shape. (111)

Nettie continues, “All that night I thought about it” (111), and then goes straight on to say:

²⁵ David Cowart, ‘Heritage and Deracination in Walker’s “Everyday Use”’. in Dieke, pp 21-32 (p 28).

²⁶ Lauri Umansky, Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties (New York & London: New York University Press, 1996), p 91.

In the morning I started asking questions about Africa and reading all the books Samuel and Corrine have on the subject.

Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the bible meant all of Africa? (111)

Walker appears to be suggesting Nettie's understanding that Sofia, by enacting a form of 'shape-shifting', or transmogrification, may be displaying, within the domestic situation in Georgia, a practical use for a form of African conjure, in which:

Key elements of African religions are beliefs in a spirit-infused natural world, reverence for spirits of ancestors, and a perceived unity between the spiritual and physical worlds. Magic – inhering in people's ability to make good or ill use of their connections with the spiritual world – is a part of this religion. [...] In the United States, the religious/magical traditions of voodoo and conjuring were also used to preserve and pass down African cultural beliefs and traditions, to resist oppressors, and to maintain order in the community.²⁷

Nettie's association of Sofia with conjure leads her to link the black American individual's oppression with a discovery of Africa's 'Stolen Legacy' – a narrative of ancestral greatness which has been written over, just as Sofia is forced to 'write over' herself – to transport her personality outside of her body – in order to survive. By enacting this parallel, Walker situates an ancient African inheritance as something with which the oppressed African-American woman, without having to move outside of her kitchen, can identify. A similar parallel is perceptible later, in Nettie's account of the Olinka being driven by European colonisers from their village, which "has a steady

²⁷ Colton, p 33.

supply of fresh water” (192), to “a barren stretch of land that has no water at all for six months of the year. During that time, they must buy water from the planters.” (192) The injustice of being forced to buy back what nature has given seems to resonate particularly with a situation which Sofia is forced into by her white employer. “Miz Millie” (90) offers to drive Sofia to see her children, whom she has not seen in “five years” (90), but when the car breaks down, and Millie protests that “I couldn’t ride in a pick-up with a strange colored man” (92), Sofia ends up spending only “fifteen minutes with my children” (92). The intervention of white colonisers, in the established relationship between the Olinka and their access to natural resources, forms a parallel with Miz Millie’s callous interruption of Sofia’s maternal bond, to position the African colonisation as identifiable with African-American domestic servitude. In this way, Nettie’s African narrative is introduced, as Brita Lindberg-Seyersted puts it, “as a footnote to Celie’s overwhelming documentation of homegrown oppression.”²⁸ Moreover, in this African footnote, historical time is all but insignificant – “Nothing that happens in Milledgeville, Georgia, is shown to bear on Africa, and nothing that happens in Africa is shown to bear on Georgia”,²⁹ and

Nettie’s private life runs parallel to but on a separate track from historical time. Though she travels widely, reads newspapers, has tea with bishops and even a head of state, and struggles to prevent exploitive land developers from destroying the traditional tribal life of the Olinka, Nettie ultimately has no perceivable impact on history, nor does it have any significant influence on her. The novel’s final indifference to historical contingencies result in obvious as well as subtle anachronisms. For example, when

²⁸ Lindberg-Seyersted, pp 95-6.

²⁹ Carla Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk: Women’s Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p 133.

Nettie arrives in Liberia in what seems to be the early twenties, she meets with President Tubman – who did not, in fact, take power there until 1944.³⁰

As the African scenario is taken into consideration in such a way that historical time is irrelevant the domestic Georgia sphere barely needs to engage with it – any of the scenes depicted or described might have happened at any time, and it is not important when, because their purpose is simply to act as a footnote to the main story. In this way, all history is treated as mythology or fairy tale.

The form of identification which is enabled is not entirely contradictory with Shug's exposition of her brand of spirituality, which can be said to constitute the fundamental message of the novel:

Here's the thing, [...] The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for [...] I believe God is everything, [...] Everything that is or ever was or ever will be [...] My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. (166-67)

Shug's message provides the promising possibility of a perspective which can overcome difference, and resembles what Audre Lorde calls the "erotic":

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. This sharing of joy, whether

³⁰ Melissa Walker, Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966-1989 (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991), p 62.

physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.³¹

The erotic as a means of overcoming difference is something like the empathic dynamic which motivates the practice of ‘speaking in tongues’, and is, in theory, perfectly placed in Walker’s novel to enable a positive identification with Africa.

However, even as Lorde, a black feminist writer contemporary with Walker, emphasises the erotic as a sharing of joy, “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual place, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling”,³² she swiftly elides what first appears as a metaphysical realm, with another, more political realm, as she pronounces upon the source of oppression which she understands as causing a stultification of this “female” feeling:

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves.³³

Somehow, even as Lorde explicates the generous possibility that difference may be transcended through an apprehension of the other in the self, she manages to append to this possibility the notion of the ‘difference’ between men and women as unquestionable.

³¹ Audre Lorde, ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power’, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), pp 56-57.

³² *Ibid.*, p 53.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp 53-54.

Lorde's notion of the erotic, Keith Cartwright argues, emerges from the African-American tradition known as 'mother wit' – "An occult(ed) realm of birthing and language acquisition, song and culinary art, [which] finds location in a female/spiritual zone".³⁴ Mother wit, Cartwright argues, is related to a (Senegambian) Mande concept of "badenya or "mother-child-ness"". ³⁵ It is important to note, I think, that as Cartwright describes it, mother-child-ness in the African context is conceived of as part of a larger story:

Ideas of mothering and fathering developed from polygamous marriage engender much of Mande ideology around a fertile tension between *fadenya* or "father-child-ness" [...], rivalry between a father's children from different wives, and *badenya* or "mother-child-ness" [...], the affection between full siblings of the same mother. *Fadenya*-oriented behavior tends toward innovation and individualistic social transgression, while *badenya*-oriented behavior tends toward conformity, social cohesion, and group-affiliated action. This engendering of ways to assimilate foreign or wild material for the benefit of the community [...] leads to an orientation toward tradition that values dialogic openness and improvisation without undue fears of losing identity.³⁶

Cartwright comments, "Polyrhythm and complementarity are so fundamental to West African worldview[s] that we may speak of the soul itself as being a polyrhythmic unity".³⁷ John Edgar Wideman has stated:

That is where I begin to identify what is Afro-American about me, with that primal language, [...] the language I learned feeling through. [...] That for me is the basis of African-American culture in general – that speaking voice, the voice of the mothers *and*

³⁴ Keith Cartwright, Reading Africa into American Literature (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004 [2002]), p 11.

³⁵ Ibid., p 10.

³⁶ Ibid., pp 9-10.

³⁷ Ibid., p 10.

the fathers. And that's a voice that [...] came partly from across the ocean, from an African experience³⁸

The notion of gender complementarity is important because it acknowledges the possibility of something like the semiotic – the realm of the “maternal law before the Law”.³⁹ Like the semiotic, a notion of complementarity recognises what should be obvious, that a ‘difference’ between maleness and femaleness, between men and women, and furthermore, between *any* one person and another is *not* set in stone, is rather, fluid and potentially always negotiable. It is this kind of recognition of difference – “a difference but [...] not a distinction”⁴⁰ as Kristeva puts it – that begins to enable positive identifications between people, and which allows for the possibility of identification even as ‘difference’ is apprehended.

As Cartwright goes on, however, he, like Lorde, positions an easily accepted difference alongside, or even within, this notion of total complementarity, when he claims that in the Senegambian context, “Although the patrilineal claims cover more geographic space and historical time, the maternal inheritance is the real story.”⁴¹ Though it is impossible for me to judge the accuracy of Cartwright’s assessment of Mande culture, the notion of complementarity of experience seems to me so important to enabling an identification between people, even across perceived differences, that it should be crucial to at least recognise the point where an outlook privileging complementarity of traditional gender assignments begins to slide into another perspective, where the feminine, or the female, is

³⁸ In Black and White: Conversations with African-American Writers – Part Six: John Wideman, dir. Matteo Bellinelli, 1992 (RTSI-Swiss Television). Emphasis added.

³⁹ Kelly Oliver. Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p 46.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Cartwright, p 29.

privileged. Furthermore, as is particularly salient to Walker's and Lorde's perspectives, we should, I think, be alert to the point where the 'feminine' as a symbolic appellation for what is essentially a sensory realm, is elided into the explicitly female, a perspective exclusive to women. As Walker's basic assumption is frequently that simply by being a black woman she 'knows' about oppression, the notion of the fluidity of difference between people is transformed into something different – the presumption of the role of *speaking on behalf of others*.

Walker treads this area of slippage when she alludes, rather embarrassingly, to the "germ" of The Color Purple as a "historical novel" starting "not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear", and comments, "what woman (or sensuous man) could avoid being intrigued?"⁴² Just as The Color Purple is able to turn a wife-beating rapist into an affectionate sewer of pants whose "mind [is] really on the slant of his next stitch" (231), Walker's novel is governed by the notion that "kinship [is] the key to transforming bad listeners into good ones".⁴³ Nonsensically, though the novel's approach to Africa concludes that "maybe it is kinfolks" (p), the discovery which is made alongside this is that some "bad listeners cannot "hear" because they are too different."⁴⁴ Walker's greatest weakness as a writer is her inability to recognise the very great responsibility which comes with assuming the right to represent others. Such lack of awareness is evident in statements such as the following:

⁴² Alice Walker, 'Writing *The Color Purple*', In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (London: Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd, 2005 [Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1983]), pp 355-60 (pp 355-56).

⁴³ Kaplan, p 140.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

If it is true that it is what we run from that chases us, then *The Color Purple* (this color that is always a surprise but is everywhere in nature) is the book that ran me down while I sat with my back to it in a field. [...] No one is exempt from the possibility of a conscious connection to All That Is. Not the poor. Not the suffering. Not the writer sitting in the open field.⁴⁵

That African-Americans and Africans might, like anyone, have something in common with each other *while also* being ‘different’ is a possibility that one would imagine is as obvious as the colour purple. Yet Walker still ‘sits with her back to’ the notion of complementarity which ‘chases’ her – which manifests itself so fully in some parts of her creative scheme, but which is completely absent from others. The main reason why Walker’s approach toward Africa is problematic, is that she easily elides that mythological, ‘fairy tale’ world where anything is possible (and in which she is most comfortable), with an approach toward the politics of representation. Most infamously, in her film Warrior Marks, which addresses the practice of female genital mutilation in Africa, Walker contends that “all I care about is why is the child crying”:

“I want to grab and imprison these women who are abusing this child; I don’t care how black they are, whose “culture” it is, or what anyone else thinks about it whatsoever.”⁴⁶

This attitude displays what Stanlie M. James calls, mildly, an “insensitivity” to “the specificity of cultural context”,⁴⁷ and which is particularly apparent as

Walker recounts the unfortunate story of how her brother shot and blinded her in one eye [...] suggest[ing] that her injury is analogous to the female circumcision/genital

⁴⁵ Alice Walker, ‘The Color Purple: Preface to the Tenth Anniversary Edition’, in The Color Purple (The Women’s Press, London, 1983), unpaginated.

⁴⁶ Alice Walker, The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult - A Meditation of Life, Spirit, Art, and the Making of the Film *The Color Purple* Ten Years Later (Scribner, New York & London, 1996), p 160.

⁴⁷ Stanlie M. James, ‘Shades of Othering: Reflections on Female Circumcision/Genital Mutilation’, Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 23.4 (1998), pp 1031-48 (p 1036).

mutilation millions of women have experienced over thousands of years and that this “visual mutilation” has helped her to “see” more clearly the subject of genital mutilation.⁴⁸

Marina Warner exclaims, “What is this virtual victimhood taken on by people whose experience of oppression may be totally different in character? It is a kind of hypocrisy I get very upset by.”⁴⁹ If, as Annette Van Dyke suggests it is “[t]he female principle” that is at work in this novel, “a force in which everything is connected – life and death – and [which] can be better understood through reading poetry and fiction than by a simple definition”,⁵⁰ I would counter that poetry can indeed enable connections between diverse positionalities, but it is not useful to separate the notion of ‘poetry’ from ‘other’ kinds of signification. Any sense that ‘poetry’ conveys meaning differently from ‘other’ uses of language is a false distinction which is not helpful in this context.

Walker’s failure to establish an effective identification between African-Americans and Africans in her novel is seen in graphic terms in the novel’s representation of speech. If, as Gates puts it, “Celie speaks herself free”,⁵¹ it is *not* true that her “narrative present is comprised of (indeed, *can* be comprised of) only one event: the process of writing itself. All other events in *The Color Purple* are in the narrative past”.⁵² If we are to credit Celie’s narration, at least, as a reasonably successful act of ‘speaking in tongues’, where not only the voices of Walker’s dead ancestors, but equally, the voices of the novel’s

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Heike Härting and Tobias Döring, ‘Amphibian Hermaphrodites: A Dialogue with Marina Warner and David Dabydeen’, *Third Text*, 30 (Spring 1995), pp 39-45 (p 44).

⁵⁰ Annette Van Dyke, *The Search for a Woman-Centered Spirituality* (New York & London: New York University Press, 1992), p 4.

⁵¹ Gates, p 253.

⁵² Ibid., p 247.

other characters, are ‘heard’ through Celie’s speech,⁵³ the approach toward the representation of African speech shows something else entirely. The excerpt where Nettie describes the missionaries’ arrival in the Olinka village is illustrative:

You never saw such curious faces as the village folks surrounded us with. At first they just looked. [...] then they moved up a little bit – nobody saying a word yet – and touched our hair. Then looked down at our shoes. We looked at Joseph. Then he told us they were acting this way because the missionaries before us were all white. [...] Then one of the women asked a question. We looked at Joseph. He said the woman wanted to know if the children belonged to me or to Corrine or to both of us. [...] Then another woman had a question. (128-29)

We begin to see how Brita Lindberg-Seyersted comes to call Walker’s narration of Africa, quite straightforwardly, “boring”.⁵⁴ Even when Walker does allow individual Africans to break from the uniform mass of humanity – who all seem to “move” as one – in order to allow one or two of them to “say a word”, she shows no concern whatsoever with citing or even commenting upon their spoken language, in marked contrast to the priority the novel accords to Celie’s vernacular. The Africans’ speech is interpreted through Nettie’s bland standard English in a way that suggests the total unimportance of seeking any kind of faithful representation of people who are simply “too different”. Moreover, where this initial dialogue between the missionaries and the Africans concludes is at a point where finally a *similarity* between African and African-American experience, like that already apprehended through the figures of round-shaped huts and

⁵³ The notion of speaking in tongues eliminates the need to fret over the significance of quotation marks, as Gates does – the speech of others is heard through one’s own speech.

⁵⁴ Lindberg-Seyersted, p 91.

shape-shifters, can be identified, providing the wished-for affirmation of a known Afro-Southern tradition:

Then another said he never dreamed missionaries could be black.

Then someone said, That the new missionaries would be black and two of them women was exactly what he *had* dreamed, and just last night, too. (129)

The connection back to the Georgia homestead is made in the way that is suggested as Catherine Colton comments on the novel's "sense of connection and the interrelatedness of everything in the natural world [which] is crucial to the African understanding of conjure."⁵⁵ Celie's emancipation, for instance, climaxes in a confrontation with Mr. _____, where she observes that her speech "seem to come to me from the trees. [...] Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words." (176) In the implicit identification of the nonrational in the Georgia homestead with a corresponding aesthetic in the African scene, we will recognise the sense of an erotic identification, from Celie's African-American perspective at any rate, with some not-quite-named memory of Africa, an affirmation of the novel's discovery of a "woman-centred spirituality".⁵⁶ But as the events in Celie's narration occur in a past which is evoked in the text's present, as speech and writing become part of the same fluid quantity, the voices of Africans are not only in the past, they are so far in the textual past that they are barely heard – Nettie's narration is contained within Celie's, African voices within Nettie's, and within an invisible translation. Where Michel Feith identifies Gates's use of "Derrida's somewhat arbitrary distinction between speech and writing" as indicative of a "nostalgia for a lost wholeness

⁵⁵ Colton, p 36.

⁵⁶ Annette Van Dyke, The Search for a Woman-Centered Spirituality (New York & London: New York University Press, 1992).

of tradition”,⁵⁷ Walker can be seen to make a similar arbitrary differentiation, but *only* in her approach toward Africa.

Walker’s Apprehensive Africanism

What Michel Feith called Gates’s “mythic apprehension of diasporic literature”⁵⁸ is particularly discernible when Gates calls Nettie’s narrative “what we might think of as the text’s middle passage”,⁵⁹ and then, strangely, also contends that “Nettie’s letters are written in standard English, not only to contrast her character to Celie’s but also to provide some relief from Celie’s language.”⁶⁰ It is hard to decide which is the more disturbing notion – an allusion to the memory of the Middle Passage as “relief” from the language of the African-American experience, or the sense that writing in a black vernacular may be so irritating that the reader must at some point be relieved of it! Walker’s apprehension of the history of diaspora might be seen to be at least equal to Gates’s, for whom, as Feith suggests,

the particular position [...] as a prominent critic of African-American literature may also bear on the case: after all, the fight for the recognition of this discipline is not yet over in the American academy. The rule of the game is that disciplines must be self-contained, or autonomous, to a certain degree: too much emphasis on impurity might weaken the cause.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Michel Feith, ‘Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Signifying Monkey*: A Diasporic Critical Myth’, in Geneviève Fabre & Klaus Benesch (eds.), *African Diasporas in the New and Old Worlds: Consciousness and Imagination* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp 59-80.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Gates, p 244.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p 251.

⁶¹ Feith, p 72.

Gates's anxiety about plurality, which manifests itself in his "validation of one [African-American] center via its derivation from a previous [African] one",⁶² may be apparent in his assertion of a linear and exclusive relationship between two traditions, and might arise from a need to act in defence of African-American culture itself. Similarly, though Walker may establish the grounds for an implicit identification between African-Americans and Africans, made in the manner of an erotic 'self-connection shared', her anxiety about a threatened history of African-American womanhood leads this basis for identification to slip finally into a celebration of self and an intense anxiety about an African 'other'.

In total isolation from that discourse of 'mother wit', which is able to draw an implicit identification between the sites of African-American and African identification, Walker positions another discourse of patriarchalism, which is nevertheless also attributed to the Olinka, but towards which her approach is little short of combative. An instance of this second discourse might be discerned as Nettie comments on the Africans' use of roofleaf in constructing their huts:

They pick it and dry it and lay it so it overlaps to make the roof rainproof. This part is women's work. Menfolks drive the stakes for the hut and sometimes help build the walls with mud and rock from the streams. (128)

If we are in any doubt as to the point Walker is making with her dramatisation of African gender roles, Nettie comments in her next letter:

⁶² Ibid., p 69.

It is as if Olivia fears the food from these wives because they all look so unhappy and work so hard. Whenever they see her they talk about the day when she will become their littlest sister/wife. It is just a joke, and they like her, but I wish they wouldn't say it...

Why do they say I will be a wife of the chief? asks Olivia.

That is as high as they can think, I tell her.

[...]

You will grow up to be a strong Christian woman, I tell her. Someone who helps her people to advance. You will be a teacher or a nurse. You will travel. You will know many people greater than the chief. (133-34)

If Walker situates colonised Africans figuratively, in relation to European colonisers, in a feminised role with which the African-American female perspective can establish an erotic identification, her representation of the mores of Olinka society presents another, more highly defensive narrative of Africa, where an African patriarchalism is represented as utterly intractable, and serves as a platform for Walker's feminist protest.

The potential which Walker's novel shows for an identification between African-Americans and Africans which might use an erotic identification of the 'other in the self' to overcome a sense of difference, can be seen to have been skewed by her particularly violent reaction to the combined circumstances of patriarchal and racist oppression.

Barbara Smith describes the mobilisation of black feminism in the 1970s against what were perceived to be "interlocking" systems of "racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression", constituting a "simultaneity of oppression".⁶³ As *The Color Purple* attempts to 'talk back' to these simultaneously oppressive influences, it begins to be able to 'talk

⁶³ Barbara Smith, 'Introduction', *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*: p xxxiv.

back' to the white woman, as Sofia's altercation with Eleanor Jane shows, but as many readers have noted, never even encounters the white man. The encounter with Africa, meanwhile, which Nettie's narrative represents, is the principal arena in which the novel's objection to the patriarchalism of black nationalist politics is staged.

Cherrie L. Moraga tells how "men of color tried to determine what "revolutionary" meant, censoring women from voicing their opposition within the people of color movements of the late 60s and early 70s."⁶⁴ Joyce Hope Scott comments, "The Black Muslim movement, Stokely Carmichael, Imiri [sic] Baraka, and Maulana Ron Karenga – all key opinion shapers of the turbulent 1960s and 70s – uniformly espoused a rhetoric of female subordination and role assignment based on traditional biological function."⁶⁵ As Melani McAlister writes, "Elijah Muhammad taught "respect" for women but also the necessity of controlling them",⁶⁶ and similarly, Tracye A. Matthews tells how the Black Panther Party "tended to rely heavily on biological determinism and notions of "natural order" in assessing and assigning separate roles for black women and men",⁶⁷ but also that female Panthers such as Elaine Brown, Angela Davis and Assata Shakur "often

⁶⁴ Cherrie L. Moraga, 'From Inside the First World: Foreword, 2001'. in This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, ed. Cherrie L. Moraga & Gloria E. Anzaldua (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2002 [third edition, first edition 1981]), pp xv-xxxiii (pp xv-xvi).

⁶⁵ Joyce Hope Scott, 'From Foreground to Margin: Female Configurations and Masculine Self-Representation in Black Nationalist Fiction', in Nationalisms & Sexualities, ed. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer & Patricia Yaeger (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), pp 296-312 (p 304).

⁶⁶ Melani McAlister, p 97. "The woman is man's field to produce his nation," Muhammad wrote. "You protect your vegetable crops from worms and thieves. Is not your woman more valuable than that crop of corn, that crop of cotton, that crop of cabbage, potatoes, beans, tomatoes?... Yet you are not careful about your women. You don't love them." [McAlister, p 96].

⁶⁷ Tracye A. Matthews, "No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is": Gender Politics and Leadership in the Black Panther Party, 1966-71', in Bettye Collier-Thomas & V.P. Franklin (eds.), Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement (New York & London: New York University Press, 2001), pp 230-56 (p 236).

tested and stretched the boundaries of the largely masculinized Party structure.”⁶⁸ With Black Panther leader Stokely Carmichael’s comment the most memorable of all: “The only position for the woman in the revolution is prone.”⁶⁹, it is not surprising that “as a few black women within the movement pointed out by the late 1960s, black nationalist pronatalism contained within it a starkly sexist and traditionalist message about black family and sexual politics.”⁷⁰ As Umansky writes, this wave of black nationalism emerged “contemporaneously with the publication of Moynihan’s incendiary report”⁷¹ in 1965. Joyce Hope Scott comments:

Like their white male counterparts, black male novelists often tended to portray black women in their fictive worlds with ambivalence at best and at worst, within the Euro-American, male-dominated, exploitative framework where the male is superior, owner, controller, and defender of the female who is owned, inferior. In this latter category, black women have appeared as the bitch or ancient “terrible mother” who, as Moynihan put it, emasculates and tyrannizes the black male, depriving him of his opportunity to flourish and grow into a healthy American man.⁷²

It is to this specific discourse that Walker responds, when “In the essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Walker writes that although black women have been called “‘Matriarchs,’ ‘Superwomen,’ and ‘Mean and Evil Bitches,’” their true strength is not malignant, but rather lies in the simple ability to maintain an inner core of creativity in the face of unbelievable oppression.”⁷³

⁶⁸ Ibid., p 244.

⁶⁹ Cited by Joyce Hope Scott, p 305.

⁷⁰ Lauri Umansky, Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties (New York & London: New York University Press, 1996), p 80.

⁷¹ Ibid., p 79.

⁷² Joyce Hope Scott, pp 303-4.

⁷³ Umansky, p 92.

This entire discourse of the ‘terrible mother’, and the necessity of controlling women through biological function, common up to a point to both white racism and black nationalism, was, in the case of some black nationalist strands of thought, backed up with a particularly contestatory approach toward the notion of an African ‘history’, which was, as Barbara Christian writes, positioned almost in competition with a more recent Southern African-American history:

Black Power ideologues emphasized the African cultural past as the true heritage of African Americans [...] Many blacks affirmed their African roots by changing their “slave names” to African names, and by wearing Afro hair styles and African clothing. Yet, ideologues of the period also lambasted older African Americans, opposing them to the lofty mythical models of the ancient past. These older men and women, they claimed, had become Uncle Toms and Aunt Jemimas who displayed little awareness of their culture and who, as a result of the slave past, had internalized the white man’s view of blacks. [...]

In contrast to that tendency, Walker’s “Everyday Use” is dedicated to “your grandmamma.” [...] this grandmamma [is not] politically conscious according to the fashion of the day: she never had an education after the second grade, she knows nothing about African names, and she eats pork. In having the grandmamma tell this story, Walker gives voice to an entire maternal ancestry often silenced by the political rhetoric of the period.⁷⁴

That the women of The Color Purple may be imagined as embodying something in the vein of the Southern “grandmamma” may be discerned not only from the story’s setting in the 1930s, but also from the fact that, as Christopher Bigsby puts it, “Miss Celie and

⁷⁴ Christian, ‘Introduction’, pp 10-11.

her friend, Shug [...] pop up again in [Walker's] next novel",⁷⁵ The Temple of My Familiar, as what Walker calls "really wonderful grandmothers".⁷⁶ Furthermore, Walker has commented:

my grandmother, who sort of morphed into being Celie, had had two children who died, or she never knew what happened to them. And she was stuck in the house with my grandfather, and never went anywhere, so I decided that in my novel, the person who would represent her, and who would be a memorial to her, would have a much richer life.⁷⁷

As the women of the novel display an unabashed ignorance of anything about the world extending beyond the front yard, it is noticeable that Walker nevertheless continually highlights this blind spot. For instance, toward the end of the novel, Sofia describes a conversation with her white employers:

They stand round looking at the children's pictures on the wall and saying how good my boys look in they army uniforms.

Where they fighting? Stanley Earl want to know.

They in the service right here in Georgia, I say. But pretty soon they be bound for overseas.

He ast me do I know which part they be station in? France, Germany or the Pacific.

I don't know where none of that is so I say, Naw. (222)

The notion that even the poorest, most sheltered, and uneducated of women living in the Deep South would display such ignorance of the world beyond her homestead, that the

⁷⁵ 'In Conversation with Alice Walker', in Christopher Bigsby, Writers in Conversation, Volume Two (Arthur Miller Centre for American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, 2001), pp 213-223 (p 220).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ 'Conversations with the Ancestors: *The Color Purple* from Book to Screen', in The Color Purple (dir. Steven Spielberg, Two-Disc Special Edition, Disc Two: Bonus Features).

prospect of her children travelling overseas, possibly to lay down their lives in the service of their country, would not even lead her to discover the existence of such a place as France, is so unbelievable, that it is impossible to imagine that Walker is not problematising something here. The fact that Africa is mentioned a couple of lines later, therefore – “Too bad they not fighting in Africa.” (222) – suggests something important about Walker’s positioning of the African narrative of Nettie’s letters as a response to a gap in the Southern matriarchal worldview.

A perspective which seeks to imaginatively invoke the era of the ‘grandmothers’ whom Walker so privileges, and to offer those grandmothers a glimpse of a broader horizon, I would suggest, is what forms the basic premise for the appearance of Africa in The Color Purple. This perspective of Walker’s on the Southern grandmamma is thoroughly informed by a protest against a patriarchalism which does not recognise the importance of an African-American tradition, and which perceives it as discontinuous with a memory of Africa. Nettie, the most adventurous of these ‘grandmother’ figures, positions “the desire to *know*” (112) as the driving force leading her to become a missionary in Africa, and comments that “my real education began at that time” (112). As Deborah McDowell comments, “Nettie’s has become an educated imagination, shaped by the context within which she moves as well as by her function as a missionary in a colonizing enterprise”.⁷⁸ Thus we begin to acquire a sense that Nettie’s narrative of Africa is given partly out of a desire to broaden the lives of historically oppressed women, and also to draw attention to those of the same generation whose lives may not have been so limited. As Cheryl A. Wall comments, “Tellingly, Shug’s exposition of her spiritual beliefs follows the

⁷⁸ McDowell, pp 104-06.

introduction of Nettie's letters in the text.⁷⁹ Importantly, Walker's approach toward Africa in this novel may be understood partly to function as a means of allowing the grandmothers' generation to be more worldly, and to establish a continuity between the tradition they represent and an African tradition.

Yet at the same time, as Janet Montelaro points out, "Through her withdrawal from Nettie, Corrine alienates herself from the maternal culture of the Olinkas whom she had come to serve. [...] she becomes obsessed with the suspicion that Nettie and Samuel are the parents of Olivia and Adam."⁸⁰ Walker has written that in her view, women "should have children – *assuming this is of interest to them* – but only one[...] because with one you can move[...] With more than one you're a sitting duck."⁸¹ In spite of her privileging of the role of 'grandmothers' as bearers of tradition, Walker's attitude toward motherhood itself is singularly ambivalent. All of the relationships which exist between a mother and a child in The Color Purple are troubled or disrupted. Celie's children are, of course, taken from her; Shug has left her children to be raised by her mother; Sofia's relationship with her children is interrupted by white oppression; and Nettie, who perhaps has a closer relationship with Olivia and Adam, is not actually their mother, but their aunt (and eventually their stepmother). Perhaps the only time the novel positions a figure of a relationship between one mother and one child in a positive way is when it is used as a metaphor for Celie and Shug's lovemaking:

⁷⁹ Wall, p 156.

⁸⁰ Janet J. Montelaro, Producing a Womanist Text: The Maternal as Signifier in *The Color Purple* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1996), p 51.

⁸¹ Walker, 'One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)', in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose (London: Women's Press, 1984 [1983]). pp 361-83 (p 363).

Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth.

Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too. (97)

The novel registers a central anxiety about the possibility of being entrapped by motherhood, which is probably a reaction to black nationalist perspectives, which, as Lauri Umansky writes:

in January 1969, the Black Panther newspaper urged black men to “deal with the situation. Educate your woman to stop taking those pills. You and your woman – replenish the earth with healthy black warriors. [...]” Amiri Baraka, one of the most influential voices of the Black Power movement, stated his nationalism in romanticized pronatalist terms in the essay “Black Woman,” writing that “it must be black consciousness that is given to our babies with their milk, and with the warmth of the black woman’s loving body.”⁸²

Perhaps Walker is aware of the fact that what her approach to Africa in this novel outlines is less often an exploration of an identification with Africa, than a defence against a black nationalist attack upon femininity, when she has Celie write:

Then I think back to one of Nettie’s letters bout the sicknesses children have where she at in Africa. Seem like to me she mention something bout blood clots. I try to remember what she say African peoples do, but I can’t. Talking to Mr. _____ such a surprise I can’t think of nothing. Not even nothing else to say. (190)

The ability to ‘speak’ when presented with the memory of Africa is, tellingly, felt to be obstructed by the relationship with the black man.

⁸² Umansky, p 82.

Lauren Berlant has commented that, “the last half of the novel returns “Africa” to the space of disappointment and insufficiency”.⁸³ The fantasy of African-American identification with Africa has fallen away to reveal the reality of the distance between them, and the unresponsiveness of Africa is now the object of African-American anger:

It’s worse than unwelcome, said Samuel. The Africans don’t even *see* us. They don’t even recognize us as the brothers and sisters they sold... We love them. We try every way we can to show that love. But they reject us. (201)

In order to avoid confrontation with the reality of difference and rejection which would render all their ideals of Africa invalid, Nettie and Samuel turn to the only avenue of fantasy left to them: “concern and passion soon ran away with us... I was transported by ecstasy in Samuel’s arms.” (201) As Carla Kaplan comments:

an erotics of talk is made possible only once the speakers turn their backs (give up, in effect) on arguing with their oppressors and begin to speak to one another instead. Turning away from Mr. _____ allows Celie both to “change words” with Shug and to foster an alternative economy. Similarly, Samuel and Nettie are able to realize their conversational romance only after they first give up on fighting the Europeans and prepare to leave Africa altogether.⁸⁴

Nettie and Samuel leave the tribe literally hidden in “a place set so deep into the earth that it can only really be seen...from the air” (234). As Keith Byerman comments, “such a space is essentially an escape from rather than an engagement with the oppressive

⁸³ Lauren Berlant, ‘Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*’, in *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. & K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 211-38 (p 226).

⁸⁴ Kaplan, p 134.

world.”⁸⁵ The family’s miraculous survival from the sinking ship which attempts to bring them home underscores the novel’s ‘anxiety’ about the Middle Passage,⁸⁶ and the only symbol of the encounter with Africa which is brought back to America is a reminder of what is represented as its most oppressive practice – the scarification which Tashi suffers, and which Adam undergoes in sympathy with her. and Tashi is brought to Georgia with the promise that “in America she would have country, people, parents, sister, husband, brother and lover” (235).

Celie, meanwhile, has a final story to tell about the relationship with Africa:

Guess what, I say to [Mr. _____], folks in Africa where Nettie and the children is believe white people is black peoples children. (231)

Celie’s tale here uses the strange myth of African origins also used by Malcolm X – “the demonology that every religion has, called ‘Yacub’s History’”.⁸⁷ The point, apparently, of evoking this myth, told in the highly laborious style reminiscent of Nettie’s attempt to ‘represent’ African speech, is to respond to the Nation of Islam’s contention that

In one generation, the black slave women in America had been raped by the slavemaster white man until there had begun to emerge a homemade, handmade, brainwashed race that was no longer even of its true color, that no longer even knew its true family names.

⁸⁵ Keith Byerman, ‘Walker’s Blues’, in *Alice Walker*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House Publishers, New York & Philadelphia, 1989), p 62. Reprinted from *Fingering the Jagged Grain* (University of Georgia Press, 1985).

⁸⁶ Celie highlights news of the sinking ship as “The only piece of mail Mr. _____ ever put directly in my hand”, and as coinciding with “all the letters I wrote to you over the years come back unopen.” (216) – the epistolary form is again used to reveal the impossibility of a living link with Africa.

⁸⁷ Malcolm X & Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin Books, 1968 [1965]), p 258.

The slavemaster forced his family name upon this rape-mixed race, which the slavemaster began to call 'the Negro'.⁸⁸

This parable also formed the basis of Amiri Baraka's play 'A Black Mass', which, as McAlister comments,

allegorically represents the rape of black women by white men, [and] also constructs "Woman" as the first and most susceptible base for the spread of "whiteness," reproducing the tendency of many nationalist ideologies to make women's bodies the sites of both nationalist reproduction and potential cultural impurity.⁸⁹

Walker's addition to the history is to comment that

Some of the Olinka peoples believe [...] folks might start growing two heads one of these days, for all us know, and then the folks with one head will send 'em all someplace else. But some of 'em don't think like this. They think, [...] the only way to stop making somebody the serpent [who is thrown out of the Garden of Eden] is for everybody to accept everybody else as a child of God (233)

The point that is apparently being made here is that someone will always be excluded, or marked as different, but that they are really all the same – and as Celie speaks the world in a certain way, it seems that, as Carla Kaplan notes, "talk (alone) can meld difference into sameness".⁹⁰ Irreconcilability of perspective, and an inability to understand the African 'other', is allowed to exist, apparently without conflict, then, alongside a notion of talk which reconciles difference. Furthermore, in the scheme of Olinka beliefs Celie describes where a snake is shown to represent African-Americans, she says:

⁸⁸ Ibid., p 256.

⁸⁹ McAlister, p 107.

⁹⁰ Kaplan, p 140.

And guess what else about the snake? [...] These Olinka peoples worship it. They say who knows, maybe it is kinfolks, but for sure it's the smartest, cleanest, slickest thing they ever seen. (233)

Celie completes her new-found happiness by rejecting the reality of Olinka indifference to African-Americans, in favour of a fantasy version of Africa, where the African-American is the most admired of all creatures.

The novel ends as "White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other." (243) Melissa Walker comments:

Public history, then, is something that happens to white people; black people must create their own separate and mainly private history. [...] The early 1980s, after all, were a kind of lull in political activism, a time when activists might have felt that they would have to wait – do something different – before changes could occur. Some readers might have concluded that the 1980s were a time for enterprising individuals to profit, as Celie does when she begins to make pants.⁹¹

Alice Walker's recourse to a "happy ending that is unambiguously materialistic"⁹² might reveal a perspective which is stuck in a dialogue with the black nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, and Walker's treatment of Africa generally in this novel is her way of absorbing the American past, not the American present or the African present. As the next chapter will show, the 1980s was an era in which the possibility of representation itself began to be wholly questioned, even as communities struggled with crippling social problems. Walker's decision to move away from historical representation into a scheme

⁹¹ Melissa Walker, pp 71-72.

⁹² Ibid., p 72.

of fairy tale which, moreover, emphasises personal pleasure over communal welfare is highly irresponsible, and suspiciously close to a forgetful American tendency in which the past is left behind to allow for a 'progress' into the future.

Chapter Four

‘Many Places At Once’: The Memory of Africa in John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire*

John Edgar Wideman’s 1990 novel Philadelphia Fire, like Song of Solomon, barely mentions the word ‘Africa’, indicating a memory which does not readily signify in language, and whose continuity with language may be interrupted by the trauma of an unspeakable history. The novel reflects upon the problems of narrating in the context of a global modernity which relies upon forgetfulness of the past, and positions an African form of memory as a medium which is better disposed than a linear narrative form often is, to enable a connection with the past and its forgotten casualties. This form of memory occurs in the context of what Wideman describes as:

the Great Time of our African ancestors, a nonlinear, atemporal medium in which all things that ever *have been, are, or will be* mingle freely, the space that allows us to bump into relatives long dead or absent friends or children unborn as easily, as significantly, as we encounter the people in our daily lives.¹

The form of memory which Wideman thus positions as ‘African’, perceives the past as alive in the present, and allows narrative to be defined by memory, whereas an American tradition, the novel suggests, would always attempt to make memory submit to narrative.

The novel moves around the historical event of a fire which burned, on 13 May 1985, in the middle of a black neighbourhood in West Philadelphia, killing eleven people and leaving 262 others homeless. The fire was the result of the City of Philadelphia

¹ John Edgar Wideman, ‘Preface’, The Homewood Books, (Pittsburgh & London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), p xi.

police's decision to drop a satchel of explosive onto a house in which members of an organisation called MOVE were living, and was the horrific culmination of a years-long wrangle between MOVE and the City, in which six adult members of the group and five of their children died under bombardment of gunfire, water cannon and explosives. Two people, a woman named Ramona Africa, and a nine-year old boy, Birdie Africa, escaped the fire alive, and a large part of Wideman's novel is told from the perspective of protagonist Cudjoe, who has just returned to Philadelphia from self-exile in the Greek islands, motivated by a quest for "the story he crossed an ocean to find. Story of a fire and a lost boy that brought him home".² As Cudjoe plans to "writ[e] a book [...] about the fire. What caused it. Who was responsible. What it means." (19), he interviews Margaret Jones, a character who is described by Wideman as a "former member of my group – the group inside the book who parallels or figures the actual MOVE organization".³ Jones challenges Cudjoe's faith in the power of narrative to heal or resolve the trauma of memory as she says, bluntly: "Don't need no book. Anybody wants to know what it means, bring them through here. Tell them these bombed streets used to be full of people's homes. Tell them babies' bones mixed up in this ash they smell." (19) When Cudjoe protests, "I want to do something about the silence." (19), he reveals himself to be insensitive to the form of memory which Jones has just made explicit for him – the memory which exists in everyday life, a present in which the past is felt and known at every moment. What bothers Cudjoe most of all is the problem of narrating an unspeakable memory, and he must, through the course of the novel, discover a way of reconciling himself to this discomfort.

² John Edgar Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire* (London: Picador, 1995 [1990]), p 7. All further page references will be given in parentheses.

³ Rebekah Presson, 'John Edgar Wideman', in Bonnie TuSmith (ed.) *Conversations with John Edgar Wideman* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p 107. Published from a transcript of *New Letters on the Air*, originally aired February 1991 over National Public Radio.

A more appropriate response to memory begins to be apprehended as Cudjoe finds himself, in the middle of the night, on the basketball court in the city's Clark Park where he played when he was younger. He hears a "sound, barely louder than the sawing crickets [...] voices teasingly close to intelligible." (49) As these voices then become recognisable as "Kids talking in the hollow in the middle of the night" (50), Cudjoe begins to play ball, at some level realising that "a ball pounding the asphalt would be like a drum summoning the kids. They'd share their secrets with him as they played through the night." (50) The allusion to the African talking drum is not accidental, as for Wideman, Jacqueline Berben-Masi notes:

basketball is as much a cultural ritual for the African American community as the intricate, patterned beadwork that retraces timeless symbols of the interpretation of life and the realms that constitute it among the Yoruba peoples of Africa. Like beads, it has become part of Great Time: timeless, permanent, formative, defining. And like beads sewn into age-old designs of the cosmos that guide life in the here and now, the past, and the hereafter, Wideman implies that the movement on the basketball court, the apparel, the colors and textures, and the body language are all-determining for a lifetime in a black man's existence⁴

Late in the novel, as Cudjoe attends a "memorial service for the dead of Osage Avenue", some means of learning how to narrate memory finally begins to be offered up:

Two black men, chests bare, dreadlocks to their shoulders, drum their way into the ceremony. They sit facing each other [...] A slow, easy rhythm rises from African

⁴ Jacqueline Berben-Masi, 'Of Basketball and Beads: Following the Thread of One's Origins', in Bonnie TuSmith & Keith Byerman (eds.), *Critical Essays on John Edgar Wideman* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006), pp 31-41 (p 32-33).

drums clasped between their knees. Cudjoe's program doesn't mention them. Invited or not, they become as necessary, as natural as a heartbeat to the event. (196)

As a "younger man [...] chants and the drums respond" (196), what is evoked here is a means of negotiating memory which, uncannily, has been available to Cudjoe all along, if only he might allow himself to perceive it.

Karen F. Jahn identifies Wideman's writing as characterised by what Craig Werner calls

The jazz impulse (grounded in blues and gospel) engages basic (post)modernist concerns including the difficulty of defining, or even experiencing, the self; the fragmentation of public discourse; and the problematic meaning of tradition. [It] engages the question of how to communicate visions of new possibilities⁵

As Wideman, speaking about his decision to write about the MOVE tragedy, comments that "if we look at certain events long enough and hard enough through the lens of fiction, maybe we can learn more of what we need to know",⁶ the possibility of interrogating the process of signification as expressive of experience or memory is palpable. It is true that in Wideman's novel, as Heather Russell Andrade comments, "words ebb, spill, flow, converge, fragment. At times, there is a sense of complete fragmentation or, more accurately, complex free association."⁷ But this free association of language, and the "visions of new possibilities" it enables, is not a "euphoria" born of a failure to "unify the past, present, and future"⁸ of experience – it

⁵ Karen F. Jahn, 'Will the Circle be Unbroken? Jazzing Story in *Hoop Roots*', in TuSmith & Byerman, pp 57-70 (p 58). Citing Craig Werner, Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p xvii.

⁶ Charles H. Rowell, 'An Interview with John Edgar Wideman', in Conversations with John Edgar Wideman, ed. Bonnie TuSmith (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p 58. [Reprinted from Callaloo, 13.1 (1990), pp 47-61.]

⁷ Heather Russell Andrade, 'Race, Representation and Intersubjectivity in the Works of John Edgar Wideman' in TuSmith & Byerman, pp 43-56 (p 44).

⁸ Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p 27, p 28.

does not emerge from a death of the past. It is, rather, an indicator of a past fully alive in the present, and is a form of memory which emerges from Wideman's central concern with depicting the voices of his community. As the text tracks Cudjoe's attempt to find the story of the lost boy, then, it reads:

What Cudjoe has discovered is that the boy was last seen naked *skin melting, melting, they go do-do-do-do-do-do-do like that, skin melting Stop kids coming out stop stop kids coming out skin melting do-do-do-do-do-do-do like going off – like bullets were going after each other do-do-do-do* fleeing down an alley between burning rows of houses. (8)

At first sight, this passage might appear to signal a collapse of narrative into nonsense. However, when we read the words of Birdie Africa, the nine-year-old child who escaped from the burning MOVE house, something more shocking emerges:

It was 'do-do-do-do-do-do,' like that, like going off, like bullets were going after each other⁹

Elsewhere in his testimony, Birdie says:

den, the fire got – with all that smoke started comin in , an you could hear the stuff droppin upstairs, and den that's when they started um just hollerin things an "the kid's comin out!", an stuff...¹⁰

Suddenly we realise that Wideman's narrative is not merely collapsing, but with jarring clarity, actually speaking the words of a child as he recalls being in a burning house, surrounded by gunfire. When we remember that the fire and the bullets were issued by Philadelphia's own police force against the city's residents, in what, ironically, is referred to as the 'City of Brotherly Love', the full force of the pain and shock of this memory is felt through Wideman's disjunctive narrative process.

⁹ 'Young Birdie Africa Survives Philly's 'MOVE' Bombing and Is Reborn As Michael Moses Ward', *The People Weekly* (December 2, 1985), p 68.

¹⁰ Louis Massiah (dir.), *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (WHYY Pennsylvania/Pennsylvania Public Television Network/Corporation for Public Broadcasting), 49m50s.

If jazz, that very American phenomenon, was developed by African-Americans in the context of a history of enforced transportation, plantation slavery, and continuing racially-inscribed conditions of inequity, Wideman's jazz writing is a response to what he calls, startlingly, "a second Middle Passage [...] afflicting black communities in America today",¹¹ where "young African Americans"¹² are "separated from traditional cultures, deprived of the love, nurturing, sense of value and identity these cultures provided".¹³ In his semi-autobiographical work *Fatheralong*, which as Mary Paniccia Carden notes, "contains many interesting echoes of *Philadelphia Fire*",¹⁴ Wideman speaks of a loss of a sense of connection to tradition, for young black people, which has more than a little to do with the emasculation of black men in American society:

Ideas of manhood, true and transforming, grow out of private, personal exchanges between fathers and sons. Yet for generations of black men in America this privacy, this privilege has been systematically breached in a most shameful and public way. [...] Whites own the country, run the country, and in this world where possessions count more than people, where law values property more than person, the material reality speaks plainly to anyone who's paying attention, especially black boys who own nothing, whose fathers, relegated to the margins, are empty-handed ghosts.¹⁵

Wideman figures the "devastatingly traumatic forces [which] have severed a generation from its predecessors"¹⁶ as commensurable with the earlier enforced separation of Africans from Africa, and understands young black people in America

¹¹ John Edgar Wideman, *Fatheralong* (London: Picador, Macmillan, 1996 [1994]), p xxii.

¹² *Ibid.*, p xxiii.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Carden, Mary Paniccia, "'If the City Is a Man': Founders and Fathers, Cities and Sons in John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*", *Contemporary Literature*, 44.3 (Fall 2003), pp 472-500 (p 475 [footnote 4]).

¹⁵ Wideman, *Fatheralong*, pp 64-65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

to be alienated from a tradition in which memories of the past would once have helped to draw meaning from bewildering experience, and thus to understand their identities:

the African voice, the conduit of traditional wisdom [teaches that] the dead are those who don't speak and are not spoken of, those not connected by vital words, those whom the stories have forgotten, who have forgotten the stories. Why am I in this American land? Why do I claim it? Why should anyone respect my claim, respect me? Who listens when I speak? Who will treat my story not as entertainment, not as a product to be sold or consumed?¹⁷

Like Reed, Wideman sees the disconnection from a fluid form of memory as enabling the commodification of black identity, through the isolation of blackness as a 'sign' from a distinctive tradition and lineage. Wideman proceeds to illustrate a notion of what he calls variously, "African time" or "Great Time", in which the answers to young people's troubled questions are known:

At the beginning of Things Fall Apart Chinua Achebe mentions a story the people of Umofia pass down from generation to generation, concerning the founder of their clan, the ancestor who wrestled a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights, earning for himself and his descendants the right to settle on the land they've occupied ever since. Told countless times, countless ways, in each recounting the fabled bout happens again, not in the past, but alive and present in Great Time, the always present tense of narrative where every alternative is possible [...] The wrestling match [...] is an intersection like the one drawn with chalk on an earthen floor to summon Loa, like the crossroads sacred to Damballah where living and dead pass one another¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., pp 63-64.

¹⁸ Ibid., p 62.

The entry into African time signals access to a place where the past is always alive and accessible in the present, where memory defines narrative rather than being falsely constructed by narrative, and language is therefore not compelled to produce intelligible meaning. If, as James Kyung-Jin Lee remarks, “the MOVE tragedy is the novel’s absent presence”,¹⁹ Wideman’s novel seeks after a greater attentiveness to the past as alive in the present, as a means of giving children a knowledge of their lineage, and thereby the tools to understand “Why am I in this American land?”. What Wideman puts in place here is a means of remembering which he situates as related to an African past, not in such a way as to remember Africa in narratively sequential fashion, but in a manner which enables a sensitivity to the effect of past trauma upon the American present. Just as Ishmael Reed figures his narration of history as a response to possession by loa, Wideman’s narrative process may frequently be imagined to be ‘possessed’ by the voices of the past, and narrative perspectives proliferate in Philadelphia Fire, to reflect the imperative which Wideman feels, as a writer, to the honest representation of his community.²⁰

Wideman’s heightened sensitivity to the potential problematics of a single-authored narrative as it attempts to recall the memory of a whole community arises from his particular personal circumstances. Wideman grew up in Pittsburgh – in the poor largely-black neighbourhood of Homewood as a child, and later in the more white-populated suburb of Shadyside. Against his working-class background, his life quickly began to be typified by opportunity and extraordinary achievement; having

¹⁹ James Kyung-Jin Lee, Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p 104.

²⁰ I am indebted to Jennifer Radtke of Long Island University, who first introduced me to this specific point of continuity between Reed and Wideman in her presentation entitled “Anancy in New England”, made on 29 May 2004 at the American Literature Association 15th Annual Conference in San Francisco, and who has further encouraged my exploration of this idea in subsequent e-mail correspondence.

won a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, he went on to become only the second African-American, after Alain Locke, to be awarded the Rhodes Scholarship, which took him to Oxford (UK) for three years. A few years later, as his career continued to blossom, Wideman again migrated away from home, this time to the plains of Laramie, Wyoming, where he undertook a Professorship at the University. In 1976, Wideman experienced the first of a series of rude shocks about the significance of his move away from his community, when his younger brother Robby, back in Pittsburgh, was arrested for first-degree murder and armed robbery; he was sentenced, two years later, to life in prison. Ishmael Reed has commented, “Like most middle-class ethnic novelists who are partly assimilated Yankee, Mr. Wideman [...] rebukes himself with harsh and self-deprecatory remorse”.²¹ But Wideman’s concerns are not without foundation, as the author makes clear in an interview conducted while he was working at the University of Massachusetts:

here I am in Amherst, Mass., writing these books about Homewood, a black, economically depressed community in Pittsburgh – what’s all that mean, what do all these words on the page have to do with that reality, and if I’m really bothered by that reality – of Pittsburgh – it exists now, this moment, my people are there, my relatives are there, and suffering various forms of oppression and danger and pain, why don’t I do something about it? What’s it mean to make stories up about it? What’s it mean to, in a sense, exploit it in a narrative or a poem?²²

Wideman’s ethical concerns about the relationship between his literary endeavours and the interests of his home community, are nevertheless paired with an equal conviction that “our grief and our history, the stories of Homewood’s beginnings [...]

²¹ Ishmael Reed, ‘Of One Blood, Two Men’, in Ishmael Reed, *Writin’ Is Fightin’: Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), pp 85-93 (p 92).

²² Renée Olander, ‘An Interview with John Edgar Wideman’, in TuSmith, *Conversations*, p 166. Reprinted from *AWP Chronicle* 29.3 (December 1996): 1-8.

such rituals, such tellings must survive if we as a people are to survive.”²³ The progress of Wideman’s writing career has, Dorothea Drummond Mbalia notes,²⁴ registered a move away, and then back again, to the concerns of his community. Philadelphia Fire, which emerges from this third phase of his writing career, is a novel written in a mixture of vernaculars, reflecting the fact that Wideman himself has, as he puts it, “been fortunate enough to do everything from run with a gang of juvenile delinquents to being a Rhodes scholar and university professor.”²⁵ The particular nature of Wideman’s class mobility, then, has led him to comment that an “explosion of doubt and skepticism that is part of everything I do [is...] one thing that keeps me from writing traditional narrative, because I frankly don’t believe in it, the tricks of it, the conventions of it”.²⁶

As he approaches the history of the MOVE tragedy, Wideman’s central concern in this novel is to construct a narrative which might act as an adequate memorial to the children killed in the fire. This is an exercise which entails accessing a language where the memory of the past is alive in the present, and is consistently a difficult task because, as Harry Harootunian comments, we live in a society in which the “present” constantly threatens to overwhelm the memory of the past:

our present – indeed, any present – can be nothing more than a minimal unity that I call the *everyday* that has organized the experience of modernity. Consisting of the primacy of the now, this minimal experience of unity is always unsettled by the violence of events that the receiving consciousness disaggregates not as memory as

²³ Wideman, ‘Preface’ to The Homewood Books, p x.

²⁴ Dorothea Drummond Mbalia, John Edgar Wideman: Reclaiming the African Personality (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press & London: Associated University Presses, 1995).

²⁵ Jacqueline Berben-Masi, ‘From *Brothers and Keepers* to *Two Cities*: Social and Cultural Consciousness, Art and Imagination, An Interview with John Edgar Wideman’, in Callaloo, 22.3 (Summer 1999), 568-584 (p 569).

²⁶ Olander, p 166.

such but as trace, not as a figured image but as “cinders,” remains left by a devastating trauma. These remains roam about like the dead (or perhaps the undead) – what Benjamin once called “involuntary memory” – who wait for their hour to return among the living and upset their present, like specters waiting to avenge themselves if the present fails to remember them.²⁷

In order to find a language which is equal to the task of representing the ‘spectres’ of the past, Wideman recalls a memory of Africa which, interestingly, he finds right within the bosom of his intimately known African-American community, and which provides a language in which the past and the present are intimately connected. He calls this the

language of feeling [...], the language that comprehends all the senses. It’s [...] the language that your mother sings to you when she holds you and rocks you, it’s the language that you learn if you’re lucky enough to lean against a breast and feel the blood. [...] That is where I begin to identify what is Afro-American about me, with that primal language, [...] the language I learned feeling through. [...] That for me is the basis of African-American culture in general – that speaking voice, the voice of the mothers and the fathers. And that’s a voice that [...] came partly from across the ocean, from an African experience, and African languages, and African cosmology. [...] The way we speak and think is enriched, is still a strong carrier of those African dimensions.²⁸

An African tradition, as Wideman conceives of it, is capable of reviving memory just as a ‘Western’ tradition attempts to overwrite it. It situates the past as alive in the present, in contrast to a Western tradition in which the present serves as a platform from which to manage the narrative of the past, and in which the consideration of

²⁷ Harry Harootunian, *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p 18.

²⁸ *In Black and White: Conversations with African-American Writers – Part Six: John Wideman*, dir. Matteo Bellinelli, 1992 (RTSI-Swiss Television).

narrative as work of art can easily assert its ascendancy over the story that is being told. The retrieval of this African tradition, then, is vitally important where narrative approaches the situation where lives have been lost and the stories of those lives are buried or contested.

“Gather Up The Family”: Narration and Lineage in Philadelphia Fire

Wideman’s valorisation of the relationship with African foremothers and fathers, in which the voices of the past, as he would have it, are felt within the very texture of contemporary African-American speech, is commensurable with the scheme suggested by a vodoun tradition. Wideman cites the following from Maya Deren’s

Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti:

Damballah Wedo is the ancient, the venerable father; [...]the great father of whom one asks nothing save his blessing [...] Damballah is himself unchanged by life, and so is at once the ancient past and the assurance of the future....

Associated with Damballah [are] divinities [...]To invoke them today is to stretch one’s hand back to that time and to gather up all history into a solid, contemporary ground beneath one’s feet.

One song invoking Damballah requests that he “Gather up the Family.”²⁹

The entry of Wideman’s text into ‘African time’ enables the “spectres” of involuntary memory to arise and be witnessed, and as in Ishmael Reed’s work, invokes a vodoun tradition. As Wideman emphasises the importance of a perception of a language of the past as part of contemporary forms of expression, however, he draws from the traditional vodoun scheme an explicit emphasis upon family relationships. We have

²⁹ John Edgar Wideman, Damballah, (London: Flamingo, Fontana, 1986 [1981]), p 7 [but unpaginated]. Citing Maya Deren, Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti (London & New York: Thames & Hudson, 1953).

seen that the author considers the absence of a sense of a connection to ancestors to be a central factor in the disenfranchisement of African-American youth. His relationship with his own son provides a particularly moving site for his meditations on this subject.

Wideman's novel seems to provide an explicit response to Fredric Jameson's contention, published in 1983, that

It is because language has a past and a future, because the sentence moves in time, that we can have what seems to us a concrete or lived experience of time. [...] The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the "I" and the "me" over time.³⁰

But for Wideman, it is not the absence of confidence in linear time which creates the sense of the 'schizophrenic' – it is in fact the tyranny of linear time, which insists that the past disappears. Wideman adopts the position, at a point roughly halfway through the novel, of first-person narrator, and asks: "How does it feel to be inhabited by more than one self?" (110). He is meditating here upon the predicament of his son Jacob, who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, and was sentenced, in 1986, to life imprisonment for murder, after stabbing a classmate on a school camping trip. As Wideman comments that Jacob "must live many lives at once, yet have no life except the chaos produced by divided, warring selves" (110), schizophrenia is compounded by the fractured relationship between father and son. The alienation of both father *and*

³⁰ Jameson, Fredric, 'Postmodernism and the Consumer Society', in The Anti-Aesthetic, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), pp 111-125 (p 119). Or as Jameson puts it in later writing: "The connection between [...] linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a twofold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present; and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life." [Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, pp 26-27.]

son from the African form of memory which produces a sense of belonging and identity means that there is nothing that he can say to his son to compensate, because they do not share a collective memory in the context of which language makes sense: “Words between us have become useless. Decorative. [...] But the phone rings and he’s two thousand miles away so all we have to work with are words. I can’t hug him. Smile at him. See how big he’s growing.” (99) Language and identity are fractured by trauma, but this trauma is actually enacted by the tyranny of linear time, by the rejection of, or oblivion to, any sense of the past existing in the present. Any narrative imposed upon memory may never be able to do the work of that African memory that could easily produce the meaning of the past in the present, giving context for his sense of self: “Can this story he must never stop singing become a substitute for an integrated sense of self, of oneness, the personality he can never achieve?” (110).

Just as trauma has fractured identity for black children and in their relationship with their fathers, the novel itself may be seen as a response to the tragedy enunciated by Margaret Jones:

The whole city seen the flames, smelled the smoke, counted the body bags. Whole world knows children murdered here. But it’s quiet as a grave, ain’t it? Not a mumbling word. People gone back to making a living. Making some rich man richer. Losing the only thing they got worth a good goddamn, the children the Lord gives them for free, and they ain’t got the good sense to keep. (19)

As Margaret Jones seems to suggest, and as we have already seen in this study, speech, or signification, seems to break down in the face of traumatic memory.

The city's "silence", which Cudjoe "wants to do something about", is the silence of an economy of linear time and capitalist accumulation which does not know how to absorb the past. Cudjoe, Wideman's sometime narrator, is, as Mary Paniccia Carden puts it, "textually fatherless", and "had developed an unsatisfactory, competitive father-son relationship with his white editor, now dead."³¹ As the novel opens with a story Cudjoe learns on the island of Mykonos, of "Zivantias named for the moonshine his grandfather cooked, best white lightning on the island" (3), Cudjoe himself is "slightly envious. He would like to be named for something his father or grandfather had done well. A name celebrating a deed. A name to stamp him, guide him." (3) Just as, according to Bonnie TuSmith, Wideman perceives "a call-and-response between his work and that of Toni Morrison's",³² this introduction of Cudjoe's desire for a patronym, at the very start of the novel, responds, almost unexpectedly, to that call issued by Morrison in Song of Solomon, as Macon Dead wishes for a cane-stalked ancestor "who had a name that was real".³³ As Cudjoe, like Macon, is shown to have approached his fathering role with some negligence, having fled Philadelphia a decade earlier and thus "failed his wife and failed [his] kids" (9), Cudjoe's response is, Carden notes, to "seek[...] the creative power of fatherhood".³⁴ Cudjoe "must find the child to be whole again." (7-8)

As he seeks "the boy who is the only survivor of the holocaust on Osage Avenue, the child who is brother, son, a lost limb haunting him since he read about the fire in a magazine" (7-8), Cudjoe's desire to construct a narrative of belonging occurs particularly strongly because his sense of an attachment to lineage is all but lost.

³¹ Carden, p 481.

³² Bonnie TuSmith, 'Introduction' to Conversations with John Edgar Wideman, p ix.

³³ Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon (London: Random House, 1998 [1977]), p 17.

³⁴ Carden, p 476.

Cudjoe's fraught attempts to explain the tragedy never seem to get beyond his attempts to make sense of his own identity. For instance, as he tries to imagine the scene of the fire:

Cudjoe hears screaming *stop stop kids coming out* as the cop sights down the blazing alley. Who's screaming? Who's adding that detail? [...]

Cudjoe reminds himself he was not there and has no right to add details. No sound effects. Attribute no motives nor lack of motive. He's not the cop, not the boy. (8-9)

The impulse to narrate, throughout this novel, is struggled with as it frequently betrays an impulse to impose narrative upon memory in order to consolidate the stable narrative of identity which is so thoroughly endangered by the notion that children could be killed in a suburban neighbourhood in America as a result of a bomb dropped by police. As Cudjoe seeks the story of the boy, named Simba in Wideman's novel, Margaret Jones comments pointedly, "You want Simmie's story so you can sell it. You going to pay him if he talks to you?" (19) The problem of seeking a child's story in order to affirm one's own identity is as central to Cudjoe's quest for "creative fatherhood" as it is to the act of representation itself in this novel.

The city as site of Cudjoe's quest for identity through fatherhood sees the fragmentation of family relations drawn into a fascinating relationship with a sense of place. As Marc Augé puts it, "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place."³⁵ The third part of the novel sees a homeless war veteran walking the Philadelphia streets:

³⁵ Augé, Marc, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), pp 77-78.

He is always everywhere at once. Never a rush, a reason to leave here and go there. He inhabits many places, no place. Not really a difficult trick. No trick at all. The end of tricks and trickery because he is no one, no where. [...]

Lost soul. If found, return to sender. (184)

As for Cudjoe, who believes “he must always write about many places at once” (23), when the individual is left without a sense of a lineage, a relationship to the place in which he lives, he is left feeling that he is “no one”. Wideman might indeed be seen to concur with Jameson on one level, when he shows that language frequently fails to signify memory in the traumatised postmodern scenario, as Cudjoe remembers his Greek lover “teach[ing] him the Greek for her body parts”, but finds that “Words are empty sounds. Saying them does not bring her back.” (6) Yet Wideman takes far more seriously the consequences of such amnesiac forms of expression, which Jameson mentions only in passing, as “the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror.”³⁶

The struggle between a perspective which accepts the fragmentation of discourse, and finds in it a valuable connection to memory as is enabled in an African ‘Great Time’, and a dominant tradition, which attempts constantly to impose linear narrative upon memory, uncannily enough, seems to characterise almost every aspect of the history of MOVE, including their very use of a memory of Africa. MOVE was founded in Philadelphia in the 1970s by an individual named Vincent Leaphart, who took the name ‘John Africa’, and bestowed ‘Africa’ as a surname upon each of his followers. Most of MOVE’s members were black, they wore their hair in distinctive dreadlocks

³⁶ Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, p 5.

(“the way nature intended, uncombed and uncut”³⁷), and had lived at 6221 Osage Avenue since 1978, when an earlier bombardment by police left their former home in Philadelphia’s Powelton Village razed to the ground. Although Kathleen Cleaver comments that “The rise of black nationalism during the sixties and seventies influenced the group, and its adoption of the family name “Africa” incorporated the continent’s mythical power into their eclectic beliefs”,³⁸ the explanation given, in MOVE literature, for their use of the name ‘Africa’, does not draw a linear narrative either from a ‘remembered’ Africa, or from any black nationalist figuration of such memory:

All committed MOVE members take the last name “Africa” out of reverence for our founder JOHN AFRICA, and to show that we are a family, a unified body moving in one direction. We have Black, White, Puerto Rican members from upper and lower class backgrounds, both college and street (mis)educated.”³⁹

The choice of the name is further contextualised by MOVE co-founder Donald Glassey, who claimed, according to John Anderson and Hilary Hevenor, that “it was chosen not out of racial solidarity but by way of paying homage to “the continent where all life began.””⁴⁰ That the use of ‘Africa’ as a signifier could thus be chosen by John Africa to allude to a memory of the continent which does not necessarily progress through the linear narrative of ‘racial solidarity’ represented by Black Power indicates memory working in the ‘African’ way that Wideman identifies – as the past existing in the present without necessarily being housed in linear narrative.

³⁷ MOVE, *25 Years on the MOVE* (1996), p 71.

³⁸ Kathleen Neal Cleaver, ‘Philadelphia Fire’, *Transition*, 1991, pp 150-157 (p 156).

³⁹ *25 Years on the MOVE*, p 70.

⁴⁰ John Anderson & Hilary Hevenor, *Burning Down the House: MOVE and the Tragedy of Philadelphia* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), p 4.

The significance of MOVE's use of the name 'Africa', and of their relationship to a history of black protest more generally, is not to be understood simply through the steady development of a linear narrative, but is more indicative of a tradition where the past appears in the present – where, as Wideman puts it at one point, “You could stare forever and the past goes on doing its thing.” (5) – and where the memory of trauma can be registered in language. MOVE's very use of signification, I suggest, registers a history in which, as Cleaver writes, “a kind of sporadic guerrilla warfare between police forces and poor blacks [which] ha[d] been under way for at least the past thirty years”,⁴¹ and furthermore, “Urban renewal and model cities programs, [...led,] through massive demolition projects, life-giving ethnic hubs [to be] transformed into “semi-inhabited desert[s].”⁴² While we might easily imagine, then, that MOVE's name might have been taken from the public cry made by Stokely Carmichael in 1966 which was seen as the initiation of the Black Power movement, “Move on over or we'll move over you”⁴³ (and some MOVE members were indeed former Panthers), nowhere do MOVE themselves emphasise such a connection. As Robin Wagner-Pacifici comments, “Group members are insistent, in fact, that the name MOVE itself does not stand for anything.”⁴⁴ However, as it turns out, once again, it is not that MOVE means nothing at all, or that it has never meant anything, but rather that any meaning it might have is not always explicable through linear narrative. John Anderson and Hilary Hevenor's account tells the story of MOVE from its very inception by its founders John Africa and Donald Glassey:

⁴¹ Cleaver, p 155.

⁴² William L. Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 114.

⁴³ Stokely Carmichael, 'What We Want', in The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade, ed. Judith Clavir Albert and Stewart Albert (New York: Praeger, 1984), pp 137-44.

⁴⁴ Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia versus MOVE (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p 11.

Together, they called themselves the American Christian Movement for Life, or else the Christian Life Movement. Eventually, the name would be shortened to “MOVE”: the reference points “Christian” and “American” eliminated, and the name capitalized. In later years, when asked what the name meant, MOVE people would shrug their shoulders and look unblinking at their interrogators and say, “Means MOVE.”⁴⁵

The trauma of an existence in a city where, as Cleaver puts it, the “police ranked among the most brutal in their blatant terrorism against poor blacks”,⁴⁶ is palpable. As a linear memory of ‘origins’ recedes, or fragments, apparently, another narrative emerges, as MOVE have been describing their name as follows for years:

The word MOVE is not an acronym. It means exactly what it says: MOVE, work, generate, be active. Everything that’s alive moves. If it didn’t, it would be stagnant, dead. Movement is the principle of Life, and because MOVE’s belief *is* Life, our founder, JOHN AFRICA, gave us the name “MOVE.”⁴⁷

Journalist, political prisoner and MOVE member Mumia Abu-Jamal’s comments show the significance of trauma, rather than a wholly coherent politics, in MOVE’s power over its followers:

So, therefore, in the same way that the Philadelphia Police Department beat me into the BPP, the Philadelphia Police Department’s repression of MOVE attracted me to MOVE. Because, even though the repression was extraordinarily severe, brutal and

⁴⁵ Anderson & Hevenor, p 4.

⁴⁶ Cleaver, p 155.

⁴⁷ 25 Years on the MOVE, p 71. Assefa and Wahrhaftig’s suggestion, that “MOVE is short for “The Movement,”” [Hizkia Assefa & Paul Wahrhaftig, Extremist Groups and Conflict Resolution: The MOVE Crisis in Philadelphia (New York, Westport CT & London: Praeger Publishers, 1988), p 9], is widely cited among accounts of this history, but this suggestion does not appear to be substantiated anywhere in MOVE’s own literature.

devastating, MOVE continued to rebel and resist, and, as MOVE founder John Africa would say: ‘Strength and commitment is attractive.’”⁴⁸

Even though MOVE’s politics do not make sense in the manner of a linear narrative, they make sense in another way, a perception which registers Philadelphia’s traumatic history through their very use of language and signification.

As devastating and pervasive as the fracture with tradition is in Philadelphia Fire, Wideman’s commitment to a ‘jazz’ aesthetic, in which narrative is shaped by a fluid connection to memory, sees him not only highlighting the difficulties of defining the self, but drawing out an almost humorous set of associations around an illusory ‘memory of Africa’ which, even as it is indicated in language, as it was in the MOVE leader’s use of the name ‘John Africa’, fails to signify anything to do with Africa. The figure in Wideman’s novel who seems to represent John Africa is first introduced by Margaret Jones:

Because he was so sure of hisself, bossy, you know. The big boss knowing everything and in charge of everything and could preach like an angel, they called him Reverend King behind his back. Had to call him something to get his attention, you know. *James* didn’t sound right. He wasn’t a *Jimmy* or *Jim*. *Mr. Brown* wouldn’t cut it. *Mr. Anything* no good. Reverend King slipped out a couple times and then it got to be just King. (10)

As the memory of the MOVE leader is evoked, the name ‘John Africa’ is nevertheless completely excised, and replaced, not once but twice, first, laughably enough, with “James Brown” – the ‘Godfather of Soul’ himself – and then with “Reverend King”. Wideman might be seen to be making his own silently sniggering commentary here

⁴⁸ Mumia Abu-Jamal, speaking in ‘Interviews with Geronimo ji-jaga Pratt and Mumia Abu-Jamal’, in William L. Van Deburg (ed.), Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan (New York & London: New York University Press, 1997), pp 347-366 (p 358).

upon the practice, discussed in Chapter One, of divorcing blackness as a signifier from a recognition of a black tradition – a situation in which, as Melani McAlister puts it, “black cultural style became incorporated into a comfortable generational identity that [...] could only happen once the signifiers of race began to be de-essentialized, to be removed from the body and to circulate like (and *as*) commodities.”⁴⁹ Wideman’s evocation of Martin Luther King, Jr. is a reference to the specific circumstances in which, as Nikhil Pal Singh notes, King has been integrated, as “icon”, into mainstream American culture:

As a new founding father, the mythic King allowed Americans not only to celebrate their progress into a more inclusive and tolerant people, but also to tell themselves that this is who they always were.

This “King-centric” account of the civil rights era has become central to a civic mythology of racial progress in late twentieth-century America.⁵⁰

The frantic desire to forget the past through a narrative of progress, which Reed and Ann Douglas identify as typically American, is ironically exploded here by Wideman, as noticeably, his character Margaret Jones offers Cudjoe the story of this ‘father-figure’ *in place* of the story he is really looking for, of the lost boy. Wideman can be read as highlighting, in the most dramatic way possible, the potential implications of placing the individual identity of an ‘icon’ at the centre of motivations for evoking Africa. Even as Wideman might mirror MOVE’s use of a tradition in which the fractured nature of the relationship with memory is present even in signification, and like the story of Umofia which Wideman draws from Achebe, gives a sense of belonging in place through the past being alive in the present, he is not necessarily any more approving of John Africa’s imposition of his own patronym and his own

⁴⁹ Melani McAlister, Epic Encounters: Culture, Media and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000 (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2001), pp 153-54.

⁵⁰ Nikhil Pal Singh, Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp 4-5.

political agenda upon the child members of MOVE, who, unlike the adults, were not there in a wholly voluntary capacity. The fiction of lineage, of meaningful relationships between fathers and sons, and equally meaningful relationships between signification and memory, may be seen to be exposed here as being motivated by a desire to construct a narrative of progress, or a fiction of belonging, and is characteristic of what Robin Wagner-Pacifici calls a “relationship between the bomb and the “metaphysical fury,” [...] at the incoherence of MOVE”.⁵¹ In another alarming instance of a linear narrative being imposed upon a history which is not fully understood, following the 1978 clash between MOVE and police, in which a police officer was killed, nine MOVE members were subsequently sentenced to between 30 and 100 years each in prison, and the presiding judge, appearing on public radio the next day offered as response to the question of who killed the police officer: “I haven’t the faintest idea... [Since] they call themselves a family, I sentenced them as a family.”⁵²

What Judge Malmed’s twisted logic fails to recognise is that as MOVE figured themselves as a “family”, this was not with a solid sense of lineage, but rather with an inherent knowledge of disruption, as Cleaver notes:

In the wake of intense periods of social unrest and transformation, when old traditions have lost their authority but no new consensus has been reached, many people sense that their world has fallen apart. Some of these people seek out certainty in tight, cult-like groups that provide them answers to fundamental questions, give them a new identity, and infuse their lives with a mission. [...] John Africa, the adopted name of MOVE’s prophet-like leader, was able to do this for his followers. He gave them a

⁵¹ Wagner-Pacifici, p 41.

⁵² <http://sandiego.indymedia.org/en/2002/08/2067.shtml>

family to belong to, a place to live, an idealistic mission to accomplish, and a practical sense of commitment to the heavily promoted goal of destroying “the system.”⁵³

Even as the notion of a patrilineage is imposed upon MOVE, either by their own leader, or by uncomprehending onlookers, Wideman recognises the importance of remembering in such a way that the past is alive in the present. So he implicitly remembers the name Birdie Africa, the child who escaped the fire, as he likens the city of Philadelphia to

a heap of all the unhappy monks in Asia. [...] In the streets of Hue and Saigon it had happened daily. You watched priests on TV burst into fireballs, roll as they combusted, a shadow flapping inside the flaming pyre. You thought of a bird in there trying to get out. You wondered if the bird was a part of the monk refusing to go along with the program. A protest within the monk’s protest. Hey. I don’t want nothing to do with this crazy shit. Wings get me out of here. (21)

The “bird” may be imagined as what Harry Harootunian calls

“cinders,” remains left by a devastating trauma. These remains roam about like the dead (or perhaps the undead) – what Benjamin once called “involuntary memory” – who wait for their hour to return among the living and upset their present, like specters waiting to avenge themselves if the present fails to remember them.⁵⁴

Unlike the myth of America’s Founding Fathers, whom Wideman figures as “dead now. Buried in their wigs, waistcoats, swallowtail coats, silk hose clinging to their plump calves.”, the memory of the children lost in the fire must be felt as the past alive in the present.

⁵³ Cleaver, p 156.

⁵⁴ Harootunian, p 18.

Narration of the past in such a way that is forgetful is characteristic of a perspective which, as Wideman sees it, reduces black life to the status of commodity, as it is disconnected from a sense of an African-American tradition, particularly by the entertainment industry, and chimes with the concerns expressed by Ishmael Reed earlier. Philadelphia, in this novel, is full of children who are figured as orphaned and dispossessed, for instance “play[ing] rough and loud in the pools below the [city’s] fountain. No adults in sight.” (47), and even, as Cudjoe is told by his friend Timbo,

gang warring. Maiming and killing each other like flies cause they didn’t have nothing better to do. [...] You wouldn’t believe juvenile court. Not no lightweight run away from home and stealing candy bars and cars shit. Huh uh. Dope dealing and contract killing and robbing and beating people in the neighborhood for drug money and full-scale turf wars with weapons like in Nam. Gangsters, man. Ice water in their veins. And ain’t this high yet, ain’t twelve years old yet. (89)

Beyond Philadelphia, Cudjoe has seen, even at his beachside hideaway in Torremolinos, “Bony gypsy children. [...] Turn a corner and there sits one of these world hunger poster children silently begging to be something other than an image of disaster.” (22) Timbo, similarly, contributes to the novel’s narration of childhood in crisis on an international scale:

I was down in Rio for Carnival [...] Talk bout tent city. These folks lucky if they got a rag to pull over they heads. Most of them just plain-ass living on the ground. [...] When the sun’s hot you bake. If it rains, you rained on. People jammed up so tight they shitting and pissing on top one another. Kids playing in open sewers. (79-80)

As the novel meditates later on: “Lebanon Soweto West Bank Belfast San Salvador Kabul Kampuchea. Spin the globe and touch it wherever it stops. You’ll get blood on your finger.” (160) The culprit, across the board, is “Greed” which has always “got the deepest pocket” (83) – “Everybody wants a piece of the rock. What’s it

matter whose bones broken hacking the rock out the earth, who's dying pushing the rock up the hill, who's ground up underneath it?" (84) A tradition of forgetting the past is central to the impulse which allows greed to dominate social behaviour, and is similarly central to the rationalist tradition which works to impose narrative upon memory of the past, rather than allowing the past to speak in the present. This tradition of forgetfulness, the novel shows, is concurrent with a culture of abandoned children, in Philadelphia, of "young black boys shotgunning other black boys, black girl babies raising black girl babies" (158).

A narrative of identity imposed upon memory, Wideman seems to suggest, may not ever compensate for that innate presence of the past in the present which he sees epitomised by African tradition, and which is made available to the individual who is in touch with his community. Moreover, the condition of living "many lives at once" may be an inescapable condition, not only for those individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia, Wideman suggests, but potentially for anyone living in the contemporary world, where a clear sense of a personal link to tradition is constantly obscured. He explains his fascinating perspective in interview:

DuBois talked about double vision, African-Americans having this double vision. I think that was a very suggestive and telling metaphor, only now it's time to revise it. I think, having two sides – you're lucky if you only have two sides. There's been such a psychic fragmentation, and so much more input – and powerful input – from different kinds of technologies and different kinds of cultures clashing, that most of us are many many in one. [...] The baseline for [some of the abiding themes in my work] are my interest in time and identity. And those two subjects are connected. I believe that the next real revolution in human consciousness, if we don't blow ourselves off the face of the earth, will be a readjustment of the notion of continuous

personality. [...] Because a single personality is, when you get right down to it pretty much a kind of superstition. From that a lot of guilt follows, a lot of prejudice, gender confusions, and [so on]. If we can face up to and acknowledge and begin to use the diversity we find inside ourselves, then maybe we'll be able to start to tolerate diversity in the world outside of ourselves.⁵⁵

Though Jean-Pierre Richard comments that “the second part [of the novel] comes as a shock to the reader [...as f]ragmentation reigns supreme through dozens of separate items juxtaposed in what looks like haphazard or chaotic fashion”,⁵⁶ I would argue that the serialisation of identity – its separation from a fiction of linear development, has in fact already begun in Part One, having been merely wrapped up in some semblance of a linear narrative, which as the novel goes on, is revealed to be increasingly redundant. From the unsettling starting-point, then, where the name ‘Africa’ is barely remembered, and even if it were, would fail to signify anything remotely African, because the postmodern landscape gives all kinds of diverse and irreconcilable meanings to both place and identity, the relationship between names, identities, and subjectivities becomes increasingly unstable throughout the novel. The very first, apparently ‘unified’, character which is introduced in the novel is, uncannily enough, central to this process of the fragmentation of personality:

Zivianas would hold his boat on course with his foot. Leaning on a rail, prehensile toes snagged on the steering wheel, his goatskin vest unbuttoned to display hairy chest, eyes half shut, humming an island ballad, he was sailor-king of the sea (4)

King, as he represents the figure of John Africa, is described in a very similar posture:

⁵⁵ Michael Silverblatt, ‘John Edgar Wideman’, in TuSmith, *Conversations*, pp 119-125 (p 121-22). Interview prepared for publication from the videotape ‘John Edgar Wideman’, *Lannan Literary Series*, No. 33, produced by the Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles, 1993. Interview conducted on 6 April 1993.

⁵⁶ Jean-Pierre Richard, ‘Philadelphia Fire, or the Shape of a City’, *Callaloo*, 22.3 (1999), pp 603-13 (p 608).

sitting the way he is on the cinder blocks, cocked back and pleased with himself, smiling through that orang-utan hair like a jungle all over his face, it's like he's telling anybody care to listen, this funk is mine. I'm the funk king sitting here on my throne (12)

As Part Three of the novel begins, the notion of the unified identity is further problematised, as a protagonist introduced as “J.B.” may, after all, be another manifestation of the figure encountered earlier: “his name is James. James Brown.” (155-6). As the memory of John Africa hovers behind these portraits – a kind of original repeatedly re-inscribed in slightly altered form, in the way that Walter Benjamin describes “The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, [which] preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity.”⁵⁷ But it is not, for Wideman, just movie stars or cult leaders who are subject to losing their unique ‘aura’, which according to Benjamin “is tied to [a person’s] presence; there can be no replica of it.”⁵⁸ Wideman enacts an extremely sophisticated fragmentation of the notion of the unified subject. As the novel goes on, we discover that John Africa, Zivianas and King may be merely three aspects of a potentially endlessly-faceted adult male persona who occupies the centre of the narration. To problematise identity in this way, as Wideman hints, and as is increasingly apparent through the course of his novel, is to renegotiate a relationship with the notion of linear time – narrative is separated from the illusion of linear development, identity is presented as a series of

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, Random House, 1999 [London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1970]), pp 211-44 (p 224).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p 223.

postures which may indicate the “many in one”,⁵⁹ or equally, as it were, the ‘one in many’, and the *fiction* of a unified identity is exposed as just that.

At least one recognisable joke is made in Part One of the novel, upon this notion of identity as a matrix of different personalities, as Cudjoe tells his friend Timbo, “Timbo. I had a dream.”, and Timbo, without missing a beat, responds “You too?” (93) Martin Luther King, earlier present in the book in the pun on John Africa’s name, is this time associated with Cudjoe, who may, after all, be only another aspect of that same ‘identity’. As Part Two begins, Wideman himself is presented as protagonist, followed swiftly by Caliban, the “Abhorred slave” (139) of The Tempest, tellingly described as having “heavy, heavy dreadlocks resembling chains drag[ging] nearly to the floor” (120), and recalling once again the dreadlocked figure of John Africa. As Caliban riffs: “Why he swoop down like great god from the sky, try make everybody feel high?” (121), an almost direct citation is made from Bob Marley and the Wailers’ “Get Up Stand Up”, thus immediately identifying Caliban with Marley, recalling that site where dreadlocks as a signifier, particularly when paired with a memory of ‘Africa’, might once have constituted some allegiance to a perceived ‘African’ identity, as text accompanying a recent Chicago exhibition on African-American hairstyles suggests:

during the 1960s, [...while] the Afro was synonymous with black activism and black militancy,... Bob Marley adopted dreadlocks to reflect his Rastafarian religious beliefs. Dreadlocks (rope-like twists of hair) embody the “dreadful” power of

⁵⁹ “E pluribus unum”, the motto of the United States, which Wideman takes to a different level by suggesting the notion of diversity within *the individual*.

holiness for Rastafarians and are a symbol of the Mau Mau rebellion by Kenya's Kikuyu soldiers, who resisted British rule in the 1950s.⁶⁰

Kobena Mercer comments that “the Afro symbolized a reconstitutive link with Africa as part of a counter-hegemonic process helping to redefine a diaspora people not as Negro but as Afro-American. A similar upheaval was at work in the emergence of Dreadlocks.”⁶¹ Mercer goes on to comment:

With varying degrees of emphasis, both [the Afro and Dreadlocks] invoked “nature” to inscribe Africa as the symbol of personal and political opposition to the hegemony of the West over “the rest.” [...] But nature had nothing to do with it! Both these hairstyles were never just natural, waiting to be found: they were stylistically *cultivated* and politically *constructed* in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness.⁶²

Though Mercer seems to suggest that the African-American invocation of ‘nature’ is constructed and imaginary – in his terms, “it was only ever an imaginary “Africa” that was put into play”,⁶³ it is less significant, I think, to identify such hairstyles as ‘fake Africanisms’, than it is to note that such invocations of ‘Africanness’ *do* work in an African-American tradition which uses *memory*, not anthropological excavation, to register movement, change and, most of all, trauma in its history.

If the initial African-American or Rastafari adoption of dreadlocks signified on “the Mau Mau in Kenya when they adopted such dread appearances in the 1950s”,⁶⁴ and just as “by the 1970s, the Afro faded, along with its social and political context”,⁶⁵

⁶⁰ ‘Hair Stories’ exhibition flyer (Chicago: Chicago Cultural Center, 2004). Text adapted from materials prepared by the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art.

⁶¹ Kobena Mercer, Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p 107.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p 108.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p 110.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p 112.

⁶⁵ ‘Hair Stories’.

there is also a certain failure of MOVE's adoption of dreadlocks to 'remember' the earlier resonance of the style, in the same way that their use of 'Africa', or even of 'MOVE', seems to be detached from a meaning it might once have had. In Philadelphia Fire, Wideman seems repeatedly to allude to this sense of a failure of signification, as Cudjoe wonders: "South Africa, the PLO, Vietnam War, civil rights, marches and protests, [Timbo]'d dealt with that time of their lives in five minutes. How could Cudjoe have thought it would fill novels?" (83) Fredric Jameson has written:

[The] approach to the present by way of the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage. Yet this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way. It cannot therefore be said to produce this strange occultation of the present by its own formal power, but rather merely to demonstrate, through these inner contradictions, the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience.⁶⁶

The present, in Wideman's novel, certainly fails to sit neatly in a linear relationship with a known and ordered 'history'. The condition which Marc Augé calls "supermodern" reflects this crumbling significance of notions of historical time as well as unified notions of place, which in light of contemporary technologies, no longer apply:

What is new is not that the world lacks meaning, or has little meaning, or less than it used to have; it is that we seem to feel an explicit and intense daily need to give it meaning: to give meaning to the world, not just some village or lineage.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, p 21.

⁶⁷ Augé, pp 29-30.

Wideman epitomises his notion of our contemporary historical consciousness with the image of “Push-button scanning of all available channels” (99), which enables us to “Cut. Cut to whatever, wherever with electronic speed” (101), and comments drily, “That’s how I learned about the Philadelphia fire.” (103) If, as Mercer suggests, dreadlocks never had anything to do with anything African, MOVE’s dreadlocks are doubly, or even triply removed from a memory of Africa, through a historical landscape which suggests the exact *opposite* of a neatly planned city which seems to say “You can grasp the pattern. Make sense of me. Connect the dots.” (44) But the fact that a memory of Africa is indicated by the hairstyle, but is not fully *signified*, foregrounds the significance of trauma in the establishment of contemporary African-American subjectivity, which can only be approached through a ‘jazz’ aesthetic.

Though in Part Three of the novel, J.B. carries a sign claiming “*I am a vet. Lost voice in war. Please help.*” (173), and we are told that “J.B. wears army fatigues, camouflage issue, [...] filthy from six months in the field” (170), Wideman is perhaps alluding to the fact that the historical figure known as ‘John Africa’ was a veteran of the Korean War,⁶⁸ but also to the fact that, as Robin Wagner-Pacifici has shown, the MOVE crisis itself was entrenched in the discourse of the Vietnam War, the spectre of that conflict manifesting itself in the discourses of both MOVE members and those critical of MOVE. Interestingly, in the MOVE hearings:

six police officers referred to having been in Vietnam, the military reserves, or other occasions of military combat [...] Neighbors suggested that MOVE children could be wired with explosives as were children of the Vietcong [...] Media reports of the

⁶⁸ Craig R. McCoy, ‘Who was John Africa?’, *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, Jan 12, 1986. <http://themoveorganization.com/johnafrica.html>

day's events continuously made reference to a sensation neighbors had that they were back in Vietnam: "How do you like our Tet offensive?"⁶⁹

All this, as Wagner-Pacifici comments, "Ten years after the war was over" (137).

The particular concern which the discourse of the Vietnam War excavates, as has been discussed by Melani McAlister, and is shown in Wideman's novel, is a discourse of the failure of American masculinity, whereby the increasing implication in a messy and brutal war, where the cost to childhood was more visible than ever before.

McAlister reminds us that "As the war escalated, television news in particular brought it home, making Vietnam "the living room war.""⁷⁰ The father, aside from his inability to explain the child's identity or his own as the past recedes, can now no longer even *identify* the child with any degree of confidence. The Tet Offensive, McAlister notes, shattered any "illusion of [a] rapid victory in Vietnam" as "U.S. and South Vietnamese troops"⁷¹ were forced to fight

Vietnamese communist forces in the courtyard of the American embassy in Saigon, with television cameras there to record every moment of the battle. For the American public, which had been told for years that the United States was winning – had almost won – the war, the fact that the communists had enough strength to launch such a daring campaign was in itself a shock [...] Just as the United States began to look like an imperial power in the eyes of some of its citizens, it began to look like an imperial power in decline, unable or unwilling to shore up its own ambitions.⁷²

If the notion that fathers cannot explain identity to their sons (or son-figures) is felt as a failure on the father's part, this is a failure which is not exclusive to African-Americans, but which infiltrates the whole society. It is a breakdown of memory and signification engendered by trauma and a failure to comprehend the past.

⁶⁹ Wagner-Pacifici, p 137.

⁷⁰ McAlister, p 155.

⁷¹ Ibid., p 157.

⁷² Ibid.

Yet, even as we begin to identify J.B. with this ‘known’ historical scenario, it turns out that:

J.B.’s not a vet, [...] but half his crew who went to war killed over there in the jungle and half the survivors came home juiced, junkied, armless, legless, crazy as bedbugs. Fucked over good in Asian jungles whiles this Philly jungle fucking over J.B. and the brothers left here to run it. Casualties just as heavy here in the streets as cross the pond in Nam. (173)

If MOVE were characterised as “them fools on Osage [who] want their block to the jungle” (81), if the “funk king” was accused of having “hair like a jungle all over his face” (12), and if the implicit suggestion of “jungle” in these contexts was of a return to primitivism, which is associated with “them and their dreadlocks” (81), and in which the association with Africa barely even needs to be spoken in order to be palpably present, all of a sudden, with the figure of J.B., a homeless resident of the city, those associations are knocked into another formation. The “jungle” which might have been assumed to evoke an established prejudice toward a pre-modern Africa, in fact begins, almost surprisingly, to refer to the recent warfare in Vietnam – and even more immediately than that, to the current ‘war’ in the city of Philadelphia. As we are told that “The old town’s dying behind J.B.’s back [...] City in flames crackling against the horizon [...] And he stares where the city should be. Hurts like his own eyelash on fire.” (155), the figure of J.B. ‘remembers’ the “sharpshooter on a roof [...] The SWAT-team rifleman [who] can’t hear, barely sees what is quivering in the cross hairs. Is it one of his stinging eyelashes?” (8) As the suggestion arises that the sharpshooter’s identity collides with that of J.B., and therefore with that of John Africa himself, the question “Did he pull the trigger?” (8) takes on magnified resonance which begin to be suggested by Cudjoe’s sense that “We are all trapped in

the terrible jaws of something shaking the life out of us.” (22) As all these diverse identities collapse into each other, it is not simply the sharpshooter, not simply the mayor who ordered the bomb to be dropped, but potentially *all* of the protagonists, and all of us, who are guilty of the children’s deaths.

The final few pages of the novel represent Cudjoe attending a memorial procession for the victims of Osage Avenue. This event, which took place in Philadelphia on the first anniversary of the bombing, is shown in Louis Massiah’s documentary film, The Bombing of Osage Avenue, and is surprising, if not shocking, for its poor attendance.

So Cudjoe feels:

The emptiness of the square means something has already happened that Cudjoe should know about, but doesn’t. So here he is expecting lots of people to be gathered and instead of a crowd greeting him, hiding him, confirming his reason for arriving, here he is out in the open with a couple other fools. (190-91)

The memorialising function which is felt by absorbing the memory of the trauma into narrative is required for both personal and public reasons – for the comfort of the individual, and for the incorporation of those lost into a history which will be passed on. The sense of having ‘missed something’ when the memorial seems inadequate might be seen as an imbalance between the inadequate response of a city which fails to remember, and the loud demands of the voiceless – those killed and those disenfranchised by the Philadelphia tragedy. Toni Cade Bambara’s narration sums up the position of the Cobbs Creek community:

The loss of privacy, of confidence, the loss of lives – caught, between the hunger for the rhythms and rituals of normalcy, and the obligation to struggle against forgetfulness.⁷³

Just as the people of the community have to rebuild their lives by reconciling the need to remember with the need to live, Cudjoe, if he can hope to tell the city's story, and indeed the story of his own identity, must find the words to reflect both the city's historical memory, and its everyday experience. In the end, the novel suggests that such a language might be offered by the city itself, as the closing words tell:

Cudjoe hears footsteps behind him. A mob howling his name. Screaming for blood. Words come to him, cool him, stop him in his tracks. He'd known them all his life. *Never again. Never again.* He turns to face whatever it is rumbling over the stones of Independence Square. (199)

These words, "Never again", appropriately, are borrowed from the chant of the memorial procession that spring day.⁷⁴ Simply by listening to memory, by getting beyond narrative as construction or as embodiment of ego, Cudjoe can allow the city in which he lives to give him a story to tell.

⁷³ Massiah, 56m39s.

⁷⁴ Massiah, 55m46s.

Chapter Five

Words Without Sound: The Memory of Africa in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*

Caryl Phillips is introduced in this study as the first of four so-called 'Black British' writers whose ethnic and cultural diversity offer us a window upon the sheer breadth which 'Black Britishness', as a signifier, might be seen to indicate. Born in St Kitts, brought to Britain by his parents "at the portable age of twelve weeks",¹ and raised in Leeds, Phillips left the UK in 1978, "for the first time since arriving in England as a four-month-old baby",² and as he says, "began a process of border crossing which I have continued to this day".³ He currently divides his time between the United States, Britain, and the Caribbean, and in the cataloguing of writers which he teasingly refers to as "only important to literary critics, librarians and booksellers",⁴ the author describes himself as indifferent to which term is allocated to him: "If people say I'm British, I say fine; if they say I'm Caribbean, I say fine – because I'm both."⁵ Though he situates himself by saying "I wish my ashes to be scattered in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean at a point equidistant between Britain, Africa and North America [...]; a place that, over the years, I have come to refer to as my Atlantic home."⁶ Phillips also reminds us that "I don't feel that Britain or Europe constitute resolved business",⁷

¹ Caryl Phillips, *The European Tribe* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999 [1987]), p 2.

² Caryl Phillips, 'Growing Pains', *The Guardian Review*, 20 August 2005.

³ Caryl Phillips, 'Necessary Journeys', in *Necessary Journeys*, ed. Melanie Keen & Eileen Daly (London: Arts Council England in association with *bfi* Black World, 2005), pp 7-15.

⁴ Chinua Achebe & Caryl Phillips at Queen Elizabeth Hall, South Bank Centre, London, 8 October 2005.

⁵ Maya Jaggi, 'Crossing The River: Caryl Phillips talks to Maya Jaggi', *Wasafiri*, 20 (Autumn 1994), pp 25-29 (p 29).

⁶ Caryl Phillips, 'The 'High Anxiety' of Belonging', in Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2002 [2001]), p 304.

⁷ Stephen Clingman, 'Other Voices: An Interview with Caryl Phillips', *Salmagundi*, 143 (Summer 2004), pp 113-140 (p 115).

that “What produced Joyce, Edward and Captain Hamilton [white characters in Crossing the River] produced me.”⁸

Crossing the River consists of what Lars Eckstein calls “narrative fragments [...], seemingly independent pieces of narration, which nevertheless silently comment on each other”,⁹ and which are set variously, in Africa, America, Britain, and on the Middle Passage itself. Of the novel’s six parts, the brief Prologue features the voice of an African father who has sold his children into slavery, and is then followed by four main narrative sections which cross time and space to situate the stories of each of the three children in diverse historical periods, and even of the slave-trader to whom they were sold. The memory of Africa is encountered as soon as the novel begins, in the figure of the Prologue’s African ‘father’, who appears frozen at the traumatic moment when “The crops failed. I sold my children.”,¹⁰ suggesting a memory of Africa which functions in much the way that Stuart Hall has perceived it in the Caribbean imagination:

The original “Africa” is no longer there. [...] History “normalizes” and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the “primitive, unchanging past”.

[...] it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered. [...] To *this* “Africa,” which is a necessary part of the Caribbean imaginary, we can’t literally go home again.¹¹

This figure seems to represent Africa as little more than a receptive ear, “listen[ing] to the many-tongued chorus” (1) of his lost children, “My Nash. My Martha. My

⁸ Jaggi, p 29.

⁹ Lars Eckstein, Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp 65-66.

¹⁰ Caryl Phillips, Crossing the River (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2000 [1993]), p 1. All further page references will be given in parentheses.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation’, in Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp 210-22 (p 217).

Travis.” (1) with, as Anthony Ilona puts it, a “hunger for history”,¹² to mitigate that loss. As the African father-figure speaks here only to emphasise his incapacity to communicate, lamenting that “For two hundred and fifty years I have longed to tell them” (1), Africa emerges as a space of insufficiency, frozen in time, unable to ‘speak’ to the diasporic present, and desiring, more than anything, to be redramatised by the diasporan children.

It is more than significant that Phillips figures Africa itself, in his Prologue, not simply as a place but also as an individual – a ‘father-figure’ – and as Africa remains behind as a historical memory, it also remains bereft as a sort of fractured individual. History is very much a matter of the personal for Phillips, and cultural memory is understood through a discourse of personality. Parts I to IV, then, retell diverse histories through personal stories, variously depicting an African-American missionary in nineteenth-century Liberia; an ageing black woman on a wagon trail heading for America’s ‘Wild West’; the trade conducted by a slaver on the West Coast of Africa, and his account of the transatlantic voyage; and a white Yorkshire woman who falls in love with an African-American GI posted in her village during the Second World War. The novel’s Epilogue returns to the voice of the African ‘father’, which is finally interspersed with echoes of the other voices representing the diverse subjects of a diasporan history, and a ‘cosmopolitan’ ideal of community, “oriented both to the universal and the particular, the global and the local”.¹³ James

¹² Anthony Ilona, ‘Crossing the River: A Chronicle of the Black Diaspora’, *Wasafiri*, 22 (Autumn 1995), pp 3-9 (p 5).

¹³ Steven Vertovec & Robin Cohen, *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p 4.

Procter identifies Phillips as an example of a ‘cosmopolitan celebrity’,¹⁴ and explains the term, coined by Timothy Brennan, as follows:

A dispersed, diasporic [...] community of intellectuals living predominantly in the US and Britain who share a preoccupation with ‘a *world* literature whose traditional national boundaries are (for them) meaningless’, which privileges ‘international’ debates over ‘internal’ ones. They are, in short, ‘not so much an elite *at home*, as spokespersons for a kind of perennial immigration’.¹⁵

For Phillips the move toward cosmopolitanism begins from his experience of growing up in Leeds, “the only black boy”¹⁶ in “predominantly white working-class areas”, and “mainly white-dominated middle-class schools”, and his “fundamental problem” of “reconcil[ing] the contradiction of feeling British, while being constantly told in many subtle and unsubtle ways that I did not belong.”¹⁷

Phillips’s sense of exclusion from British society may be attributed not only to specific incidents of “blind bigotry”,¹⁸ but also to his sense of being marginalised by a dominant historical narrative which has figured English or British identity¹⁹ as wholly linear and rooted to one place:

¹⁴ James Procter, ‘cosmopolitan celebrity’ & ‘Caryl Phillips’, in Alison Donnell (ed.), Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), pp 84, 237.

¹⁵ James Procter, ‘cosmopolitan celebrity’, in Donnell, p 84. Procter is quoting from Timothy Brennan, ‘Cosmopolitans and Celebrities’, Race & Class, 31.1 (July/Sept 1989), pp 1-19.

¹⁶ Phillips, ‘Growing Pains’.

¹⁷ Phillips, The European Tribe, pp 3, 3, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 125.

¹⁹ I do differentiate, on a few occasions during the course of the next chapters, between “Britishness” and “Englishness”, and this differentiation is meant to imply something about the very fraught nature of national identity in Britain (and England) today. Where I use the terms “English” or “Englishness” I will generally be referring to what Vera Nünning calls “nostalgic and seemingly harmless constructs [...] which] may lead to serious consequence, when, for instance, they are used to legitimate racist behaviour”, to what Raphaël Ingelbien calls, less politely, “a backward-looking irrationalism”. I use the term “British” in a more neutral way. [Vera Nünning, ‘The Importance of Being English: European Perspectives on Englishness’, European Journal of English Studies, 8.2 (August 2004), pp 145-58 (p 148); Raphaël Ingelbien, same volume, p 165.]

I grew up in Yorkshire which is a very [...] rooted part of England – very working class, extended family, everybody’s going to see their mam and their gran [...] I didn’t have any grandparents, or aunts and uncles, or cousins, because they were all in the Caribbean [...] So [...] I suppose the primary displacement I felt was growing up in such a tight-knit family community without the sense of family, and I think that engendered in me a very deep desire to have all those things such as family, and a sense of place, and a sense of home[...] But I don’t really feel that so much any more,[...] maybe because of the amount of travelling I do, and maybe because [...] my literary influences, and people I consider to be my peers have changed, and a lot of those people don’t have a sense of home, and I sort of began to think it’s OK not to have a sense of home²⁰

Even as Phillips describes the shift in his perspective as a very personal process, it is possible to discern here a radical historical shift from what Jan Vorwoert refers to as “the standstill of history”, to the emergence of “a multitude of competing and overlapping temporalities”.²¹ To grow up “without the sense of family” in such a family-oriented community, as Phillips did, presents a notion of self as compromised by a “momentary suspension of historical continuity”,²² effected, in the case of Black British writers, by the tyranny of a narrative of Britishness which has, apparently, been uniform and unchanging. The fracture which is enacted upon the individual personality by the monolithic memory of Englishness is commensurate with the effect of the Middle Passage upon the memory of an ‘African father’ who stands speechless, apparently frozen in time. The dramatisation which the African father-figure awaits is the equivalent of what Phillips himself has finally discovered – a way of living with

²⁰ Interview with Pico Iyer, 7 March 1995, Los Angeles, Lannan Literary Videos: Caryl Phillips (44) (dir. Dan Griggs).

²¹ Jan Vorwoert, ‘Apropos Appropriation: Why Stealing Images Feels Different Today’, Tate Triennial 2006: New British Art, ed. Beatrix Ruf & Clarrie Wallis (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), pp 14-21 (p 16). Also at <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/triennial/catalogue.shtm>

²² *Ibid.*, p 15.

the multiple temporalities of a diasporan existence, by embracing the ‘cosmopolitan’ sense that “it’s OK not to have a sense of home”. The memory of Africa awaits a narrative which is similarly sensitive to historical discontinuity, what Stuart Hall describes as “what Africa has *become* in the New World, what we have made of “Africa.” “Africa” – as we retell it through politics, memory, and desire.”²³

All of the protagonists of this novel appear to feel painfully excluded by distinct narratives of community, attached to a notion of place and people, which appear to have silently formed before their arrival. In Part I, for instance, Nash Williams, serving as a Christian missionary in nineteenth-century Liberia, reports in letters to his former master Edward Williams, that his “*native* style of living” leads him to be “shunned by [his] fellow Americans” in the African settlement (41). In Part II, Martha Randolph, having escaped slavery after her husband and daughter are sold away from her, is nevertheless described as “assaulted by loneliness” (79) as she attempts to move ‘West’ across America with a black wagon trail, which is eventually forced to abandon “this old, colored woman...like a useless load” (92). Even the slave-trader Captain Hamilton, who is encountered with little sympathy in Part III, nevertheless describes himself, in love-letters to his fiancée, as a victim of “a frenzy of hostility” from his crew, for unlike them, “being pleased with a drunken debauch, or the smile of a prostitute, can never give one such as I pleasure” (109). In Part IV, Joyce has moved to a village from “town” (130), and feels “the uninvited outsider” (129) even before she has an affair with the black American GI Travis – himself labelled as one of the “not very educated boys”, who are “different” (145) – and is called “a traitor to [her] own kind” (217). If these five protagonists are symbolically

²³ Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation’, p 218.

bound together by the traumatic moment of enslavement – the “shameful intercourse” (1) depicted in the prologue – and by the scattered processes of diaspora, their stories also resonate with each other by being stories of alienation from a narrative of collective identity which is frozen in the past and fails to resonate through the personal present of each protagonist.

The African-American writers discussed in this study have sought to retrieve a sense of lineage under threat by figuring the past as potentially alive in the present, as well by establishing a linear African-American history connected to African tradition. For Phillips and other Black British writers, however, the approach toward that sense of lineage, in which an African ‘parent’ or ancestral figure might feature, is rather different. Where the effect of shock or trauma upon memory, in the African-American novels we have examined so far, has led to a memory of Africa often being narrated in a liminal ‘semiotic’ zone where language and the pre-linguistic are part of the same fluid communicative realm, in the Black British novels we will proceed to discuss, memory can occupy a more central position in relation to language. Indeed, language *must* be reclaimed as the territory of historical memory, precisely because language is one of the primary media in which Britain, historically, has exercised a pervasive forgetfulness of its black presence. Rather than seeking to figure language and memory as continuous, as African-American writers might, Black British writers foreground the moments in which a dominant ‘History’ has used the textual (the historical archive, or even the charting of linear time) in order to record its particular version of memory. Against this textual record, Black British writers position a form of memory in which lived experience – the lives of individuals – are remembered, often with recourse to a realm which asserts itself as being very much *external* to the

historical record, which emphasises its own *imaginative* nature, and which is frequently expressed in the novels through a distinct orality or aurality.

Lars Eckstein notes that “Nash’s letters from Liberia to his former owner [are in part based on those] collected in Bell I. Wiley’s *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia, 1833-1869* [and] as such, they dialogically confront the third part of the novel, “Crossing the River,” which quotes verbatim from the *Journal of a Slave Trader* by John Newton.”²⁴ Other kinds of dialogical confrontations recur repeatedly in this novel, as personalities and settings alike are narrated not in a way that establishes, as Jameson would have it, “temporal unification [as] a function of language, [...] as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time”,²⁵ but that fragments such linear narration of people and place simultaneously. Speaking about this tendency, which he has displayed in a number of his other novels and non-fictional works, Phillips comments:

I keep trying to write a book with a sort of beginning a middle and an end, in that order, and failing spectacularly. I mean something happens during the process where the linear structure seems to break down and [it’s as if I’ve] crafted this wonderful ceramic fruitbowl, and I’m sort of two pages from the end of the book, or just doing the final glazing, and I sort of deliberately drop it, and it shatters, and then I have to start again in some way. And I think it’s because I don’t trust the linearity of time [...] The old nineteenth-century realistic novel does not seem applicable to the

²⁴ Eckstein, pp 113-14. Cites Bell I. Wiley (ed.), *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia, 1833-1869* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1980) and John Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader* (London: Epworth, 1962).

²⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p 27.

subject matter that I'm addressing, and I think that's why I drop the bowl every time.²⁶

Phillips's distrust of linearity, it is fair to say, arises principally from an objection to the notion of personality as linear and rooted in a stable landscape and temporality. What is enacted by 'dropping the bowl' of linear narration is an attempt to shift both characters and settings free of textual representation, which to Phillips seems always to be constrained by linearity, and into a new kind of relationality equivalent to an ideal of 'cosmopolitan' community. A sense of Phillips's struggle with linearity is illustrated in a particularly revealing way with the notion of "deliberately" breaking something that might otherwise be considered 'perfect', and is a notion we will encounter again in Bernardine Evaristo's approach in Chapter Seven. These Black British writers' struggle with linearity arises as a result of an inability to assimilate a hegemonic history which does not include them, and speaks ultimately of the need to submit to the insistent call of memory which arises, simply, from their own life experiences.

There is the same sense of the inevitability of the 'breaking of the bowl' as there is to the novel's process of 're-membering' history, as Father Africa strains to hear the diasporan children's voices. This, crucially, is not the desire for the restitution of a connection to lineage in the way we have seen in Wideman and other African-American writers – in Phillips's work it more closely resembles a drive to dramatise a fragmented history. Where the American writers protest against a hegemonic tendency to erase tradition, and aim to show the past alive in the present, Phillips, along with the other Black British writers, is not arguing with the notion that history died, but recognising that it died because histories have been suppressed. In the

²⁶ Interview with Pico Iyer.

American novels, a parental or ancestral inheritance (African-American or African), was felt as an agency which inhabited the past, but was established in a broader scheme where the past could run through the present. In Phillips, a memory of Africa as parental or ancestral figure is partially left behind in the past (a past which becomes frozen in postmodern terms, or discontinuous in Caribbean terms), and becomes most significant as it is re-dramatised and even partially forgotten in diasporan expression in the present. As Phillips's novel takes its title from a Kamau Brathwaite poem which begins "So crossing the river / and walking the path / we came at last to Kumasi.",²⁷ Phillips plays to the indeterminate perspective elucidated by Brathwaite's poem, in which the lines "can you hear / can you hear me?",²⁸ may be spoken either by a 'returning' diasporan subject, *or* may be the words of an African 'father'. Phillips responds to this poem with this novel, though, by conceiving of the more important 'crossings' as those which are made, not by any 'return' to Africa, but by the continuing cultural dissemination represented by all the criss-crossing voices of the novel.

Part I of the novel offers a portrait of Africa which is again fractured into a monolithic idealisation stuck in the past, and a particularly unusual kind of dramatisation which might be imagined to play through the novel's 'present', and into the future. Nash Williams, writing from his missionary settlement in Liberia, tells his story exclusively through letters to his former master Edward Williams, and in an instance of 'writing back' to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Nash's tale is given in a narration so highly mediated as to exaggerate Conrad's likening of the experience of Africa to

²⁷ Edward Brathwaite, 'Bosompra', in The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1973 [1967, 1968, 1969]), p 136.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

some impenetrable solidified past distant from the modern present. Where the encounter with Africa is spoken, in Conrad's novel, by Captain Marlow, and relayed by a narrator who is listening in on the account, Phillips's narration of Africa here is even more heavily mediated. Before we even encounter his reports of his experiences in Africa, Nash's letters are clearly bracketed within the story of Edward's experience, following the news of his death, introduced as "news [which] reached [Edward] after dinner" (7), in an envelope carried by a servant. Later, we discover that a letter written by Edward to Nash "was uncovered by Edward's wife, Amelia, and not conveyed" (11), and then that she, jealous of Edward's apparent closeness to his servants, had also "destroy[ed] the colored man's letters" (56), so that the correspondence we finally witness is an interrupted and abbreviated version of the narrative which Nash had apparently written.²⁹ As Phillips, then, takes Conrad's cue and exaggerates the extent to which his portrait of Africa is 'filtered' away from the centre of the narration, we find that the portrait of Africa given by Nash begins to break in half, as it were, into something which is on the one hand increasingly monolithic, and something which on the other hand finally comes to shift free of representation.

²⁹ I would therefore disagree with Ledent's suggestion that "the epistolary narratives [...] can be equated with 'dramatic speeches' in so far as they give the reader the impression of existing in a continuous present "at the cutting edge of the character's suffering, analysing, experiencing mind." [Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p 10], and also with the optimism of Dieter Riemenschneider's assertion that Joseph Conrad's classic depiction of Africa as 'nowhere' is "counterpoised and reversed by Nash's precise mapping of his world and his locating himself in it" [Dieter Riemenschneider, 'One Hundred Years of Darkness: "I am no longer of Monrovia, having relocated into the heart of the country": Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993) writing back to *Heart of Darkness* (1902)', in *Being/s in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation*, ed. Liselotte Glage (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2000), pp 83-92 (p 88)]. Neither critique takes account of the position of Nash's own discourse in the novel, which begins to be more accurately identified by Anthony Ilona's observation that "Nash's story is rendered through letters of response to his mentor Edward who occupies the main narrative space in the novel", [Ilona, p 6.]

Nash has been stationed in Africa by the American Colonization Society, which expresses the hope that “the natives would...welcom[e] home their lost children” (8), and Nash’s own language might easily have been lifted wholesale from the Society’s own most enthusiastic propaganda:

A colored person can enjoy his liberty in this place, for there exists no prejudice of color and every man is free and equal... I doubt if I shall ever consent to return again to America. Liberia, the beautiful land of my forefathers, is a place where persons of color may enjoy their freedom. It is the home for our race (18)

While Nash, Kathie Birat notes, “is simply transposing the American discourse of slavery and inequality onto what Edward describes as “the inelegant shape of Africa” (13)”,³⁰ the reader is given the sense that neither Nash nor the truth of his experience of Africa can really be known through the text of his letters. By the time we come to Nash’s third letter, written when he has been in Africa for four and a half years, we begin to see more clearly a fracture emerging in the speaking subject, as Nash’s fine-sounding assertion that “It was intended that Africa should be a land of freedom, for where else can the man of color enjoy his liberty?” (32) is immediately followed with “I have been in Africa a long time and I wish to come home as soon as possible.” (35)³¹ Nash goes on to deny a rumour that he has fathered a child by a native woman (33), and reports, moreover, that he “expects to be wedlocked to” (34) an African-American woman, but in his fourth letter, written only a year and a half later, he says he is marrying “a native woman...[who] discharges the office of mother to a child I possess by another, less successful, connection” (38), a child that Nash has not

³⁰ Kathie Birat, ‘Re-visionary Strategies’: History and Fiction in the Novels of Caryl Phillips and Wilson Harris’, in *Theory and Literary Criticism*, ed. Jean-Pierre Durix (Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 1999), pp 21-31 (p 24).

³¹ Although Dieter Riemenschneider sees Nash as having, at this point in the narrative, “solved the conflict between remnants of his colonial past and his newly-won independence in Liberia [so that n]either necessarily excludes the other”, Phillips’s narrative may be more ambivalent than this would suggest. [Riemenschneider, p 90.]

mentioned before this point. While Bénédicte Ledent contends that “one realises [Edward’s story] is full of significant truncations whose main goal is the concealment of his homosexuality”,³² it also begins to become clear that the truth of Nash’s African experience may lie some distance from the experience he represents upon the page. Birat comments that “Gaps gradually appear at the fictional and metafictional levels, creating a silence which eventually fills the entire narrative space... [and] Nash gradually slips out of language back into what he calls “this dark and benighted country” (31) and disappears.”³³ As gaps in narration open up, however, it is not only that Nash disappears, but also that his identity *and* the Africa he describes begin to be imagined as teeming with possibilities.

Following Nash’s fourth letter, the novel turns back to the plight of Edward, who upon learning of his servant’s disappearance, has travelled to Africa to investigate matters himself. At this point we are reminded of the role of another former servant of Edward’s, called Madison, who has been asked to track Nash down, and reports to Edward that “Nash Williams is dead” (58), delivering to him Nash’s final letter. Against the framework of Nash’s already highly mediated narrative, it is important to note that Madison’s role as messenger adds another complicating factor to our interpretation of Nash’s fate. The “seemingly objective extradiegetic narrator,”³⁴ informs us early on that:

Madison had, at an earlier time, borne Nash some feelings of ill-will, having reasoned, and to some degree correctly, that his master’s affection for himself had

³² Ledent, Caryl Phillips, p 116.

³³ Birat, p 25.

³⁴ Ibid., p 24. Chris Baldick, in his Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 1990), defines this term as follows: “The diegetic level of a narrative is that of the main story, whereas the ‘higher’ level at which the story is told is extradiegetic (i.e. standing outside the sphere of the main story).” (57).

been usurped by this younger interloper. But Edward trusted that the passage of time, and a change of climate, would have healed these old wounds, and that Madison would not resent the task with which he was now being entrusted. (8)

Edward can be understood to take a significant leap of faith in requesting, against this background of the relationship between the three men, that Madison act as intermediary to communicate Edward's concerns to Nash, and to report Nash's fate back to Edward. The possibility of yet another intervention into the communication of Nash's story and his experience of Africa (including the possibility that Nash's death may be pure fabrication on Madison's part), makes very possible the older servant's instrumental role in a narrative occurring beyond the words on the page, and is subtly underlined by Madison's "scornful glare upon his former master" (59). As one version of Africa becomes more thoroughly entrenched and monolithic than ever, with the narration's emphasis upon "the fetid African air" (47) and "this savage environment" (53), another simultaneous narration of Africa begins to move outside the terms of representation. As Nash Williams disappears into Africa, he simultaneously, and paradoxically, comes more clearly into focus than ever for the reader, his transcendence of the borders of a distorting colonial discourse of Africa suggesting the possibility of this character's survival beyond the page, and furthermore, in his own language as yet unspoken by the text.

Such division between a monolithic memory fixed in the past and an experience moving into the future and beyond the bounds of language is not unique, in this novel, to the memory of Africa – it is characteristic of all the identities and settings seen across the diverse stories. So Gilbert McInnis has commented upon Part II of the novel:

[Phillips's] portrayal of Dodge is nothing like the American Classic Western T.V. show *Gunslinger* that some of us would have seen years ago on television. Phillips has altered our traditional impression of Dodge. The Dodge in the novel has no sheriff, Matt Dylan, who "should" have rescued Chester. Furthermore, no "cavalry" shows up unexpectedly to rescue Chester from "Three brave men with pistols smoking." So Phillips offers an alternative view of Dodge, and by doing so he reconstructs a new image of Dodge. And by Phillips'[s] attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct a historical "icon," [Helen] Tiffin says that "these post-colonial writers seek to recast history as a 'redefinable' present rather than an irrevocably interpreted past"³⁵

Part III, 'Crossing the River', sees a destabilising of any received history of the Middle Passage, as the cold accounting of Captain Hamilton's slaver's log is, strangely, interleaved with his love-letters to his sweetheart. Part IV, meanwhile, entitled 'Somewhere in England', features a Yorkshire village during the Second World War through the characteristic Yorkshire idiom, yet more surprisingly, figures a white protagonist who is apparently 'colour-blind'³⁶ – in her narrative the African-American GI with whom she falls in love, Anthony Ilona comments, "Travis is revealed to be black long after he first appears, thus tipping the reader into reinterpretation."³⁷

³⁵ Gilbert McInnis, 'The Struggle of Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*', <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/caribbean/phillips/mcinnis2.html>. McInnes cites Helen Tiffin, 'Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XXIII.1 (1988), pp 169-81(p 176). Tiffin, in turn, cites Eva-Marie Kröller, 'Postmodernism, Colony, Nation: The Melvillean texts of Bowering and Beaulieu', *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa Quarterly*, 54, 2, p 56.

³⁶ Phillips has said in interview, "[Joyce] possesses an admirably non-racist view of the world [...] That's what makes her so vulnerable." Jaggi, p 27.

³⁷ Ilona, p 6.

The encounter with Africa in Part I ends as Edward is taken by Madison to view “the final Nash Williams settlement”:

Madison took the lead and ushered Edward forward and into the unkempt filth of the place. Everywhere he turned, Edward’s eyes were assaulted by natives who squatted idly, their bodies resting awkwardly on their foundations, like their infantile shacks. Edward [...] was ill-equipped to disguise his true feelings of disgust in the midst of this spectre of peopled desolation. [...] The natives stared at him, and watched as the white man’s lips formed the words, but no sound was heard. Still, Edward continued to *sing* his hymn. The natives looked on and wondered what evil spirits had populated this poor man’s soul and dragged him down to such a level of abasement. Their hearts began to swell with the pity that one feels for a fellow being who has lost both his way and his sense of purpose. This strange old white man. (69-70)³⁸

Phillips’s ending to the chapter responds to a similar excerpt from Conrad’s novel, which Phillips cites as an example of “passages that seem terrifyingly contemporary in their descriptive accuracy”:

Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence.³⁹

³⁸ Johanna Garvey’s comment, that “Nash’s own return has ended in a sort of desolation, the final settlement he established now a site of filth and idleness”, too readily accepts the colonial rhetoric which Phillips has expended so much effort in trying to complicate. [Johanna X. K. Garvey, *Passages to Identity: Re-Membering the Diaspora in Marshall, Phillips, and Cliff*, in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, eds. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Carl Pedersen (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p 261.]

³⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p 64, quoted in Caryl Phillips, ‘Introduction’ to *Heart of Darkness, & Selections from The Congo Diary*, Joseph Conrad (New York: Modern Library, Random House, Inc., 1999), pp xi-xviii (p xvii).

Phillips has paid specific attention to Chinua Achebe's contention that Conrad was "a bloody racist", that Heart of Darkness is "an offensive and deplorable book",⁴⁰ and that "there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind."⁴¹ He counters Achebe's commentary as follows:

It is nonsensical to demand of Conrad that he imagine an African humanity that is totally out of line with both the times in which he was living and the larger purpose of his novel... [T]he main focus of the novel is the Europeans and the effect upon them of their encountering another, less "civilized," world... Conrad's only program is doubt; in this case, doubt about the supremacy of European humanity, and the ability of this supposed humanity to maintain its imagined status beyond the high streets of Europe.⁴²

In Crossing the River, Phillips's paragraph also redramatises a scene pictured by Wole Soyinka (itself in response to Descartes), in order to refute the notion, proposed by Negritude, that Africans think in a more "intuitive" way than Europeans:

I cannot imagine that our 'authentic black innocent' would ever have permitted himself to be manipulated into the false position of countering one pernicious Manicheism with another. He would sooner, I suspect, reduce our white explorer to syntactical proportions by responding: 'You think, therefore you are a thinker. You are one-who-thinks, white-creature-in-pith-helmet-in-African-jungle-who-thinks and, finally, white-man-who-has-problems-believing-in-his-own-existence.' And I cannot believe that he would arrive at that observation solely by intuition.⁴³

⁴⁰ Phillips, 'Introduction' to Heart of Darkness, pp xiv-xv.

⁴¹ Ibid., p xv.

⁴² Ibid., pp xv-xvi.

⁴³ Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp 138-39.

Soyinka himself perhaps creates a Manicheanism between logic and intuition – in similar way we have seen in Gates – asserting a continuity, but still creating a border between the two. Phillips inherits these heavily-loaded ‘natives’ as signifiers, then, from a significantly contested lineage. In another article, Phillips interviews Achebe, who remarks:

I am an African... [Y]ou cannot compromise my humanity in order that you explore your own ambiguity. I cannot accept that. My humanity is not to be debated, nor is it to be used simply to illustrate European problems.⁴⁴

Upon being confronted with this perspective, Phillips’s reaction is one of disorientation:

The realisation hits me with force. I am not an African. Were I an African I suspect I would feel the same way as my host. But I was raised in Europe, and although I have learned to reject the stereotypically reductive images of Africa and Africans, I am undeniably interested in the break-up of a European mind and the health of European civilisation. I feel momentarily ashamed that I might have become caught up with this theme and subsequently overlooked how offensive this novel might be to a man such as Chinua Achebe and to millions of other Africans.⁴⁵

Phillips, in Crossing the River, seems to respond to Conrad, Achebe *and* Soyinka, by dramatising a sense of the difficulty of describing the consciousness of unknown African ‘others’, in order to attempt to respect their point of view, without overdetermining the capacity of language to force such unknown ‘otherness’ to submit to representation. In the excerpt under discussion, a sense of the author as a character begins to emerge, as he negotiates all these historical texts, and Eric Neel’s

⁴⁴ Caryl Phillips, ‘Out of Africa’, Review: Books, The Guardian, Saturday February 22, 2003, p 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

comment, made in response to Phillips's nonfictional work The Atlantic Sound, is just as pertinent to Phillips's fiction:

Each figure he introduces, *including himself*, has an identity entrenched in the history of the [slave] trade, but the nature of their stories and experiences and how they relate to each other is ambiguous. Phillips, wary that coherence might make the twisted history digestible, is committed to the idea that the trade's enduring aftermath is something fractured. His book [The Atlantic Sound] is full of wounded, disconnected souls who struggle with the sense of homelessness that is the inevitable consequence of their history.⁴⁶

Whether Phillips's dramatisation of his uncertainty as regards the representation of what the African 'others' he figures as 'rooted' is quite so easily understood as "inevitable" is open to question, but it is certainly true that he dramatises, in the novel, his own uncertainty about his relationship with them.

To Make A New Thing? Phillips's Historical Memory

Clarence Major, commenting upon Phillips's strategy, in Crossing the River, of placing diverse stories side by side, reflects: "I find it interesting to speculate: Did Caryl Phillips start four separate novels, change his mind, and end up saving the best parts, finally bringing them together as this book?"⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Lars Eckstein, commenting upon Phillips's earlier novel Cambridge, which similarly positions 'separate' stories side-by-side, points out that "a second reading reveals that Phillips's

⁴⁶ Eric Neel, 'Sound Travels: "The Atlantic Sound" by Caryl Phillips', <http://www.newcitychicago.com/chicago/words-2000-11-16-791.html>. Accessed 8 November 2006. Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Clarence Major, 'Caryl Phillips, Crossing the River', *Book Reviews*, African American Review, 31.1 (Spring 1997), pp 172-74 (p 172).

novel evinces a unique mnemonic design”.⁴⁸ The critical shift from seeing the narratives of Crossing the River as ‘separate’, to the perception of a “mnemonic design” between them, even if such perception only begins to occur *after* the reader’s first encounter with the text is over, is fundamental to an understanding of the way in which Phillips works with memory in this novel. An initial encounter with the novel, as Clarence Major seems to suggest, might yield little sense of any connection between the stories of the separate parts, other than that which is contrived by positioning an African ‘father’ figure in the Prologue, and by repeating memorable sections from each narrative in a diasporic ‘symphony’ in the Epilogue. As I have suggested, however, Phillips’s ‘cosmopolitan’ perspective works to privilege individuality, and if the novel presents a sense of its “mnemonic design” beyond what is indicated by the presence of the Prologue and Epilogue as figurative ‘bookends’, I suggest that this appears in a way which emphasises the very personal and subjective nature of the relationship between text and reader. To lend my critique a sense of this intense subjectivity, for a moment, I will observe that during the process of researching this chapter, it was only after having read the novel, and upon hearing Phillips reading aloud from each of its six parts,⁴⁹ that I began to perceive the effect of what I call ‘echoes’ between the voice of the ‘African father’ in the book’s Prologue, and its other parts. By offering this sense of my personal engagement with the text, I would hope to offer an insight into the way in which Phillips uses auralty, in this work, to evoke the function of memory.

The particular instance of ‘echoing’ which was revealed to me by Phillips’s reading occurs in Part II of the novel, which follows protagonist Martha Randolph’s escape

⁴⁸ Eckstein, p 69.

⁴⁹ Lannan Literary Videos: Caryl Phillips.

from slavery in nineteenth-century America, and her attempt to move West with a black wagon trail. Martha is remembering the painful moment when, as a slave, it became clear to her that her daughter would soon be sold away from her:

I run my hand across Eliza Mae's matted hair. On Sunday I will pull the comb through the knots and she will scream. Outside, I can hear the crickets, their shrill voices snapping, like twigs being broken from a tree. 'Master dead.' (76)

As I heard these words read aloud by Phillips, they immediately echoed, for me, with the earlier words spoken by the African father of the Prologue: "You are beyond. Broken-off, like limbs from a tree. But not lost, for you carry within your bodies the seeds of new trees." (2) What I was experiencing, as a reader, was of course my own memory, manipulated ever so subtly by Phillips, and functioning in the same way that is illuminated by Walter Benjamin's commentary on Proust:

Proust tells us how poorly, for many years, he remembered the town of Combray in which, after all, he spent part of his childhood. One afternoon the taste of a kind of pastry called *madeleine* (which he later mentions often) transported him back to the past, whereas before then he had been limited to the promptings of a memory which obeyed the call of attentiveness. [...] Proust, summing up, says that the past is 'somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), although we have no idea which one it is. As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it.'⁵⁰

Phillips draws attention to a remarkable function of memory, intimately known to us all, which seems to transport consciousness to the past in the most powerful of ways, while the "call of attentiveness" might always have found that past beyond reach.

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, Random House, 1999 [London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1970]), pp 152-96 (pp 154-55).

What Phillips does here is to give us a sense of the novel's stories, and the connections between them, in a powerful way, as a part of our own personal experience and memory. This manipulation of the reader's memory is reminiscent in a way of that which we observed in Morrison's novel, where the memory of Africa appeared at a level somewhere beyond the symbolic realm of the narrative, through a succession of "doors". However, Phillips's text differs from Morrison's here, in that as he allows a far greater expanse of 'real time' to elapse, in the reader's encounter with the text, between narrative moments which clearly echo each other (74 pages pass in the instance cited above), we are given a much greater sense that we have stumbled across the memory only *by chance*.

This is not a memory established in the past which only needs to be discovered in the present, as in Morrison – it is something which may or may not occur in as random and unpredictable a fashion as experience itself occurs. The reader experiences memory through textual signs which recall a moment described, not earlier in the life of an individual, or in the life of their town or nation, but in the life of *another protagonist*, who may live in an entirely different time and place. Such an exercise works to create vivid connections, felt on an intensely subjective and momentary basis, between narratives not necessarily bound by a linear sense of time or a settled sense of 'home'. Just as Phillips described his own progress to a point where he could feel that "it's OK not to have a sense of home", so his constant interruption of linear narrative, by placing diverse stories side by side, can be seen to help dramatise a sense of the 'cosmopolitan' community. As empathy with others is felt *via* intense individual feeling, we will recognise what Audre Lorde called the 'self-connection shared' of the erotic (seen in Chapter Three), in which Phillips allows us to participate

in the most remarkable of ways. But of course, where the erotic may, in Walker, have been implicitly related to an ‘African’ form of memory, here it is encountered in a way that the reader can understand on his/her own terms. In this way the memory of Africa begins to be dramatised in the present, in the way suggested by Stuart Hall, “as we retell it through politics, memory, and desire.”

So we see the echoes of the African father’s voice through all parts of the novel. An initial instance is given in a “passage[...] that [is] marked typographically”, providing, just as Lars Eckstein comments with regard to Cambridge, “some initial assistance to the reader towards an awareness of his referential design.”⁵¹ The Prologue reads:

Approached by a quiet fellow. Three children only. I jettisoned them at this point, where the tributary stumbles and swims out in all directions to meet the sea. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl. I soiled my hands with cold goods in exchange for their warm flesh. (1)

When we come to the account of Captain Hamilton, the slave-trader of Part III, we appreciate the way in which one narrative voice absorbs and obliquely engages with another:

Approached by a quiet fellow. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl. I believe my trade for this voyage has reached its conclusion. (124)

Anthony Ilona comments upon a point in Part IV of the novel, where the Englishwoman Joyce recalls giving up for adoption the child conceived with the African-American GI Travis:

if we listen once again to Joyce’s words: For eighteen years I hadn’t invited Greer to do anything. Your father and I, Greer. We couldn’t show off. We had to be careful.

⁵¹ Eckstein, p 106.

And bold, their cadence is almost identical to those uttered on the first page of *Crossing the River*:

For two hundred and fifty years I have longed to tell them: Children I am your father. I love you. But understand. There are no paths in water. No signposts.

The matching rhythm provides a forceful association between the two confessions which once again links the personal memory of Joyce to the wider historical process⁵² The adoption of Greer, the child conceived by Joyce and Travis, functions as another echo of the history of children sold into slavery, and the words of the African father can be seen to resonate with Joyce again, at a point when she is walking down the street she used to live in, which has just been bombed by the Luftwaffe, leaving behind “mountains of rubble” (179):

It occurred to me that I was lost. That all the familiar landmarks had gone... I walked on knowing that there was no longer any such thing as a familiar route. (179-80)

If echoes are heard between these moments in the novel, what is communicated is a lament for humanity through the incomprehensible scale of history’s tragedies, of which Martha losing her daughter at a slave auction, or Joyce losing her home, and later her child, are merely the tiniest snapshots of personal moments, that can help us understand why Phillips has commented that Joyce’s narrative was “probably the most painful thing I ever wrote”.⁵³ Phillips’s positioning of the ancestral African figure as simultaneously able and unable to communicate with the diaspora, is representative of the myth which is stuck in the past, but which can also be replayed in different ways in the present. It is as this memory of Africa is remembered and replayed through diverse present moments that it is of value, joining together a

⁵² Ilona, p 8. Ilona is quoting pp 223 & 1-2 of *Crossing the River*.

⁵³ Jaggi, p 27.

‘cosmopolitan’ community. This community, created by the ‘music’ heard between the periodical ‘echoes’ throughout the novel, evoke even more than the “mythological Africa” which Alan Rice identifies in the novel as a “landscape of the mind [...] that links diasporan blacks across the Atlantic and is the reason that jazz music has such transatlantic resonance for Africans in Europe and America.”⁵⁴ This community, first of all, includes whites as well as blacks, and also allows the terms which might recall a memory of Africa to carry the equal resonance of other historical and personal moments.

Having registered the important effects of Phillips’s engagement with his reader’s memory, it must be noted, however, that there are also adverse effects to the extreme infrequency with which these moments of ‘echoing’ occur in the novel. Marcus Wood notes that as “the third section of Crossing the River consists of extended quotations from” John Newton’s Journal of a Slave Trader, the “hybrid texts which result from Phillips’s magpie processes of assemblage can be constructed as an assault upon Western notions of the authoritative text.”⁵⁵ Wood notes, furthermore, that as Phillips rewrites John Newton’s account, he “creates a flatter voice” than is found in the historical record, “obliterates what is most difficult and horrible in Newton’s writing”, and “reduces Newton to a far less troubling consciousness”⁵⁶ than that which emerges from the Journal itself. In part I of the novel, the letters of Nash Williams are, similarly, partially based upon the “Liberian Letters”, written by

⁵⁴ Alan Rice, “‘Heroes across the Sea’: Black and White Fascination with African Americans in the Contemporary Black British Fiction of Caryl Phillips and Jackie Kay”, in Heike Raphael-Hernandez (ed.), Blackening Europe: The African American Presence (New York & London: Routledge, 2004): pp 217-31 (p 229).

⁵⁵ Wood, Marcus, Slavery, Empathy and Pornography (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p 53.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 59, 64, 59.

African-American émigrés to Liberia in the early nineteenth-century.⁵⁷ In Phillips's redramatisation of these letters, through the voice of Nash Williams, we see a similar 'flattening' of the voice of the historical archive which, I suggest, is a result of a profound ambivalence on Phillips's part with regard to the 'documentation' of history.

A striking instance of this ambivalence is seen in Phillips's use of the letters collected in Bell I. Wiley's anthology, and in particular the 'Letters of the John McDonogh Negroes'. In the Nash Williams letters, which always address Edward Williams "Dear Father", Phillips redramatises what Wiley identifies as an instance "indicat[ing] an unusually affectionate relationship between the writers and their former master. The black correspondents saluted McDonogh variously as "Dear Father," "Honored Parent," "Dear Beloved Benefactor," "Dear friend & benefactor," "Dear Beloved Sir," [etc]"⁵⁸ Furthermore, Nash's letters are found, if we refer to this archival record in any detail, to bear uncommon resemblances to the letters written by a particular individual. Wiley remarks:

Perhaps the most remarkable of the blacks sent by McDonogh to Liberia, and the one who wrote him the most letters, was Washington Watts McDonogh. This Negro was reared in the McDonogh home and the term "father" that he so often applied to his former master reflected the closeness of their relationship. [...] He was the only one of the migrants who refused on arrival in Africa to settle at Monrovia; instead he proceeded more than one hundred miles beyond to Setra Kroo where he became a teacher in a mission school maintained primarily for native Africans.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ These can be seen in Wiley's *Slaves No More*, as well as on the University of Virginia's website, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/subjects/liberia/intro.html> Thanks to Bertrand Bickersteth for pointing out this latter resource to me.

⁵⁸ Wiley, p 117.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p 118.

An illustrative instance is the following from Washington Watts McDonogh's letters, which Phillips has 'lifted' from this source, making his own, apparently minor, but not insignificant changes. McDonogh's letter reads:

Hon Sir, I have taken this opportunity of addressing you a few lines to inform you that I am still in the land of the liveing and enjoying the rightes of man for although I am in a land of darkness I have nothing to fear. My wants are few and of course easily supplied, Not like you who are liveing in a land of milk & honey and yet never satisfied. I have lived in the same land myself and had the pleasure of enjoying all that the heart could wish for or that would make one happy and yet I was not willing to denie myself of the lease thing. But alas, what a change has since taken place. Things that seemed to have been of so much value to me in those times are no more to me now than idle dreams. When compared with my present views of them, all that I now wish for is just enough to make me comfortable and happy while I live in this world, for we are told in scripture that we can carry nothing out of it when we go hence.⁶⁰

Phillips's text reads as follows:

Since the passing of my wife and child, my wants are few, and of course they are easily supplied in this land of darkness. I have nothing to fear. America is, according to my memory, a land of milk and honey, where people are not easily satisfied. Things that seemed to me then to hold so much value are now, in this new country, and in my new circumstances, without value. All that I now wish for is enough to give me comfort and some small happiness whilst I dwell in this world, for I have learned, by means of sad experience, and by close study of the scripture, that we carry nothing out of this world when we go hence. (25)

⁶⁰ Ibid., p 148.

It is noticeable, when comparing Phillips's version to the 'original' letters, that as spelling and grammatical errors are 'corrected', and as the text is apparently 'abbreviated', or made more concise, Phillips seems almost to employ an editor's critical eye – one can almost imagine him slashing through words with red pen! The effect is to obscure the very humanity, the sound of the speaking voice which comes through the historical record, and which occurs in marked contrast to Nash Williams's more featureless voice. One effect of Phillips's 'flattening' of language is to push knowledge of Nash's character off the page, as we have discussed, so that it might be imagined to exist somewhere 'beyond the page'. However, while Reed used pastiche of diverse historical documents in order to figure the past as alive in the textual present, the effect of Phillips's use of pastiche is to emphasise the hollowness, the meaninglessness, *even of his own prose* as it purports to be a textual historical record, particularly if it begins to resemble a linear narrative which is taken to be 'representative' of a moment in history. So we are given the sense, as we read the 'separate' stories of the novel, that apart from the very occasional echoes which conjoin them, Jamal Mahjoub comments, "The author's restraint seems to force the real power of the story away, into abstract shadowlands[, leaving the reader] wondering what it is that he is holding back, and why."⁶¹

Phillips's attitude betrays an ambivalence toward the textual record. While his figuring of the real power of the memory of Africa through subtle instances of 'echoing' is a clear attempt to undermine dominant narratives, his technique also betrays some lack of conviction as to the possibility of doing so. Lars Eckstein has found in the Caryl Phillips papers, recently collected at Yale University Library, a

⁶¹ Jamal Mahjoub, 'The Nature of Blood, Caryl Phillips', *Reviews*, Wasafiri, 28 (Autumn 1998), pp 61-62 (p 62).

fascinating exchange between the author and Paul Edwards, the scholar and editor of Equiano's narrative, in which Edwards criticises the manuscript of Cambridge for its failure to add much of value to the historical record. Edwards writes:

the Cambridge section uses so much material from Equiano and other sources in a wholly undisguised way that I doubt the value of the narrative. It is not as you thought, simply a problem of plagiarising your sources, I think rather that the narrative degenerates into easily recognisable pastiche, a kind of impersonal patchwork with little contemporary value, since the original sources have said it all already. I think that the narrative of Cambridge must derive much more from your own imagination, but as it stands, what you do is repeat material from the past. That's not what a modern novelist must do with material like this (e.g. *Wide Sargasso Sea*), which is to make a new thing.⁶²

In his reply to Edwards, Phillips's comment upon his use of historical documents is singularly revealing as regards the author's attitude toward historicity:

The novel is an attempt to dramatically rewrite, using the sources and what skills I possess as a novelist, material which is largely (though by no means totally) inaccessible to the general reading public. I am attempting to make something 'new' out of something 'old'. In the process I hope I have created two characters (and a supply cast) the memory of whom might linger in the minds of those who read this "fiction." *It might even send them back to the original sources to find out more.*⁶³

Black British fiction, at its most successful, tends to emphasise the very partial nature of historical records, and in the next chapter, we see in the work of S.I. Martin a much greater sense of the historical archive as unfinished, which encourages an

⁶² Eckstein, pp 70-71. [Citing Paul Edwards, letter to Caryl Phillips, Aug. 10, 1990, in "Cambridge Words and Early Writing," Uncat MSS 15, box no. 10, folder 6.]

⁶³ Ibid., pp 71-72. [Citing Caryl Phillips, handwritten draft of a letter to Paul Edwards, undated, in "Cambridge Words and Early Writing," *Caryl Phillips Papers*, Manuscripts at Yale University, Uncat MSS 15, box no. 10, folder 6.] My emphasis.

understanding of the need for fiction, not just to ‘dramatise’ the historical black presence, or to draw attention to it, but to allow the history to make sense at all. Even as his writing makes us feel his scepticism of textuality, Phillips’s ambivalence toward the historical record is made apparent by his obliviousness to the implications of privileging the documentary resource as the “original”.

While we can recognise what Phillips attempts to do in this novel, overall the work, I suggest, falls somewhat short of its potential, by underplaying its strengths and overplaying its weaknesses – that is, by making the ‘echoes’ between the stories (which actually, as far as I am concerned, constitute the novel’s real story) so infrequent as to be barely perceptible, and by overplaying his tendency to ‘flatten’ the language of the historical record, a story which is not completely without value, but which Phillips’s prose style quickly makes us lose interest in. The effect of this is that characters are denied the opportunity to speak through the historical record on their own – their voices are only truly heard as they are figured in chorus with each other. Marcus Wood identifies one of the most worrying implications of this as he remarks that one of the means by which Phillips ‘rewrites’ Newton’s Journal is by altering the numbers accorded to particular slaves by Newton. Wood writes:

[Phillips] could be seen to destroy that one small vestige of historical identity she possessed – her number. Number 72 has been removed from her place in the historical archive into another space, a space hard to identify, perhaps harder still to justify.⁶⁴

Phillips tries to undermine the historical record by undoing the slave-trader’s naming – in one sense he frees the slaves from the bounds of the historical record into a

⁶⁴ Wood, p 58.

“space” which, we will see in the following chapter, is not so “hard to identify” after all – it is the space of the imagination, which, S.I. Martin shows, is vital to the process of even engaging with and understanding the historical archive. However, it is true, it seems to me, that Phillips’s approach towards textuality itself is singularly embattled, inasmuch as he can be seen to privilege historical archives as containing the “original” history even as he questions the capacity of the textual to communicate historical voices at all! This troubled relationship with the archive is related, I suggest, to Phillips’s similar attitude toward the notion of community itself.

Phillips’s ambivalent attitude toward the archive is parallel to his tendency to figure hegemonic communities as largely monolithic – we will remember that a sense of a cosmopolitan community is dramatised through ‘echoes’ which emphasise a sense of community between individuals who feel excluded by an unchanging hegemony, rather than by wholly discovering the different bounds of that hegemony. Much as Phillips might on one level thoroughly and convincingly celebrate individuality, there is another level upon which his cosmopolitanism, as Robbins puts it, “involves solidarity with *some* people outside the nation, not solidarity with humanity as a whole.”⁶⁵ Though Phillips does open small chinks in his homogeneous communities – for instance as Joyce, who is on the whole resolutely set against her village community, allows herself to be befriended by Sandra – a “partial universalism”⁶⁶ can otherwise be seen in all parts of Crossing the River, manifested in a distaste for local, apparently ‘lowbrow’, rooted communities – for example, in Nash’s “going native”, in the Yorkshire folk in Joyce’s local pub (we might have discerned it in Phillips’s

⁶⁵ Bruce Robbins, ‘The Village of the Liberal Managerial Class’, in Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture, ed. Vinay Dharwadker, (New York & London: Routledge, 2001), pp 15-32 (p 29).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

mimicking of “their mam and their gran”), in Captain Hamilton’s sailors, perhaps even in Martha’s wagon trail. Much as Phillips purports to celebrate the individual, his reflections, in this novel and elsewhere in his work, upon the predicament of individuals who find themselves excluded from apparently ‘rooted’ communities depends upon a representation of these communities as rather monolithic. This is reflective of what Tim Brennan calls “The cosmopolitan embrace [whose] articulation of a new world literature [is] designed to capture the global juxtapositions that have begun to force their way even into private experience”, and which, uncannily enough, “involves instead a *flattening of influences*, which assemble themselves, as it were, on the same plane of value.”⁶⁷ Rooted communities, like historical archives, are both, to Phillips, ‘finished’ texts – they can be spoken back to, but the basis for their hegemonic position is not wholly undermined in the way that we shall see in Bernardine Evaristo, for instance, in Chapter Seven. Perhaps, then, as Phillips renumbers Newton’s slaves, he may imagine that he is allowing them to perform freely beyond the strictures of the history written by the slave-master. But by altering one number to another, it is questionable whether the slave is even allowed to speak more freely through the historical archive.

The novel’s Epilogue constitutes a reprise of the Prologue, but finally, it seems, the African father hears the chorus of the diaspora he has been waiting for so long:

And then he reached out and pulled me towards him. I couldn’t believe it. He’d come back to me. He really wanted me. That day, crying on the platform, safe in Travis’s arms. For two hundred and fifty years I have listened. To the haunting voices. Singing: Mercy, Mercy Me. (The Ecology.) Insisting: Man, I ain’t got no

⁶⁷ Brennan, p 4.

quarrel with them Vietcong. Declaring: Brothers and Friends. I am Toussaint
L'Ouverture, my name is perhaps known to you. Listened to: Papa Doc. Baby Doc.
Listened to voices hoping for: Freedom. Democracy. Singing: Baby, baby. Where
did our love go? Samba. Calypso. Jazz. Jazz. (236)

This epilogue, however, is thoroughly overdetermined, and as Jamal Mahjoub says, “sounds like the rather desperate warbling that a singer might strike upon reaching the end of an ambitious aria and realising that the notes remain, after all, beyond the range of his abilities.”⁶⁸ Phillips, speaking about Crossing the River, claims, “These people were talking in harmonies I could hear.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, he insists that in his work, “there is faith. I don’t necessarily mean faith with a religious gloss on it. I mean the ability to actually acknowledge the existence of something that you believe in, something that helps you to make sense of your life.”⁷⁰ Yet this epilogue belies a faltering in Phillips’s own faith in his readers’ ability to hear the echoes which run through the work, and as a ‘choral’ section which is separated from the novel’s other stories, situates the possibility of a ‘cosmopolitan’ ideal of community as something which exists almost ‘outside’ of society, rather than in its midst.

⁶⁸ Mahjoub, p 62.

⁶⁹ Jaggi, p 28.

⁷⁰ ‘Caryl Phillips, Interviewed by Graham Swift’, Kunapipi, XIII.3 (1991), pp 96-103 (pp 102-3).

Chapter Six

‘Circular Talk’: The Memory of Africa in S.I. Martin’s *Incomparable World*

S.I. Martin’s *Incomparable World* is positioned squarely as a response to a British historical amnesia about its black presence, by setting the semi-forgotten presence of eighteenth-century black Londoners in the very streets of St Giles and Covent Garden which are trodden by tourists, theatregoers and office-workers today. Dramatising this buried history in a pacy adventure story which has the feeling of the ‘mainstream’, the novel wrests a place for the historical black presence at the centre of contemporary consciousness. As “escaped convicts, runaway slaves, [...] thieves and beggars, black and white”¹ share space with “well-dressed drinkers” (5), and free-born black Britons behave “as if they’d never known bondage” (111), the novel registers the sheer energy and vigour of eighteenth-century urban sociality, but also reflects the ever-present dangers, for the black poor, of slavery and starvation, and the apparently arbitrary nature of British racism which it suggests continues to this day. The protagonists of this novel are African-American soldiers, lured to the side of the British in the American War of Independence with the promise of freedom, only to “exchange[...] the life of a slave for that of a starving beggar on the London streets.”²

The majority of Martin’s narrative plays out in the months before the April 1787 departure of three ships for Sierra Leone as part of a ‘resettlement scheme’,

¹ S.I. Martin, *Incomparable World* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997 [1996]), p 3. All further page references will be given in parentheses.

² Fryer, Peter, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p 191.

presented by the British government, as “the only way of removing the ‘Burthen’ of the black poor ‘for ever’”,³ perversely enough, only three years after African-American soldiers were welcomed to London. The plan to ‘resettle’ London’s blacks in Sierra Leone was accompanied by its own public relations campaign:

the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor [...] had a handbill printed telling the black poor that ‘no place’ was ‘so fit and proper’ for them as ‘the Grain Coast of Africa; where the necessaries of life may be supplied by the force of industry and moderate labour, and life rendered very comfortable.’ The black poor themselves were much harder to persuade, largely because the Sierra Leone coast was a notorious slaving area.⁴

We first meet the novel’s protagonists three years after their arrival in London – the poverty-stricken Buckram has just been released from Bridewell prison, while William is making a comfortable, if insecure, living in Covent Garden’s gambling dens. “The lives of the characters”, Chris Campbell comments, “are led under the shadow of the imminent Sierra Leone settlement scheme”,⁵ and as protagonist Buckram puts it, “Everyone’s talking about it.” (72)

Martin wrote Incomparable World over a three-month period in 1995, as he says, “in a fever dream”,⁶ after having spent over a decade researching Britain’s black history in London’s archives. Set amid the rookeries of Dyott Street, near Tottenham Court Road, the novel offers a sense of being rooted in the ‘known’ city, yet also, by bringing to life the city’s significant eighteenth-century black

³ Ibid., p 196.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Christopher Campbell, ‘Writing, Representation and Rescue: Narrating an Eighteenth-Century History in S.I. Martin’s *Incomparable World*’, New Formations, 55 (Spring 2005), 159-171 (p 161).

⁶ In personal communication. See Leila Kamali, ‘S.I. Martin, April 24, 1961-’, in R. Victoria Arana (ed.), Contemporary ‘Black’ British Writers (Dictionary of Literary Biography series, Brucoli Clark Layman, Inc., *forthcoming*).

presence, which, Martin tells us, “numbered between 10 and 15,000 among 800,000 residents”,⁷ offers a distinct response to a void in historical memory – re-membering that which has been obscured by what Black British artist Keith Piper calls

an aggressive forgetfulness which can surface at any point in the prevailing political discourse, often enforcing a singular official memory and drowning out the diverse, multiple, complex, but all too often ephemeral, voices from the margins.⁸

The specific proposal to deport black Londoners to Africa constitutes one among a number of dramatic figures which occur in the novel to represent a grindingly cyclical history of exclusion and forgetfulness which the novel suggests has always characterised Britain’s relationship with its black and Asian citizens, or in fact with anyone who is perceived as ‘immigrant’ or ‘other’. Having fought together in Carolina, Martin’s protagonists experience Britain from an African-American perspective, where *de jure* segregation and the plantation system led to black people being automatically accorded the position of second-class citizenship – in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, being “shut out from their world by a vast veil”.⁹ In London, however, their experience is more ambivalent. Buckram, for instance, at a moment when he finds himself in Covent Garden, face-to-face with a white American, “someone who could once have owned him” (63), realises, as “a gaggle of onlookers” (63) gathers, that as long as he “raise[s] his voice and [speaks] *London* English for all to hear” (63), he might define himself as an ‘insider’ against the presence of this other, alien ‘outsider’: “I

⁷ S.I. Martin, *Britain’s Slave Trade* (London & Basingstoke: Channel 4 Books, Macmillan, 1999).

⁸ Keith Piper, in *Necessary Journeys*, ed. Melanie Keen & Eileen Daly (London: Arts Council England, 2005), pp 68-71 (p 70).

⁹ W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1996 [1953]), p 4.

asked where you came from, rebel. Answer me!” (63) As the crowd might offer Buckram provisional acceptance, with cries of “Dob ’im one on, blackie!” and “We’re with you, darkie!” (64), Buckram also knows the experience of “hav[ing] to compete and sometimes fight with the legions of native poor (crossing themselves whenever you cross their path), [...] your gaze never leaving the ground for fear of meeting another’s bewilderment” (27).

This perceptible ambivalence of the ‘natives’ toward the black presence in Britain, which shades so easily into hostility, is hardly confined to the inhabitants of rookeries and slum-dwellings. In 1596, and again in 1601, Queen Elizabeth I herself called for “those kinde of people ... [to be] sent forth of the lande”, “who are fostered and relieved here to the great annoyance of her own liege people, that want the relief, which those people consume ...”¹⁰ The novel comments:

It was just as William Supple had said, Buckram reflected: there would always be black people starving about the streets of London. Every now and then there would be a public outcry and demands for their expulsion would be followed by yet another cruel, half-baked scheme to drive them from the land. For two hundred years this had been their condition here. Would another two centuries bring any change? (175)

As the parallel is drawn between the context of the Sierra Leone scheme in the 1780s, and the earlier Elizabethan context, an additional parallel is suggested between the eighteenth-century scenario, and “two centuries” later, evoking the climate of the late 1970s and 1980s, which saw Margaret Thatcher’s claim that Britain was being “swamped”¹¹ with immigrants, and large-scale urban

¹⁰ Fryer, pp 10, 12.

¹¹ In January 1978, while serving as Leader of the Opposition, Thatcher announced: “People are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture...

disturbances in London's Brixton, Liverpool, Bristol and Harmondsworth in Birmingham related to police hostility towards black people. Furthermore, Martin has referred to

a horrible rite of passage [...] by which one of the routes of claiming Englishness is by joining the pogrom. [...] The comments that I hear from young teenagers of African and Caribbean origin talking about 'these people in my country', with no irony at all! It's a game that I really don't think we can afford to play, because in another generation, these people from Croatia, and Latvia, and Poland, are not going to be visible, or even audible – they're going to vanish! And when people of Afro-Caribbean origins have been in Britain for four or five generations we will still be taking the flak.¹²

The exclusion of black people from a full and unconditional sense of British citizenship, Martin's novel seems to suggest, is a condition which is never far from the surface in British society, and which, while skin colour continues to be perceived as a marker for 'difference', is likely to continue indefinitely. The Sierra Leone scheme is only one example of this broad historical pattern, and like almost every opportunity which crosses the paths of the novel's homeless protagonists, the possibility of happy settlement in Africa seems to occur against enormous odds, any such utopian hope of freedom dismissed almost as a matter of course against a more likely possibility: "Imagine the Englishman inviting us to return to Africa. We'd end up in chains, for sure." (73). Any fantasy of 'return' to Africa that these protagonists might nurture is co-opted by the overwhelming cyclical scheme of exclusion in British society, leaving them feeling sadly disinherited.

The British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and done so much throughout the world, that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in." [Fryer, p 397. As quoted, *Daily Mail*, 31 January 1978, p 1].

¹² Campbell & Kamali, p 140.

Any sense that the past is repeated through the present, then, and forms the basis for predicting the future, occurs in this novel not so much in the manner of 'possession' we found in Reed's novel in Chapter One, but more in the historical context of a denial of full citizenship for black people in Britain, which has never fully disappeared. A cyclicity of time, then, has very little to do with perceiving African gods or ancestors as living in the present, as might have been suggested by the African-American texts we have considered. In pragmatic, bittersweet contrast to that tendency, cyclicity has more to do here with the pervasive condition of xenophobia which, as this novel depicts it, seems always to return with a vengeance in British society. We have seen, in African-American texts, a desire for reconstitution of a link with an African ancestor, which is finally satisfied not through the explicit recounting of a lineage, but through a regained sensitivity to the presence of an African past in the present. In this novel, as in Phillips's, a memory of Africa remains frozen in the past, fractured from the present by a British fiction of racial and cultural 'purity' which relies upon a silencing of Black British history. Martin's novel particularly emphasises the recurrence of this fiction, in cycles or waves, through the course of British history. However, it is precisely by characterising the history of Britain's attitude towards its black citizens as a predictably perverse, cyclical game, in which it is impossible to claim unqualified victory, that the author begins to dramatise something like the 'Caribbean' continuity and discontinuity we have already seen, where because racial exclusion might recede, but never fully disappears, a fracture emerges with the myth of the past, new spaces can be found for the individual's self-creation. From the sense of British exclusiveness

as potentially terminal arises the notion that the Black British past is forgotten and must be discovered through redramatisation.

What emerges from this disruption, then, is a particular need to 'fill in the gaps', in a manner that frequently appears imaginative or performative. In the novel we see a preoccupation with the condition of orphanhood, a figure which draws a graphic scenario by which individuals are alienated from a sense of their past.

This sense appears at the most incongruous of moments amid the endless social buzz of the novel, such as in the middle of the 'heist' scene itself, when William hears "American voices" and feels "four years old again, back on the auction block in Charlestown, being examined by business-like eyes and callous hands."

(148) And as Buckram is introduced to the parents of his lover Charlotte:

"Buckram was paralysed. This was something he could never have imagined: seeing a black adult in the company of their parents." (130) A loss of lineage in terms of the specific division of families which occurred under slavery may be read here as a figure representative of the submersion of Britain's black history.

Against this sense of loss, the novel foregrounds the performance of identity with the repeated refrains "it could have been anyone or nobody" (27, 77, 177) and connects such figures of performance with a loss of identity, or lineage, indicating an orphaned condition.

The memory of Africa is first introduced in the novel as Georgie George asks Buckram a question designed to enlist him in a scheme to rob London's American Embassy:

‘A question; tell me, what would you do if you had two thousand pounds?
Where would you go with that sort of money? As a black man, I mean.’
Buckram didn’t have to think long. ‘Africa,’ he said. ‘I’d be there tomorrow
had I the money today. [...]’ (16)

Georgie George later asks this same question of William, in the very same terms, devised as a means to encourage Buckram’s fixed contemplation of his migratory dreams, in order to better manipulate him into acquiescence to a scheme. When Buckram and William realise that Georgie has asked this same question of them both, “Buckram stare[s] at [William] like a condemned man.’ (77) – they are reminded of their eternal dependence, in the insecure world which they inhabit, upon such schemes which speak of hopes of freedom, but which contain the more likely possibility of repeated disaster. The notion of a ‘return’ to Africa, even as it might touch upon a realm of fantasy for the protagonists, is also inflected with a disillusionment born of the endless, and daily, struggle of evading recapture into a hegemonic transatlantic system of slavery and servitude, and of the repeated reminders that neither Britain, nor anywhere else, offers an unconditional sense of home for these landless protagonists.

For Buckram, Georgie George’s suggestion undoubtedly contributes to the appearance of the memory of Africa in his dreams that night, in a formation that is distinctly reminiscent of the trope of the flying African seen in Morrison’s novel in Chapter Two, but which does not offer the solace of community to which Morrison persistently draws our attention:

In his sleep he dreamed of Africa, an Africa he’d never known. The scene was a forest clearing – everywhere was hot and damp, with rotting vegetation just like Virginia in August. Smoke rose from chimneys, grass huts had windows and all

the people dressed in the same cloth, the slave material: buckram. Roasting, fatty meats turned on spits. The whole village sang, call and response, with the rhythms knocking out in the background.

Warm breezes gathered under his outstretched arms and carried him, spiralling slowly into the sky.

‘But you cannot fly, you who have never known Africa,’ a dream voice informed him.

[...]

‘Let me dream. To the devil with ye! Just for once, let me dream!’

But dreaming again, he remembered.

He was running through Carolina nights and breaking into storehouses.

[...]

And all the while, throughout the war and throughout the dream, Neville and his Bible readings; doleful psalms and grim monodies promising deliverance.

Suddenly Neville’s voice was gone, to be replaced by the African drumming and lamentations from Ivy Street. And now he was back in the early campaign, just after they’d taken Camden, Carolina. (28-29)¹³

As Buckram dreams he is flying above Africa, it is an Africa that is nevertheless not entirely distinct from the American and British scenes he knows. The intervention of a “dream voice” almost sets this dream in the register of rickety pantomime performance rather than uplifting and culturally-resonant tropes, reminiscent of Bernardine Evaristo’s anachronistic contrast drawn between “Morrison, Naylor or Walker[’s] steaming swamps” and “the wonderful

¹³ It is not insignificant that the African people in his dream are dressed in “the slave material: buckram” – he figures himself as slave ‘material’, but also as part of an African village scene. – but then this parallel has the feeling of a ‘red herring’ too – which Martin is not beyond throwing in.

steaming swamps of Woolwich”.¹⁴ Though, as Sean Coughlan comments, the characters in Martin’s novel are “only a generation away from another history in Africa”,¹⁵ Buckram’s identification with Africa functions like an inherited fantasy, its dramatisation seeming to betray a hollowness, a sense that identity is floundering without a connection to lineage or tradition.

William appears to be less easily seduced by the dream of return to Africa than Buckram is, perhaps as a result of his friendship with an African slave on “Blackstock’s Plantation” (76), which offers William some knowledge about his African ethnicity, and even that of the “shoeless, shuttling messenger-boys” (76) he lives amongst in London:

Bambara, *Mandinka*, Wolof, Fulani, Ibo, *Whydah*, Ashanti, *Coromantee*, *Fanti*, Ga, Hausa, Yoruba, Angola, William knew them all, even if they didn’t know themselves. William was a Wolof. That’s what Gullah had told him. [...]

Gullah talked of a world so unlikely William took it to be imaginary. It was a black world of black kingdoms where black people did black things.

William was glad Gullah wasn’t here with him in the Charioteer to see just how much cheap London gin could tame an Ashanti like Old Morris, or how extreme poverty and isolation had compelled an Angola woman like Molly to market her maidenhood. (76-77)

Yet William still approaches the African history presented by Gullah as “imaginary”, and his relationship to it as vague and generalised. For both Buckram and William, there is a distinct sense that any way in which the memory of Africa might feature as part of a meaningful tradition is undermined

¹⁴ Bernardine Evaristo, ‘New Writing Worlds: Writing and the Past’, at www.newwritingpartnership.org.uk/fp/aspen/public/getFile.asp?, p 2.

¹⁵ Sean Coughlan, ‘Soldiers of Misfortune’, *Features: Books*, *The Times* (7 December 1996), p 8.

by the loss of lineage in London, where Africanness now only appears as a role performed upon the stage of an endlessly repeated present.

In the latter part of the novel, a stereotypical performance of Africanness comes to figure centrally as part of a scene which, Campbell notes, “in the terminology of [...] typical gangster movies [...] could be called the ‘last big job’ or ‘the heist’.”¹⁶ The novel recovers the memory of Africa from the position of unsatisfactory utopian lure, and finds a way for it to be performed by these former slaves, who seek to undermine the system of slavery, certainly, but whose most immediate aim is to save themselves, by earning £2000 apiece! Georgie George explains the plan:

‘I have here a letter from Mr Hayden Irving, who will be a guest of Minister Adams next month. He has consented to meet with an African delegation headed by a Chief Birempon Kwaku, Mansa of Obomi in an attempt to secure trading rights in human cargoes from an area of the Niger Delta. Due to the nature of his business, Mr Hayden will be travelling with a sum of approximately twelve thousand pounds in notes and gold coin. Needless to say, there is no such land as Obomi and no Chief Kwaku. So far, our imposture has been successful, confined as it is to mere correspondence.’ (121)

Georgie George is shown to have perceived his companions’ desperation for an escape from the condition of dispossession, which informs Buckram’s fantasy of return to Africa, and to channel this desperate impulse into a scheme which speaks to the dormant desire in all black subjects in this transatlantic economy, to make the beneficiaries of slavery finally pay for what they take:

¹⁶ Campbell, p 169.

‘Dreams, dreams and dreams,’ he continued. ‘Let me tell you about your dreams. Friend Buckram, you are a born horseman, you rode the Long Chase with Tarleton’s Legion through the Carolinas. That was your happiest time, was it not? And what did you gain for your efforts but wounds and a whipping? For two thousand pounds, will you be our escort and ride with us but for one day?’
(121)

With Georgie George as canny instigator, Martin deftly draws a meaningful and active connection between the role which a figure of Africa plays in the lives of these homeless men as site of desire, and as site of catalytic performance – a performance which has the potential, not only to change their lives, but even, in a small but nevertheless real way, to undermine the institution of slavery itself. Yet even as the performative is felt to have a distinct political function, it is equally felt, potentially, to be hollow and pointless. As might be suggested by the staged nature of the ‘heist’ convention, playful posturing as it is epitomised by this episode may represent the freedom to perform, but it also signifies something far more frightening than that – that performance is an “intense, shallow circular talk” (76), which belies a disconnection to lineage. As Georgie George frames the scheme:

‘William Supple, you remember our old sessions at the Golden Cross where for the price of a measure of ale, we’d play Princes of Araby for provincial fools? You have the soul of an actor, the royal role becomes you. For the price of two thousand pounds, will you be our king for a day?’ (121)

The performance of Africanness in this scenario, like every other performance through the novel, offers something that fills in a historical gap in a way that is always provisional, that recognises, as Stuart Hall puts it, that the performance of identity is “not totally universally true. It is not underpinned by any infinite

guarantees. But just now, this is what I mean; this is who I am.”¹⁷ As this notion of a performance of Africanness is ‘staged’ beside the possibility of migration to Sierra Leone, and beside Buckram’s own dream of ‘return’ to Africa, the hollowness of such a performance which is not backed up by a sense of lineage is emphasised.

The pleasure which Martin derives from emphasising his own freedom to perform even as he engages with unearthing endangered histories is nowhere clearer than when Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cuguano, the authors of the earliest Black British slave narratives, crop up in the novel as mischievous caricatures. As Equiano is described, irreverently, as having “the sort of face to which only outright victories could bring a smile” (96), and Cuguano is depicted as having the “look of a well-flogged ex-slave” (96), Martin comments that

primarily I wanted to demystify them, demythologise them, because too often in literatures of ‘peoples of colour’, especially when dealing with historical or noteworthy figures, there is that attempt to mythologise, so that everyone has to be perfect, they have to be church-going, god-fearing, beyond reproach. I wanted Equiano, who is one of my heroes, to come across as someone that people could relate to, so I wanted him to be imperious and haughty, and standoffish, and maybe a bit vain [...] – I wanted him to be *human*, rather than the Equiano which has been built up by history departments as this person beyond reproach – which apart from being untrue, is *boring!*¹⁸

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Minimal Selves’, in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara & Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp 114-19 (p 117). Reprinted from *Identity*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: Institute for Contemporary Arts (Document 6, 1987).

¹⁸ Campbell & Kamali, p 131.

Martin emphasises that the notion of showing such historical figures ‘respect’ is less crucial if we are to use them as examples to learn from in the present, than may be the process of being able to identify with them, and even laugh at them. Loosening these figures’ humanity from the fossilising effects of the historical archive, particularly in a political environment where such figures might be expected to carry a ‘burden of representation’ for whole communities, shows the important function of performance as a means of asserting freedom, and paradoxically, attaining a more pliable, attractive and user-friendly notion of history even as historical records may be partially lost. Even as Equiano and Cuguano are depicted engaged in ‘intellectual’ battle, Martin is asserting his right to improvise, freely and not without humour, upon the historical practices of ‘studying’ these figures for clues to the past:

‘You do me wrong, Otto. I would not seek to undermine the gravity of our situation, I sought only to state that our numbers here increase and that we will become, if indeed we are not already, an ineradicable element of this nation’s character.’

‘So, they frequent our clubs, sing our songs, dance our dances and eat our foods. They do all that in the Caribbean and still flog us to death on a whim. Dammit, Ola, there are no ineradicable elements to these people, they’re a composite of those they’ve conquered, and nothing more [...]’ (98)

This imagined Equiano/Cuguano argument seems to move, roughly, around questions of whether the cultures of black people are recognised by the British as they are imitated and co-opted in the British environment. It is a question which arises again later as Georgie George comments, “their blood, our heartbeat, their heartbeat, our blood, it’s all the same to them.” (119) However, if we attempt to take the terms of this debate too seriously, in order, for instance, to try to

construe what *exactly* Martin is saying about the politics of eighteenth-century black Abolitionists, we find ourselves the butt of the joke –after all, what is the difference between “ineradicable” and “composite” anyway? The larger point which we should perhaps draw from this is about the falsity of reading historical figures, as it were, as complete ‘texts’, and furthermore, about the way in which Equiano and Cuguano themselves, were accepted as voices valuable to the Abolitionist cause, in no small part due to the fact that they *performed* the acceptable role of the chaste, Christian, middle-class black. As Buckram is publicly humiliated by the men’s discovery that he is peddling pornography, the pious Equiano chastises Buckram with a specific invocation of African ‘solidarity’ – “You’re nothing but a Piazza pimp, preying on the weakest daughters of Afric” (101). Vincent Carretta emphasises, Equiano’s performance of ‘Africanness’ was positioned with considerable care:

as the phrase “the African” reminds us, the author was very aware that his readers would assess him not just as an individual but as the representative of his race, as a type as well as a person. He was the first Anglophone writer of African descent to use the definite article to refer to himself: James Ukawsaw Gronniosaw was “an African Prince,” Wheatley simply “a Negro Servant,” Sancho “an African,” John Marrant “a Black,” and Cugoano “a Native of Africa.”¹⁹

As Charlotte later intimates, though, “Ottobah and Ola[’s...] concern for our people weighs on them as a daytime duty, but by night they choose to consort with white women.” (107) As Martin underscores the very constructed nature of these figures’ public roles, his irreverence nevertheless brings eighteenth-century history into sharp focus for a late-twentieth-century readership. The notion that

¹⁹ Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p 294.

Equiano, furthermore, may have employed the role of ‘the African’ as a basis for political manoeuvre, acquires new depth with the possibility, suggested by Carretta’s findings, that Equiano may not have been born in Africa after all.²⁰

Historicity and the Politics of Remembrance

With the novel’s action beginning in May 1786, when the Sierra Leone proposal began to be considered seriously as a viable scheme, Martin comments:

the Sierra Leone project [...] added an edge, an additional pressure, to the circumstances under which these people lived in the 1780s – they could literally have been taken off the streets, or been obliged to sign up for this project. I was interested in finding out how people would have lived under those conditions.²¹

Martin seems to suggest that it is *through the work of the imagination*, and not merely as a result of his path-breaking archival research, that he “finds out” how people would have lived through this period of history. As Campbell puts it, Martin “does not merely breathe life into historical notes and sources but adds an energy, dynamism, humour and depth of pathos to his characters’ lives; this can be the achievement of only fiction.”²² Martin’s novel is testament to a powerful truth – that the remnants of the past which may be found in historical records or archives *must* be responded to with an empathic and imaginative effort in order for a history to begin to become ‘known’. Though the contrast between ‘history’ and ‘imagination’ is more a thought-figure than a quantitative distinction, the emphasis upon a history which is only partially ‘received’, through

²⁰ Vincent Carretta, ‘Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity’, *Slavery and Abolition*, 20.3 (1999).

²¹ Campbell & Kamali, p 140.

²² Campbell, p 170.

documentation, and which remains to be ‘completed’, is still perceptible.

Imagining ‘how it would have felt’, then, plays a central role to the discovery of history, *particularly* when, as a result of what Stuart Hall calls “a kind of historical amnesia, a decisive mental repression”,²³ the ‘history’ which has been passed down, through written or oral records, is partial.

Lyn Innes observes the role of invention and imagination in the construction of identity and reconstruction of history, remarkably enough, through 200 years of Black British writing:

so much of the writing by black and Asian people in Britain throughout the [last] two centuries [...] allows the reader to understand the extent to which individual selves as well as visions of Britain may be continually invented and reinvented. Indeed they *must* be reinvented in resistance to the persistently experienced pressure to confine people and communities within rigid categories.²⁴

Kwame Dawes contends that contemporary black writers “reject any lineage with the writers of the fifties and sixties and quite arrogantly (if understandably), and, perhaps foolishly, assert a new invention: the black British voice.”²⁵ Such a statement, however, may not be wholly sensitive to the fact that reinvention is not an attempt to deny the past – it is a stance which is adopted entirely out of necessity, *as a result* of a history which is inherited in disrupted form. Martin comments:

²³ Stuart Hall, ‘Racism and Reaction’, in Five Views of Multi-cultural Britain (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978), p 25.

²⁴ C.L. Innes, A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p 244.

²⁵ Kwame Dawes, ‘Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction’, Wasafiri, 29 (Spring 1999), pp 18-24 (p 19). R. Victoria Arana seems to suggest something similar when she says that Black British writers “lay a proprietary claim on English history.” [R. Victoria Arana & Lauri Ramey (eds.), Black British Writing (New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p 21.]

archival research is where [the] subject [of Black British history] comes into its own, because we have only begun to scratch the very surface of this. I spent a year and a half in Lambeth Archives [in south London], and there's just masses and masses and masses of stuff. It will be a good thirty or forty years before there's a body of knowledge where we will feel that we can move forward.²⁶

There is, as Martin tells it, a huge fracture in the story of the past, which would need filling in before a linear narrative could be told. Even as Martin speaks there is a sense of that deferral of certainty – the sense that a history *will* one day be more complete. The relationship between the narrative of the historical document and the empathic role of fiction is reminiscent of that formation which occurs between what Stuart Hall has called a distinctively ‘Caribbean’ process of simultaneous “rediscovery [and] *production* of identity”.²⁷ In a commentary on Armet Francis’s photographs of peoples of the African diaspora in his book The Black Triangle, Hall writes: “Crucially, his images find a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas. He does this by representing or “figuring” Africa as the mother of these different civilizations.”²⁸ Where disconnection exists, it is precisely through fiction that the memory of Africa is ‘reproduced’. While awaiting a hoped-for historical continuity, then, the gaps are filled in imaginatively in the meantime.

Martin’s work as a historian and a teacher who, as well as ‘unearthing’ black history from the archives, works with schools, museums and borough councils in

²⁶ Campbell & Kamali, p 134.

²⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation’, in Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp 210-222 (p 212).

²⁸ Ibid.

London to involve young people in the process of historical recovery and rediscovery, draws a profoundly contemporary resonance to the relationship between the buried past and its redramatisation in the present. For instance a project entitled “Black Performers on the 19th Century London Stage”, which Martin co-ordinated for Islington Borough Council in 2004, asked children to consider “Have you ever wondered how black performers made the transition from minstrelsy to serious roles on the London stage? How the legacy of slavery affected their careers? How black actor Ira Aldridge blazed a path for the acting career of Paul Robeson?”²⁹ The imaginative work which is always necessary to understand history plays an even more central role in this situation, where the sense of knowledge of the past drawn from historical records as ‘incomplete’ is palpable. Martin has expressed his concern for the state of Britain’s archives, and their accessibility to ethnic minority users, who in a 1999 survey were found to constitute only “2 per cent of the archive-using public”.³⁰ The heritage sector in Britain, and specifically in black communities, he says, “has a uniquely low image and poor profile. The crude view is that museums, galleries and archives are still places which tend to be *about* us rather than *for* us.”³¹ As a historian, Martin draws our attention to the alarming amount of material which is sitting in decaying and endangered archive collections, and is representative of a history which is not made available to black communities today, living in a context where the history of their presence in Britain has been denied. If we consider historical archives to be the site where the past is ‘documented’, then, we find, I suggest, a deeply disrupted relationship with a sense of Black British lineage – a

²⁹ http://www.islington.gov.uk/pdf/education/cea/bhm_programme_final.pdf

³⁰ S.I. Martin, ‘Inheriting Diversity: Archiving the Past’, in *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of ‘Race’*, ed. Roshi Naidoo & Jo Littler (London: Routledge, 2005), pp 196-201 (p 196). See Kamali, ‘S.I. Martin’.

³¹ Martin, ‘Inheriting Diversity’, pp 197-98.

disruption which is caused by the silence of the historical record. As Martin's work with schools groups emphasises, the relationship with the archive is participatory, the recovery of information interacting fluidly with the work of the imagination – this is always the case with history, but where history has been buried this scenario is accentuated.

Even within the novel, there is a self-conscious sense of recreating a tradition for future generations, from the stories which have been buried and are now (through the novel's own narration) being recovered:

Suddenly [Buckram] was seized by a delirious vision of this land, this London, in time to come, teeming with generation after generation of his kinfolk, freedmen, English-born and bred; transforming this wet, cold island with African worship and celebration. Imperial orphans in communion with a fractured past – his present – leading Albion's hag-masses to a greater, more wholesome dance of life. And would they, like him, still be hovering by closed doors, waiting for scraps from the master's table? And would they, like him, still be able to rely on the kindness of curious suburban strangers? (40)

As a performance of Africanness is imagined in Britain's future, Martin weaves a complex historicity, situating Buckram as the eighteenth-century figure looking forward to the twentieth/twenty-first century, but also as the twentieth/twenty-first century figure looking forward again. This is reminiscent of the way that Reed dramatised Abdul Sufi Hamid, as both *predicting* the coming of Malcolm X, and *also as* Malcolm X himself. However, in Martin's novel this is not quite so much about the past being alive in the present as it was in Reed, through a voodoo/hoodoo traditional system of belief – it is more to do with a heightened sensitivity to what happens as history is unearthed from the places where it has

been buried – what happens through processes of archiving and remembrance. Jacques Derrida writes:

if the psychoanalytic theory of spectres [...] leaves a part, a share of nonverisimilitude unexplained or rather *verisimilar*, carrying truth, this is because [...] there is a *truth of delusion*, a truth of insanity or of hauntedness. Analogous to that “historical truth” which Freud distinguishes [...] from the “material truth,” this truth is repressed or suppressed. But it resists and *returns*, as such, as the spectral truth of delusion or of hauntedness. It *returns*, it belongs, it comes down to spectral truth. Delusion or insanity, hauntedness is not only haunted by this or that ghost [...], but by the specter of the truth which has been thus repressed. The truth is spectral, and this is its part of truth which is irreducible by explanation.³²

The fearful ‘truth’ with which Buckram ‘haunts’ the twentieth/twenty-first century present, and potentially the future as well, is the possibility, not only that black people may never “transform” Britain with their Africanness, but that as the performance of Africanness falls away as unconvincing of any truth, and as Britain will never change, black people may only be left with “scraps” with which to form any narrative of identity. There is a self-consciousness here about the implications of reconstructing the present through the reconstruction of the past, and a palpable sadness arising from the awareness of the insufficiency of performance.

A remarkable analogue to the work undertaken by Martin in this novel can be seen in artist Keith Piper’s 2005 project entitled ‘Ghosting the Archive’, in which photographs of the physical space of the archive room at Birmingham City

³² Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p 87.

Archive are overlaid with sepia prints of the black and Asian figures drawn from the collection itself.³³ Piper writes:

the archive itself is far from transparent. It reflects absolutely the social and political priorities, which prevail at any given moment, determining which object is 'collectable' and which is garbage. In turn, each object, text and image also carries its own internal framework of implied and applied meaning – encoded into it at its moment of construction and decoded differently at every subsequent moment of viewing.³⁴

As Piper foregrounds the disparate, and politically motivated shifts which occur at the moment of archiving, and again at the moment of 'recovering' material from the archive, the role of the historian is thought of as 'inventor' of new histories in a completely undisguised way. This is a dynamic to which Assia Djebar is similarly sensitive:

I'd stack up the photographs, [...] now that they had yielded the picture of Islam that was wanted of them and nothing more: a convenient, accommodating picture, which would satisfy my innate taste for the exotic and at the same time leave me with the feeling that I had summed it all up neatly: Islam revealed in pictures – the mystery plus the luxury of course; plus the poverty also, unfortunately; plus progress on the march... Look again, my dear, see how pretty that little Arab girl is with her pony-tail: quite a Parisienne. Isn't that encouraging?

No, it's not encouraging. I'm not in the least reassured that the photographs may not themselves be betraying me.

³³ See Piper, in *Necessary Journeys*, pp 68-71. These photographs can also be viewed at [http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/Downloads%20\(pdf%20etc\)/ConnectingHistoriesNews3.pdf](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/Downloads%20(pdf%20etc)/ConnectingHistoriesNews3.pdf)

³⁴ Piper, p 70.

So I re-arranged them I put them in order. And I told myself I must try to stop them telling lies.³⁵

The archivist as ‘inventor’, as he or she recovers history from buried documents, controls the archive’s ability to produce “truth” or “lies”. Martin can be seen to produce his own ‘truth’ from the historical record, when, for instance, he nicknames Georgie George the “King of the Beggars” (35, 55, etc). He comments, in the context of a radio feature about London’s black history, that

figures like Billy Waters, whose 1823 funeral was immortalised in that famous image “There goes old Billy”, and it occurred just along this street we’re standing on now. You see beggars on both sides of the street, with the funeral cortege moving between them, the beggars with doffed caps. This was someone who would have been very widely known – he would have been, well he was, the “King of the Beggars” – that was his title.³⁶

The relationship between Martin, as storyteller, and the historical archive, may be discerned in Walter Benjamin’s commentary:

It has seldom been realized that the listener’s naïve relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told. The cardinal point for the unaffected listener is to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story. [...] *Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation.³⁷

³⁵ Assia Djebar, *Women of Islam*, trans. Jean MacGibbon (London: Andre Deutsch, 1961), p 9.

³⁶ S.I. Martin speaking on ‘The Sunday Feature: Black London’s Story’, BBC Radio 3 (12 January 2003). The moniker ‘King of the Beggars’ had in turn been borrowed from John Gay’s ‘The Beggar’s Opera’, a work which played a central part in dramatising the figure of the beggar in eighteenth-century British consciousness. David Dabydeen reminds us, also, that ‘Gay’s play extends into the West Indian colonies, the place to which pimps and whores and thieves were transported as punishment for their crimes, and set to work’. [David Dabydeen, *Hogarth’s Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art*, Denmark & UK, Dangaroo Press, 1985, p 127.] So Martin’s dramatisation of the figure of the beggar can be seen to reinforce the central impulse of the novel, which is to restore our knowledge that slavery, colonisation, and the black presence operated at the *centre* of British consciousness in this period, not at its periphery.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, Random House, 1999 [London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1970]), pp 83-107 (pp 96-97) .

Tradition has been interrupted because the history of the black presence in Britain's past has not been passed on. It is thus vital that Martin passes the story on – and because memory as 'chain of tradition' has been disrupted, the storytelling function becomes not only the more important, but also takes on some self-consciousness. Just as in Hall's Africa which is 'normalised' by "History", but "becomes" something else as it is retold, Benjamin writes:

One ties on to the next, [...] In each of them there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop. This is epic remembrance and the Muse-inspired element of the narrative. [...] It is, in other words, *remembrance* which, as the Muse-derived element of the novel, is added to reminiscence, [...] the unity of their origin in memory having disappeared³⁸

This sense is also found in the notion that the excavation of historical archives produces a sense of performance as drawing a live story out of a dead story. This is particularly appropriate in the Black British scenario, where the history often can *only* be found in the archive, because it has been obliterated from popular memory or 'official' accounts – a story is recreated, performed, and this is very much the context in which a memory of Africa is reproduced. Martin's sensitivity to the *performance*, the reconstruction of meaning, which is enacted even at the moment of viewing archival documents is further evidenced by his professed intention, to illustrate his forthcoming series of children's books, about the early twentieth-century black entertainers Bert Williams and George Walker, with photographs overlaid with drawing.³⁹ Piper and Martin, like Djébar, recognise that history is performed even as it is 'discovered', and is given new

³⁸ Ibid., p 97.

³⁹ This idea appeared to occur to Martin even as I was speaking to him about this project in March 2006, as part of the process of researching a biographical piece on him; as I asked him whether the books would be illustrated, the notion of photographs overlaid with drawing seemed to pop into his head!

context in which the politics which surround the act of remembrance cannot be ignored.

It is not only the memory of Africa which is replete, in this novel, with the sense of being performed. London itself, we find, is illustrated as a city which seems to be reborn with each individual's experience of it. Martin clearly regards eighteenth-century London in this way, where individuality is constructed from moment to moment:

even when you look at society at its lowest levels in the eighteenth century, [...] you can see, not just the vocabulary [...] ordinary people had, but the facility they had with it, and you just realise they were *switched on*. Unless they were chronically ill, they had to be switched on, all the time, mentally and physically, because your life depended on your strength of arms and your presence of mind.⁴⁰

In this novel, we see that the individual's self-presentation is everything, the performance of individual identity rooted in the communal present of the city, rather than in the individual's own past. Sukhdev Sandhu situates Martin's novel amid a recent "outpouring of novels, plays and poetry, by black and Asian authors [in Britain], all of which engage powerfully, viscerally, with black metropolitan history across the centuries", in which,

London is variously seen as a heart of darkness, a passage to nowhere, a moral abattoir. Equally though, London is viewed as a lifeline, a chandelier, a place of rebirth, luminescent centre of the imperial world, a pleasure-palace and epicurean banquet, [...] celebratory, joyful, giddily utopian.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Campbell & Kamali, p 135.

⁴¹ Sukhdev Sandhu, speaking on 'The Sunday Feature'.

Sandhu's use of the term "heart of darkness" to describe London is perhaps not accidental, and says something important about the performance of history in these texts – Africa and London may be played in similar roles – they are both ancient and timeless, but both can also always be rediscovered anew. The sense of dispossession occasioned by the burial of black history in British writers encourages a sense that any site, whether London or Africa, may be performed anew in a utopian role. As Sandhu seems to suggest, for black writers any of those sites of utopian hope might also be sites of complete disillusionment.

While the submersion of historical records might lead identity to be set free from both the benefits and the constraints of a sense of 'lineage', both London and Africa can appear, in a performative function, both powerful and also potentially pointless. So blacks in Martin's London sometimes appear as a ghostly presence, described at one point as "mov[ing] soundlessly through the morning shoppers" (35), or "wasting away in grotty, sunless corners across the city, waiting to die." (103-4) The sense of the loss of lineage, and the equal freedom and anxiety which are attendant to that, is emphasised, Harry Harootunian writes, by the modern life of the city:

In modernity, during the epoch of industrialization and the establishment of mass society, the places of history are the cities, the expanding industrial sites, and their experiences are the everyday. It is thus the cities, not anymore the countryside in general, that make up the contemporary scene, the now of the present. This scene is the stage that both figures the experience of the everyday and provides the space on which it is enacted, and it is vastly different from the immemorial daily life lived in the countryside, the villages, and even those pre-modern cities surrounded by a rural political economy. The modernity of everydayness is the streets, the buildings, the new institutions and constant

movement, the ceaseless interrelationship between public and private that register large and small events alike.⁴²

It is not just the cities, I would suggest, but the manner of living which is divorced from a sense of lineage, which enables this sense of possibilities being renewed every moment, and which in Martin's novel is apparent in a number of diverse sites. So even as William, who "desperately wants to believe he dreams of being with his family",⁴³ responds to Georgie George's question with yet another utopian ideal, a similar sense of hope and hopelessness is again felt:

'A question,' said Georgie. 'Tell me, what would you do if you had two thousand pounds? Where would you go with that sort of money? As a black man, I mean.'

William didn't have to think. 'I'd fulfil my promise to my family. [...] We'd go to Nova Scotia and start a farm. Like I should have done in the first place.' (59-60)

William's utopian dream has similar status as the dream of Africa and of London – containing the hope and despair of a present which functions free from the past.

Martin's novel seems to test this theory, with its representation of "the pastoral" which Mark Stein contends "is a constant in black British writing", even though "these are precisely the terms that exclude black Britons."⁴⁴ For instance, as Buckram leaves the city by the "fields, common and heathland" (38) of Edgware Road, on his way with other black beggars to collect a relief payment in Lisson Grove:

⁴² Harry Harootunian, History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p 19.

⁴³ S.I. Martin, speaking at the University of Warwick, 19 February 2003.

⁴⁴ Mark Stein, Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004), pp 78-79.

The only activity this morning [...] were families working their allotments, solitary fishermen perched over ponds and half-asleep at their rods, and a great many children, all of whom stopped their work and play to gaze at the waves of exhausted, brown-skinned folk walking through their world.

When the ragged band sat down to rest before the final mile and a half to their goal, two old women dragging hoes approached them. Buckram let one of them feel his skin and hair. The crones walked off to a small stone house from which they re-appeared with a sack of apples and a bucket of water. The men drank and ate greedily as other villagers clustered round them to touch their flesh and joke with them. (38)

Gaining access to this sleepy-paced rural idyll, even as objects of spectacle, offers an appealing sense of comfort in comparison with the endless circuits of poverty and danger associated with London life, and in fact with all the other memories and fantasies which the novel has navigated. As this episode sees Buckram's meeting with Charlotte Tell prefigured, when he is told, "He that's followed by a mare shall soon meet maiden sweet and fair!" (39), the association of a life away from the routes of slavery and global modernity with a *new* possibility of family life, or performance of lineage, is introduced. As the novel ends, Buckram actively pursues this possibility as he is seen leaving London for the Staffordshire countryside, the settled black presence which Charlotte represents, and the possibility of family life represented by their newborn son "Hosea" (173):

He enjoyed the feeling of being gloved and muffled on horseback. With just his eyes visible, he could have been anyone or nobody at all. A harsh wind buffeted them as they hit the open spaces along the Hampstead Road. He spurred Juno to

a gallop and raced under the darkening skies, glad to be leaving London, if only to relish the taste of sweet, clean air.

He's charging through the white of winter, a black man on a black horse. He throws back his head and laughs in the cold, wild air. He is heading north now and speeding into Christmas Day, ready to claim whatever present the heart of England holds for him. (177-78)

The indeterminacy of identity which arises from being separated from a sense of historical lineage has been central to Buckram's experience in London, as well as in America, and has been repeatedly suggested by the phrase "it could have been anyone or nobody" (27). Where African-American writers might seek to reconstitute any sense of lineage interrupted by a forgetful history by instituting a sense of the past felt in the present, Black British writers represent and dramatise the alienation from lineage as a site in which identities, for better and for worse, are repeatedly revised. By allowing Buckram to end the novel moving away from the social circles of the urban context, Martin figures this character, appropriately masked, ready to enter into whatever new performance may await him. But perhaps this time he may have the opportunity of establishing the beginning of a *new* lineage.

Chapter Seven

Awaking to the Singing: The Memory of Africa in Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*

Bernardine Evaristo's Lara (1997) figures a memory of Africa as part of its quest to position diversity at the *centre*, rather than at the margins, of British experience. The novel follows protagonist Lara da Costa as she grows up in suburban south London in the 1970s and 1980s, and spans the history of her family "across seven generations and three continents".¹ As Lara grows into adulthood, the book follows her travels to Nigeria and to Brazil, as she seeks to piece together the inheritances which form her ancestral past. Written in the unusual novel-in-verse form, Lara is composed of verses, set out one to a page, and is appended by an "Index of First Lines".² While playing to the conventions of a volume of poetry, then, the work also establishes itself as a novel, as its verses are grouped into numbered chapters, and the work in its entirety tells the story of a protagonist's coming-of-age, in the manner of a *Bildungsroman*. Though Stewart Brown finds in Lara a "hybrid literary form[...which] cross[es] boundaries, mix[es] genres, [and] challeng[es] established 'ways of saying'",³ Evaristo presents a form which can easily be two or more things at once, and which is able powerfully and assertively to dismantle notions of a perceived 'normality', from which a so-called 'hybridity' might diverge. Through her negotiation of form, plot and narrative voice, Evaristo situates a memory of

¹ Bernardine Evaristo speaking at *My Africa: four journeys of genealogical self-discovery*, event at Borders Charing Cross Road, London, 28 September 2005.

² Bernardine Evaristo, Lara (London: Angela Royal Publishing, 1997), pp 145-47. All further page references will be given in parentheses.

³ Stewart Brown, 'Lara, Bernardine Evaristo', *Reviews*, Wasafiri, 29 (Spring 1999), pp 83-84 (p 84).

Africa amid a proliferation of other cultural memories, influences and inheritances, which enables Lara to assert her place in a contemporary British society which is inherently hybrid. Evaristo adopts diverse traditions and inheritances and adapts them to a personal requirement, in order to access a language in which she can best represent herself and her claim to multiple cultural inheritances.

A vibrant memory of Africa is narrated as soon as the novel begins, and is figured as a site of the historical past which is continuous with the protagonist's present. The first verse encounters Lara's African great-great-grandmother Tolulopé, and situates the voice of that figure alongside the narrative of Lara's own life. It is neither Tolulopé's voice, nor Lara's own, which is given narrative agency here, but rather the expressive process of communication itself, as the text is apparently 'possessed' by diverse historical agents:

1 8 4 4

Sugar cane, damp musky earth, saccharine, vanilla
journeys in from eighteen forty-four, scenting Lara.
Disembodied chords pluck the air.

'Tolulopé

– the scarred one. They took me while my boys slept,
my bones had shivered all day, I could barely think.
When I bent to work I imagined vultures clawing
my back. When his men came I heard my bones jangle
like wooden sticks shaking in a bowl. His chamber,
sunk in the bowels of that great house, kept for us
women, only. There he pierced me with a bayonet

as I lay on a marble slab, bound. My screams
ricocheted the walls, he ejaculated on my ruptured
body but by then I had become the fire of a naked
torch, until he put me out. Then I jumped a spider,
crept deftly through the warren of cellars into daylight
where a bird swooped me up. I became that bird,
circled the fazenda, until a baobab seed rooted
from my droppings. When it broke through earth
into life, I lived in that tree, grew quickly, saw one
of my seeds planted by my stronger son over Antonio's
dead body and so it continued. I was carried over
the ocean, burst into life, watched over Baba until
he joined us a century after my death.

So you have it.' (1)

As with the invocation of vodoun "loa" or spirits in Ishmael Reed's work, seen in Chapter One, Evaristo presents here a sense of the past travelling through the present, first through a depiction of an exoticised ancestral terrain (which may be Africa, or may just as easily be Brazil), and then through Tolulopé's own voice. A sense of Lara's inherent connectedness with her diverse past is in this way put in place, long before the narrative even comes to the occasion of her birth. As well as being reminiscent of the capacity of the past to possess the present, as epitomised by Reed's Jes Grew, the opening to the novel effects an exemplary instance of the process of 'speaking in tongues' seen in Alice Walker's work in Chapter Three, where diverse historical subjectivities as well as temporalities can flow together in "a dialogue with the aspects of 'otherness' within the self",⁴ and

⁴ Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, 'Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition', in Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (eds.), Colonial

which Mae Gwendolyn Henderson considers to be typical of “black women’s speech/writing”.⁵ Yet if Evaristo evokes a practice familiar to African-American tradition here, she nevertheless also positions the ‘speaking’ function of her text as continuous with *other* traditions, so as to emphasise a real fluidity between diverse cultural positions.

The author describes this novel as “about my family history, loosely”,⁶ and to anyone who discovers anything about Evaristo’s background, the parallels between the author and her protagonist present themselves easily. Evaristo, like Lara, is the fourth of eight children born to a mother of English, Irish and German extraction, and a Nigerian father whose forebears were transported to Brazil as slaves. Evaristo was born in Eltham, and grew up in nearby Woolwich, and Lara maps quite precisely the site of her birth – “I was born in Westmount Road, Eltham” (45) – and childhood home:

Atlantico sits like a fat Victorian dolls’ house
on its own high land behind Nightingale Vale,
on the bend of long Arundel Road which ambles
towards the bleak wasteland of Woolwich Common. (46)

A map of London reveals this to be an almost exact description of the existing topography of the area, and it is not necessary to undertake much ‘detective work’ in order to be able to hazard a guess that Lara’s childhood home might correspond to Evaristo’s own.⁷ However, Evaristo’s relationship to the memory

Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp 257-267 (p ?). [Reprinted from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (ed.), Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology (New York: Meridian Press, 1990), pp 116-25, 136-40, 142.]

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 258-59.

⁶ Bernardine Evaristo speaking at *My Africa*.

⁷ The only alteration which Evaristo appears to have made in this ‘mapping’ is to change the existing ‘Eglington Road’ to the more pleasing, and more historically-resonant, “Arundel Road”.

of Africa is affected by a personal connection with the continent which contrasts with what we have witnessed in all the other novelists discussed so far – as the author’s own father was born and raised in Nigeria, a cultural memory of Africa might be said, in one sense, to be only one generation away from her upbringing in Britain. Yet Evaristo’s more immediate ‘blood-tie’ to Africa does not make her relationship to the memory of the place any less complex than that of Black British writers descended from Caribbean parents, because, as she reports, “[my] Nigerian father [...] never spoke about his family or culture back home”,⁸ and “little of my father’s Yoruba culture was passed on to me; not his language, his food or his traditions.”⁹ Crucially, a West African connection is absorbed into a ‘Black British’ sensibility just as easily as a Caribbean inheritance may be.

By situating Lara as protagonist of a story which is continuous with, but not necessarily identical to, her own biography, Evaristo negotiates a question of philosophical proportions – whether there is ‘difference’ between life and fiction. However, nowhere does Evaristo explicitly engage this question. Lara does not, even on the book jacket, announce itself as ‘autobiographical fiction’,¹⁰ in the

This is a reference which evokes one of the oldest English castles, Arundel Castle in West Sussex, built in the time of Edward the Confessor, and which supports Evaristo’s project of stitching her identity and history firmly into a ‘quintessentially’ English history.

⁸ Bernardine Evaristo, ‘The Road Less Travelled’, in *Necessary Journeys*, ed. Melanie Keen & Eileen Daly (London: Arts Council England in association with *bfi* Black World, 2005), pp 19-23 (p 19).

⁹ ‘New Writing Worlds: Writing and the Past’,

<http://www.newwritingpartnership.org.uk/nwp/site/writers.acds?context=1105158&instanceid=1105160> (PDF document, follow ‘Bernardine Evaristo’ link), p 1.

¹⁰ Perhaps the only indication, within the text, that of a relationship between Evaristo’s autobiography and Lara’s story is of the ‘blink and you’ll miss it’ variety – the narrative mentions that “Iyabo was born [...] to Juliana” (101), who is Lara’s eldest sibling, and the novel’s dedication page reads: “For Jack (Obayomi), Charlie (Oladimeji) and Natasha (Iyabo)”. A dedication page is conventionally a space in which an author addresses people who are, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson put it, “living in the experiential world” (Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p 186), although arguably, even this is not necessarily a failsafe marker of the ‘difference’ between truth and fiction.

manner that is seen, for instance, in a “disclaimer” attached by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood to her novel Cat’s Eye, which reads “This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one.”¹¹ Nathalie Cooke is prompted to comment, in that case, upon “the invitation that autobiographical fiction sends to its readers, to be read as *both* fiction and nonfiction – at the same time. Readers of autobiographical fiction, that is, are asked to read with a kind of double vision.”¹² As Evaristo allows an easy continuity, unremarked upon within the text, to exist between her own life story and Lara’s narrative, we are introduced to a relationship between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ which is fluid and continuous, indeed must be so, as in Martin’s novel, in order to fill in the gaps of a history which has been received in palpably partial form – not only, in Evaristo’s case, because of an interruption in the history of Britain’s black presence, but also because of an interruption in the transmission of the history of her own family. If Evaristo’s text betrays any loss of a historical ‘lineage’, equivalent to the interruption to Black British history which we have remarked upon in previous chapters, she is able to overcome this loss easily by allowing any notions of ‘difference’, such as that between history and fiction, to recede into the background of the text, negotiating each through a fluid sense of memory. This fluidity between categories of ‘autobiography’ and ‘fiction’ which

¹¹ Nathalie Cooke, ‘Reading Reflections: The Autobiographical Illusion in *Cat’s Eye*’, in Marlene Kadar (ed.), Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp 162-70 (p 164). This disclaimer appears on the imprint page of Cat’s Eye (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), and reads, in full: “This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one. Space and time have been rearranged to suit the convenience of the book, and, with the exception of public figures, any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. The opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with the author’s.” Atwood seems here to be making the kind of joke that would present itself if we were to attempt to differentiate between ‘life’ and ‘fiction’ in Evaristo’s work – it is a joke at the expense of the Western assumption of the ability to categorise and rigidly define such phenomena which escape clear definition.

¹² Cooke, p 163.

is felt in the text can be taken as yet another marker set down by Evaristo to show the relative meaninglessness of notions of difference.

According to Henderson, “black women writers weave into their work competing and complementary discourses – discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns”.¹³ Evaristo may be seen to employ such a process of adjudication in order to make textual links between the characters in her story, and between the diverse international settings in which they are situated, even as they themselves might each attempt to escape the dialogic relationship with memory which allows for an identification of the past in the present, and the self in the other. So the narrative comes to introduce Lara’s English grandmother Edith, who despite her determination to distance herself from the past, is shown, through an allusive figure of language, to recall the voice of Tolulopé which was able, at the novel’s beginning, to dramatise a perfect fluidity between diverse positions. Edith’s account of her experience of the Blitz in 1939 reads:

Thunderous explosions outside made Guy Fawkes Night
sound like the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party, and I felt as if
my bones were cracking into pieces like broken crockery. (18)

Edith’s words recall Tolulopé’s description of her kidnapping, when she mentioned: “I heard my bones jangle/like wooden sticks shaking in a bowl.” (1) Evaristo’s idiosyncratic lightness of touch belies her sensitivity to the subterranean echoes which, through the process of speech/memory, reverberate across languages to enable connections not only between the different generations of Lara’s family, but also, and just as easily, between its diverse

¹³ Ibid., p 263.

cultures. Furthermore, Edith, normally so determined to distance herself from the memory of the past, is shown as a child, experiencing a communion with memory which speaks directly to the form of 'possession' epitomised by Tolulopé:

sometimes long-dead Nan would tap her shoulder,
Draw her back to a childhood where Nan was a spindly old
Form in front of the kitchen fire, black bonnet and shawl,
Brown-spotted, knobbled hands knitting skeins of wool.
Edith: long brown ringlets, petticoats, button-up boots,
Avidly studying Nan's dexterous fingers with a learning frown. (12)

The pasts of Lara's English and African ancestors are thus drawn into a powerful dialogic relationship with each other, working to unite the broad and diasporic family history across its differences, and even drawing in the most aggressive of narratives, where characters seek to imagine themselves to be altogether different from an African 'other'. Communion with spirits or ancestors is figured as continuous with what is understood simply as memory, as something that anyone can engage in. Possession, or memory, then, is seen to occur on both the African *and* the English sides of Lara's family, prefiguring her own later encounter with "Daddy People".

If these instances, in the novel, of speaking with spirits, or 'speaking in tongues', implicitly recall the African-American tradition identified by Henderson, this does not of course mean that Evaristo wholly identifies herself with an African-American inheritance. The phase in Lara's story signposted as "Summer 81" (88) might be seen to be a light-hearted satirisation, on the author's part, of a corresponding phase in her own experience, in which she describes herself as

having become “militant”,¹⁴ by which we might understand her to mean that she absorbed the position indicated by the notion of the “simultaneity of oppression” among African-American women. Here is an instance of the Black British ‘inheritance’ of an African-American legacy of protest, discussed in this study’s Introduction, which, Evaristo’s satirical tone might suggest, may not have been wholly relevant to her own experience after all:

I denounced my patriarchal father [...] saw
the rapist in every homme, the worms in every phallus,
the bigot in all whites, the victim in every black
woman, [...] I divorced my honky
mother (92)

Following this ‘phase’ of Lara’s, amusingly reminiscent of the black feminist position epitomised by Alice Walker, Barbara Christian and Audre Lorde, which protests against oppression on the grounds of race, gender and class, Evaristo, like Lara, might nevertheless be understood to have moved on to adopt a different attitude toward an African-American influence:

For many years I believed that my literary inheritance began with African-American women writers. [...] Then I realised that we were worlds apart. They were writing out of an African-American tradition, drawing on their history, their cultural specificities, their regional vernaculars. None of this was mine. [...] Then I began to discover my own literary voice, or multiple voices, and thankfully there was nothing American about it. [...] *What I had inherited from the American writers was the confidence to write out of my own experience.*¹⁵

Evaristo expresses here a crucial aspect of the uneven dialogue which emerges between African-American and Black British positions throughout this thesis.

¹⁴ Evaristo, speaking at *My Africa*.

¹⁵ Evaristo, ‘New Writing Worlds: Writing and the Past’, pp 1-2. Emphasis added.

While she is inspired by the example of African-American writers, she is not, in the end, at all concerned with the privilege they place upon certain forms of expression as *especially* characteristic of African-American tradition. If Evaristo adopts expressive forms seen by African-Americans as ‘typical’ of African-American writing, she treats this site of tradition with a lack of seriousness, actually situating it, as she experiences it, as *similar* to *other* diverse cultural inheritances, and moreover, as simply characteristic of memory itself.

The communication enabled between the ancestral realm and Lara’s everyday existence by the opening verse of the novel may also recall the function of the “divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara”,¹⁶ also known as Legba, to whom “all living creatures must address themselves [...] before they can be understood by the gods”,¹⁷ and which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. identifies as antecedent to the African-American ‘Signifying Monkey’. This very same function, however, Evaristo’s text itself suggests, simultaneously recalls a number of other identifiable traditions. For instance, she has said that she “love[s] Greek drama” and “still re-read[s] *Antigone*, many years after having studied the play at school.”¹⁸ A trained actress,¹⁹ Evaristo writes partly out of a dramatic tradition, and her narration, given in “blank verse”,²⁰ may also be seen to recall the Greek choral device which traditionally “provid[ed] the playwright with a means of filling in the necessary time while the three available actors

¹⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 23-4.

¹⁸ Toh Hsien Min, ‘Never Forgetting The Source’, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, 3.2 (January 2004): <http://www.qlrs.com/issues/jan2004/interviews/bevaristo/html>, p 2.

¹⁹ Evaristo attended Rose Bruford College for dramatic arts.

²⁰ Lars Ole Sauerberg, ‘Repositioning Narrative: The Late-Twentieth-Century Verse Novels of Vikram Seth, Derek Walcott, Craig Raine, Anthony Burgess, and Bernadine Evaristo’, *Orbis Litterarum*, 59, pp 439-64 (p 458).

changed costume, mask, and role behind the scenes, and describ[ed] or respond[ed] to unseen events”.²¹ Tolulopé, in the opening verse above, may be seen to speak ‘across’ time and space like a vodoun loa, yet she also speaks like one of the “numerous gods” of Greek tragedy, whose “sovereignty [...] is immune to time’s passing”,²² and whose assistance is invoked by the chorus.

As well as being reminiscent, incongruously enough, of both African-American and Greek oral traditions, Evaristo’s choice of form is also reminiscent of an English verse tradition. With the novel-in-verse form, a multiplicity of diverse positions are allowed to ‘possess’ a form of writing which suggests speech and writing simultaneously.²³ Sending up the notion of a British ‘traditional’ context with its adherence to metrical form, the opening verse, then, tells a history in a form which situates past and present as part of the same fluid realm, positioning a history as already ‘finished’ and as simultaneously being performed, and as allowing diverse traditions to inhabit the same self-contained and relaxed form of writing. As the first verse ends, however, the recognisably English colloquialism, “So you have it”, positions an example of a “postcolonial [...] reappraisal of the verbal not as the given but as the constructed”²⁴ which is also, nevertheless, suggestive of the relaxed way in which Evaristo is able to allow diverse memories of Africa, of Brazil, of the Middle Passage, America, Greece,

²¹ Edith Hall, ‘Introduction’, *Sophocles: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Electra* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp ix-xxxvi (p xxx).

²² *Ibid.*, pp xxx, ix.

²³ Mark Stein notes that “While the poem *recites* the links of continents and generations, histories and characters, it at once *performs* these connections.” [Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004), p 82.] Lars Ole Sauerberg writes that the “narrative drive and the consolidation of an everyday fictional universe that we associate with the low mimetic in the form of the novel” (Sauerberg, pp 442-43) but also maintains “the importance of spoken performance” (Sauerberg, p 457), for “the verbal [i]s the construction site for meaning”.

²⁴ Sauerberg, p 460.

and so on, to negotiate (or ‘possess’) what is recognised as a ‘quintessential’ Englishness. As Evaristo has commented, with regard to her second novel, The Emperor’s Babe, but which is equally apt here, “the culture is mongrel, I’m just going to make it even more mongrel.”²⁵

Diverse notions of historical practice and of the function of memory are figured as completely compatible and continuous with each other, then, as history itself is felt to have already been ‘ordained’ by the voices of speaking spirits, to be played out as we witness spoken performance, to be already ‘written’ at the heart of an English child’s inheritance, and simultaneously *writing itself* back into a historical silence. When Evaristo comments on the process of writing Lara, the sense that her use of the novel-in-verse form, rather than the more usual prose form, occurs as a response to some urgent demand made upon her by her own experience, is perceptible:

Lara began as a prose novel of 200 pages, which, after three years of struggle, didn’t work at all. I then transformed the story into poetry and it really took off.²⁶

Whenever the author discusses her use of form, she conveys a sense that her challenge to established forms has not been wholly of her own volition, and has occurred instead in some realm not entirely within her control:

I never intended to be a maverick, but that is what I’ve turned out to be. I simply have not been able to write a novel-by-numbers, and it is a curse and a blessing – trust me. [...W]hen I try to slot into traditional forms I end up abandoning them. My novel-in-verse *Lara* was originally a straightforward

²⁵ Sofía Muñoz Valdivieso, ‘Interview with Bernardine Evaristo’, Obsidian III, 5.2 (Fall-Winter 2004), pp 9-20 (p 17).

²⁶ Toh Hsien Min, p 1.

prose novel [...] which I changed into poetry. The Emperor's Babe was originally a few poems which grew into a novel-in-verse. So I've written plays that were poems, prose that became poetry, poems that became novels and now I've written a novel [Soul Tourists] which has all sorts of weird things in it.²⁷

We may recall Caryl Phillips's reference to his "ceramic bowl", deliberately dropped, and the almost comic intersection between artistic purpose and chance accident this implied. What is suggested as both these writers invoke the sense of happy accident in their encounters with literary form, is something approaching the notion of being 'possessed', as it were, by memory, or simply by their own experience. We may be reminded of Reed, for whom possession by 'loa' may also be thought of, simply enough, as submission to a memory of the past that functions in the present. Yet where Reed showed this practice of possession to be connected to a tradition drawn back to Africa, for Black British writers submission to memory is *not* explicitly attached to any notion of tradition. The emphasis, instead, is upon the need to express that which is true to the individual experience. If a sense of African tradition is encountered through the forms of expression used in Lara, this is felt to be a chance encounter, and is absorbed into a fluid and hybrid form whose main purpose is to find ways to communicate the diverse experience of the individual. Evaristo fractures any narrative of linearity associated with Englishness.

Evaristo does more here than figuring an African-American literary inheritance as 'speakerly' and a British inheritance as 'literary' – she positions these and other inheritances as continuous with each other, and as altogether able to

²⁷ Bernardine Evaristo, 'Extract from *Soul Tourists* – Analysis', at <http://www.crossingborders-africanwriting.org/writersonwriting/bernardineevvaristo/soultourists-analysis/>

communicate to a cultural diversity which exists as part of a unique individual, but which might also constitute any given individual. Evaristo is thus able to use speech, or a 'speaking' form of writing, in this novel, as a fluid medium through which common ground can be discovered between diverse cultures, in a manner which suggests their distinctiveness, without insisting upon their 'difference' from each other. This is especially important because Lara's experience is characterised by a particular *stoppage* of speech, a historical amnesia which can be traced to complementary historical scenarios of forgetfulness. So the focus upon 'progress' by a character like Edith might be seen as a deep-seated anxiety about engaging with memory: "Edith invested in the future, the past was a pit to fall down" (12). Taiwo, despite himself, mirrors his mother-in-law's perspective later when he learns of his own mother's death: "The pit I build for grief this time will be infinite." (57) The sheer power of memory is thus emphasised, as it draws routes of communication even between subjects who attempt to distance themselves from the past altogether.

Yet as the novel shows Lara growing up not only ignorant of her family history, but isolated from her relationship with memory, she is shown to be powerless to respond to the racist taunts and remarks upon her so-called 'difference', which typify her British childhood:

'Where'you from, La?' Susie suddenly asked

[...]

'My dad says you must be from Jamaica,' [...]

'I'm not Jamaican! I'm English!' 'Then why are you coloured?'

Lara's heart shuddered, she felt so humiliated, so angry.

'Look, my father's Nigerian, my mother's English, alright?'

[...]

‘Where’s Nigeria then, is it near Jamaica?’ ‘It’s in Africa.’

‘Where’s Africa exactly?’ ‘How should I know, I don’t

bloody well live there, do I!’ (65)

Susie’s ignorance about the world, and particularly about the history of British imperialism, clearly learned from parental influence, occurs as a result of what Stuart Hall calls the “decisive mental repression [among] the British people”,²⁸ and contributes to Lara’s sense that Britain is a “Home [where] I searched but could not find myself” (69). Long before this sense of alienation is given a chance to set in, in Lara’s experience, though, the novel’s opening has shown that her memory of Africa occurs as a kind of knowledge which negotiates time fluidly, and is established in the past before she was born, while also accompanying her present experience. So it is that Lara’s relationship with ancestral memory is shown to be constituted by its easily felt presence in her everyday experience, as she is depicted, at a young age, “kneel[ing], face squashed against the misted window” (48):

In the front garden before her through splattering rain,
she sees people watching her, young, old, so strange,
sitting motionless in a semi-circle among the tall grass,
lips unmoving but eyes alive with the singing of a song:

‘Lara kiss, Lara kiss, we love you always, Lara kiss.’ (48)

Lara understands, here, that her very identity is being made through a communicative connection with her paternal African inheritance, as she tells her mother: “Mummy, I saw Daddy People in the garden singing me” (48). At this point, then, Lara has an easy and instinctive knowledge of these ancestral spirits,

²⁸ Stuart Hall, ‘Racism and Reaction’, in *Five Views of Multi-cultural Britain* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978), p 25.

which is bestowed upon her in spite of her lack of experience of Nigerian 'language, food or traditions'. Lara's practice of "utter[ing] the mysteries of the spirit",²⁹ as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson would put it, represents a private and unconscious connectedness with a form of memory which subsequently comes to be marginalised or written over, but which, because it is already established, finally transcends the temporary interruptions which are incurred through individual failures of speech.

Evaristo uses her 'speaking' prose verse to 'adjudicate' between even the most hostile positions. As Edith and Taiwo meet for the first time, the sense of a challenge could not be more fraught if pistols had been drawn:

A pyramid of trimmed and quartered sandwiches
separates Edith's high collar from Taiwo's blue-tied
Adam's apple. [...] Taiwo [...] gritted
his back teeth like a pestle grinding corn in a mortar,
smiled mechanically at the diminutive devil opposite. (37)

Edith and Taiwo are shown to be in corresponding positions. Evaristo is careful to situate Edith's attitude towards Taiwo is a consequence of her own experience – "Edith's script had been written some fifty years earlier" (83), as she and her "seven siblings" (13) are born to Mary Jane, daughter of "Emma of the O'Donoghue clan who fled the hardship / of the garrison town of Birr in southern Ireland" (12). While Edith's "glassblower pa, struggl[es] to be The Provider / on his paltry pay, returning at midnight from the factory" (13), Edith works alongside her mother as a seamstress:

Between chores Edith hemmed herself out of adolescence,

²⁹ Henderson, p 262.

apprenticed to her mother's pernicky tuition, making
velvet evening gowns, abundant lacy wedding dresses.
She imagined balls and finery, envied the porcelain dolls'
hands of the la-di-dahs who came for fittings, rejected
her station in life; aspired to a husband, a child, a home
in the suburbs and entry to the middle classes. (13)

Just as Taiwo seeks to leave his African home behind him, Edith drives herself toward her goal of suburban advancement as a means of escaping the difficulties of the past. Lara's father Taiwo arrives in Britain in 1949, as part of the wave of migrants from the former colonies who arrived in response to the call for labour which followed the end of the Second World War. He is initially ecstatic at the opportunity to travel to the 'motherland' of his dreams:

'London calling The Empire! Calling The Empire!
Come in Nigeria!' *I'm coming! I'm coming!*
I shouted at night into the warm winds on deck.
Mama, my dreams have been my fuel for years,
all those British films for sixpence at the movie house.
See London, then die! I was desperate to get here! (3)

The colonial mythology upon which Taiwo has been raised in Nigeria has taught him about Africa's 'inferiority', and has consequently led him to fixate upon a future in England, and to repudiate his African past: "Nigeria is small time. / Why eat rice and stew when you can taste Yorkshire / pud, meat and two veg."
(4)

Yet Taiwo finds Britain less than welcoming ("Oh Mama, these people hate me!" (35)), and as a welder at Battersea Power Station, is forced to "provide for my

brood in a job / where my imagination dies and my soul suffocates.' (49)

Because of his indoctrination by the imperialist myth of England's superiority, as well as the pain of personal experiences of loss, Taiwo remains fixated on progress away from the past. He makes the following determination, upon learning of his mother's death:

Tears are for sissies, women and nancy-boys.

Pain is shit to be flushed down the toilet.

I have taken my heart out, dug a grave for it
and said good riddance. I never want to see it again.

Man was put on this earth to suffer, but not me,

I will make a success of my life and one day

go visit Mama with a suitcase full of green notes.

Ah! Life can be good when put into perspective. (28)

Edith, similarly, has grown up in the early twentieth century, a period in Britain's history in which, Patrick Brantlinger writes,

the British found it increasingly difficult to think of themselves as inevitably progressive; they began worrying instead about the degeneration of their institutions, their culture, their racial "stock." [...] Apocalyptic themes and images are characteristic of imperial Gothic, in which, despite the consciously pro-Empire values of many authors, the feeling emerges that "we are those upon whom the ends of the world are come."³⁰

With this historical backdrop of imperial paranoia in mind, Edith's hysterical reaction at Ellen's romance with Taiwo is marginally more comprehensible:

After all I've done for you!

Do you think I'm going to let you ruin your life

³⁰ Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 1988), especially Chapter 8, 'Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880-1914' (pp 227-53).

by marrying... a... darkie, a... nigger-man! You silly girl!

I have sacrificed my whole life for you! How cruel! (32)

The 1980s, the era in which Lara grows up, is characterised in the novel in the way described by Dick Hebdige:

The Thatcher years saw a particular investment in a set of images and myths designed to “put the ‘Great’ back into Great Britain again” (to quote a 1980s Tory Party campaign slogan). The ideas of British “grit” and rugged island independence, of Britain as a nation of “hardworking, home-loving ordinary people” were regularly invoked to secure popular support for the Thatcherite project of “regressive modernization” (Hall and Jacques, 1985). This project entailed the selective appropriation of elements of national “heritage” (e.g., Victorian entrepreneurial values) which were summoned up to lay to rest the more recent ghosts of postwar consensus politics, welfarism, and 1960s libertarianism while, at the same time, selected British institutions (e.g., local government, the health service, education) were opened up to “free market forces.”³¹

Edith and Taiwo are shown to be part of this same British imperial and post-imperial history, a history which has affected Africans as much as it has affected the English, with a sense of the need to run from the past.

Taiwo’s first letter home to his mother Zenobia, after four years in London, elicits her recriminations, but more than that, the heartbreaking news that Taiwo’s “precious twin” (26) sister, Kehinde, has died in childbirth. Taiwo’s pain is reflected in an anguished lament in which an elemental desire to return to

³¹ Dick Hebdige, ‘Digging for Britain: An Excavation in Seven Parts’, in Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara & Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp 120-162 (p 121). Revised and reprinted from Come on Down: Popular Media Culture in Postwar Britain, ed. Dominic Strinati & Stephen Wagg (London: Routledge, 1992).

Africa is symbolically bound up with a desire to return to the mother's womb, or perhaps simply to die:

Mama! Let me crawl back!	Kehinde	dead
Back into your womb, Mama!	dead	dead
Undo me. Rock me unborn!	dead	Kehinde
Back to water, back to water	dead	dead (27) ³²

In response to the question, “Do you sense any influence of Yoruba or African poetry in *Lara*? Do you know any Yoruba poetry?”, Evaristo has said:

That's a really interesting question because I don't; I haven't studied Yoruba poetry. [...] And yet there is a bit in *Lara* where Taiwo's twin sister dies and it's shaped on the page; it is almost like a drum beat and you can read it as a sort of chant. A Nigerian friend of mine said that it was like the kind of ritualistic drum beat chant that you would have at a funeral in Nigeria, and yet that wasn't intentional. I don't know anything about that. So I could almost say that something passes through me even though it is not conscious.³³

Evaristo represents herself here as responding almost unconsciously to both an African-American influence, and perhaps also a Yoruba influence, and specifically names this notion of being ‘possessed’ by diverse traditions – as if the line between a reader response (a conscious response) and an unconscious

³² Taiwo's cry here strongly echoes the words of the character in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (London: Vintage, 1998 [1973]) called Eva, who kills her son Plum, a veteran from the First World War, who is shell-shocked and debilitated by drug addiction. Eva says, “he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well... I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin' back.” (p 71) Evaristo has described Toni Morrison as her “favourite novelist” (Toh Hsien Min, p 2), and if the condition known as ‘shell shock’ is one of the mind's own strategies for cutting off from a memory which causes great emotional pain, Taiwo's reaction to his strong desire for comfort can be seen as Evaristo signifying upon Eva's extreme act of severance. Eva explains her act as providing “a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb” (p 72), and Taiwo's own act of severance from memory (and in the process from both mother and motherland), in the attempt to live ‘like a man’, can be seen as an equally misguided – but nevertheless instinctive – attempt to protect the self from the pain which memory can engender.

³³ Sofia Muñoz Valdivieso, ‘Interview with Bernardine Evaristo’, *Obsidian III*, 5.2 (Fall-Winter 2004), pp 9-20 (pp 15-16).

response is quite blurred. The idea of being possessed by her own experience speaks to the memory of Africa being positioned before Lara is even born – so it is something that is known, and does not need necessarily to be learned. Like the use of the novel-in-verse form, the creative process does not situate itself firmly as coming from self or from other. It may instead be an expression of self-in-other, and that is accepted; it does not need to be a problem or anything unusual. Evaristo shows herself to be sensitive to the fact that cultural identity is not formulated in a wholly linear or developmental way – that there are frequently things which are known from birth, forgotten and relearned, and this is often the fractured way in which memory works.

If the process of memory occurs in fractured and uneven fashion, the stoppage of memory is, by contrast, decisive and progressive, the pressures upon a fluid connection with memory accumulating so that Lara is discouraged from both sides of her family from developing a relationship with her African heritage. Ellen is, “[l]ike Taiwo, ...the product of a post-colonial diaspora; caught, to use Roy Foster’s words, ‘in the interstices of the Irish-English relationship’.”³⁴ If Taiwo is fixated on escaping the past in a linear drive to the future, Ellen inhabits a narrow and ceaseless present which looks neither back nor forward – Ellen is dedicated to her life of “babies, shopping, food, ...[and] soapy water” (47), and is thoroughly dismissive of Lara’s encounter with ancestral memory, finding her to be

Too fanciful, too boisterous

and [having] too much silly imagination for her own good.

³⁴ Patricia Murray, ‘Stories Told and Untold: Post-Colonial London in Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara*’, *Kunapipi: Journal of Post-Colonial Writing*, XXI.2 (1999), pp 38-46 (p 45).

The child was too old for this malarkey. It had to stop. (48)

Even this mild censure from her mother can be seen to represent Lara's first encounter with a social world which deeply challenges the validity of the process of memory which has been revealed to her so easily. The next time the Daddy People appear to Lara, unfortunately for her, she is intercepted by her father:

[Lara] summons the Daddy People to appear, phantoms,
perched in trees like owls, eyes smiling, singing.

[...]

suddenly, shocking the spring air, a missile hurtles
down, 'Enough!' Taiwo's vibrato, basso profundo,

[...]

Lara bears nine hard strokes with the broken wand,
screeches up the garden an inferno of raging hysteria.

That night in bed she called the Daddy People to her,
said farewell, willed them away forever. (54)

Lara's full and natural process of communication with memory meets head-on the full impact which the anxieties related to isolation from memory have had upon her parents, and this anxiety leads, in turn, to Lara's own disconnection from the healing process of memory.

she once

casually mentioned a burgeoning desire to see Nigeria.

Edith twitched, 'What do you want to go there for?

You'll come back looking like a nigger-man, dear.' (84)

Lara's approach toward her father similarly encounters a closing down of any connection with the African past:

Now that's enough, I have work to do.' She was irritating

him, he decided, he didn't want to go tomb raiding. (81)

By the time Lara seeks this history, as a teenager, she does not even remember the connection with a memory of Africa which she once had.

Lara's amnesia is very quickly noted by her cousin Beatrice, who visits from Liverpool, the city which, S.I. Martin notes, "made its fortune from the slave trade and is home to one of Britain's oldest and least assimilated Black populations."³⁵ Beatrice, in her "Angela Davis wig" and "lime green flares" (73), is outraged by Lara's suggestion that "I'm not black, I'm half-caste, actually" (74), and introduces a politicised black perspective, influenced by African-American forms of black nationalism:

'Lara, lovey, so long as you're of negroid
stock, diluted or not, you're black, ask me how I know?'
'How d'ya know, Miss Africa?' 'The P word, prejudice.
So it's about time you learnt some African ways, eh? (76)

Despite the fact that Beatrice flicks open "a map of Africa lighter", African-American cultural nationalism is not really a memory of Africa – it speaks to a 'performance' of Africanness as suggested by Kobena Mercer:

invok[ing] "nature" to inscribe Africa as the symbol of personal and political opposition to the hegemony of the West over "the rest" [...] championed an aesthetic of nature that opposed itself to any artifice as a sign of corrupting Eurocentric influence. But nature had nothing to do with it! [This aesthetic was] never just natural, waiting to be found: [it was] stylistically *cultivated* and politically *constructed* in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness.³⁶

³⁵ S.I. Martin, Britain's Slave Trade (London: Channel 4 Books, Macmillan, 1999), p 144. See also Caryl Phillips, The Atlantic Sound (London: Vintage, 2001 [2000]), pp 87-9.

³⁶ Kobena Mercer, Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p 108.

In the British situation, a 'cultural nationalism' inherited from America has even less to do with a memory of Africa. Lara reacts to Beatrice's brand of cultural nationalist wisdom with extreme ambivalence: "Lara yawned, assumed a bland / disinterested expression, studied the sky, intensely." (74) Beatrice's is a perspective which is constructed as a form of self-defence against racism – instead of engaging with memory to discover the fluid nature of difference, it accepts and uses the notion of 'difference' as a positive quality – as Koye Oyedeji puts it, "a Black identity [which] is not something inherent, but something often worked upon in response to white hostility."³⁷ It is therefore, in one sense, a symptom of the very anxiety about 'difference' which arises with imperialism. This fiction of Africanness is one with which Lara cannot fully identify, because it does not in any way recall her own fluid connection to memory in the way that she discovered in her encounter with the ancestral spirits called "the Daddy People".

Lara goes on to seek some answers from her father about what Africa should mean to her, but Taiwo's decision to turn his back on the past means he is unwilling or unable to help her evoke that connection with memory she needs: "he didn't want to go tomb raiding." (81) As Lara grows to sexual maturity, she explores further her relationship to 'African' identity by entering into a relationship with a Nigerian called Josh. Lara, having grown up in suburban Woolwich, is described as "born into whiteness", and the "vivacious tableaux of Atlantic faces" which she encounters as she explores Brixton with Josh is as

³⁷ Koye Oyedeji, 'Prelude to a Brand New Purchase on Black Political Identity: A Reading of Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* and Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind Of Black*', in Write Black Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature, ed. Kadija Sesay (Hertford: Hansib Publications, 2005), pp 346-74 (p 357).

foreign to her as “the moon” (88). In response to flirtatious attempts made by black men towards her, Lara would previously have “[worn] my grandmother’s stiff back, her deaf ear” (88) – her sense of her buttoned-up white inheritance would have inhibited her comfort in a black community. Despite the common Nigerian thread, the relationship fails as Josh hinders rather than helping Lara’s desire to find her relationship to African identity:

‘You’ll not marry a Nigerian if you can’t obey me’

... you don’t even know what

Jollof rice is, let alone how to cook it. You’re strictly

a fish fingers and mash girl. You’ll make a sorry wife.’ (90)

Josh presents another notion of ‘Africanness’ which is alien to Lara’s own experience, and cannot, therefore, connect with her relationship with memory. As Patricia Murray comments: “[Lara’s] searching and poetic interrogation of Africanness is constantly interrupted by difference and hybridity, and by racial constructions that only partially give her voice.”³⁸ These essentialised positions are such a threat to Lara because while the communicative process of memory is blocked, the connections which reveal the fluid quality of ‘difference’ are hidden from view.

Memory Figured, Journeys Travelled

The failure of communication with all of these forms of ‘Africanness’ finally leads Lara’s confusion to a point of crisis – “Fury rode me” (92), and as a student at art college, she seeks refuge in alcohol, before finally choosing to save herself by going travelling – “I s’pose I am escaping. I’ll soon know if it’s from

³⁸ Murray, p 45.

myself.” (95) As she “trundle[s her] way across Europe” (95) with her friend Trish, the oppressiveness of race-consciousness which is felt when in Britain lifts somewhat:

...We become
more British, Trish and I, darker with the Turkish sun,
yet less aware of race for we are simply: Ingiltere. (97)

“London retreats, [becomes] a dislocated memory, immaterial now” (97), and soon afterwards, As Lara, through the experience of travel, has been able to loosen her preoccupation with defining her identity according to other people’s narratives, her own connection to memory returns with its full power and strength, evoking a voice from her ancestral past, the fulfilment of whose request proves to be of utmost importance to Lara’s own survival in Britain. Jan Vorwoert’s commentary is pertinent:

The stalemate situation of the Cold War seemed to bring modern history to a standstill, freezing the forces of progress. [...] After 1989[,] when the superpowers could no longer hold their breath and the Wall was blown down, history sprang to life again. The rigid bipolar order that had held it in a deadlock dissolved, releasing a multitude of subjects with a visa to travel across formerly closed borders and with unheard histories to tell.³⁹

In Lara’s case, it is not the fall of the Berlin wall which encourages her to travel, but simply her restlessness with the restrictive linear narrative of Britishness.

Travel starts up the multiple voices of history/memory again, reminds Lara that there are other stories outside of the one linear story of Britishness, and gives her

³⁹ Jan Vorwoert, ‘Apropos Appropriation: Why Stealing Images Feels Different Today’, Tate Triennial 2006: New British Art catalogue (ed. Beatrix Ruf & Clarrie Wallis), Tate Publishing, pp 14-21 (pp 15-16).

a sense of simultaneous temporalities, which has been lost sight of, and which now suddenly returns.

With Edith's death comes a dramatic return of Lara's sense of connection with memory, and patterns and communication are drawn across the two sides of the family:

When Nana died the sea began to surge,
rushed into my ears at night, a conch shell,
One morning I awoke, not sure if I'd slept at all,
the sun, a Tibetan-monk-orange sprung easily above
the cascade of red-tiled houses down Camden Road
– sunrise at sea. Someone materialised in my room,
like darkroom paper in developer, an image formed,
a woman, I thought, dark-skinned, tall, I was not sure
for it quickly faded out into murkiness, then air,
but the music, the wind, the tune, encircled me.

'Bring him home,' it sang, 'Bring him home.' (101)

If Edith, earlier in the narrative, was connected through the process of memory with the ancestral figure Tolulopé, that connection is echoed by others as Edith's death signals not only the birth of a white-looking child who is figured in her image – “‘Mother Returns’, named by my father, identikit / of Nana” (101) – but the appearance of another African matriarch, Taiwo's own mother Zenobia, whose earlier cries Taiwo had “ignored” (25). As cultural diversity is revealed as inherent to Britishness, a voice within the familiar British environment initiates the sense of diverse simultaneous narratives, and encourages travel. However, it takes travel to Africa, and then to Brazil, to reveal this to Lara, not only because

of any inherent Africanness which may be encountered in those sites, but because like the experience of being possessed by memory, the encounter with diverse places and peoples has the capacity to loosen the bonds of Britain's forgetfulness. Thus, in Africa, Lara discovers, paradoxically, that her Africanness is something she has always known, and which, beyond the fiction of linearity, may always reside at the heart of a Britishness which is inherently diverse, and within which she can claim her place.

The latter part of the novel sees Lara travelling to Nigeria, musing, "This is the land of my father,... / I wonder if I could belong." (104), and then "crossing / over to Brazil, completing her own three point turn." (108) Meanwhile, Evaristo mentions that: "During the writing process [of Lara] I travelled to Nigeria and to Brazil, both for the first time, and these trips enabled me to write the chapters set in those countries".⁴⁰ Lara's so-called 'fictional' journey to Africa can therefore also be seen to allude to a 'real' journey taken by the author. Evaristo comments that during her travels to Nigeria and Brazil, "I became aware that travel brings alive the senses, and that sensory detail brings alive literature."⁴¹ Evaristo thus indicates that travel has helped to reveal to her, as a writer, the continuous relationship which exists between life and fiction. The part of Lara which depicts the protagonist's impressions of Lagos, rich in sights, smells and sounds, certainly encourages a sense that this 'fictional' writing is infused with the presence of Evaristo's own travel experience:

Sliced dodo⁴² browned, crisped, in hot oil pans,
were wrapped, sold for a few naira on the streets;

⁴⁰ Evaristo, 'The Road Less Travelled', p 20.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² *Dodo* is plantain (*Glossary*, in Lara, p 143).

knived meat salivated on stalls, pink vulva flesh
exposed, was skewered, to excrete over flames;
herons elegantly plundered smoking refuse tips –
mobile daffodils; storm drains festered pungently;
fuji⁴³ pounded out of door-size speakers, rattling
the ribs of those passing, vibrating through soles.
'Yaba! Yaba! Yaba! – Yaba! Yaba! Yaba!' clanking
jalopies hurtled past, sardined, men hanging off; (104)

In the introduction to a volume in which Evaristo is a contributor, Melanie Keen comments upon the practice of describing “time passing (or life progressing) by using the metaphor of travel and journeying”.⁴⁴ Travel, as it is represented by the encounter with ‘otherness’, encounter with the experience of the ‘other’ as the experience of the self – making flexible any previously imagined notion of difference certainly seems, in the above ‘fictional’ excerpt, to offer a vivid, brighter than ever, sense of life. This, I would suggest, is potentially because of the relationship that travel bears with memory. As Vorwoert suggests, travel loosens the bounds of linear time imposed by the narrative of the nation. Thus, immediately following this vivid sense of connection across diversities enabled by travel, the full power of memory returns to Lara as she “sleeps on a sun-bleached pillow”:

‘Lara kiss, Lara kiss, we love you always, Lara kiss.’
She awakes to the singing, calling her. ‘Daddy People!’
she cries out astonished before her brain registers,
shoots upright, dark brown eyes swivel at the chorus
around her. There they are, straight out of childhood,

⁴³ Evaristo’s *Glossary* describes *fuji* as “modern type of Nigerian music” (p 144).

⁴⁴ Melanie Keen, ‘From There to Here’, in *Necessary Journeys*, pp 4-5 (p 4).

there she was, back in her bunk bed in Woolwich:
the old man with tight white curls, a teenager, scarred,
a young woman – the spitting of her father, a fierce man
in a hat, someone so old she is toothless, hunched.
Her eyes rest on a woman whose fathomless
gaze unravels such love in Lara she feels faint with it –
her grandmother, recognised from the sepia photo
Lara treasures from nineteen thirty-five. It is Zenobia.
She speaks,

‘My Omilara, now we take you into memory

Sleep now, sleep..... (109)

Just as memory functions by both maintaining and undermining notions of ‘difference’ between times, places and narratives, the experience of travel to Africa reveals its similarly ambivalent role. Lara is shown, as the ‘Daddy People’ reappear to her just as she has known them since childhood, that her own Africanness is not *only* something she will find in Africa – it has been a part of her all along, even through her apparent disconnection from memory in London. Yet simultaneously, the fact that this realisation occurs to Lara *in* Africa, that the ‘Daddy People’ choose this moment to appear to her, also suggests that her connection to Africanness *is* to be found in the African setting.

If we add to this the fact that researching family history in Nigeria, for this novel, involved talking to “elderly relatives [...who] did not believe in talking about the dead”,⁴⁵ we find that engaging with an African perspective, even across only one generation, does not, in Evaristo’s experience, *necessarily* encourage easy access

⁴⁵ ‘On the Road: Bernardine Evaristo interviewed by Karen Hooper’, Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 41.1 (2006), pp 3-16 (p 5).

to the past, as seen, for instance, in Reed or Wideman. This contrasts particularly with African-American notions of African memory as alive in the present, to which access is blocked by the residual effects of trauma of what is frequently figured as occurring initially with the Middle Passage. However, by surpassing this particular instance of the failure of speech (notably these encounters with relatives who refuse to speak are not dramatised at all in *Lara*), Evaristo instead positions the appearance of Lara's grandmother Zenobia, who speaks to Lara to say "My Omilara, now we take you into memory" (109), and beyond that, as the narrative navigates the generations, a "magical memory grandmother" some generations earlier, who

spoke dip dip down into the deepest part of she-self,
churning stories into a babbling stream of poetry oratory
[...] as she voyaged back to the early time.' (124)

Evaristo overcomes an impediment to memory here through poetry itself, so as to situate an African inheritance, in the novel, as wholly concerned with the fluid communication of memory, where in her own experience of her African relatives, that may not necessarily have been the case. As Evaristo uses writing to "journey[...] into my own childhood and into the childhood of my parents and their forebears",⁴⁶ she uses this process to render less debilitating to the communication of history the silence which surrounds particular aspects of her ancestry. In the novel she keeps the emphasis, in the interrupted communication of memory, upon Taiwo's running away from the past. Though Baba commands Taiwo to "shut up and listen / as if you were a bat with no eyes." (120), Baba tells his tale and then dies, and Taiwo deserts his memory, focused instead on his English future (pp 130-131) – Taiwo is oblivious to the fact that "Baba's journey

⁴⁶ Evaristo, 'The Road Less Travelled', p 21.

ha[s] begun.” (131) As Evaristo positions her speaking text, she writes against a *number of cultures*, including the British *and* the African, which seem to impose upon her the expectation that she should live in a present which is separated from the past. But she does situate the African inheritance in Lara as being that which more naturally encourages communion with memory, which initiates it at the novel’s start, and which is epitomised by the Daddy People. This strategy is seen again later, as reconciliation between Lara and uncommunicative father Taiwo is never quite achieved, but Lara’s relationship with his African homeland can nevertheless surpass that ruptured link:

He boasts to his cronies that

He has two women to boss around in Lagos until her eyes

Shoot ice darts at him, decades of frozen anger, and his

Words quake, spring off the floor, stream back into his mouth. (108)

Instead of turning a slightly uncommunicative relationship between Lara and Taiwo into a fully communicative one, Evaristo slightly bypasses the blockage in memory he represents, to figure a powerfully imaginative relationship with Africa – once again we see the power of writing to overcome rifts which appear non-negotiable in lived experience.

Where Henderson claims that “the objective of [black women] writers is not [...] to move from margin to center, but to remain on the borders of discourse, speaking from the vantage point of the insider/outsider”,⁴⁷ Evaristo is not content simply to position herself as writing ‘from the margins’ – she is more fundamentally concerned with exploding the idea of a margin/centre dichotomy in British society altogether.

⁴⁷ Henderson, p 264.

I denounced my patriarchal father, deconstructed
my childhood, regurgitated appropriated ideas
like closing-time vomit, [...]
I was a walking irradiated automated diatribe,

Here is Evaristo satirising the black feminist project, and perhaps sending up her own participation in it, which she is now able to see as a stepping-stone on her way to a fuller awareness of the possibilities embodied by her own cultural identity. Evaristo may be seen to have discovered, also, that moving away from the desire to assert a political position enables clearer access to sometimes surprising truths. As Evaristo has come to discard some of the black feminist agenda, perhaps as a result of, certainly as part of, the experience of travel, she speaks as though she encountered some surprising truths – for instance, that her encounter with Africa turned out to be an experience through which she “came to terms with [her] white side”⁴⁸ – in other words fulfilling a very different role from that often ascribed it in artistic and political statements of the 1980s black feminist project. Just as Lara, when she visits Lagos, is called “Oyinbo”, meaning “Whitey” (104), the phase of Evaristo’s life where she encountered Africa for the first time initiated what she sees as her “acceptance of [her]self as mixed race”.⁴⁹ The “emancipatory impulse”⁵⁰ that Henderson speaks of is thus taken a stage further by Evaristo, who refuses to credit the dominant order with the attributes it has long claimed for itself.

Immediately following the vivid appearance of the Daddy People, the narrative moves smoothly into the stories of Lara’s African ancestors – the process of

⁴⁸ Evaristo, speaking at *My Africa*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Henderson, p 264.

speech/memory, temporarily blocked by Taiwo's (and Edith's) fear of engaging with the past, now flows freely, opened up by the practice of travel. By travelling into the Lagos environment, Lara/Evaristo literally opens access to the formerly stifled narrative voice of Zenobia,⁵¹ who, prefiguring the fate of Evaristo's next protagonist Zuleika in The Emperor's Babe, is "plucked...by Gregorio, treble her years, / and desirous of a madonna negra to reproduce himself." (113), and cries, "Why oh why, must I be chosen but cannot choose?" (113). Another voice narrated is that of Taiwo as a boy, who is shown to have learnt his example of stern authority from his own father Gregorio, and is shown always enacting escape, "always in a canter" (118), as he roams tirelessly his diverse city of Lagos:

Always, when the sun graced this island which pulled
people to its shores like wasps to honeycomb, Taiwo dreamt
of exploring the worlds these migrants left to memory:

Lebanon, Libya, China, Greece, India, Europe. (118)

Taiwo receives memory from Baba's own mouth. At almost 100 years old, he passes on his story: "The gods born me on a fazenda in the hills of Brazil." (121) Born slaves, Baba and his brother Gilberto are "bequeathed" their "freedom" upon the death of "the old master" (125). After Gilberto is killed in a fight, Baba marries and takes his son Gregorio back to Africa, "land of my grandmother" (130). A sense of the continuity across 'difference' which these stories present is sensed by Patricia Murray when she comments that even though "we have no context in which to read Tolulopé's story,...her disembodied cries echo,

⁵¹ Heard only once before, as she scolded Taiwo for his abandonment (p 26), Evaristo positions Zenobia as a forgotten voice in the context of the narrative. Evaristo dedicated her first published volume of poetry, Island of Abraham (London: Peepal Tree Press, 1995), "For my grandmother, Zenobia Evaristo".

strangely, through the narrative.”⁵² That continuity has been present, somehow, through all the experiences of alienation and marginalisation Lara has endured, and the narrative’s easy movement into the spoken stories of the ancestors shows that travel to Africa is one of the factors which re-sensitise Lara to her connection with memory.

‘Difference’ and the Return to Britain

“Lagos”, Pilar Cuder-Domínguez comments, “is only one step in [Lara’s] journey of self-discovery”,⁵³ and the truth of Lara’s identity and connection with memory, as it may or may not lie in the encounter with Africa, is actually revealed in the broader encounter with diversity which travel enables. As Lara travels to Brazil, Brazilian society itself, like Lagos, is able to epitomise diversity as effectively as London might ever have:

I [...] follow
my singing ears, Catholic hymns hybridized by drums,
it is a hilltop church, Indian congregation, holding flowers
and palm fronds. It is Palm Sunday! I hum from the door,
witness to one culture being orchestrated by another,
yet the past is gone, the future means transformation. (139)

As Lara is able to trace her lineage to the “Brazilian Quarter” (105) in Lagos, and goes on to witness, in Brazil itself, “Salvador [which] grips its Yoruba mother like a shawl, /...as if no sea, / no history separates them” (138), it becomes clear that the undermining of the notion of ‘difference’ is important in ways which are

⁵² Murray, p 42.

⁵³ Cuder-Domínguez, ‘(Re)Turning to Africa: Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara* and Lucinda Roy’s *Lady Moses*’, in *Write Black Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, ed. Kadija Sesay (Hertford: Hansib Publications, 2005), pp 300-13 (p 310).

far more than simply symbolic. London, Evaristo makes us see, is not the only place where diverse cultures have met, mixed and become part of the landscape, and the twentieth century is not the first time such mixing has occurred. With this realisation, Lara is able to return to Britain reborn into the dialogic process of memory:

I am baptised, resolve to paint slavery out of me,
the Daddy People onto canvas with colour-rich strokes,
their songs will guide me in sweaty dreams at night.
I savour living in the world, planet of growth, of decay,
think of my island – the ‘Great’ Tippexed out of it –
tiny amid massive floating continents, the African one
an embryo within me. I will wing back to Nigeria again
and again, excitedly swoop over a zig-zag of amber lights
signalling the higgledy energy of Lagos.

It is time to leave.

Back to London, across international time zones,
I step out of Heathrow and into my future. (140)

Evaristo is able, in this conclusion to Lara, to take account of history, yet also to lay it to rest, as her heroine is able to “paint slavery out of me” and move “into *my future*” [my emphasis]. Evaristo takes a firm stance toward British history, claiming her protagonist’s – and her own – right to be released rather than trapped by it. The process of travel reveals Lara’s relationship to her African inheritance, it in all its flexibility, and enables Evaristo to assert for her a comfortable place in British society, by refusing to credit the validity of the notion of ‘difference’. In Lara, Evaristo’s stunning first novel, the author thus can be seen to be coming to terms with this memory of Africa as part of the

process of preparing the ground for the exercise to which she addresses herself in earnest with her next work, The Emperor's Babe – as she puts it, “challenging a holy cow of British history – that Britain was a white nation until the 20th century.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Evaristo, ‘The Road Less Travelled’, p 21.

Conclusion

The memory of Africa is identified, in the four African-American texts I discuss in this study, as continuous with African-American tradition. In these works, the memory of Africa tends to feature in a realm in which language and memory are imagined to be in continuous and fluid relation with each other, so as to undermine an American hegemony of linear narrative over nonlinear consciousness, and of the present over the past. This access to a continuity between language and memory has to work against a broad American trend of forgetfulness toward the past, and particularly toward an undervalued African-American past. Yet as these writers work to access this liminal linguistic space, partly in response to the 'occupation' of language by a hegemonic Euro-American tendency to define an African-American 'other', they find that memory works to 'possess' language in a scheme of signification which is traditional to both African-American and African worldviews.

The four African-American writers discussed here are all sensitive to the effects of trauma which interrupt the relationship with the memory of the past, and of which the politics of black nationalism is frequently as indicative as a white hegemonic perspective may be. Ishmael Reed figures the traumatic denial of memory to be something which has occurred repeatedly through history in order to establish fictions of unitary 'truth' against the more flexible and mysterious forms which historical memory can take. Toni Morrison shows how the traumatic memory of African-American history and the Middle Passage inhibits the fluid relationship between memory and language, so that the relationship with

the memory of Africa is barely able to be vocalised at all. Alice Walker, in her dramatisation of an African society, is prevented from representing African speech on the same equitable terms she provides for an African-American past, by a central anxiety about diaspora in her approach toward Africa. John Edgar Wideman shows how an African form of memory registers a traumatised process of signification by registering the trauma of the past in language itself.

There is, however, another strain visible in the African-American literature discussed here, as it approaches the figure of the African continent, which while emphasising a sense of an African tradition and history alive in the African-American present, finds it difficult to engage in such a meaningful way with contemporary Africa. Reed, for instance, insists upon the coevalness of distinct notions of time, so that an African past may be perceived to both precede and ‘possess’ an American present, and even discusses the possibility of contemporary African-American influences occurring in Africa. Yet he makes almost no comment upon what impact a *contemporary* Africa may have upon American, or world culture. This may be a case of what Johannes Fabian calls the “allochronic”, a form of time-consciousness characterised by

ethnographers [who] have always acknowledged coevalness as a condition without which hardly anything could ever be learned about another culture. Some have struggled consciously with the categories our discourse uses to remove other peoples from *our* Time [...] But when it comes to producing anthropological discourse in the forms of description, analysis, and theoretical conclusions, the same ethnographers will often forget or disavow their experiences of coevalness with the people they studied. Worse, they will talk

their experiences away with ritualistic invocations of “participant observation” and the “ethnographic present.”¹

African-American writers, consistently keen to undermine any hierarchy of the present over the past, nevertheless seem to struggle to dramatise a contemporary relationship with an African present. In Chapter Two of this study, I have discussed Toni Morrison’s sophisticated understanding of how this difficulty in the African-American approach toward Africa might arise. Morrison’s work in particular shows that African-Americans perhaps do not have a choice in the approach to Africa, that their access to tools of representation in the approach toward Africa is compromised by the double bind enacted by white Euro-American imperialism and racism. The tendency of African-American cultural nationalism to employ an identification with Africans in such a motivated and symbolic way is felt in the often-repeated trope of the Flying Africans, which is discussed further in Chapter Two, and is described by Olivia Smith Storey:

The trope often refers to three figures representing basic groups in the Diaspora: The African, the American born or Creole, and the Overseer. These three look at each other from the three points of a triangle; that is, they exist in relation, and they constitute an entity among themselves, examining and defining each other. Individual expressions of the trope might refer to only the African figure or to the African and an Overseer or to all three, but even in accounts where the Creole and the Overseer are not explicitly mentioned, their presence is strongly implied. The African flies from the Overseer whether he is literally present or not. The African also runs away from a future limited to hard labor and to the

¹ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1983]), p 33.

psychological terror of becoming accustomed to slavery, a future represented by the Creole figure in the trope.²

The trope of the Flying African shows the African figure as someone for the African-American to identify with and admire, to hope perhaps to emulate, but crucially, as someone who is *not involved* in the troubled and all-consuming everyday battle between blacks and whites in America, and in a sense as he flies away, recedes into the past, while the relationship between blacks and whites in America continues through the present. This is partly a symptom of American forgetfulness of all that is outside the United States.

In contrast to the trend observed in the four African-American novels discussed in this study, I find that Black British novels make a more assertive claim to the symbolic realm of language, frequently making visible interjections into texts and discourses established as markers of a British 'tradition'. For these writers, language is a currency which has, in British history, been entirely silent upon the presence of black people in Britain, and into which they must write themselves. The memory of Africa is evoked in Black British fiction in the context of a British history which has had little to say about its black presence, and has failed to register the role that black people in Britain might play in an otherwise overwhelmingly linear narrative of Britishness. The memory of Africa in this scenario is frequently inherited as an impenetrable monolith in the same way that 'Britishness' itself has been inherited. Britain's official silence paradoxically leaves Black British writers much more free than African-Americans in their

² Olivia Smith Storey, 'Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 5.3 (2004). Accessed via Project Muse at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/v2005/5.3storey.html, paragraph 5.

approach to language itself; language is used to figure what may once have been a rather monolithic 'memory of Africa' in diverse ways to show that it can in fact be penetrated, interlaced with other influences and experiences, and performed in new ways appropriate to diverse identities. Where African-Americans must rewrite themselves against an almost overwhelmingly noisy prejudice, then, Black Britons must write themselves into a silence.

The Black British approach toward the memory of Africa does not signify tradition in the way that it does for African-Americans. Instead, it features diverse traditions as part of a broad repertoire of performances, which might nevertheless be said to form an alternative notion of tradition, which is not sedimented, but is always fluid and mongrel. The priority of African-American writers in this study is to undermine the notion of a linear relationship between the past and the present, evoking instead a past that, like the gods of a voodoo pantheon, is alive in and interacting with the present. In the Black British scenario, however, the sense of a fluid connection with a memory of Africa is more thoroughly disrupted, so that it is instead a monolithic ideal which is inherited, and must be played with and often overturned. These writers redramatise such an inheritance in ways which position a memory of Africa alongside other cultural memories, in order to situate British identity today, and identity in general, as mongrel, shifting, and relating fluidly to a diversity of cultural inheritances. Black British identity, which is always moving as it moves into the future, situates any notion of African tradition in an equal and equivalent relationship with other traditions and notions of memory.

A final reflection upon the relationship between African-American and Black British identity formations which this thesis has begun to unpack, via the motif of the memory of Africa, may be approached with reference to an interesting comment made by A Sivanandan in 1971. Writing in that moment when black communities in the United States and Britain were adjusting, respectively, to the shifts which came with the Civil Rights era and with decolonisation, Sivanandan remarks upon the application of the model of colonialism to describe the African-American situation, and predicts a comparable Black British scenario in years to come:

The radical black of Britain [...] is a product of both colonialism and slavery[,] he is the common denominator [...] that connects the enslaved people and the colonised, the blacks of America and the peoples of Afro-Asia. [...]

But this comparative militancy is only a prelude to the revolutionary Black Panther oriented struggles that will be taken up by 'the second generation'. For these are youngsters who will not have known any experience but with the British, and it threatens to be an experience akin to that of the blacks in America. It is they who will more closely approximate 'the colony within the mother country' status of their American counterparts. And it is they who will take up the same solutions. They will have no country of the mind to return to. They are here and now and will take what British society owes them – as fully fledged British citizens – and will not give.³

Sivanandan observes, as Toni Morrison has, the analogy which can be drawn between African-American and colonial subjects. This thesis argues that African-American literature figures a notion of African tradition as continuous with African-American tradition, and an African past as alive in and interacting

³ A Sivanandan, 'Black Power: The Politics of Existence', in *A Different Hunger*, pp 62-63 [from *Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, February 1971].

with the present. Yet what is remarkable about reading these comments of Sivanandan's today is the realisation that Black British writers are not quite in the same position as African-Americans were in 1971, and even more excitingly, are not suffering in exactly the way suggested. Precisely because Black British writers do not have the same sense of a distinct community or "colony within the mother country" that Sivanandan remarks upon (and which African-Americans arguably have to a greater extent), the loss of any "country of the mind" which might be suggested by notions of remembered traditions, stories or customs, is more complete for Black Britons. However, this is not the kind of loss which is mourned over. Quite on the contrary – it is, in these novels, initially struggled with, but finally celebrated. African identity is approached in the same manner as African-American, British and other traditions are – as masks which can be performed in order to access a sense of the diversity of the individual. Loss of tradition, then, in the form in which it is commonly understood, is celebrated as an opportunity to engage with the sheer diversity which personal identity can encompass, and to engage with the diversity of historical memories which remain unheard, and to these writers, must be attended to. 'Black British' identity, like the postmodern, as Stuart Hall notes, anticipates its own implosion as a useful term, and this is part of the core of what defines it:

But doesn't the acceptance of the fictional or narrative status of identity in relation to the world also require as a necessity, its opposite – the moment of arbitrary closure? Is it possible for there to be action or identity in the world without arbitrary closure – what one might call the necessity to meaning of the end of the sentence? Potentially, discourse is endless: the infinite semiosis of meaning. But to say anything at all in particular, you do have to stop talking. Of course, every full stop is provisional. The next sentence will take nearly all

of it back. So what is this “ending”? It’s a kind of stake, a kind of wager. It says, “I need to say something, something ... just now.” It is not forever, not totally universally true. It is not underpinned by any infinite guarantees. But just now, this is what I mean; this is who I am.⁴

With this notion in mind of identity being constantly deferred to another moment when it might change, to encompass the ever-changing landscape of experience, it seems appropriate to conclude with a suggestion, vocalised by Mike Phillips, that “black writing in Britain may be standing at the gateway to a subject matter which informs a number of what will be crucial global issues for this new century.”⁵

⁴ Stuart Hall, ‘Minimal Selves’, in Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara & Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp 114-19 (p 117). Reprinted from Identity, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: Institute for Contemporary Arts (Document 6, 1987).

⁵ Mike Phillips, London Crossings: A Biography of Black Britain (London & New York: Continuum, 2001), p 143.

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