

Slavery and Silence in Ina Césaire's *Mémoires d'Isles* and Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone*

Valérie Bada

*L'histoire a son inexplorable, au bord duquel nous errons éveillés*¹ (Glissant, *Discours* 229)

Anxiety towards history is deeply ingrained in the Caribbean psyche, and literary explorations of the past reflect the dual contradictory effect of such endeavors: the imaginative recovery of the past also involves a recovery from the past and its determinism. The painful journey into repressed areas of memory that the playwright from Martinique, Ina Césaire (Aimé Césaire's daughter), and the late Jamaican author Dennis Scott undertake in the two plays under scrutiny is shrouded in meaningful silences and shadows of images. I would like to focus my analysis of the two plays on the tropes of muteness and silence, which offer critical filters to explore the disturbing landscape of slavery representations in Caribbean theatre. On the one hand, the narrative flow of Ina Césaire's *Mémoires d'Isles* is fractured in the middle by a visual reconstruction of "le viol original" ("the original rape"), the rape of one of the two female characters' great-grandmother by her white master; on the other, the central role of the "mute rattler" (drummer) in Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone* points to the crucial but incomplete function of language in reconstructing the past.

Both plays stage fragments of memory erupting in a flow of narratives or in the visual materialization of reminiscences in the form of a constant interplay between the spoken and the unspoken, between the shown and the unshown. The characters' meaningful silences and allusions open up a space where absence of representation articulates a traumatic remembering. This dramatic strategy interspersing hyperfluency with abrupt silences allows an exploration of the disjunct nature of history and memory, both personal as remembered by each character in turn, and collective as ritualized by the interacting community of characters.

The staging of slavery memories in *Mémoires d'Isles* and *An Echo in the Bone* involves the complexity of a triple semantic link: the narrative intertwines historical facts and subjective fictionalization, and in so doing generates a tension between the creative imagination and the will to give a powerful vision of slavery without alleviating its inherent horror. This

double articulation is further complicated by the dramatic visual representation of the "unnamable." What we see in performance is the materialization of the "unspeakable," the violent rendering of the institution euphemistically referred to as "peculiar." This euphemism reflects both the reluctance to express the human degradation of the trade and the difficulty in remembering the "dis-membling" nature of slavery: shown on stage, signs are voiced, "em-body-ed," i.e. violently made present in contemporary consciousness. The stage becomes the site of violence, the locus of the reconstruction of horror where history is exposed, then transfigured, and cultural consciousness and identity come into being through imaginative re-enactment. In this perspective, the trope of muteness not only expresses the difficulty of framing the historical event of the transatlantic slave trade in a literary structure, it also comes to represent something essential about the nature of the event itself. The radical negativity of slavery ruptures the fabric of history and memory, emptying them of meaning. Just as Caribbean history originated in utter dislocation, muteness in both plays reflects a consistent movement of displacement of language. A dialectical tension between this "peculiar" silence which speaks the fracture and the narrative and dramatic forms which attempt to represent it and bridge it lies at the heart of *Mémoires d'Isles* and *An Echo in the Bone*.

Mémoires d'Isles presents two elderly women from Martinique belonging to different social backgrounds. Aure is an educated light-skinned "mulâtresse" from the rural South of Martinique, and Hermance is a dark-skinned townswoman from the North with no formal education. The play is mainly composed of a series of monologues in which the two women remember fragments of their past. The opening scene² shows the two actresses made up as Ash Wednesday she-devils, "les femmes hors du temps" ("the women out of time"), and introducing the play as a Carnival celebration which they have been rehearsing for "three hundred years." It thus reveals the essence of the play as a ritual staging Caribbean female archetypes, "personnalités authentiques" ("authentic personalities"), engaged in an exorcising evocation of a collective past. The dramatic strategy of the Carnival ritual performed by folk characters playing the roles of Aure and Hermance signals the overlapping of the personal and the collective paradigm in reconstructing the past. The two reminiscing women are revealed as epitomes of the island's antinomic characteristics, the South and the North, the rural and the urban, the educated and the uneducated, the French-speaking and the Creole-speaking, the light and the dark, the discreet and the volcanic, the soft and the violent. Their recollections embody the memories of the island, even the Caribbean islands in general (*Mémoires d'Isles*), and history is brought into present consciousness through a collective act of imagination.

As the play progresses, their initial dialogue turns into monologues receding further and further into the past, from their wedding, echoes of their parents' voices, their childhood, their first memories, until they reach the point of wordlessness; they stumble against the "unspeakable" when Aure imagines her great-grandmother's rape by the "béké," the white master, in her daughter's presence. The stage direction says:

La pénombre s'installe brutalement. Scène du "viol original." Malvina sursaute lorsque s'ouvre la porte. On entend le grincement d'un lit sur lequel se jette un corps. Malvina se lève lentement et se penche sur le lit. Elle lève la main, geste d'amour, d'agression? On entend au loin des aboiements de chiens de chasse, des cris lointains, pendant que, sourde à ce tumulte, l'autre femme se balançant dans sa dodine fredonne à bouche fermée: "Papa moin mô, man pa pléré. . ." L'obscurité totale envahit la scène. Ce sera l'unique rappel de la période de l'esclavage. (51)

Darkness falls abruptly. Scene of the "original rape." Malvina jumps when the door opens. The creaking of a bed on which a body throws itself is heard. Malvina slowly stands up and bends over the bed. She lifts her hand, a gesture of love, of aggression? One can hear in the distance the bellowing of hounds and screams while the other woman, deaf to that noise, rocks in her chair and softly sings: "Papa moin mô, man pa pléré. . ." [Daddy not dead, do not cry Mummy] Total darkness invades the stage. This will be the only recalling from the period of slavery. (translation mine)

This crucial passage is the only break in the flow of reminiscing narratives. The abrupt darkening of the stage signals a leap from Aure's conscious remembering of her own past to shadowy reverberations suddenly erupting from repressed areas of her unconscious. Her past ceases to emerge from language but moves like a camera freezing the picture of Malvina's ambivalent gesture of love/hatred towards her father in arrested motion. As Wilson Harris points out about Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*,

images [. . .] cease to be passive or submerged; instead each image is an apparent catalyst of discovery, it acts upon the falling or ascending weight of a subtle imagination immersed in what it appears to describe. (5)

Through the painful and reluctant reminiscence of the "original sin," the motion is revived, the past recreated to inform the present. This scene is ambiguous enough to allow the stage director's imagination to inject a personal interpretation. I tend to visualize this fracturing moment of the play as an imaginary revision of the "original rape" as re-enacted by Aure impersonating in mind and body her ancestor Malvina who witnesses her

mother's sexual exploitation by the master, and "l'autre femme" ("the other woman") suggesting Hermance's reluctant involvement in this "prophetic vision of the past" (Glissant, *Toussaint* 9). The brutal revision of the historical moment of terror is framed within a partial visual performance that bridges the linguistic inability to utter the "unspeakable." Silence thus connects here with the playwright's search for a credible voice and with her striving for an effective, powerful representation.

Such a quest for a form that would reflect the disruptive experience of slavery is at the core of Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone*. The Pocomania ritual of the Nine-Night ceremony constitutes the framework of the play. Crew, a poor farmer, killed the white owner of the big neighboring estate, and after nine days of disappearance is presumed dead by his wife, Rachel. She thus gathers some close friends and her family in an old sugar barn to hold a ritual wake where the dead man is remembered and events from his life re-lived through the possession of the participants by the spirit of the dead. These acts of dynamic remembering "move though the present, a ship moored off Africa in 1792 . . . a [slave] auctioneer's office in 1820, woods near an estate in 1833 . . . a Great House in 1834" (75). The fragmented chronology of contemporary scenes interspersed with reconstructions of a distant past gives a sweeping perspective on Caribbean history and places it in its causative nexus. The old sugar barn, significantly "dominated by a huge chain . . . looped to the roof" (75), becomes a "lieu de mémoire" (Nora 26) where the history of the island is scripted and re-inscribed in contemporary consciousness through ritual re-enactment. The barn appears as a microcosm of the Caribbean where "the basis of the Antillean experience" is ritually exhumed and celebrated, "this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs" are asserted as "not decayed but strong" (Walcott, *The Antilles* 11) cultural ferment. These echoes of the past flow out not only from entranced characters, from the "bone" of a collective body, but also from the mute rattler's instrument, from the "skin" of his drum playing "broken rhythms" (84).

The first scene of collective remembering trance is introduced by the sound of ghost drums building up in the background. The rattler shows his "empty, idle hands" (88), powerless to prevent the re-living of the source of his own muteness on a slave ship off the African coast in 1792. The trauma of silencing, both individual and collective, is re-enacted through the "protean reality of space" (Harris, "History" 13, 15) which allows buried visions to unfold in present consciousness through the power of imagination to move in time and space. Thus the primordial memory of Afro-Caribbean history, its dislocating and silencing moment when the slaves realize that they are "all strangers in a dark place" (90), is re-inscribed in contemporary consciousness in "a visual echo of History"

(Walcott, *Antilles* 6). The rattler evokes the internal conflicts in Africa that allowed the spreading of slavery:

I saw when they took her [the "woman" of another slave on board]. It was no worse than I seen your people do to mine in the year of the war between us. (90)

But at the same time he creates and expresses the new social bond linking African slaves regardless of origin: "Peace, my brother" (90). He enunciates the birth of a new community, a "diffracting unity" (Glissant, *Discours* 226), in the very moment of dislocation of African communities. In a defiant gesture, he spits on the officer who was hitting him. His tongue is cut off but his gaze remains fierce and disturbing to the traders. He embodies the silent force of resistance to annihilation, the conscience of history, and his drumming skills symbolize the subterranean retention of his African past³. He is described by another slave as a "cold one [who] will live long" (90). So, the rattler "endures"⁴ as a mute agent of memory transmitting the "broken rhythms" of the past. His enforced muteness represents both the source of trauma and at the same time the lasting effect of that trauma. It reflects both the brutal fracture of "his-story," i.e. the "unspeakable" erasure of being, and the silent development of a collective consciousness refashioned from broken fragments of history. He embodies the power of imagination not merely to describe but to reinscribe the past in endless variations. His drumming echoes "this gathering of broken pieces [which] is the care and pain of the Antilles" (Walcott, *Antilles* 9) and recreates a mental space in which identity is instinctively reconstructed in a ritualized social form, intensely experienced and "transmitted in eloquent pulses from the past" (Gilroy 74).

The second collective trance of remembrance shows him as a mute slave who can "read, write and reckon like a schoolmaster" (100). He is depicted as the master's instrument writing the apology of slavery and the figures of his own price. He thus epitomizes both the passive victim imprisoned in a perverse ventriloquism and the active resistant silently "humanizing the inhuman void" (Budick xviii) by maintaining rhythms of creativity that defy verbalization. Dennis Scott expresses in the poem "Epitaph" the resigned silence of the Caribbean people to the evocation of slavery:

They hanged him on a clement morning, swung
between the falling sunlight and the women's
breathing, like a black apostrophe to pain
[. . .]

At least that's how
they tell it. It was long ago
and what can we recall of a dead slave or two

except that when we punctuate our island tale
they swing like sighs across the brutal
sentences, and anger pauses
till they pass away.

Contemporary deprivation and distress trigger anger and violence, while memories of past misery induce wordlessness, "sighs" of defeat and fatalism or "sighs" that express a "repugnance to 'come back to things past' which would be a manifestation of the return of what has been repressed" (Glissant, *Discours* 229). *An Echo in the Bone* also reflects the refusal to go back to the past as the characters order the rattler to stop drumming during the first possession trance. But the drumming keeps building up, "telling a story all by itself" (107) and energizing "the vital work of enquiring into the terrors that exhaust the resources of language amidst the debris of a catastrophe" (Gilroy 218). In the last spirit possession of the play, Crew's son re-lives the moment of the white planter's killing, but the intervention of his brother changes the course of the re-enactment that would have led to the actual death of the possessed, and the murder is avoided. The contemporary voice covers the revengeful scream of the past and reverses its course. The painful revision of the past becomes a transforming fiction of history. Past and present merge in a criss-crossing dialogue through space and time. This final interpenetration of history and remaking of individual stories reverses the annihilating consequences of murderous confrontation. The humiliated and mutilated past ceases to be "sticks and stones . . . breaking [their] bones" (105): "no matter what is past, you can't stop the blood from drumming, and you can't stop the heart from hoping" (136).

The two plays ultimately appear as imaginary reconnections with history which break down the cognitive and emotional barriers that keep the past safely in the past. Only imaginative leaps reveal what might have been the fragmented stories of the characters' ancestors, simultaneously reproducing and revoking the radical silence enslavement imposed upon them.

In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention. (Walcott, "The Caribbean" 53)

As ritualistic reconstructions of the past, both plays attempt to bridge the gap of history through imaginative remembering. This theatre of memory represents a protean site of creative reconnection with disparate shards of the past across the wounds of history. The stage becomes a social and spiritual meeting place mediating and ultimately articulating a subter-

reanean silent terror by means of ritualized forms. The figure of the rattler drumming to the "bone" of the past epitomizes the fractures and discontinuities inherent in Caribbean history, and his opaque muteness in the text metaphorically corresponds to the brutal silence of the "original rape" scene in *Mémoires d'Isles*. Their silence resonates in the very midst of the ongoing narrative and forms the semantic and stylistic core of both texts: the retrieval of impossible narratives, of absent stories made present by a "radical imagination" (Harris, *The Radical Imagination*).

FNRS University of Liège (Belgium)

Notes

1. *History has its inexorable side on the edge of which we roam wide awake* (translation mine).
2. This scene is strongly reminiscent of the Prologue to Aimé Césaire's *Une tempête*.
3. In West Africa drums have a crucial function in possession rituals in which the invoked gods "ride" the bodies of entranced devotees. The hypnotic drumming channels the flows of energy necessary to connect the spiritual with the material.
4. See Faulkner's description of Dilsey and the black community in *The Compson Appendix*: "They endure."

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